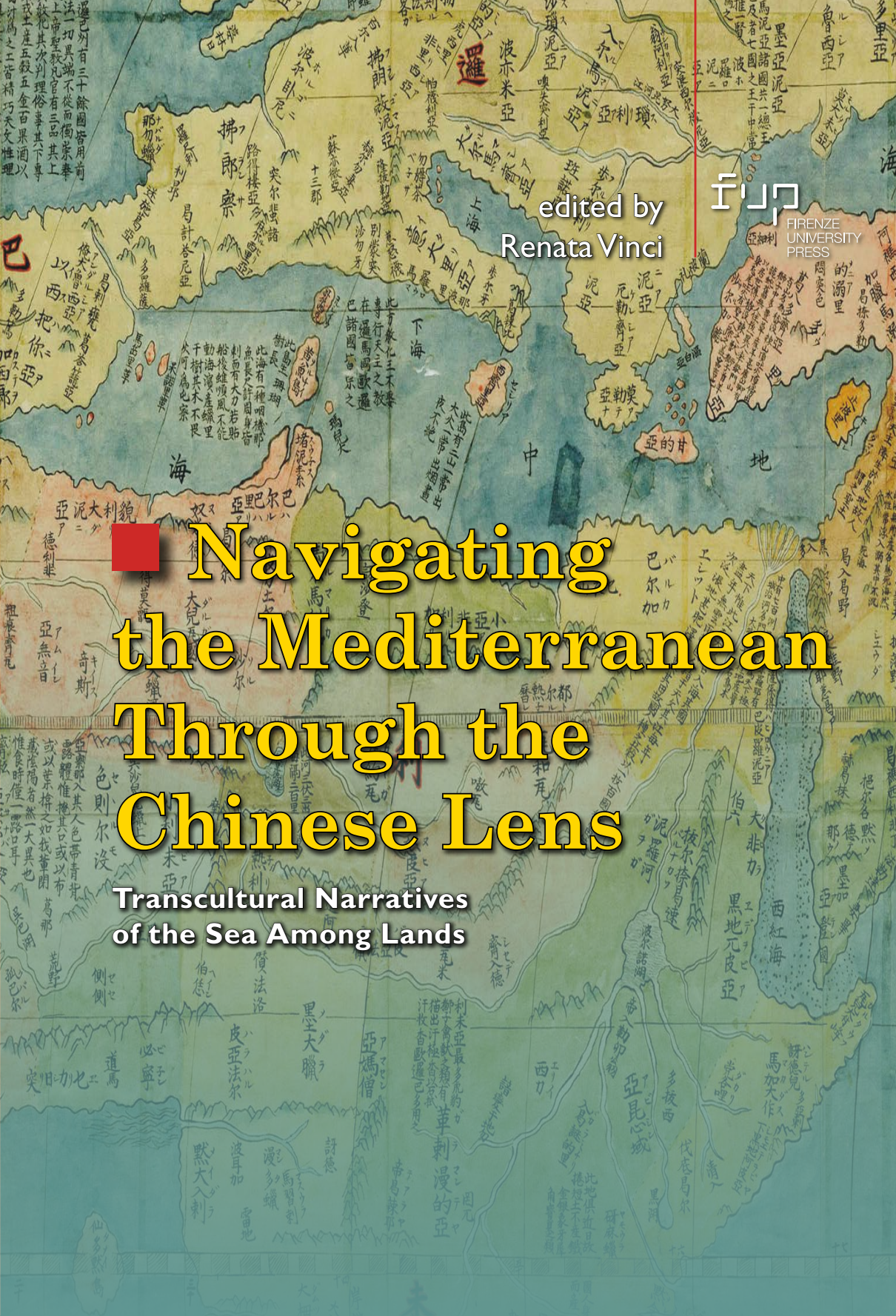




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Renata Vinci

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# Navigating the Mediterranean Through the Chinese Lens

Transcultural Narratives  
of the Sea Among Lands

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# Μεσόγειος Θάλασσα (Mesogeios Thalassa) in the Reflection of Dizhonghai 地中海: Routes and Connections Between the Greek World and China

Francesca Fariello

**Abstract:** This chapter examines the historical and cultural intersections between the Mediterranean Sea (Mesogeios Thalassa – Dizhonghai 地中海 in Greek-Roman and Chinese sources), particularly the Greek-Hellenistic world and China. Beginning with Herodotus' depiction of the Mediterranean as an intercultural space and tracing connections through the expansion of Alexander the Great's dominion, the chapter explores the strategic role of settlements such as Alexandria Eschate in the Ferghana Valley. By analysing Chinese sources, including the *Shiji* 史記 and *Hanshu* 漢書, it is possible to highlight the transcontinental networks linking the Mediterranean world to China, emphasising the symbolic and economic importance of trade commodities like silk. Special attention is also given to the toponym Tiaozhi, identified with Characene, and the maritime routes to Da Qin 大秦 (commonly associated with the Roman Empire or its eastern territories). The chapter concludes that Da Qin in Chinese sources provides a sophisticated perspective on the Greek-Hellenistic world, shaped by intercultural exchanges across Central Asia and the Mediterranean world.

**Keywords:** Sino-Mediterranean Exchanges; Silk Routes by Land and Sea; China and the Greek-Hellenistic World; Alexander the Great; Da Qin.

子曰。道不行。乘桴浮海。  
The Master said: "If my Way fails to spread,  
then I will float on the sea with a raft".  
(*Lunyu* 論語, Gongye Chang 公冶長)

## 1. Introduction

In the first book of *Histories*, Herodotus – rewinding the narrative thread on the origins of the tensions that escalated into wars between Asia and Europe – refers to the Phoenicians, whom he blames for kidnapping Io, daughter of the king of Argos (I, 5). He reports that “the Phoenicians had come from the sea called Red to ‘this’ sea” (ἤδε ἡ θάλασσα), meaning the Mediterranean Sea. To Herodotus, the sea is θάλασσα: that pool of salty water shaped by Poseidon's trident (the deity who personifies it) below the temple of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis of Athens, besides the olive tree given to the Greeks by Athena (VIII, 55).

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This is a reference to the ‘sea between the lands’, that the ancient Greeks called Mesogeios (Μεσόγειος): an *ante litteram* intercultural space, that would later, in Latin translation, be called *Mare Nostrum*, borrowing the expression from Herodotus. In Book I, the historian proceeds in his exposition stating that the Greeks decided to kidnap the Phoenician princess Europa in revenge for the injustice they had suffered. Greek mythology attributes Europa’s abduction to Zeus, who, in the guise of a white bull, carried her to Crete. From the union of Zeus and Europa came king Minos, marking how the *mythologein* – the allegory of myth – created a prehistory of the long memory of Mediterranean travels, bringing to the centre of the Mediterranean world ‘that East’ known to the Greeks at the time of Herodotus.

By retracing some significant passages from Greco-Roman and Chinese historical sources, this chapter offers a brief review of the places and trajectories that constituted the earliest traces of the so-called silk routes by land and sea. Beginning with the first book of *Histories*, it is possible to identify the foundations of what would become – to borrow David Asheri’s evocative phrase – the entire “journey of the archaic world in two hundred and sixteen chapters”, where the historical drama will unfold (Asheri 1988, C), and to discover the polychrome civilisations – with their deeds and monumental works – revealed by Herodotus, who portrayed ancient communities from West and East as engaged in a continuity marked by conflicts and transformations.

## 2. Alexandria Eschate and the Ferghana Valley: Greek Strategic Settlements Between East and West in Chinese Sources

From the 4th century BCE, thanks to the conquests of Alexander the Great, the Greeks stretched further and further eastwards: the king’s strategy of conquest evolved from a pan-Hellenic plan of legitimacy to an innovative project of universal monarchy, in which the Macedonian ruler skilfully became a demiurge of a multicultural political dialogue to legitimise himself with the communities of the territories he conquered. In 329 BCE Alexander founded his farthest city, Alexandria Eschate (Arr. IV, 4, 1): a military settlement located in the south-western part of the Ferghana Valley (present-day northern Tajikistan), approximately four hundred kilometres away from the Tarim Basin.

Alexandria Eschate was a frontier foundation, located precisely in the *eschatia*, in the marginal territories: it served the very specific purpose of controlling the migratory flows of nomadic confederations that gravitated around the northern bank of the Iaxartes. Its location likely corresponds to the area of the Khodjent fortress. This geographical position held strategic importance, especially for the trade routes. From this point onward, within the oasis of the Ferghana Valley, the Greek presence began to coexist with the local populations.

In this region, interactions between nomads and sedentary people had always underpinned the local economy of the Sogdian territories north of Bactria (Fariello 2024). Moreover, on the Eastern side, Scythians confederations had driven their horses to the gates of the Great Wall, establishing and securing di-

rect and indirect contacts with China and other groups that exchanged goods and contributed to a large-scale dissemination of cultural and technological influences (Di Cosmo 2006).

Since the Qin 秦 era (221–206 BCE), Central Asia horsemen had been meeting the Chinese demand for horses from the Ferghana area, which constituted a powerful warfare mean thanks to their mobility. Tribal clan leaders often succeeded in becoming wealthy by selling livestock at the frontiers and gaining important positions in the Qin court. In fact, in chapter 129 of the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), it is recorded that Luo 倮, the leader of the Yuezhi 月氏 (Wuzhi 烏氏), became so rich and influential that the First Qin Emperor admitted him to seasonal court audiences (Sima 1982, 3260). The Yuezhi are likely identifiable among the groups of peoples who exchanged Chinese silks for other products. The Da Yuan 大宛 political entity (located in the Ferghana valley, where Alexandria Eschate itself had once been founded by Alexander the Great) acted as mediator between the emissary Zhang Qian 張騫 and the Yuezhi.<sup>1</sup> The Da Yuan were probably the same successors of the Greeks who had settled there, and eventually mixed with the native populations (Fariello 2024 for a more detailed discussion).

In 323 BCE, following the death of Alexander, the Greek presence in the East appears to have entered an even more remarkable phase of expansion. A passage by Strabo is particularly noteworthy: in the eleventh book of his *Geography* (XI, 11), based on the *Parthika Παρθικά* (History of Parthia) of Apollodorus of Artemita, he states that “the Greeks of Bactria extended their dominion as far as the peoples called Seres and Phrynoi” (*mechri Seron kai Phrynon exeteinon ten archen* μέχρι Σηρών και Φρυνών ἐξέτεινον τὴν ἀρχήν: XI, 11, 1). It is widely accepted that this area mentioned by the geographer corresponds to the contemporary province of Xinjiang 新疆 (Fariello 2024). The Seres are the silk peoples often mentioned in Greek and Latin sources (Coëdes’ 1910 study remains unsurpassed), mostly in connection with the silk trade. The identification of this mysterious group, as is well known, has led to many different theories among scholars (Fariello 2024; Gallo 2025). Without delving further into this aspect, it is important to affirm that the various occurrences of the term Seres reveal portraits of numerous ethnic groups who acted as trade intermediaries: these range from the vast array of nomadic Scythian confederations (some of which had close contacts with the Greeks), to Himalayan peoples and the Indo-European speaking communities (Tocharian) located in Xinjiang, among whom the Yuezhi likely constituted, at least in part, a significant component (Narain 1957, 128–34; Janvier 1984; Benjamin 2007; Aydemir 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Zhang Qian’s diplomatic mission (139–126 BCE) was ordered by the Emperor Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE). He was the first Chinese envoy to visit some territories of Central Asia. The *Shiji* 史記 by Sima Qian 司馬遷 contains Zhang Qian’s account on the Western Territories (Xiyu 西域).

Silk also held a fundamental symbolic meaning for these communities, as it was received in exchange for the tributes they offered to the Han court: silk was not only a commodity traded on the Eurasian caravan routes, but it also served as emblem of power, as it played an instrumental value for the hierarchisation of nomadic or semi-nomadic societies in Central Asia, a token symbolising a unique status (Liu 2016, 22–3; Selbitschka 2015; Honeychurch 2015). However, the Han Court was not actively involved in this trade: in fact, it has been described as ‘an involuntary agent of the intercontinental silk trade’ (Selbitschka 2018). Moreover, during the Han dynasty, silk became the most reliable form of currency, used alongside grain and coins to pay soldiers and mercenaries (Frankopan 2016, 11; Wang 2004). It also became the most sought-after luxury good in the Mediterranean basin during the apogee of Roman power.

The determination of the Greek territorial borders in the East is strictly linked to the chronology of the expansion of the Greeks of Bactria, attested by Strabo in the above-mentioned passage of his *Geography*: proposed chronology ranges from the second half of the 3rd century BCE to the middle of the following century, during the reign of Eucratides (r. 172/1–145 BCE; for the chronology problem see Coloru 2009, 213; Fariello 2024). According to some recent studies, during the first thirty years of the 1st century BCE a new wave of Greek influence from Bactria reached Sogdia: this influence is thought to have resulted from a kind of exodus, possibly caused by two nomadic incursions by the Saka and the Yuezhi who arrived in Bactria between 145 and 130 BCE (Lyonnet 2021; for the Yuezhi in Bactria, Benjamin 2007).

Sogdia and Bactria (Kangju 康居 and Da Xia 大夏), together with Da Yuan 大宛 (Ferghana valley), are attested in *Shiji* (c. 100 BCE), particularly in *juan* 卷 123, based on Zhang Qian’s 張騫 report. Kangju – which Zhang Qian probably visited in 129 BCE, only two or three years after Yuezhi passed through on their way to Bactria – is described as a small itinerant political entity with a strong army; its customs were similar to Yuezhi’s (Sima 1982, 3158). In the narrative of the *Shiji*, Da Xia – located south of the Oxus – was, at the time of Zhang Qian’s arrival (128/7 BCE) under the control of the Yuezhi. Their political centre was located near the northern shore of the river (Sima 1982, 3161). Da Xia’s description in the *Shiji* depicts a still rich and densely populated territory, full of walled cities, and a large population engaged in rice and wine farming, as well as trade. There is no mention of the destruction caused by the Yuezhi invasion, which had taken place only a few years earlier, nor of the prior incursion by the peoples known as Saka, who had penetrated into Bactria from the east around 145 BCE.

Zhang Qian’s report on Da Xia is particularly significant because it highlights the existence of a trade route, described by E. V. Rtveladze (2010) as ‘the Great Indian Road’:

騫曰：「臣在大夏時，見邛竹杖、蜀布。問曰：『安得此？』大夏國人曰：『吾賈人往市之身毒。身毒在大夏東南可數千里。其俗土著，大與大夏同，而卑溼暑熱云。其人民乘象以戰。其國臨大水焉。』以騫度之，大夏去漢萬二千里，居漢西南。今身毒國又居大夏東南數千

里，有蜀物，此其去蜀不遠矣。今使大夏，從羌中，險，羌人惡之；少北，則為匈奴所得；從蜀宜徑，又無寇。」天子既聞大宛及大夏、安息之屬皆大國，多奇物，土著，頗與中國同業，而兵弱，貴漢財物；其北有大月氏、康居之屬，兵彊，可以賂遺設利朝也。且誠得而以義屬之，則廣地萬里，重九譯，致殊俗，威德遍於四海。天子欣然，以騫言為然 [...]。終莫得通。然聞其西可千餘里有乘象國，名曰滇越，而蜀賈姦出物者或至焉，於是漢以求大夏道始通滇國。

[Zhang] Qian said: "When your humble servant was in Da Xia, he saw bamboo reeds from Qiong and textiles from Shu. He asked how he could get them, and a villager from Da Xia replied: 'Our merchants go to Shendu, which is several thousand *li* southeast of Da Xia. They have settled habits, mostly similar to those of Da Xia, but [the country] is low-lying, humid and hot. Its people fight on elephants. This country is located by a big river'". According to Qian's measurements, Da Xia is 12,000 *li* away from the Han, and it is located southwest. Now, since Shendu is located several thousand *li* southeast of Da Xia and Shu products can be found there, this means that it is not too far from Shu. Now, if you should send a mission to Da Xia, it would have to pass through the Qiang: it would be dangerous, and the Qiang would oppose it; if you should pass just to the north, then you would be captured by the Xiongnu. From Shu the path is suitable, and moreover without bandits. The Son of Heaven has just heard about Da Yuan and all the great countries subjected to Da Xia and Anxi, about the abundance of their extraordinary products, their indigenous populations, the differences and similarities of their customs to those of the Central Territories, but also about the weakness of their armies, and the value they placed on the luxury products of the Han. To the North, away from them, there are [the territories] subdued by the Da Yuezhi and Kangju: their armies are strong, but it is possible through the offering of gifts to establish a plan to bring advantage to the Court. If you really succeed in this, and subdue them through justice, then you will expand [our] territory by ten thousand *li*. Through translation, we will be able to reach their different customs, and [His Majesty's] authoritarian virtue will spread throughout the Four Seas". The Son of Heaven appreciated the truthfulness of it all, and considered Qian's account authentic [...]. [But] in the end it was not possible to make a way. However, it was heard that westwards, at a distance of more than 1000 *li*, there was the country of those who mounted the elephants, whose name was Yue of Dian. Shu merchants who exported products illegally often went there. For this reason, the Han, in search of a way to Da Xia, entered into communication with the country of Dian (Sima 1982: 3170–1).

This passage reveals the presence of an "unofficial" trade network linking Bactria to the Chinese south-west (Shu area): it crossed Burma and Bangladesh and then reached India, in the area of a "great river", likely Ganges or Indus. The Chinese search for a safer route to Da Xia would have led to create a connection with the autonomous Dian kingdom 滇國 located near today's Kunming, capital of Yunnan. However, some archaeological traces seem to attest exchanges with Central Asian areas or even further west (Xianggang lishi bowuguan 2004, 186). The existence of a route linking Central Asia to India as early as the 2nd century

BCE, and the presence of some findings, suggest that during this period the network of contacts were already extended westwards via the sea routes, towards the Persian Gulf and the territory known as Tiaozhi 條枝 (Sima 1982, 3163).

The Han era was also characterised by significant advancement in navigation techniques. The tower-shaped warships (*louchuan* 樓船), already in use during the Qin era, and the bridge ships (*qiaochuan* 橋船), were not only employed in battle but also in commercial navigation along the coasts of southern China (Lin, Chen 1994). Evidence of these maritime exchanges extending into the Indian Ocean includes the discovery of a state-supervised shipyard in Guangzhou in 1974, which was probably active as early as the Qin period (late 3rd century BCE) (Guangzhou wenwu guanlichu 1977; Stein 2017, 60). Additionally, miniature ceramic ship models dated to the Eastern Han period demonstrate that, at least by the 1st century CE, stern-mounted rudders were a common feature of Chinese long-distance ships (Needham 1986, 627–8).

A brief section of the geographical chronicles (*dili zhi* 地理志) of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (Book of Han) records several Chinese maritime trade activities: the departure point for the Han-controlled trade was primarily Rinan 日南, corresponding to the central strip of Vietnam, between Quảng Bình and Bình Định provinces (Ban 1975, 1671; see also Yu 1967, 172–3; Schottenhammer 2012, 68–9). The furthest point of this trade network was the country of Huangzhi 黃支國, identified with the present-day territory of Madras on the east coast of India. Furthermore, a passage from the *Weilue* 魏略 (Concise History of Wei, Chen 1975, 863) states that the waterways (*shuidao* 水道) connecting Jiaozhi 交趾 (northern Vietnam) to Da Qin constituted the most ancient route. Thus, the two passages from the *Hanshu* and the *Shiji* seem lend plausibility to the *Weilue*'s claim.

According to studies on the ancient trajectories of maritime trade networks stretching from China to the south and west, there must have been a sort of “segmentation of the maritime space”. Following this hypothesis, merchants departing from southern China rarely went beyond the east coast of India, where other cargoes arrived and departed along the western maritime routes (Zhou 2015; see also Wheatley 1957). Whether or not this hypothesis aligns with the historical reality, what seems certain is that from the 1st to 2nd century CE, with the new westward expansion, Chinese world crossed this invisible border and set out in search of Da Qin: by the sea route.

### 3. Characene, the “Last” Alexandria on the Tigris and the Sea Route to Da Qin 大秦

The westward expansion of the Han Empire during the reign of Wudi 武帝 experienced a revival in the years between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Traditional historiographical sources, such as the *Hanshu*, along with other manuscript documentation recently found in different locations within the Chinese region, demonstrate a deepening of knowledge about the westward regions of Central Asia. This is evidenced by numerous annotations detailing the distances between the various political centres, as well as other ethnographical and commercial data (Korolkov, Lander 2023).

Within the network of maritime contacts between the Mediterranean world and China, the toponym Tiaozhi 條枝 played a very fundamental role (Fariello 2025). The first occurrence of this toponym is found in the *Shiji* (Sima 1982, 3162–4). The description of Tiaozhi is not based on the direct experience of Zhang Qian but it is the result of information he likely acquired in Bactria:

條枝在安息西數千里，臨西海。暑溼。耕田，田稻。有大鳥，卵如甕。人眾甚多，往往有小君長，而安息役屬之，以為外國。國善眩。

Tiaozhi is situated some thousands *li* west of Anxi [Parthia]: it is located in front of the Western Sea. The climate is hot and humid. The land cultivated there produces rice. A large bird is found there, whose egg is like a jar. The population is particularly large. In many places there are local governors, but Anxi has subjected them to a state of vassalage, considering it as an external kingdom. In the kingdom there are experts in the art of illusionism.

The second mention of Tiaozhi appears in the *Hanshu* (Ban 1975, 3876–7). *Juan* 96 (*Xiyu zhuan* 西域傳, Records of the Western Regions) likely benefited from the new data on western regions, contained in reports sent by Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE), the Han general and elder brother of Ban Gu, main compiler of the work. It was Ban Chao who, in 97 CE, sent the emissary Gan Ying 甘英 westwards in search of the Da Qin. The geographical position of Tiaozhi is recorded in relation to the kingdom of Wuyishanli 烏弋山離, located east of Tiaozhi, at the southern end of the overland route starting from Yumenguan and Yangguan, south of Dunhuang. The majority of scholars have identified this toponym with Alexandria in Arachosia (Ἀραχωσία), the city founded in 329 BCE by Alexander the Great corresponding to present-day Kandahar in Afghanistan (Pulleyblank 1962, 116, 128). The city, which preserved its Hellenistic characteristics even after losing autonomy around 100 BCE, was the terminal point of the trade network described in the *Parthians Stations* by Isidore of Charax.

The third source on Tiaozhi is found in *juan* 88 of *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Book of the Later Han, Fan 1977, 2909–32). Here appears the reference to Gan Ying, the first Chinese that reached Tiaozhi – sent by the General Governor (*duhu* 都護) Ban Chao in 97 CE – to create a contact with Da Qin. This toponym must have already been known in China during that period, as evidenced by its mention by Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139 CE) in his *Dongjingfu* 東京賦 (Rhapsody of the Eastern Capital) (Knechtges 1982, 228, 299):

九年，班超遣掾甘英窮臨西海而還。皆前世所不至 [...]。條支國城在山上，周回四十餘里。臨西海，海水曲環其南及東北，三面路絕，唯西北隅通陸道。土地暑濕，出師子、犀牛、封牛、孔雀、大雀。大雀其卵如甕。轉北而東，復馬行六十餘日至安息。後役屬條支，為置大將，臨領諸小城焉[...]。甘英 [...] 抵條支。臨大海欲度，而安息西界船人謂英曰：「海水廣大，往來者逢善風三月乃得度，若遇遲風，亦有二歲者，故入海人皆齎三歲糧。海中善使人思土戀慕，數有死亡者。」英聞之乃止 [...]。論曰：西域風土之載，前古未聞也。[...] 其後甘英乃抵條支而歷安息，臨西海以望大秦。

In the ninth year [of the Yongyuan era of Emperor He (97 EC)], Ban Chao sent his subordinate Gan Ying to the shores of the Western Sea and returned. No one had come there in previous generations [...]. It faces the Western Sea, whose waters surround it to the south and northeast. Access routes are [therefore] interrupted on three sides: only in the north-west corner there is communication with the land route. The area is hot and humid, and there are lions, rhinos, humped buffaloes [zebu?], peacocks and ostriches. The ostriches' eggs are like jars. If one turns north and then east, proceeding on horseback, one reaches [the capital of] Anxi [Parthia] in more than sixty days. Afterwards, [Anxi] made Tiaozhi a vassal and placed a military governor there who controlled all the small towns. [...]. Gan Ying [...] came to Tiaozhi; standing on the coast of the Great Sea, he wished to cross it. But the sailors on the western border of Anxi turned to him and said: 'The waters of the Sea are boundless. If those who sail them encounter favourable winds, then it is possible to cross them in three months. If one encounters unfavourable winds, it could also take two years. For this reason, those who travel by sea always carry provisions for three years. In the sea there is something that makes men have a yearning for the land, that makes them feel a strong longing for it; many are those who have died. Ying heard this, and then stopped. [...] The commentary states: the geographical and ethnographical aspects of the Western Territories were not known in ancient times [...]. Later, Gan Ying reached Tiaozhi and crossed Anxi, and he went to the shores of the Western Sea to observe Da Qin from a distance.

Gan Ying must have travelled on his route from Wuyishanli/Arachosia to Tiaozhi. Numerous attempts have been made to identify Tiaozhi (Hulsewé 1979, 113, n. 255). In my opinion, the toponym can be identified with the territory of Characene, also known as Mesene, mentioned by Pliny (Pl. *Nat. Hist.* VI, 31), Strabo (Strab. XVI, 4, 1) and the geographer Ptolemy (VI, 5), where in 324 BCE Alexander the Great founded his 'last Alexandria' on the Tigris. Despite periodic destruction by river flooding, the international commercial purpose of this city would have been maintained and strengthened over the centuries. According to Pliny, Alexandria on the Tigris, situated at the innermost point of the Persian Gulf, corresponds to the toponym Charax (Χάραξ) (*Nat. Hist.* VI, 31, 138), the birthplace of Isidore, whom Pliny calls Dionysius of Charax. Isidore, who lived between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, authored of the *Parthian Stations* (Σταθμοὶ Παρθικοί), describing Charax as an important station along the trade routes in Parthian times. The city was connected to Palmyra by land, and by sea to the routes linking India with Mesopotamia by sea via the Persian Gulf (Gregoratti 2011, 209).

The phonetic reconstruction of the place-name Tiaozhi is \*tʰiw-ʰke (Baxter, Sagart 2014, 110, 152–3) or \*liù-ke (Schuessler 2014, 277; for similar conclusions see also Pulleyblank 1999, 73–4), which closely resembles the place-name Seleucia. This may refer to Seleucia on the Eulaios, the name given to Susa during the Seleucid period. For later times, the reconstructed phonetic form for the Eastern Han period is \*thieu-kie (Schuessler 2007, 579, 614). The phonetic

similarity to Ἀντιόχεια (Antioch) – the name of the city on the Tigris founded by Alexander and rebuilt in 166/5 BCE by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV – is notable. This commercial and political settlement on the shores of the Persian Gulf would have been known from around 140 BCE as Charax Spasinou, the “Fortress of Hispaosines”, named after its governor of Bactrian or Sogdian origin.

The importance of Charax trading settlement increased due to its strategic location at the mouth of the river routes leading to the sea: by navigating the Euphrates and the Tigris to the Persian Gulf – a route probably taken by Gan Ying from Susa to Charax –, trade routes arriving from the east maintained some autonomy, particularly during the period of intense conflict between the Roman and Parthian empires (late 1st–early 2nd century CE), when Parthian controlled overland trade routes to the east, and the Romans attempted to bypass intermediaries by opening alternative trade channels. According to Isidore’s description, the trade route followed a direct line to the Euphrates, reaching Seleucia on the Tigris. Eastwards, it continued north of the Euphrates and reached the Media highlands, crossing the Caspian Gates to the banks of the river Herat, and finally turning southwards to Kandahar (Schoff 1914, 17–9). This last station of the itinerary in Arachosia (Wuyishanli in Chinese sources) marked the extreme point reached by the Chinese envoys during Han times, before Gan Ying’s voyage – a deliberate attempt to avoid Parthian intermediaries to establish direct contact with the Mediterranean world of Da Qin via sea routes from Charax.

The name Charax also seems to echo in another passage in *Hou Hanshu*, where a place called Yuluo 于羅 is described as “the extreme western boundary” of Anxi (Parthia): “From here if you take the sea southwards, you can reach Da Qin. In this land one can find many precious, bizarre and exotic products of Haixi” (Fan 1977, 2918). Thus, Tiaozhi would be the territory of Characene, while Yuluo would refer to Charax (its capital city), the “extreme western border” of Parthia from which it was possible to embark southwards, towards Da Qin. The sailors who dissuaded Gan Ying were at this western point under indirect Parthian control (Baxter and Sagart 2014, 72, 141). Old Chinese reconstruction for Yuluo, G<sup>w</sup>(r)a-r<sup>ˊ</sup>aj, plausibly corresponds to the Greek Charax.

The indications of the southern route is another key piece of information, along with the reference to Haixi 海西, a place of origin for exotic and precious products. Described in *juan* 86 of *Hou Hanshu* (Fan 1977, 2851) as a territorial entity corresponding with Da Qin, Haixi seems to correspond to Egyptian territory (a Roman province since 30 BCE).<sup>2</sup> The sea voyage Gan Ying avoided would likely have involved circumnavigating the Arabian Peninsula to reach the Red Sea, where significant trading emporiums were established by the Ptolemaic kingdom in the 3rd century BCE, and later controlled by Rome after Egypt’s annexation.

According to the text, Gan Ying, having reached the shores of the West Sea, may have had the opportunity to “observe from a distance” (*wang* 望) Da Qin. Even though this may be interpreted as a poetic expression, another explana-

<sup>2</sup> See the contribution by M. Paolillo in this volume.

tion could be considered. The compilation of the *Hou Hanshu* in the 5th century CE involved the collection of different documents, dating back some three centuries earlier. If one accepts the possibility that reports about Tiaozhi in the *Hou Hanshu* were collected not only by Gan Ying (97 CE), but also by Ban Yong (around 120 CE), when territories under the Roman rule were not so far away – this could clarify how Da Qin could have been observed – metaphorically – “from a distance”. In 116 CE, Mesopotamia had fallen under the control of Roman armies, during the Trajan’s campaign (98–117), who personally visited Characene, a territory that temporarily became a tributary of the Roman Empire (Young 2001; Gregoratti 2011; Celentano 2016).

#### 4. The Sea and Da Qin: An Open Conclusion

The above-mentioned passage describing Da Qin as a country reachable by sea from the Persian Gulf inevitably leads us to address, albeit briefly, the problem of this toponym in the conclusion of this contribution. Da Qin (not mentioned by the sources before the 2nd century CE) has been described using concrete geographical references (not unanimously interpreted), as well as literary clichés derived from utopian visions in sacred geography treatises and (especially Daoist) descriptions of ideal lands (Bertuccioli, Masini 2006).

Western, Chinese and Japanese studies have identified Da Qin with the Roman empire (in some cases more specifically with the Italic peninsula), or with its eastern areas, in particular the Near East (Hirth 1885; Shiratori 1956; Leslie, Gardiner 1996; Yu 2013). In a passage in *juan* 88 of *Hou Hanshu*, it is stated that Parthia (Anxi) had tried to prevent direct contact between Da Qin and China (same statement in *Weilüe*: Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 51, n. 79). Immediately after this account, the presumed and famous diplomatic mission ordered by Da Qin in 166 CE reached the coast of central Vietnam by sea. Most scholars doubt the official nature of this expedition, although the identification of Da Qin’s ruler “Andun” with Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161) or, perhaps more likely, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (r. 161–180) seems plausible (Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 153–8).

A few decades later, in 226 (or 233), according to *Liangshu* 梁書 (Book of Liang), a merchant from Da Qin reached Jiaozhi (northern Vietnam) (Yao 1973, 798). The source adds that merchants from Da Qin often visited the areas of Funan (Cambodia and South Vietnam), Rinan (Central Vietnam) and Jiaozhi (North Vietnam).

In conclusion, it seems safe to assume that a significant portion of the knowledge about Da Qin may have come via the maritime route. Expanding on this point, it becomes clear that the central role of the Egyptian area and the Mediterranean East is crucial to the possible “identikit” of Da Qin. The importance of regions formerly controlled by the vast Seleucid dominion cannot, therefore, be overlooked in the spread of knowledge of real or imaginary aspects of Da Qin, justifying the inclusion of this new toponym in the historical chronicles of the 2nd–3rd centuries CE.

This conclusion finds confirmation in the *Naxian biqu jing* 那先比丘經 (Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra), a Buddhist dialogue between the Indo-Greek ruler

Milinda (Menander I, 165/155–130 BCE) and the monk Nāgasena, which is a translation from the *Milindapañha* (Questions of King Milinda, composed during the 2nd century CE) (Guang 2009; Kubica 2021). In the Chinese text, the king claims that he was born in Da Qin, in the city of “Alisan”. Even though this statement finds no correspondence with the original Pali version of the text, it contributes to offer an important interpretative key.

Alisan is most probably Alexandria on the Caucasus, in southern Bactria (Alasanda in Indian texts; Bopearachchi 1991, 78–9). Therefore, the anonymous Chinese translator considered this Central Asian region naturally included in that vast *Oikoumene* that during that period was labelled as “Da Qin”, because it had been influenced by the Greek *koiné* that emerged after the expedition of Alexander the Great. In conclusion, Chinese sources on Da Qin appear to refer more to the Greek-Hellenistic world than to the Roman-Italic milieu.

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