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FROM CHINA TO PALMYRA: THE VALUE OF SILK

1. Introduction

Starting from the early 20th c., the excavations conducted in the Western Necropolis of Palmyra brought to light an abundant group of textiles of diverse qualities. Early finds have been published by Rudolf Pfister (1934; 1937; 1940) and his identification of silk fabrics found in the Palmyrene tombs as Chinese caused a long and lively discussion (see RASCHKE 1978: 728, note 323 for further bibliography). Newer finds, together with a new research on material discussed by Pfister have been published by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, Annemarie Stauffer and Khaled al As'ad in 2000, in the volume *Die Textilien aus Palmyra*, containing a complete catalogue of the fabrics found in Palmyra with a wide commentary on weaving techniques, decoration and pigment analyses. Among over 500 pieces of textiles collected from seven tower-tombs in the Western Necropolis of Palmyra, close to 100 are made of silk. Although we are not able to determine the origin of all monochrome tabbies – they may have been imported from China as well as produced of imported yarn in the local workshops, and some of them may have also been of Indian origin, but a small group can be identified as definitely Chinese textiles – Han damasks and *jin* brocades. These finds suggest quite a large scale import from China. According to the chronology of the tombs and stylistic features in the fabrics themselves, they have to be interpreted as produced during the reign of the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 220) (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000; STAUFFER 1995).

The issue of silk trade between China and Rome inevitably connotes the term *Silk Road* used for the first time by Ferdinand von Richthofen at the end of 19th c. Although still broadly used in the context of diverse research concerning trans-Asiatic long distance trade and other forms of exchange, the term gradually changed its meaning during the past century, due to new discoveries and changes in the methodological approach. For Richthofen *Silk Road* was the commercial route from China to central Asia and further West and for the first time he used the term for the road described in Ptolemy's *GEOGRAPHIA* on the basis of Maes Titianos' account recorded by Marinus of Tyre (VON RICHTHOFEN 1877: 499–500; WAUGH 2007: 4; about details of Ptolemy's description of the caravan road see: BERNARD 2005). Modern scholarship rather follows the approach proposed by Raschke (1978) who pointed out the multiplicity of travel itineraries and diversity of social interactions involved in the processes of long-distance

exchange of goods. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the development of research on the issues connected to the long-distance trade between China and the Mediterranean. However, it should be pointed out that, during several decades of studies, little attention was paid to questions concerning reception of exotic products, which were travelling very far from their places of origin.

Starting from the last centuries BC, more and more goods were gradually transported through Eurasia and this phenomenon influenced multiple spheres of life of all societies involved in the process. Appearance of new products certainly influenced local markets, production, art, craft and even aesthetic trends. On the other hand, their use, meaning and reception in the place of origin could be completely different than in the regions where they were imported in small quantities as exotic goods from the other edge of the world.

Palmyra is one of the rare places where archaeological finds of silks of Chinese origin are abundant enough to be studied as intentionally imported merchandise rather than curiosia brought accidentally by wandering travellers. This gives us a unique opportunity for reflection on the social and cultural context of imported luxurious goods, their value and meaning in the society of Roman Palmyra, as well as in the regions on the way from China.

The Palmyrenes were trading with the Persian Gulf region (GAWLIKOWSKI 1988; 1996) and probably also with Indian Ocean ports on the north-western coast of India (STARCKY 1949: no. 96; MILIK 1972: 32; GAWLIKOWSKI 1996: 143). Thus we can track the possible itinerary of Chinese silks travel to Palmyra as a road from China, via the so-called Western Regions and India to the ports in the Persian Gulf (Fig. 1). Then, closer to Palmyra, the itinerary is much better known. The city of Charax, located somewhere in the Tigris-Euphrates delta, was a usual destination of Palmyrene caravans; more than good diplomatic relations existed between Palmyra and the Characene at least in the 2nd c. AD, which is reflected in abundant epigraphic sources (GAWLIKOWSKI 1988; 1996). *PERIPLUS MARIS ERYTHRAEI*, an anonymous itinerary describing sailing and trading in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean regions, written around the mid-1st c. AD points to Apollogos, a port in the Persian Gulf, neighbouring to Charax, as a place where ships from the Western Indian coast were arriving with exotic goods. From Charax silk travelled along the Euphrates and desert roads to Palmyra, being part of the Roman Empire, and possibly was also resold further to the west.

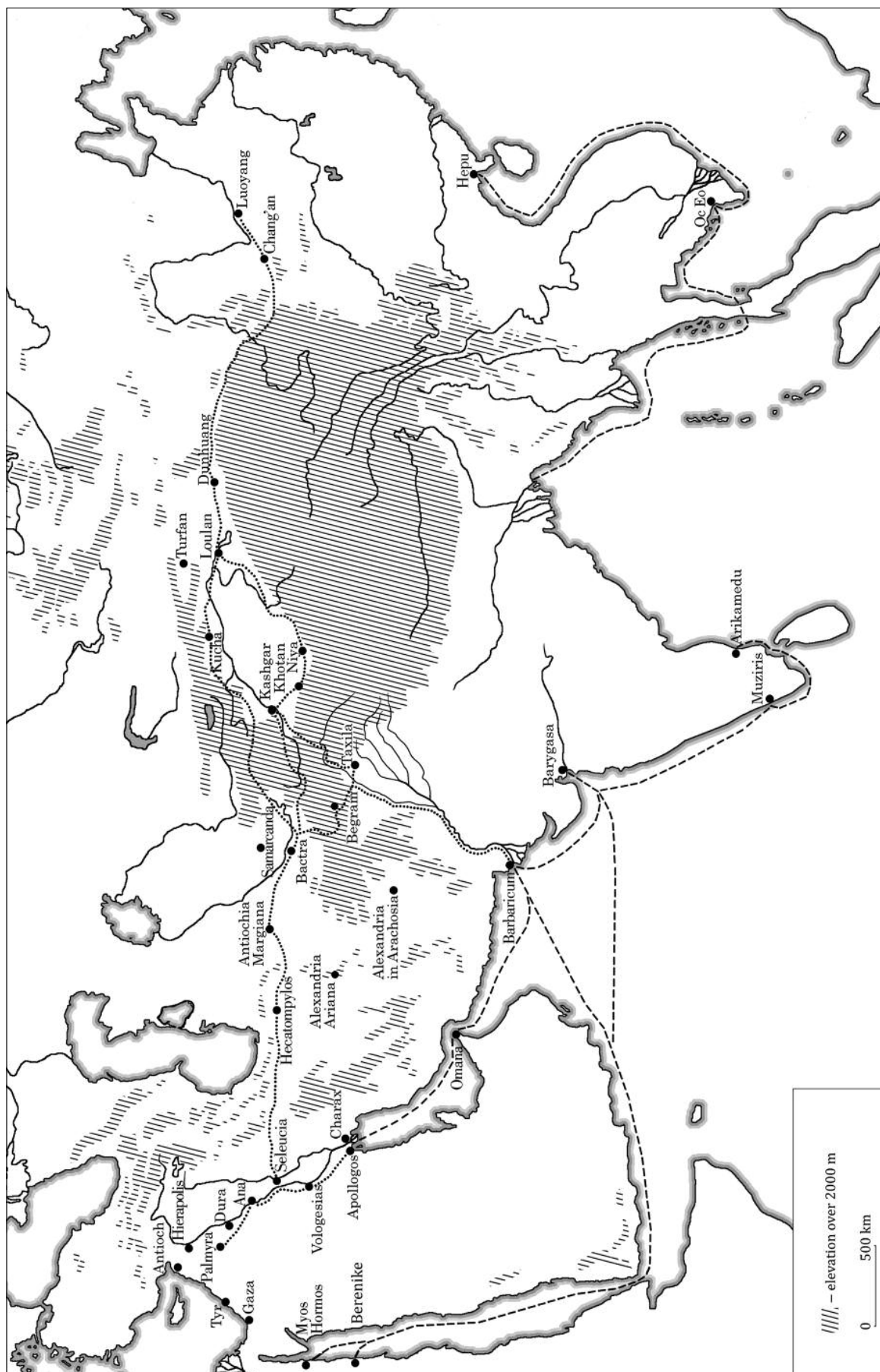


Fig. 1. Map of communication and trade routes in Asia: ----- sea routes; land routes (Drawing R. Żukowski, after BERNARD 2005; fig. 2).

Ryc. 1. Mapa szlaków komunikacyjnych i handlowych w Azji: ----- szlaki morskie; szlaki lądowe.

The purpose of the present study is to follow the silk's way from China to Palmyra in order to determine how the meaning and value of silk was changing in diverse cultural and social contexts. It is not my intention to discuss technological issues of textile production in different areas, and these questions are explained to a limited range, when necessary. I will rather focus on historical and cultural background of the processes connected to transfer of silk objects from China to the Eastern Mediterranean. Due to different modes of exchange, this common product of the Chinese civilisation, deeply rooted in the Chinese tradition was transferred to areas with entirely different culture and tradition, getting a new meaning, function and value. The aim of this paper is to show the differences in perception of Chinese silk in the societies involved in the process of this exchange.

The chronological scope of this paper is generally defined by the chronology of silks found in Palmyra, usually dated to the period between the 1st and 3rd c. AD, corresponding roughly with the reign of the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220). Some questions will however exceed this framework, especially while it will be necessary to explain some long-term processes.

2. Silk production in China during the reign of the Han dynasty

In early China weaving was a typical home industry and every woman was expected to weave at home. Early Chinese texts, such as the *Book of Odes* [Shi Jing 詩經] or *Record of Rites* [Li Ji 禮記] contain instructions about duties of women, which were: breeding of silkworms, silk production and weaving, and providing clothing for the family (KUHN 2012: 5–6). A traditional saying warned: “If a girl does not weave, who’s going to marry this misfortunate?” But the industrial boom of the Western Han [西漢] Empire (206 BC – AD 9) also boosted the development of imperial, government-controlled, official workshops, called Weaving Chambers [Zhi Shi 織室] (ZHAO 2005b: 10). During the reign of the Western Han dynasty, in the capital city of Chang’an two Weaving Chambers were established, named respectively the Western and Eastern one, but in 25 BC the Eastern Weaving Chamber was closed and the Western one went on to be called simply the Weaving Chamber. In addition to these workshops, official

manufactures were also established in other regions (YÜ 1967: 23–24). During the Western Han period (206 BC – AD 9) the most important silk industry centres were developing in the area of the North China Plain, especially in the middle flow of the Yellow River. During the Eastern Han [東漢] reign (AD 25–220) southern manufactures developed and Sichuan silk fabrics become renowned all over China (ZHAO 2005a: 86–87). According to Chinese sources, official silk workshops were employing thousands of workers every year with the costs of their maintenance amounting to 50 million coins¹ per year (YÜ 1967: 23–24).

Silk industry was an important part of economy in many regions. According to the present stage of research, silkworm was relatively early domesticated in China and, although non-mulberry *Antharaea* species also occurs in this region, Chinese silk during the reign of the Han dynasty was mostly the product of *Bombyx mori* breeding (ZHAO 2005a: 4–5). *Bombyx mori* raised in controlled conditions produce thread, which is white, shining and the smoothest of all species, and which does not need to be spun – after boiling the cocoon in slightly alkaline solution to kill the moth and dissolve sericine – it may be just reeled (VARADARAJAN 1988: 561–562; GOOD 1995: 960). In consequence, Chinese mulberry silk is the most precious of all and was also imported by such countries as India, where non-mulberry or wild silk was produced.

The reign of the Han dynasty was a period of significant technological changes, also in weaving techniques. Development of new types of looms increased the diversification of textile production and most of typical Chinese fabrics took shape in this period (ZHAO 2005a: 84; about Chinese silk production in Han China see also: LUBO-LESNIČENKO 1961; RIBOUD 1973; ZHAO 2005b; 2008; YUAN, ZHAO 2009; KUHN 2012; LI 2012). Archaeological data show that different types of silk were produced, reflecting diverse uses and different values of fabrics. The most important feature of Chinese silk textiles in this period was the production of warp-faced cloths while in the western tradition weft-faced fabrics were the most common (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS’AD 2000: 26). The most popular type of cloth was probably tabby weave, called generally *pingwen* (平紋). This could be produced everywhere, using simple weaving machines. There were multiple types of *pingwen* – normal silk tabby called *juan* (絹), open weave silk tabby or gauze called *sha* (紗) or heavy and thick silk tabby, called *di* (縹) (KUHN, ZHAO 2012: 521–529).

¹ The monetary system in ancient China was generally based on copper coins, whose weight and shape varied in different periods, changing a few times even during the reign of the Han dynasty.

The value was conventional, however. It seems that whatever was the official coin in that time, it was agreed as a conventional basic unit for all the monetary calculations (SWANN 1950: 377–378).

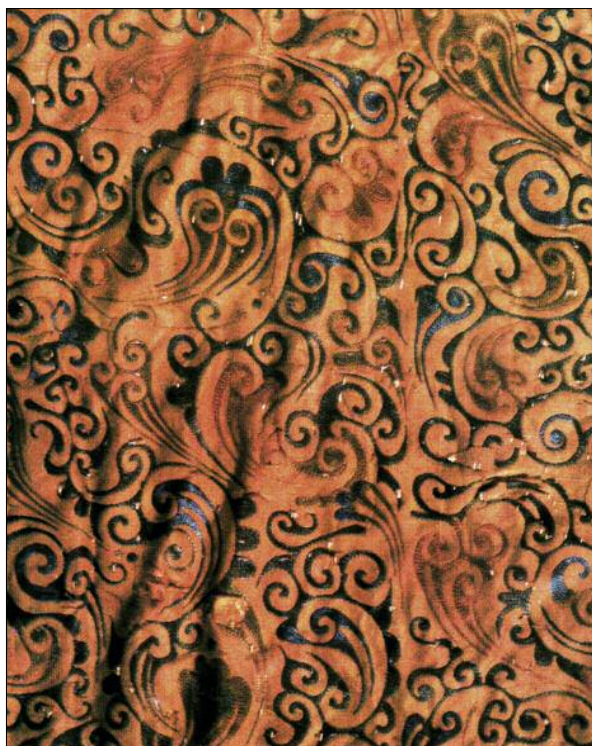


Fig. 2. Embroidered tabby silk from the tomb No. 1 at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province (ZHAO 2005b: pl. 8:a).

Ryc. 2. Haftowany jedwab z grobowca nr 1 w Mawangdui, Changsha, prow. Hunan.

Additional value could be obtained by embroidering, quite popular in the Han times (Figs. 2, 3). The second popular type of silk fabric was the so-called Han damask – warp-faced tabby with warp floats. Other definitions describe this type of textile as damask on the plain weave, which was called *qi* (綺) during the time of the reign of the Han dynasty (XU 2007: 160) (Figs. 4:a, 5). The most elaborate and obviously the most expensive was multicoloured patterned silk, called *jin* (錦), or sometimes Chinese brocade – polychrome warp-faced compound tabby (Figs. 4:b, 6, 7).

The *jin* silk is especially interesting, because of its decorative motives in a characteristic style, full of local symbolism. Almost every piece of the *jin* silk had an auspicious meaning, expressed by a decorative motif or inscription, understandable for an educated Chinese, but only nice looking for a foreigner. During the Han times, the most popular decorative motif was a pattern of meandering clouds originating from elder embroidery pattern called “longevity” [*changshou* 長壽], known for example from the fabrics found in the tomb no. 1 at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan province [湖南長沙馬王堆] (LI 2012: 134–142). Many pieces were decorated by scrolls and auspicious animals, such as dragons, tigers or *qilins* [麒麟] (sometimes interpreted as unicorns). There is also a small group of known examples of ‘speaking’ patterns – inscriptions, which make clear their value and importance in the Han Dynasty society. “Long life and prosperity” is the typical content of inscriptions on the silk from this time. Some silks were decorated with

characters meaning simple wishes: a silk ribbon found in Tomb 1 in Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province [湖南長沙馬王堆] wishes: *qianjin* [千金] – “thousand pieces of gold” (ZHAO 2005a: 120–121; VON FALKENHAUSEN 2000: 71, cat. no. A1; CHANGSHA... 1980: 55–58, tables 26–29). Others have more elaborated texts shedding some light on the real value of this textile type in the Chinese society. A piece of Chinese *jin* silk found in Tomb 8 in Niya, Minfeng, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region [新疆维吾尔自治区民丰县, 尼雅遗址] is decorated with the text: *qianqiu wansui yi zi sun* [千秋萬歲宜子孫] – “Thousand autumns, ten thousand years shall sons and grandsons benefit” (ZHAO, YU 2000: 74, cat. no. 34; VON FALKENHAUSEN 2000, 74, cat. no. B16). One of the most interesting texts is found on the piece discovered in Loulan, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region [新疆维吾尔自治区樓蘭遗址].



Fig. 3. Embroidered tabby silk from the tomb No. 2 at Yinwan, Donghai, Jiangsu Province (ZHAO 2002: fig. 7).

Ryc. 3. Haftowany jedwab z grobowca nr 2 w Yinwan, Donghai, prow. Jiangsu.

It says: *Han Ren xiu wen guang jun zi sun wu ji* [韓仁繡文廣君子孫無極] – “Embroidered by Han Ren, wide and ornamented, your sons and grandsons [will benefit] forever.” (STEIN 1928: 247, cat. no. L.C.07.a; VON FALKENHAUSEN 2000: 73, cat. no. B12a; RIBOUD 1973: 22). A small piece of very similar textile with only two first characters preserved was also found in the delta of Qum-Darya during the Swedish campaign in 1934 (BERGMAN 1939: 125, pl. 23). These few examples show that silk in Chinese culture was not only a precious textile, but could also bring an auspicious meaning or blessing for the owner. For that reason *jin* silks were probably often used as gifts offered by the Chinese court to the rulers of allied nations.

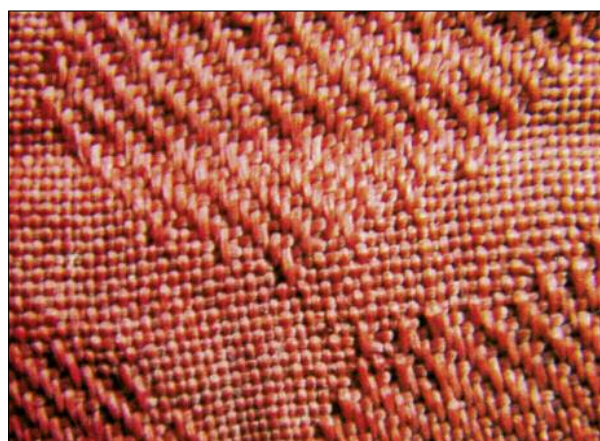
Silk was an important part of Chinese economy and life. The question of its value and function in Han dynasty China at first glance does not seem clear, because silk is omnipresent in multiple layers of Chinese culture and life. Written sources indicate that it was produced widely, even in simple farming households. But archaeological finds come mostly from aristocratic graves. It seems obvious that different qualities must have had appropriate use and prices. The most elaborate fabrics, such as the *jin* silks were definitely believed to be luxurious products and often connected

to the luxurious style of life, while others were appropriate for lower classes of the Chinese society. But despite its common production and regardless its actual price, silk was always considered as valuable product and often used as currency. There are documents attesting payment to soldiers in silk as early as during the reign of Wang Mang (王莽) (AD 9–23) (RASCHKE 1978: 725, note 302). In the 3rd c., after the fall of the Eastern Han dynasty, monetary economy became unstable and silk became a quasi-currency for a few hundred years. Under the reign of some rulers taxes were collected in silk rather than in coins (LIU 1988: 70).

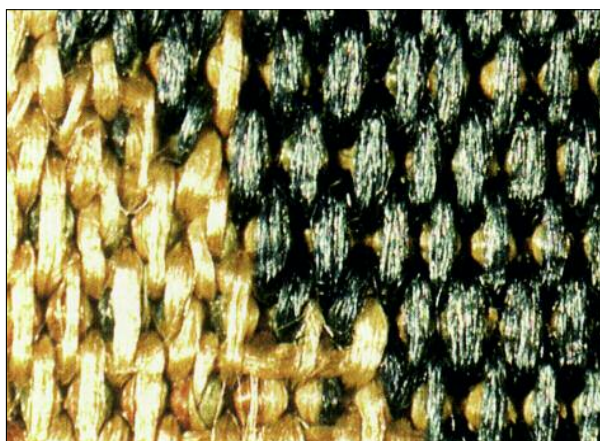
3. Silk flows westward

The development of silk production and establishment of government-controlled manufactures during the reign of the Han dynasty need a closer look. With the home industry still flourishing, the development of government-controlled workshops must have had more reasons than a simple response to the needs of the court.

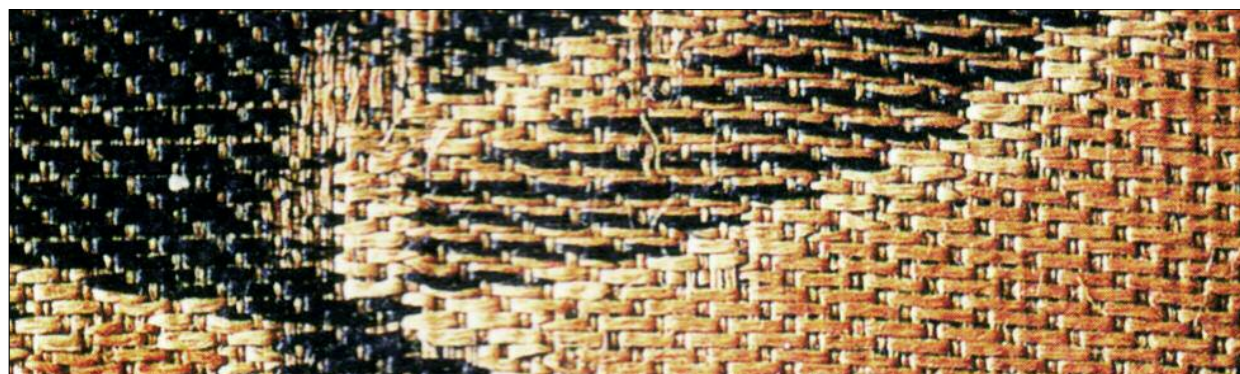
One of the reasons for such a quick development could be a growing demand for silk caused by the political situation in China during the reign of the Western Han



a



b



c

Fig. 4. Types of fabrics: a – Han damask (*qi*) weave; b – warp-faced compound tabby (*jin*) weave; c – *taqueté* – weft-faced compound tabby (*jin*) (ZHAO 2005b: pls. 2:b,g, 3:a).

Ryc. 4. Typy splotów tkackich: a – tzw. chiński adamaszek (*qi*); b – tkanina *jin* – splot wzorzysty osnowowy; c – tkanina *jin* – splot wzorzysty wątkowy (*taqueté*).

dynasty when, in many cases, instead of military campaigns, precious gifts including silk were sent to enemy barbarian tribes to establish peace on the borders. The most serious threat for the Han Empire were nomadic tribes called by the Chinese Xiongnu [匈奴], who were controlling lands north and north-west from the border and made multiple raids on the Chinese territory. At the very beginning of the reign of the Han dynasty, the first emperor, Gaozu [漢高祖] tried to resolve the problem in a military way, but the Chinese art of war was yet not prepared for such confrontation and he found himself besieged in the city of Pingcheng [平城]² and in 198 BC – forced to sign a rather humiliating treaty, which stated that the Xiongnu were equal to the Han Chinese, their peace would be cemented by the marriage of Han princesses with the Xiongnu chieftain *shanyu* [單于],³ and that *shanyu* would be gratified by yearly gifts in silk, livestock and food. This event determined the Chinese policy against the Xiongnu for many years. In the court the idea that barbarians should rather be paid to keep away from the borders than fought prevailed and the policy of so-called *heqin* [和親] – “peace through kinship” was established (KEAY 2008: 132–133).

The *heqin* policy changed during the reign of Emperor Wu (漢武帝) (141–87 BC) who carried out some successful campaigns against the Xiongnu, but the idea was still alive and came back soon in a new version. In 51 BC, when the Xiongnu federation broke up into two coalitions, the Northern Xiongnu remained independent, while the Southern Xiongnu declared formal submission to China (DI COSMO 1994: 1095). From this moment onwards they started to benefit from the so-called *tributary policy*, which was quickly also extended on city-states in the so-called Western Regions [*Xiyu* 西域 – present-day Xinjiang area]. In the simple words – tribal chieftains and small state rulers were declaring their subjection to the emperor and they had to present themselves in the court with the tribute as well as send a ruling family hostage to the Chinese capital, but they were granted with rich gifts and military protection in reward, upon request. Since the tribute did not have to be equal to Chinese gifts, and actually never was, in effect a huge amount of goods was flowing north and westward.

One of the most desired Chinese products was obviously silk and we have documents showing how much of fabric and yarn was sent to Xiongnu tribes specifically. The quantity of silken gifts was growing visibly every year: in 51 BC it was 8000 pieces of silk fabric and 6000 catties⁴

of silk yarn, while in 1 BC – already 30000 pieces of silk fabric and 30000 catties of silk yarn (YÜ 1967: 46–47).

4. Border trade

Due to gifts and payments starting from the last two centuries BC we can observe a one way flow of huge amount of silken gifts travelling westward. This was obviously supplemented by regular trade, but the international trade in China was highly restricted and possible only under some special conditions. Most of traders in all probability came from different areas of Central Asia.

There is no plausible evidence of western traders operating in China during the reign of the Han dynasty. In Ptolemy's *GEOGRAPHIA* (I.12) we find a mention of Maes Titianos, a merchant, who sent a caravan from Hierapolis in Syria to *Sera Metropolis* – the capital of the Seres, usually identified with peoples living in the area of Tarim Basin. This text, based on the relation of Marinus of Tyre, who claimed to have known Maes personally, is valuable as a detailed account on one of possible itineraries. However, the road is described only up to the place called *Lithinos Pyrgos* (Stone Tower), which is believed to be placed somewhere west of Kashgar, probably in one of the passes of the Alai Mountains, on the way towards Samarkand (BERNARD 2005: 954–955). The last passage, from *Lithinos Pyrgos* to *Sera Metropolis* was not described, and this fact implies that indeed the caravan of Maes in all probability stopped in *Lithinos Pyrgos* and never reached either China or even the Tarim Basin. Chinese sources do not bring much information about western traders either. In *Liang shu* [梁書] (54,48), a Chinese chronicle written in the first half of the 7th c. we find a piece of information that western traders often arrive in countries of South East Asia, but rarely in China itself. During the reign of Emperor Da of Eastern Wu [吳大皇帝] (AD 229–252) a merchant called Qin Lun [秦論], claiming to come from the Roman Empire arrived in the southern Jiaozhi commandery [交趾郡] (present-day northern Vietnam) and was sent by the governor to the Chinese court. He was asked to describe his country, but his account was not included to the text of the chronicle so it is impossible to say whether he really came from the Mediterranean region (HIRTH 1975: 102–103). Anyway, the fact that a simple merchant was sent to the imperial court says a lot about the extraordinary character of his visit.

² Modern Datong [大同].

³ *Shanyu* – Chinese historic title of the Xiongnu tribe chieftain.

⁴ Measure of weight, Chinese *jin* [斤]. About 450 gram.

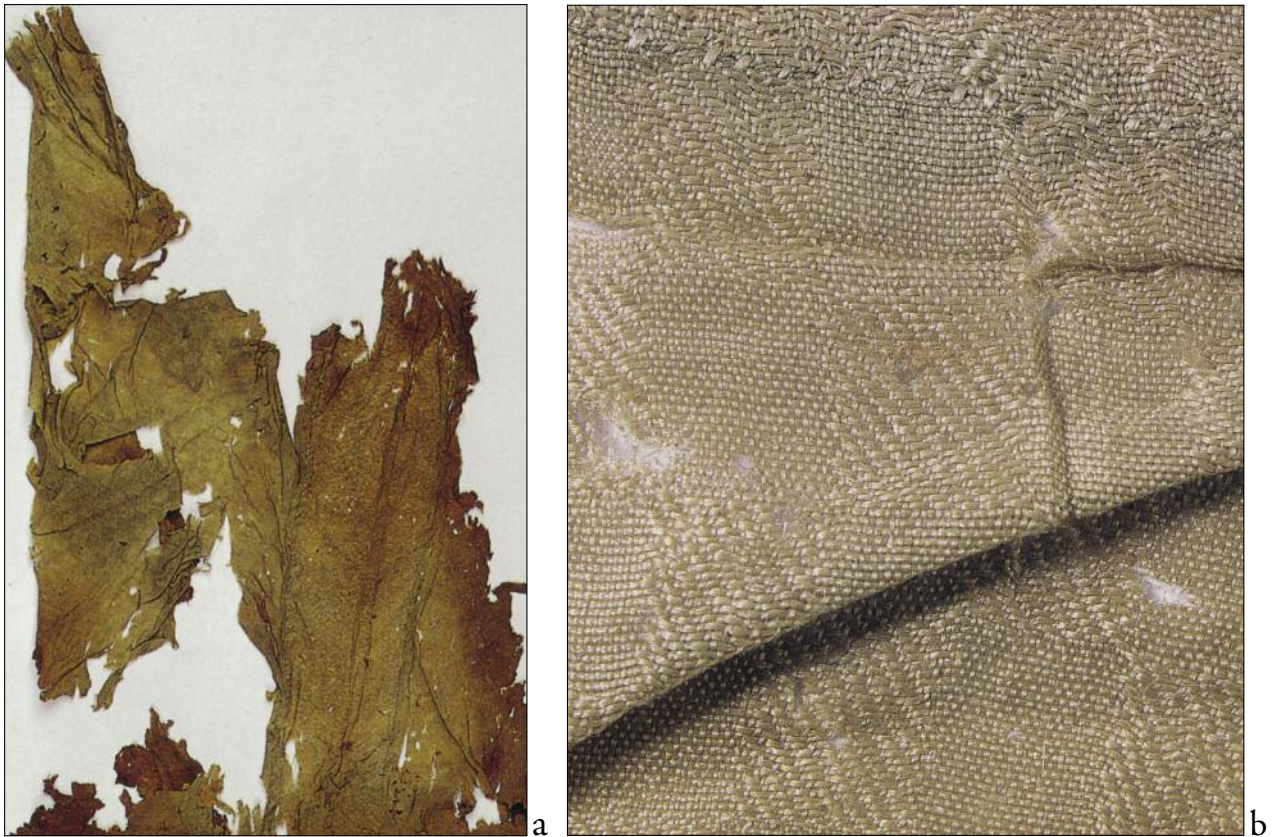


Fig. 5. Han damask (*qi*) from the Yingpan necropolis, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (ZHAO 2002: cat. no. 22, pp. 63–64): a – whole preserved fragment; b – detail.

Ryc. 5. Jedwab *qi* z nekropoli Yingpan, Ujgurski Region Autonomiczny Xinjiang: a – zachowany fragment; b – detal.



Fig. 6. *Jin* silk with interwoven inscription. Edging of the wool caftan. Tomb No. 8 at Niya, Minfeng, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (ZHAO, YU 2000: fig. 01.1.1).

Ryc. 6. Jedwab *jin* z inskrypcją. Obszycie wełnianego kaftana z grobowca nr 8, Niya, Minfeng, Ujgurski Region Autonomiczny Xinjiang.

Foreign traders were generally allowed to trade with the Han Chinese only when granted a special permission. In many cases such permission was part of a tributary treaty. Chinese sources show that trade permissions were highly desired, but rather unwillingly granted by the Chinese government at least in the beginning. Trade occasions also emerged when a foreign embassy was paying an annual visit at the court, requesting a renewal of a treaty, or just presenting tribute, so the practice was sometimes abused and some tribal chieftains were sending envoys or were traveling to the capital themselves as often as possible, only to get more gifts and have more occasions for direct trade (SHI JI 110; YÜ 1967: 99–104).

The official method for international transactions were border markets, often called “barbarian markets” [*hu shi* 胡市]. They were organised in cities at the frontier or in strategic frontier military posts. Here non-Chinese “barbarians” were officially allowed to trade with the Han Chinese. However, there were no permanent market-places, but rather trade fairs organised usually once a year, with strict rules concerning categories of goods that could be traded (HUANG 2000: 141–159). Finally, many soldiers, or

members of their families, were trading on local markets and so-called “military markets” [*jun shi* 軍市] with the non-Chinese in garrison cities (YÜ 1967: 95).

Of course some Chinese traders travelled out of China in search of profits, but such private enterprises were not very popular and definitely not supported by the government. On the contrary, the official chronicle of the Han dynasty underlined that foreign trade was operated by “barbarian merchants’ boats” and, although it stated that some Chinese officials and volunteers were ready to travel far away by the sea, it equalled such adventurers with simple pirates and robbers (HAN SHU 28, *Dilizhi*, 漢書-地理志 – *Book of Han – Treatise on Geography*).

The sale of silk must have been very good and the growing demand could hardly be covered by the Chinese industry. Some documents concerning transactions from this region shed more light on this issue. Particularly interesting is a document recording a transaction between two Chinese soldiers stationed at the border. A piece of silk was sold by one soldier to the other one for the official price of 600 coins while the market price of such piece was 1000 (YÜ 1967: 96). It seems that at least in the border area, the demand for silk was much bigger than the supply, and foreigners were ready to pay a market price nearly the double of the official price to get it.

5. Silk out of China

It is not very easy to understand the value of silk among nomadic tribes, which mostly profited from the tributary policy. Literary sources show only the perception of their enemies – the Chinese – who used silk not only to bribe the Xiongnu tribes, but also, as the sources state, to spoil them by luxurious lifestyle and make them soft and easier to conquer (YÜ 1967: 36–37).

Although the archaeological evidence is still not clear, silk seems to be a typical good in rich Xiongnu graves contemporaneous to the reign of the Han dynasty, together with other luxurious items, such as lacquerware and bronze mirrors (DI COSMO 1994: 1100).

Of all pieces of silk offered by Chinese Emperors to Xiongnu *shanyus*, most must have been redistributed among higher-ranking nobles. This could be reflected by the tombs of Noyon Uul (Noin Ula), one of which is considered to be a grave of a legendary hero and a head of the tribe. Even plundered, it contained a few fine pieces of silk (TREVER 1932). Besides its prestigious significance, silk actually had very little utilitarian value for the nomads as has already been observed by a Chinese advisor of the Xiongnu *shanyu* (SHI JI 110; YÜ 1967: 37). Silk clothing was not suitable for the nomadic style of life. On the other hand, textiles as a whole constituted an important part of the material culture among nomadic tribes. They were a substitute for house building materials and furniture.



Fig. 7. *Jin* silk with interwoven inscription from the tomb No. 20, Yingpan necropolis, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (ZHAO 2002: cat. no. 10, p. 42).

Ryc. 7. Jedwab *jin* z inskrypcją z grobu nr 20, nekropola Yingpan, Ujgurski Region Autonomiczny Xinjiang.



Fig. 8. Kyrgyz yurt, Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture Kizilsu, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China (Photo R. Żukowski).

Ryc. 8. Kirgiska jurta, Kirgiska Prefektura Autonomiczna Kizilsu, Ujgurski Region Autonomiczny Xinjiang, Chiny.

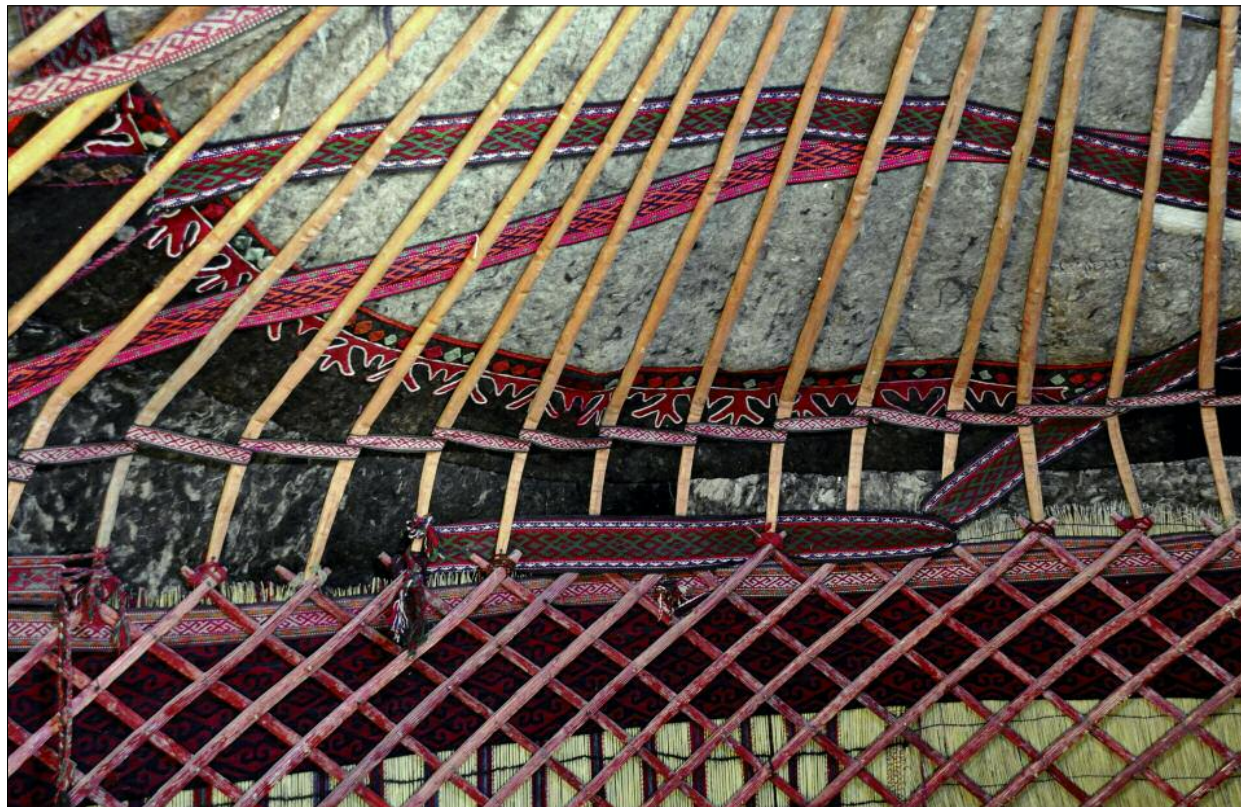


Fig. 9. Inner view of a Kyrgyz yurt (Photo R. Żukowski).

Ryc. 9. Wnętrze kirgiskiej jurty.

Unfortunately, we do not have too much archaeological data helping to reconstruct the Xiongnu lifestyle. According to Chinese sources they were nomad pastoralists and as such they probably lived in some kind of tents. The present-day state of research suggests that in fact there were also agricultural settled communities among the Xiongnu, but the nomadic economy was predominant on the steppes during the reign of the Han dynasty (DI COSMO 1994: 1099–1100). We could use here an anachronistic example of pastoralist communities living now in this region in order to give an impression of Xiongnu nomadic lifestyle. Until modern times, different groups of nomads living in the northern and western borderland of China, such as the Mongols, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, live in yurts (Figs. 8, 9), made with a wooden frame and a felt cover. Most of inside elements are decorative – bands joining wooden elements, the lining of the tent, pillows and covers. All kinds of fabric form an important part of the property of the nomads and the beauty of textile is certainly praised and appreciated in such a society.

Abundant finds of diverse types of textiles in Xiongnu aristocratic graves suggest that cloth played an important role in their culture and everyday life (TREVER 1932; LUBO-LESNIČENKO 1961; GOOD 1995). Raschke (1978: 611) argued that only the prestigious aspect of silk was important among the nomads and the artistic values of such textiles were usually neglected. In his opinion nomadic societies demonstrated “disrespect” to beautifully decorated fabrics by cutting them into pieces fitted to be used as shabracks (like in Pazyryk) or to be nailed to wooden beams in kurgans and attached to the coffin’s cover (like in Noyon Uul) (RASCHKE 1978: 619). Such reasoning however disregards the question of differences in aesthetic conventions among diverse societies. Silk must have been of special value to the nomads also because of its beauty and for this reason it was used for diverse decorative purposes. Obviously it implied a high status of the owner as a valuable and luxurious good. We cannot forget about the ideological aspect of silk ownership either. At least at the beginning, Chinese silk was obtained during military raids against China or as a tribute preventing such raids. Thus, in both cases, it could be treated as a symbol of military power. At least part of silk gifts must have been treasured and kept as the sign of prestige. But the rest had to be exchanged for more useful goods.

The economy of nomadic tribes in this region was not totally dependent on gifts and trade with China. It is obvious that other sources of grain, pottery, and various products of settled societies were accessible, including exchange with small agricultural communities living north of the Chinese border and even a small scale “nomadic agriculture,” as Di Cosmo (1994) argued. However, this economy was neither perfectly stable nor independent. This is clearly visible especially during the Eastern Hans (AD 25–220), when gifts requested from the Chinese court also comprised cattle, suggesting shortages in livestock – the main re-

source of nomadic economy (YÜ 1967: 50). In consequence we should suppose that large part of luxurious goods was exchanged and thus moved further west.

Besides different barbarian tribes, also some small states of present-day Xinjiang, located along the roads on the fringes of the Taklamakan Desert were included into the tributary system of the Han Empire. Some cities in this area, like Loulan or Niya were intermittently under Chinese control during the reign of the Han dynasty (HANSEN 2012: 35–37). People living there could obtain silk from the Chinese themselves and from different barbarian tribes through exchange, but here again, large part was due to the imperial gifts. Because of the special climatic conditions which allow very good preservation of organic materials, most of known silk fabrics dated to the reign of the Han dynasty come from this area, also called the Western Regions. A large quantity of Chinese silks from this period was found in the necropolises in Loulan, and Niya (Minfeng), suggesting that silk was popular and used mainly for clothing and shoe production, and also to cover small precious items, such as mirrors (QI, WANG 2008: 28–35, 48–57; WENWU 1972: 14–19). Sometimes objects having specifically funerary purpose were also made of silk: in local rites the face of the deceased had to be covered by a kind of a face cover which was often made of silk (ZHAO 2002: 31). A particularly interesting example is a tomb of a man, identified as a member of the highest elite group of Niya, or even a ruler, excavated in the last decade of the past century (Tomb 8). The occupant of the tomb was wearing a woollen caftan and pants lined with three different types of *jin* silk decorated with animal patterns and auspicious inscriptions. Multiple other pieces of grave goods, such as a hat, an arm-guard and a pillow made of *jin* silk, were also found in his grave, showing his high status (ZHAO, YU 2000: 28–33, 60–63).

In this region the technique of silk weaving appears about the 3rd–4th c. AD, but the quality, at least at the beginning, was different than in China (YOKOHARI 1992: 167–168; WANG 2006: 76; ZHAO 2008: 76–83). Latest finds from Yingpan [营盘] and Zaganluk [扎滚鲁克] show that Xinjiang silk textile production of the 3rd–4th c. AD was developed enough to create polychrome fabrics. However, typical local clothes are *taquetés* (polychrome weft-faced compound tabbies) using silk threads spun in Z direction while, as it was written above, the Chinese were weaving mainly warp-faced compound tabbies and used rather unspun silk. Warp-faced compound tabbies were also produced in Xinjiang, but only narrow ribbons were weaved using this technique (ZHAO 2008: 76–93; WANG 2008: 18–39).

6. Silk in India

From the barbarian tribes and city-states on the Chinese border, silk was traded and transported further south and west and finally reached the Roman Empire. It

seems however that the main redistribution region was India: apparently Rome imported most of the silk fabric and floss from Indian ports on the north-western coast. The road from the Tarim Basin region to India could be a still active route through Karakorum, going via the Kashgaria and Khunjerab Pass, then along the Hunza, Gilgit and Indus Valleys, up to Kushan cities, such as Taxila, or the port of Barbarikon (KEAY 2010: 115–117). There are still visible Buddhist graffiti and drawings on stones along the today's Karakorum Highway, and the earliest of them is dated to the first three centuries AD (HANSEN 2012: 29–30). Unfortunately, the present state of knowledge about the perception of silk and its value in India is worse than poor. What we have are only scattered archaeological finds of silk fabrics coming from South Asia, including the Indus Valley (MEHTA, CHOWDHARY 1966: 186; RAY 2003: 220; GOOD, KENOYER, MEADOW 2009). *PERIPLUS MARIS ERYTHRAEI* mentions Chinese silk or silk yarn and Chinese cloths as being traded in Indian ports, such as Barbarikon, Barygaza and Limyrike (38, 49, 56). In India silk was also produced locally, however, its quality was different, as it was obtained from a different species of silkmooths, not fed on mulberry trees. They are called usually “wild silkworms” as many of them were not domesticated or bred. The silk of diverse indigenous silkmooth species, such as *Antheraea mylitta*, *Antheraea assamensis* and *Samia cynthia*, was used for local textiles and is known to have been exported as far as to the Indus Valley already in the 3rd millennium BC (GOOD, KENOYER, MEADOW 2009: 459–462). Ancient Indian literary sources contain at least three terms for silk types: *patrorna*, *kauseya* and *cina-patṭa*. *ARTHAŚĀSTRA*, dated probably to the 2nd c. AD mentions *kauseya* silk-cloth and a fabric called *cina-patṭa*, specifying that the latter is being produced by the Chinese manufacturers (II, 11). According to the Sanskrit dictionary of *Pāṇini* dated to the 4th c. BC *kauseya* was “originating from cocoon” (SCHARFE 1993: 288). The differentiation between wild silk and Chinese silk was clear in the account on India in the *DA TANG XI YU JI* written by a Buddhist monk of Chinese origin who travelled through Central and South Asia in the 7th c. AD. In his text we find a piece of information that *jia she ye* (*kauseya*) which was worn by the inhabitants of India was a product of wild silkworms (*DA TANG XI YU JI* II). The most problematic seems to be the term *patrorna*, also present in *ARTHAŚĀSTRA* (II, 11), which may be explained as “uncultivated silk from different types of trees” – thus silk of wild silkworms. On the other hand, in *Amarakośa*, the Sanskrit Thesaurus written during the Gupta's reigns in early 5th c. AD, *patrorna* was defined as bleached silk (SCHARFE 1993: 290). However, the *Amarakośa* explanation also suggests wild silk, since most of wild silkmooths produced fibres not as perfectly white as the *bombyx mori* yarn, so they had to be bleached. All these sources show that there was a clear distinction between locally produced types of wild silk and the Chinese silk, but according to *ARTHAŚĀSTRA* both types of fabric were worth enough to be included in the king's

treasury, along with more common types of textiles, such as woollen blankets and cotton cloth (II, 11).

In the texts of Kalidasa's play, written probably at the beginning of the 5th c. AD, during the Gupta's reigns, silk fabric appears in the context of court scenes, where it is worn by beautiful girls and is a preferred textile for marriage dresses (*ABHIGÑĀNAŚĀKUNTALAM*, IV). It does not seem that silk had any prestigious value and usually it does not appear as a symbol of status, but it was obviously appreciated as a cloth of exceptional beauty.

7. Silk in Roman Palmyra

Palmyra was a trade centre, which developed in the Roman Period because of the trade with the Persian Gulf and sites along the western Indian coast. The city controlled the desert road down to ports on the northern edge of the Persian Gulf. Epigraphic sources from the city bring evidence that the Palmyrenes were organising caravans to Vologesias and Charax (GAWLIKOWSKI 1988; 1996). They also sent at least one maritime expedition to so-called “Scythia,” which is believed to be the region of the River Indus' mouth, with the famous port of Barbarikon, as it is attested by the epigraphic material (STARCKY 1949: no. 96; MILIK 1972: 32; GAWLIKOWSKI 1996: 143). Palmyrene caravans must have brought goods of high value, but, because of the lack of archaeological sources, we still do not know what kind of goods were exactly imported and what the Palmyrenes could export in exchange. It seems that at least part of the merchandise was composed of perishable products, such as scents and spices (ŻUCHOWSKA 2013). Also pearls from the Persian Gulf and agate beads from north-western India have been found in Palmyra (WITECKA 1994: cat. nos. 1, 2, 9, 11; HIGUCHI, SAITO: 2001, cat. nos. 25, 26, 73, 74). But the most exotic goods imported to Palmyra via India and Charax were Chinese silk textiles. An important group of different fabrics have been found in the Palmyrene necropolis showing that these textiles were not only imported but also used and worn by the citizens (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000).

In Palmyra all main types of silks have been found: plain silk – monochrome and multicoloured, embroidered silks (Fig. 10), the Han damasks (Fig. 11) and *jin* brocades (Figs. 12–14), including multicoloured silks with auspicious inscriptions in Chinese characters. The last two types were obviously of Chinese origin. Among three *jin* silks, one, preserved only in very small pieces, was decorated with probably animal figures between stylised clouds – a typical motif for this kind of fabric produced in China during the reign of the Han dynasty (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000: cat. no. 521, pl. 93). Ornament of the second one, decorated with fantastic animals in so-called “diamond grid” (Fig. 10) (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000: cat. no. 223, pls. 94, 95) was less common, but finds some analogies in Chinese textiles unearthed in



Fig. 10. Embroidered silk from the tomb of Kitot, Palmyra (Photo K. Juchniewicz).

Ryc. 10. Haftowany jedwab z grobowca Kitota, Palmyra.

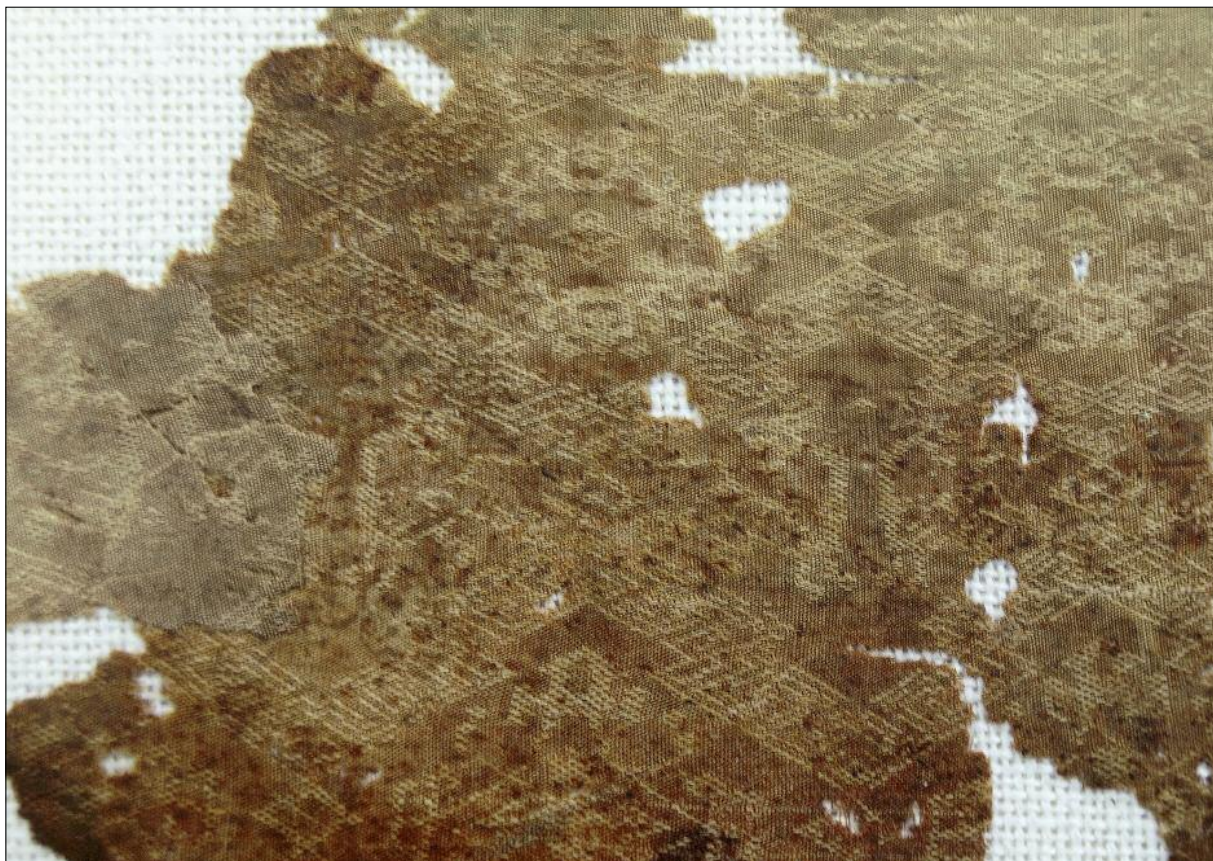


Fig. 11. Han damask silk (*qi*) from the tomb of Kitot, Palmyra (Photo K. Juchniewicz).

Ryc. 11. Jedwab *qi* z grobowca Kitota, Palmyra.



Fig. 12. *Jin* silk from the tomb of Kitot, Palmyra: a – preserved fragment; b – detail (Photo K. Juchniewicz).

Ryc. 12. Jedwab *jin* z grobowca Kitota, Palmyra: a – zachowany fragment; b – detal.

present-day Xinjiang area (Li 2012: 158–159, fig. 3.44:a,b), for example in Loulan. The third fragment, found in the funerary tower No. 65, needs special attention: it presents a man collecting grapes from the vine, accompanied by camels and tigers. Tripod jars are presented between human and animal figures (Figs. 13, 14). The technique of weaving of this fabric is evidently Chinese – warp-faced compound tabby and the material used was dyed mulberry silk without traces of spinning so this fabric must be definitely interpreted as Chinese product (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000: 145–146, cat. no. 240). However, motifs are totally foreign to the Chinese, except for the tigers and the tripod jars being very Chinese in style. Such pattern has no analogy in Chinese silk textiles from this time, and it probably represents one of the earliest examples of production influenced by western stylistic preferences and manufactured for the purpose of gifts or exchange with the Western Regions. From there, this piece travelled up to Palmyra, where the motif was surprisingly familiar.

The Palmyrenes were not only textile merchants

and users but also producers. They were producing wool and weaving woollen fabrics in local workshops and this production was a very important part of economy and social life. Spinning and weaving constituted typical female activities in the Middle-Eastern region. In the 2nd c. AD the most popular female attribute on Palmyrene funerary reliefs were spindle and distaff. Similar portraits were also common in other cities like Seleucia – Zeugma (WAGNER 1976: pls. 34:42b, 49:123,124; PARLASCA 1982: pls. 7:4, 10:1,2, 12:1,2). This typical representation of a female virtue proves the wide spread and importance of textile home industry in this period.

The Palmyrenes were not only using textiles for clothing, but also as house mattresses and pillows – iconographic representations of such goods are abundant in funerary sculpture and relief, and characteristically, architectural decoration of Palmyra was based on the textiles design (AL AS'AD, SCHMIDT-COLINET 1995: 50–51). It is not perfectly clear whether the Palmyrenes were manufacturing fabrics made of other types of yarn. Cotton, linen



Fig. 13. *Jin* silk from the tomb No. 65, Palmyra (Photo K. Juchniewicz).

Ryc. 13. Jedwab *jin* z grobowca nr 65, Palmyra.

and silk have been found besides wool among the fabrics unearthed in graves.

Han damasks and *jin* brocades obviously came from China as finished products. Tabbies could be imported, but also produced locally from imported yarn. Also some embroidery was probably local addition to the tabbies, although in most of the cases filaments were imported *Bombyx mori* silk. A few examples of wild silk use have been found. Among them, some were identified as *tussah* silk made of *Antharaea* species cocoons, which are indigenous to the vast area of the southern part of China and South Asia (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000: 12–13, pl. 102:g). Of special interest are two examples of damask made of fine mulberry silk, which are considered as woven in Syria using imported Chinese yarn (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000: 159, cat. no. 319; 178, cat. no. 453). There was also a small group of textiles of unknown origin found among textile material from Palmyra, which are made of silk or use silk warp but woollen, cotton or linen weft. In some examples warp was made of visibly spun silk (Z-twisted) and western dyes, such as cochineal or kermes, were used, which suggest Eastern Mediterranean origin of cloth. In other examples use of mulberry silk without traces of spinning suggests at least use of imported Chinese threads. Textiles made of silk warp and linen weft dated to this period are known only from Palmyra, but they could be produced in another Middle Eastern region (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000: 53–55).

The social context and value of silk in Palmyrene culture, which blended eastern and western influences to form its original style, is again ignored by our sources.

Roman literary sources are useless for research of Palmyrene culture. Pliny the Elder does not hide his disgust for silk clothes, which uncover women's charms, make men soft and unable to wear armour (*NATURALIS HISTORIA* XI.25–27). As a luxurious and expensive product silk was often deprecated by the Senate, for the first time during the early reign of Tiberius (Tacitus, *ANNALES* II.33). Also in later times orators and even emperors claimed that luxuries such as silk degenerated men and women, so Roman citizens should not defile themselves wearing such fabrics. Nevertheless, demand for silk was still growing in the Roman Empire and prices for such fabrics were enormous – as we can read in Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices, the price of one Roman pound (about 330 g) of white silk was 12000 denarii (*EDICTUM DIOCLETIANI*... 23.1a) – the same as one Roman pound of gold wire or thread (30.2), while the same amount of best type of wool was worth only 300 denarii (25.1a), and the price of the first quality linen was not supposed to exceed 1200 denarii for one Roman pound (26.4–4a).

The Palmyrenes were however only superficially Hellenised and there are very little traces of influence of the Roman thought in their society. They did not seem to share Pliny's concern about bad influence of luxurious silk tex-

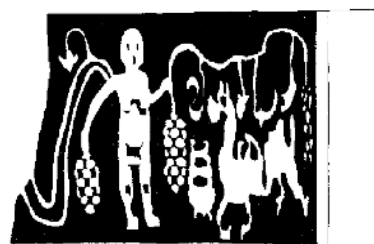


Fig. 14. Reconstruction of the decorative motifs of *jin* silk from the tomb No. 65 at Palmyra (SCHMIDT-COLINET, STAUFFER, AL AS'AD 2000: fig. 105).

Ryc. 14. Rekonstrukcja motywów dekoracyjnych na jedwabiu *jin* z grobowca nr 65, Palmyra.

tiles on their life and morality. On the contrary, being merchants in the first place, they demonstrated their taste for valuable goods, by wearing richly decorated textiles and jewellery, which is attested by funerary sculpture (INGHOLT 1928; 1935; PARLASCA 1976; SADURSKA 1977; 1994; SADURSKA, BOUNNI 1994; SCHMIDT-COLINET 1992; TANABE 1986). In Palmyrene culture silk seems to have been associated with richness, and then, only by consequence could show the high status of the owner.

There are no literary sources concerning life in Palmyra in the Roman Period. The "Palmyrene Tariff" – a long inscription containing a list of taxes for trading goods and services – does not mention exotic products imported from outside the Roman Empire, since they were taxed on the border (TEIXIDOR 1984). Inscriptions honouring leaders of caravans or those who sponsored travels up to the Persian Gulf or the Indus Delta show a high status of people engaged into this risky business, but actually no literary source mentions silk or any other goods that were imported by these caravans. We cannot however neglect the indirect evidence of written, epigraphic and iconographic sources.

Caravan trade was the fundament of the Palmyrene economy. Appian of Alexandria, in his *Civil Wars* (*APPIANI HISTORIA ROMANA* V.9) wrote that the Palmyrenes, being merchants, imported Indian and Arabian products to resell

them to Rome. Income of overseas transactions boosted development of Palmyra during the first three centuries AD and the importance of caravan trade is visible in almost all spheres of its culture. Caravans, organised by Palmyrene merchants must have brought exceptional benefits to the city, since those who were in charge were often honoured by erection of their statues and by honorific inscriptions praising their efforts on the columns of Agora or the Great Colonnade – the main street of the city.

The financial aspect of such enterprises was underlined in many occasions. An inscription from AD 193 on the column in the Great Colonnade honours the caravan leader, Taimaršu, son of Taime for having spared 300 gold denarii for expenses on travel and for having brought it back from Charax (CANTINEAU 1930: cat. no. 28; GAWLIKOWSKI 1996: 143, cat. no. 28), while another text from AD 257/258 (also placed on the column in the Great Colonnade) honours the caravan leader, Julius Aurelius Shalamallat, son of Male 'Abdai, for having brought back a caravan at his own expense (CANTINEAU 1930: cat. no. 13; GAWLIKOWSKI 1996: 143, cat. no. 32). Other texts mention owners of boats used for travels to the mouth of the River Indus (STARCKY 1949: cat. nos. 91, 95, 96). Over 30 honorific inscriptions mention the Palmyrenes who contributed to the successes of caravan trade by being sponsors, leaders, guides, officials etc. (GAWLIKOWSKI 1996). This commercial aspect of civil virtues is quite particular within the Roman Middle East.

The focus on material aspects of life is also visible in Palmyrene art and architecture. Rich persons or families built a large part of the city's monumental structures on their own, which is reflected again by abundant epigraphic material (HILLERS, CUSSINI 1996). Thus, Palmyrene art and architecture, although following general trends of the Roman Orient, shows a tendency for ostentatious manifestation of richness and luxury. The Great Colonnade at Palmyra has the highest columns in the whole Greco-Roman East. Also citizens manifested their taste for luxurious and precious objects – funerary reliefs show men and women wearing richly decorated clothes and a lot of jewelry, which is especially visible in the 3rd c. sculpture. As examples we could mention here the funerary portraits from the Shalmallat hypogeum (SADURSKA, BOUNNI 1994: cat. nos. 213, 214, 218, 219; TANABE 1986: pls. 333–335, 338) as well as reliefs decorating funerary *triclinia* in the tomb of Alaine (SADURSKA 1977: cat. no. 1, pp. 76–95, figs. 18–35; cat. no. 2, pp. 95–99, figs. 36–40; cat. no. 4, pp. 101–105, figs. 42–45), or from the tower-tomb of Atenatan (INGHOLT 1935: 63–67, pls. 26, 27).

Silk trade was a lucrative business, bringing fortunes to those who were involved and growth to the whole city. The Palmyrenes were aware of its value and all dangers

connected with its import. It is obvious that most of silk was not for local purpose, but for further export and those who were wearing silk in Palmyra had to be rich enough to buy it and could manifest their position in this way.

8. Conclusions

To conclude, Chinese silks were transferred from China to Palmyra via multiple middlemen through different cross-cultural interactions, and their value and meaning were changing along the route. In the East-Asian context silk was more connected to the political power and prestige, and was used by the Chinese to corrupt barbarians and maintain peace among different tributary city-states. Of course it was also traded, but the value attached to the gifts made of silk fabrics was rather connected with the political realm of power and mutual respect. In India, as far as we can observe from the sources, silk was valued as a textile of exceptional beauty, worthy of being part of the royal treasure, giving more glamour to beautiful women and being an ideal dress for the bride. In Palmyra, possession of silk clothes reflected economic status rather than political power. It was an exotic and luxurious good imported from far-away and the Palmyrenes knew how difficult and risky the long-distance trade was and what the value of exotic goods was. The high status of people involved in caravan trade was the consequence of their contribution to the economic power of the city; demonstration of economic position is clearly visible in diverse aspects of the Palmyrene art.

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MIĘDZY CHINAMI A PALMYRĄ: O WARTOŚCI JEDWABIU

Badania wykopaliskowe w Palmyrze wśród wielu odkryć przyniosły również – jeden z największych w tym regionie – zbiór tkanin z okresu rzymskiego, w tym sensacyjne znaleziska tkanin jedwabnych datowanych na I–III w. n.e. Część z nich z całą pewnością została wykonana w Chinach, na co wskazuje struktura i motywy zdobnicze; pochodzenie innych jest trudniejsze do ustalenia – monochromatyczne płótna mogły zostać sprowadzone z Chin, mogły jednak zostać utkane lokalnie, ze sprowadzonej przędzy. Analizy włókien wykazały również, że część tkanin wykonano z nici pozyskanej z dzikiego jedwabnika rodzaju *Antheraea*, którego różne gatunki są rodzime dla południowych Chin i Indii; możliwe więc, że część przędzy lub gotowych tkanin sprowadzono do Palmyry również z Indii. Niewątpliwie mamy jednak w tym wypadku do czynienia z dość dużą grupą przedmiotów, które zostały intencjonalnie sprowadzone ze Wschodu, a następnie były wykorzystywane w Palmyrze.

Znaleziska te dotychczas były omawiane głównie jako produkty będące przedmiotem handlu dalekosiężnego, natomiast niewiele uwagi poświęcono zagadnieniom związanym z kontekstem kulturowym tej wymiany. Prześledzenie drogi, jaką pokonywały jedwabne tkaniny z Chin do basenu Morza Śródziemnego, pozwala na ukazanie rozmaitych aspektów ekonomicznych, społecznych i kulturowych związanych z handlem i wykorzystaniem jedwabiu przez społeczności zaangażowane w wymianę, a reprezentujące odmienne tradycje kulturowe. Jedwab był wywożony z Chin nie tylko jako obiekt handlu, ale także w formie kosztownych darów odzwierciedlających społeczny status i pozycję polityczną zarówno ofiarodawcy, jak i obdarowanego. Jako towar mógł być również wykorzystywany i odbierany na różne sposoby – na zachodzie był uważany za luksusowy produkt, podczas gdy w Chinach wykorzystywano go często jako walutę i powszechnie płacono nim podatki.

Zrozumienie wartości i znaczenia, jakie miał jedwab w samych Chinach, jest niezwykle trudne ze względu na jego wszechobecność w kulturze chińskiej. Monochromatyczne tkaniny jedwabne były wytwarzane w domowych warsztatach. Już najwcześniejsze teksty chińskie zawierają informację, że podstawowym zadaniem kobiet w gospodarstwie była hodowla jedwabników, pozyskiwanie z nich nici, tkanie i szycie. Za czasów dynastii Han (206 r. p.n.e. – 220 r. n.e.) wytwarzano wiele gatunków jedwabiu, i o ile najprostsze nadal produkowano w warsztatach domowych na użytek lokalny, wielobarwne wzorzyste tkaniny o skomplikowanym splocie, z których najbardziej spektakularne były tzw. brokaty *jin* [錦], powstawały w oficjalnych warsztatach na potrzeby dworu. Tego typu tkaniny, nierzadko zdobione drobnymi inskrypcjami, były również elementem cesarskich

darów, a także trybutu dla barbarzyńskich plemion z północy i sprzymierzonych miast-państw w Kotlinie Tarymskiej.

To właśnie w formie darów najwięcej tkanin i przędzy jedwabnej z Chin trafiało na zachód za czasów panowania dynastii Han. Sam handel z ludami spoza granic był silnie ograniczony rozmaitymi zakazami i mógł odbywać się tylko w nielicznych punktach granicznych, podczas organizowanych okresowo targów zwanych *bushi* [胡市] – „targi barbarzyńskie”. Okazją do wymiany były również poselstwa na dwór chiński, jednak przywilej handlu przyznawany był tylko niektórym i zawierał w sobie rozmaite ograniczenia dotyczące m.in. towarów, jakie mogły podlegać wymianie.

Część darów przekazywanych plemionom koczowniczym i władcom sprzymierzonych miast-państw była niewątpliwie gromadzona w kręgach elit; dość liczne znaleziska chińskiego jedwabiu pochodzą z grobowców zlokalizowanych na terenie Mongolii i Syberii, związanych z plemionami koczowniczymi, wśród których najważniejszym byli w tym czasie Xiongnu [匈奴]. Masowe znaleziska znakomicie zachowanych jedwabnych tkanin chińskich pochodzą też z nekropoli zlokalizowanych wzdłuż południowych obrzeży pustyni Taklamakan, zwłaszcza ze stanowisk takich jak Loulan [樓蘭] i Niya [尼雅], położonych na terenach okresowo kontrolowanych przez Chiny za czasów dynastii Han. Nadwyżki były najprawdopodobniej odsprzedawane dalej na zachód.

Jednym z ważniejszych szlaków handlowych na zachód była w owym czasie droga prowadząca przez Kotlinę Tarymską, przez przełęcze w górach Karakorum i wzdłuż doliny Indusu do północno-zachodnich Indii. Niemal zupełny brak znalezisk archeologicznych tkanin z tego regionu nie pozwala na pełną analizę wykorzystania jedwabiu w tamtejszej kulturze. Analiza tekstów sugeruje, że jakkolwiek rozmaite rodzaje dzikiego jedwabiu były produkowane lokalnie, chiński jedwab był tu najwyżej ceniony ze względu na swoją jakość i walory estetyczne. Jedwabne tkaniny pojawiają się w literaturze z tego regionu jako ślubne szaty, a także jako luksusowy produkt znajdujący się w królewskim skarbcu.

Kontakty handlowe między regionem śródziemnomorskim a Indiami w okresie rzymskim są dość dobrze poświadczone zarówno w materiale archeologicznym, jak i w źródłach pisanych. Wydaje się też, że większość towarów sprowadzanych z dalej na wschód położonych regionów Azji trafiała w tym czasie na zachód za pośrednictwem Indii.

Materiał epigraficzny z Palmyry sugeruje, że w okresie rzymskim miasto utrzymywało ożywione kontakty handlowe ze Spasinu Charaks, położonym nad Zatoką Perską;

Palmyreńczycy zorganizowali też co najmniej dwie wyprawy do portów położonych w delcie Indusu. Wydaje się więc, że egzotyczne towary ze wschodu, w tym jedwabne tkaniny i przędzę, pozyskiwali właśnie za pośrednictwem Indii. Zachowany materiał epigraficzny sugeruje, że osoby zaangażowane w organizację handlu karawanowego cieszyły się wysoką pozycją społeczną, a wspomaganie kupców

i inwestycje w handel traktowane były na równi z innymi, bardziej typowymi formami euergetyzmu, takimi jak wznoszenie budowli publicznych lub fundacje na rzecz świątyni. W społeczeństwie Palmyry jedwab, podobnie jak inne towary luksusowe, był przede wszystkim symbolem bogactwa, a w konsekwencji także statusu społecznego.