ROMANS IN CHINA

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Ancient Chinese documents dating back 1600 years have revealed the presence of Romans at the very heart of China as far back as the year 166 AD. According to these chronicles, they had been emissaries sent by the powers in Rome in order to establish relations with the Han Empire. Were they ambassadors or just ordinary merchants ? Maybe they were both...

At the times of Augustus, Rome's first emperor, the empire had been enjoying two prosperous centuries. It was the era of the Pax Romana and Rome's power was to expand rapidly due to contacts and trade. Endless caravans supplied a steady stream of goods from the Orient to the ports of the Mediterranean. Each trip represented a perilous voyage of 11 000 km with dangers lurking along the trade routes, not least of them being the Huns who turned travelling into a dangerous and uncertain enterprise.

Setting out from Antioch (Antakya), the merchants sent their goods to Asia via the terrestrial trade routes to Lo Yang, the capital of China. Along the road, intermediaries forced themselves upon the Roman and Chinese traders: the Parths, an Iranian tribe which occupied Persia. Their hold on the caravan routes was to become so powerful that the Romans looked for alternatives: it would be the maritime route.

During the reign of Augustus, some 120 ships crossed the Indian Ocean. On behalf of the Romans, Tamil sailors expanded their maritime routes towards the golden land, in other words Indochina, then crossed the Malacca straits to reach China. The Romans had established trading posts all along the coast of Indochina and put Tamil or Indian agents in charge of them.

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