

# DISSERTATIONES ARCHAEOLOGICAE

ex Instituto Archaeologico Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae



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# Contextualizing the comparative perceptions of Rome and China through written sources and archaeological data

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## Abstract

Abstract of PhD thesis submitted in 2015 to the Archaeology Doctoral Programme, Doctoral School of History, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest under the supervision of László Borhy.

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## Objectives and goals

Relations between the Roman and early Chinese Empires have been a considerably popular research field,<sup>1</sup> however, principally from a trade-oriented point of view. At the same time, an integrated approach of reception studies provides a more coherent nexus. In this regard, the thesis aims to contextualize the comparative perceptions of Rome and China (i. e. the Middle Empire) by using written sources and archaeological data as a complex system, in order to reveal new aspects of seeing and being seen.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, critical discourses on cross-cultural interactions and the interdisciplinary standpoint towards these dynamic interrelated systems are playing important role in recent studies.<sup>3</sup> The integrated comparison of Chinese and Roman perceptions serves as a significant element of such debates. Accordingly, the period from the first to the fifth century AD constitutes the main body of the thesis, when *Daqin* 大秦 appears as a multifold synonym of the Roman Empire in Chinese records, and also when *Seres* are presented as vague ethnonym of silk makers on the easternmost part of the *Oikumene* in Antique works.

Through appropriate methods of investigation, it is possible to have a better understanding on the reception of foreign in China and Rome. Transparent glass vessels,<sup>4</sup> western imported metalworks and decorated textiles in China; silk tapestries and hu bronzes in the *Imperium Romanum* carry a multiple testimonia of cultural impacts and interactions, leading towards a stereotyped and utopian picture of the two imperii. The dissertation intends to focus on the complexity of such cross-imperial connections through contextualizing the most significant

1 A great number of studies have been published on this field. A few recent examples: YING 2004; WAN 万 2008; DE LA VAISSIÈRE 2009; VON WALTER 2011; YU 2013; SEVILLANO-LÓPEZ 2015.

2 For terms see CANEPA 2010, 7, 9.

3 See e.g. CANEPA 2010; CANEPA 2014. Other aspects e.g.: WOOLF 1994; HARDWICK 2003.

4 As an important result of the dissertation a more detailed analysis on Chinese reception of Roman-related glass artefacts will be published. See HOPPÁL 2016.

Chinese- and Roman-interpreted archaeological finds. The incorporation of archaeological remains into the complex, utopian and multileveled *Daqin/Seres*-tradition helps to understand local answers to the Non-Local.<sup>5</sup>

Principally, by a detailed and critical examination of Roman-related transparent glass vessels, it also aims to enlighten problems on earlier identifications and interpretations. In addition, a precise recollection of the existing data not only allows to catalogue the above mentioned objects, but also helps to insert these glass artifacts into the Roman glass typology system. Therefore, the thesis attempts to provide a reliable and searchable database in order to differentiate Roman-originated from Roman-associated items.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, the dissertation is devoted to collect, analyze, contextualize and compare significant materials connected to the perceptions of Rome and China. Furthermore, it seeks to highlight questions such as:

- What factors and how might play role in forming perceptions of Rome and China?
- How ways of seeing and being seen could be described in context of China and Rome?
- Is there any universality/common aspect in Roman and Chinese perceptions of each other?
- How reception of foreign could be depicted in context of the two imperii?
- In light of complex approaches and methods, how Sino-Roman relations could be (re)described?

Moreover, by giving an available anthology of publications, sites and finds in China, the thesis also intends to draw attention on the importance of Chinese archaeology. As a synopsis of some historical, geographical and socio-cultural phenomena in the first to fifth centuries AD East-Asia, it might also help to deepen Hungarian academic knowledge on this field.

## Materials and methods

The chronological frame of the dissertation spans from the first to the fifth century AD (although earlier and later sources were also analyzed), from the appearance of term *Daqin* and *Seres* until the elementary changes of data in the fifth to seventh centuries. Altogether 45 Chinese and 91 Latin/Greek works were collected and studied in order to outline the comparative perceptions of Rome and China. In light of difficulties of appropriate interpretations, summaries were given by using originals and various translations as control works.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese sources on *Daqin* were grouped by relevance (primary and secondary), type (e. g. historiographies or geographical treaties, etc.) and date (before or after the fifth/sixth century). Each category was followed by a conclusion of perceptions defined by their description. In

5 Another example: HOPPÁL 2015.

6 For a catalogue of Roman-related glass artefacts see HOPPÁL 2016.

7 For Chinese texts and translations see HIRTH 1885; LESLIE – GARDINER 1996; HILL 2009; YU 2013. A great collection of ancient authors on the Far East: COEDÈS 1910; LIEU – SHELDON 2010.

the same way, sources on *Seres/Thinae* were arranged into groups according to date and genre, each followed by chapters of conclusions.

Besides written works, archaeological finds were examined as an equivalent but independent category in order to build a complex system of information. The relating chapters contain 69, the catalogue 64 items interpreted as Roman/Chinese in earlier studies. These objects were analyzed in their complexity: social context, geographical and historical nexus. Regarding the problems and limits of such comprehensive research – especially concerning archaeological remains discovered in the People's Republic of China – only published materials were used. Although Roman-like transparent glass vessels unearthed in China are the most remarkable (both in number and relevance) group of archaeological finds – since original materials are hardly available – still many misinterpretations and misquotations exist in modern studies (*Fig. 1*). In light of these problems the catalogue of these items devoted to collect all the existing data to build a reliable, searchable and verifiable database, which might serve as a basis for later research. At the same time, in case of Roman-related textiles, Chinese silks and bronze vessels – due to their different characteristics (i. e. good documentation) and role in perceptions – situation is dissimilar: relating chapters and catalogues only intend to focus on main patterns and mechanisms.



*Fig. 1.* Faceted glass bowl from Xianheguan (NANJING BOWUGUAN 南京博物馆 2004, 43).



## Structure

The body of dissertation is divided into six main parts and – regarding the complexity of the subject – into several subchapters. Head divisions are the following:

### *I. Daqin in ancient Chinese written works*

Through a careful examination of the accounts of *Daqin* it is possible to visualize how the Chinese imagined another ancient empire far in the West. The Chinese historical records, annals, geographical treaties, Taoist scriptures, Buddhist sutras, etc., provide more or less information on the interpretation of the name of that mysterious country. Furthermore, they add details about its geography, administration, trade and the envoys sent by *Daqin* people and economy, including agriculture, domesticated animals and products. Among the curious products that came from *Daqin*, jades, gemstones, glass and glass-like materials occur in a significant number.

Although the presented historical annals, encyclopedias, etc., only had second-hand data influenced by the great distance and their particular interpretation of the world, it is more significant that they had the claim to make a reasonably complex description about *Daqin*. In these passages the Roman Empire is a distant, utopian country surrounded by mythical places. The locals are civilized and virtuous, making rare, mysterious products.<sup>8</sup>

A short reflection on the history of Sino-Roman relations is followed by the explanation of the multileveled *Daqin*-concept and the detailed study of perceptions in different source-categories. As a result, these perceptions – regarding aspects of time – can be described as a complex, multifolded system, where *Daqin* is:

- distant, almost unreachable, remote country – on the westernmost part of the known world
- mystical, homeland of magic and supernatural phenomena
- utopian, locals are honest and wise, there is no crime and the ruler is righteous
- homeland of extraordinary and exotic products – symbol of provenance of hardly obtainable rarities

Furthermore, in some works – e. g. on the Nestorian Stele – new aspects are added, such as:

- beyond the sphere of profane a religious feature is given

### *II. Roman-related archaeological data discovered in the People's Republic of China*

Second of the main divisions is focusing on the Roman and Roman-like materials unearthed in China. Among the archaeological finds, transparent glass vessels are considered to be the most remarkable group (*Fig 2*). Besides the significant number of glass discoveries, in some cases chemical analyses are also available, which might help to identify the origin of these objects.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> HOPPÁL 2011. For a more recent study see SEVILLANO-LÓPEZ 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Works on Roman-related glasses in China e. g.: AN 安 1984; LAING 1991; AN 安 2000; AN 2002; AN 2004; AN 安 2005; GAN 干 2005; GAN 2009; LEE 2009; BORELL 2011; WANG 王 2011; etc.

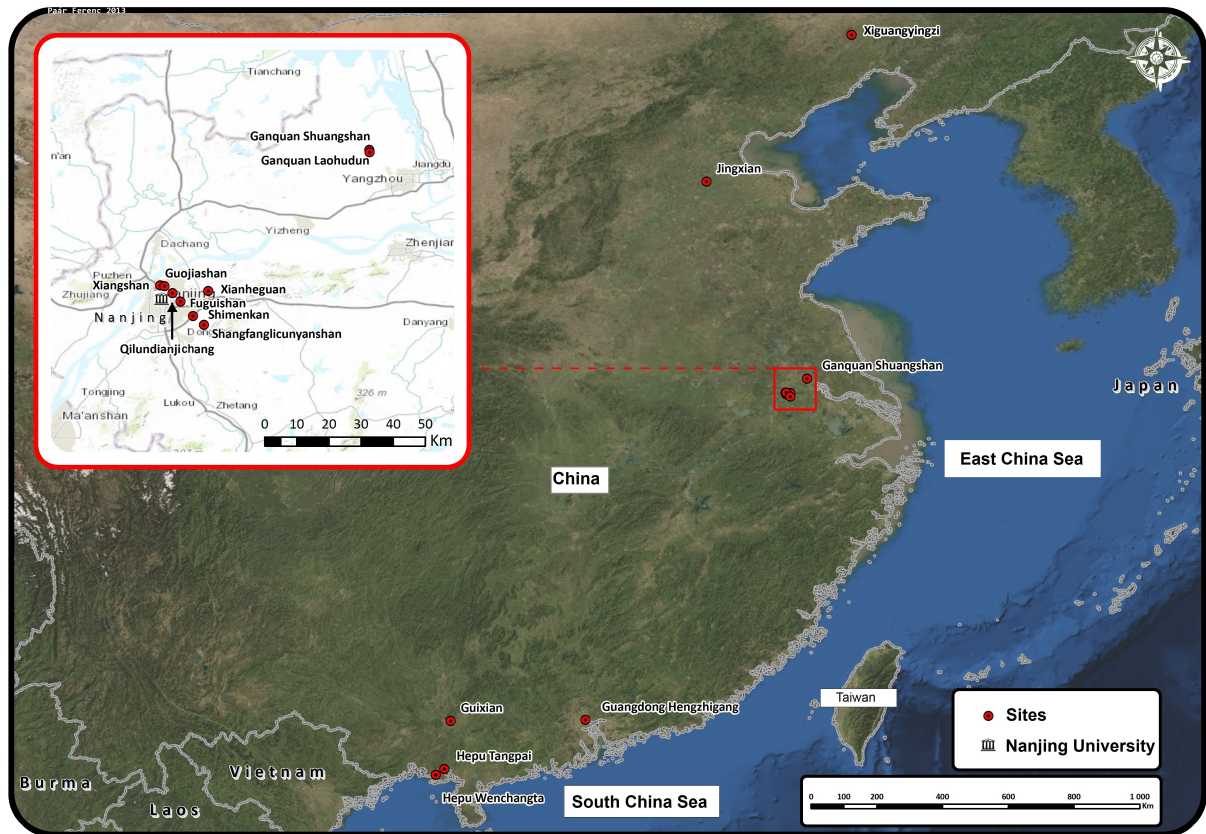


Fig. 2. Some Roman-related glass vessels in China (Map by Ferenc Paár).

However, in several cases, the contexts of these items are poorly documented or corrupted in some ways. Regarding the above mentioned difficulties and importance of the material group, the catalogue collects all the existing data including illustrations (Fig. 3), relevant publications, measurements, detailed descriptions, etc., in order to enlighten their social background.

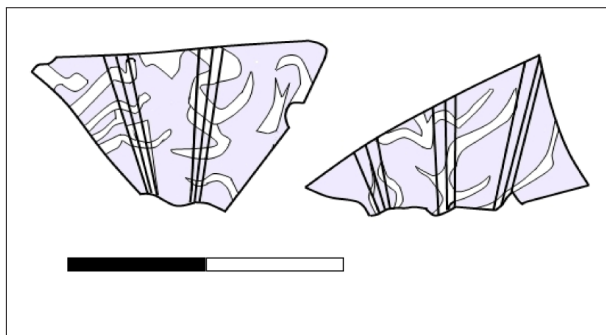


Fig. 3. Fragments of marbled glass bowl from Shuangshan (based on AN 2004, 132).

At the same time, it is also significant that western-imported glass objects were discovered in a remarkable number in the eastern coastal part of the People's Republic of China. They were unearthed in burials of the most prestigious and well-defined stratum of Chinese aristocracy (Fig. 4) and were also highly treasured because of their transparency, rarity and mysterious characteristics. According to the literary sources these mythical objects most often originated in the West, many cases in the utopian Daqin, the land of curiosity and

exotic.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, considering the role of Roman-related objects in Chinese society, despite their concrete price and rarity, they might have been described from ritual and symbolic aspects as well, which resulted in value beyond material sphere.

10 A great summary is displayed by An Jiayao. See AN 2002, 56–59.



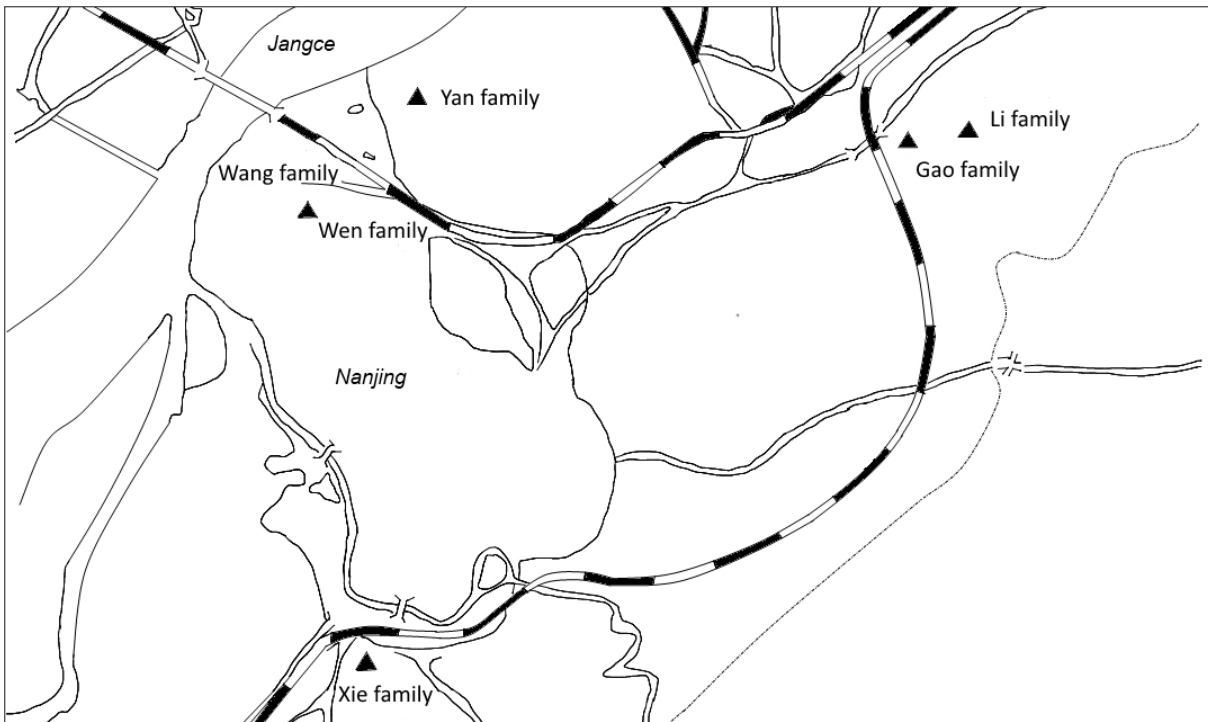


Fig. 4. Burials of wealthy families in Nanjing (based on HUA 华 2003).



Fig. 5. Roman-related textile fragment from Shanpula cemetery (XINJIANG – XINJIANG 2001, 184).

At the same time, Roman and Roman-influenced finds discovered in Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region regarding the cultural–ethnic diversity of the area<sup>11</sup> are divided into a separate group. As a consequence of the above mentioned particularities, Roman-related artifacts from this region might not have had direct impact on formulating perceptions of *Daqin* in Chinese society. Moreover, presumably none of these items associated with such complex/varied traditions might be directly connected to the Roman Empire (except transparent glass vessels that underwent chemical composition analyses).<sup>12</sup> However, typical characteristics of Hellenistic/Roman art can be clearly detected.<sup>13</sup> In this manner, these Roman-related objects play an indirect role in affecting perceptions of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, these items might also help to have a deeper understanding on the various and complex artistic/cultural models of the Silk Road (Fig. 5). Concerning Roman-like metalwares, a similar pattern – taking problems of their insignificant number into consideration (only two items for the whole research period,<sup>14</sup> Fig. 6) – can be outlined.

11 Important works on this matter: DI COSMO 2000; YU 2004; MILLWARD 2007; YÜ 2008; SELBITSCHKA 2010; HANSEN 2012, etc.

12 e. g. AN 安 1984, 437–439; JIANZHU CAILIAO YANJIUYUAN QINGHUA DAXUE 建筑材料研究院清华大学 – ZHONGGUO SHEHUIKEXUEYUAN KAOGUYANJIUSUO 中国社会科学院考古研究所 1984; BRILL 1999; 2007; LIN 林 2006; Yu 于 2007; LIN 2010; YU 2010, etc.

13 e. g. BOARDMAN 1992, 36–37.

14 e. g.: DATONGSHI BOWUGUAN 大同市博物馆 1972; BARATTE 1996; CHU 初 1990; PIRAZZOLI-T'SERSTEVENS 1994;



Fig. 6. Left: Gilded silver plate from Beitan (<http://www.gansumuseum.com/zppic/3b8591a2687f4e6b8cd-bc060332946a2.jpg> [Accessed 09.04.2015]); Right: Stem cup from Datong (<http://www.sxcr.gov.cn/uploadfile/2014/1217/20141217095906421.jpg> [Accessed 04.04.2015]).

Summing up the significant information obtained from Roman-related archaeological data, the following perceptions of the Roman Empire can be formed:

- distant: its products are moved by series of middlemen as a long-term (in some cases hundreds of years ) action, which results in an increasing material value
- mystical: manufacturer of goods, often connected to ritual practice in Chinese society, which result in an increasing immaterial value of its products

It is – compared to descriptions in Buddhist sutras – complemented with a special aspect outlined by textiles from the desert region of Xinjiang,<sup>15</sup> metalworks, figurative and visual artworks:<sup>16</sup>

- a nearly indefinable area with specific (Hellenistic) cultural characteristics/civilization(?) designating the region of Bactria in particular<sup>17</sup>

The above mentioned perceptions are adding new aspects towards the multileveled, utopian and mystical image of the Roman Empire.

SIMS-WILLIAMS 1995; LIN 林 1997, 58; LIN 林 1998, 170-171; JULIANO – LERNER 2001, 321-322; MARSHAK 2004, 47, 149; DIEN 2007, 278-279.

15 Significant works on Roman-related/Hellenistic textiles from Xinjiang e. g.: XIA 夏 1963; WU 武 1994; WU 武 1995; LIN 林 1985; LIN 林 2003; SCHORTA 2001; GONG 龚 2003; SHENG 2003; ZHAO 2004; JONES 2009; WAGNER – WANG – TARASOV 2009. etc.

16 On frescoes signed by 'Tita': STEIN 1921, 512, 514-515, 545; RHIE 2007, 376-378; HANSEN 2012, 53-56.

17 As S. M. Kordoses and Yu T. have assumed concerning Buddhist sutras (KORDOSES 2008; YU 2013, 206-207).



### III. The Roman Empire in China – Comprehensive review

In light of the several problems by using Chinese materials (availability, documentation, interdisciplinarity, etc.) a detailed review of *Daqin*/Rome- image is given as a third part of the dissertation's main body.

### IV. The Far-East in Antique texts – perceptions of China in the Roman Empire

The special image of the easternmost *Oikumene* in Greek/Roman written sources constitutes the fourth major section of the thesis.

Considering the specific features of perceptions of China in the Roman Empire different methods of approach are necessary to be used. Despite the considerably larger amount of actual texts (91 presented in relating chapters) and archaeological finds (13 items yet alone in province Pannonia), a concrete China conception (in conventional terms) did not exist at this period (i. e. 1st–5th century AD).



Fig. 7. Ptolemy's world map

The term *Seres* used by Greek/Roman authors implies a vague ethnonym of silk makers on the easternmost part of the *Oikumene* (Fig. 7). Although since the first century other expressions e. g. *Thinae/Sinai* are existing as more direct allusions of China, these idioms cannot be considered as elements of Antique doxography.<sup>18</sup> Despite such problems, a careful research of these texts might help to deepen knowledge of Roman perceptions (affected by propaganda, philosophy, etc.) on the Far-East, and in this manner on China as well.

18 Some more recent works: FALLER 2000; WAN 万 2008; YANG 杨 2008; TARN 2010; JI 冀 2011; Wang 2012; Malinowski 2012.

According to these rather ambiguous ideas, Roman views are similar in many ways to the *Daqin* perceptions, where *Serica/Thinae/Sinai* – and indirectly the Middle Empire – is

- distant, almost unreachable, remote country – on the easternmost part of the known world
- mystical (particularly in the first century AD)
- utopian, locals are honest and wise, there is no crime
- homeland of extraordinary and exotic products – one but not only symbol of provenance of hardly obtainable rarities

#### ***V. Chinese objects in the Roman Empire***

The fifth major section of the dissertation deals with some significant Chinese-interpreted archaeological remains discovered in the Roman Empire.

As a consequence of unconventional perceptions on the Middle Empire, Chinese archaeological finds have been analyzed principally to describe particular models and patterns. Therefore, relating chapters are focusing on Chinese silks as important features of *Seres/Thinae* accounts.



*Fig. 8. Left: Silk fragment from Palmyra (SCHMIDT-COLINET – STAUFFER – AL-AS'AD 2000, Farbtaf. VIII 223a); Right: Textile fragments from Heténypuszta (SIPOS 1990, Pl. II).*

First, a detailed study of Greek/Latin texts on *Seric* textiles<sup>19</sup> is given followed by an analysis of Palmyran silks with Chinese characters<sup>20</sup> (*Fig. 8, left*) and Chinese silk finds from Pannonia (*Fig. 8, right*).<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that knowledge on the provenance of these precious materials was rather vague (they were originated from the undefined East; *Serica* or *Thinae*) and therefore had no direct role in China-perceptions, yet they might reflect on special aspects of trends and highlight the importance of luxurious textiles in imperial propaganda.

19 KAJDAŃSKI 2007; SZÉKELY 2013.

20 e. g. STAUFFER 1995; 1996; ZHAO 1999; SCHMIDT-COLINET – STAUFFER – AL-AS'AD 2000; ŽUCHOWSKA 2013.

21 PÓCZY 1998; TÓTH 1987; TÓTH 2009.



As a consequence, Chinese silk – without having any relevant idea on the Middle Empire in Roman society – can be regarded as a significant agent from cultural, economic and social angles as well.<sup>22</sup> Detailed examination of the above mentioned aspects concerning peculiarities of Rome's Eastern policy is also presented in the relating chapters.



Fig. 9. Chinese hu bronze vessel (© Trustees of the British Museum).

At the same time, Chinese bronze vessels believed to be in connection to the *Imperium Romanum* are also discussed (Fig. 9). However, considering the insignificant number of these finds and their dubious background,<sup>23</sup> presumably none of them had relevant impact on perceptions of China. Therefore, no more than a short survey is given.

#### **VI. Comparative perceptions of Rome and China – Theory and conclusion**

The sixth section serves as a collection of main results presented in the dissertation, where an outline of theoretical framework and some alternative approaches are given.

22 Important works on this field: WILD 2003; HARLOW 2005; PARANI 2007; THOMAS 2012, 124–128; CANEPA 2014; GLEBA 2014; etc.

23 Even their date is dubious, see JONES 1990, 95. cat. no. 88.

## Results

The sixth section of the dissertation's body contains the comparison of similar and dissimilar perceptions which can be regarded as a synthesis of major results.

Through a careful comparison – taking cultural, philosophical, etc., heterogeneity into account – it is possible to outline universalities/common aspects in Roman and Chinese visions. These common features are considered to be examples of typical utopian *topoi*,<sup>24</sup> where the people of *Daqin* and the *Seres* are:

- residents of the westernmost/easternmost part of the known world, in a remote and unapproachable area;
- with mystical/magical (longevity) utopian (peaceful, straightforward) characteristics;
- distant, famous for their commercial activity and high-quality articles (multicoloured glass or fine silk tapestries);
- symbols of exotics,
- thereby vehicles of imperial propaganda and
- moral rhetoric.

Moreover, the comparative reception of the two *Imperii* is also presented as an interdisciplinary approach towards the problem of seeing and being seen. The various responses on foreign in Chinese and Roman society are also depicted by using the archaeological data. Through focusing on transparent glass vessels and silk remains relating paragraphs are concentrating on possible forms of selection, evaluation, appropriation, etc. The temporal and spatial patterns of perceptions – as significant elements of a complex mechanism – are also studied and form another important viewpoint of the dissertation.

In addition, a further result of the thesis is the particular intention of a holistic and critical approach towards written sources and archaeological data in order to incorporate them into an integrated system. Particularly, concerning western imported glass vessels discovered in China – as one of the most informative but corrupted material group –, a searchable database has been built to serve as a reliable and available basis of future research.

Consequently, through complex approaches and methods, the dissertation (re)describes Sino-Roman relations in several aspects.

Last but not least, as an effort of the thesis, another synthesis of some major features of East-Asian history and archaeology has been available for Hungarian scholarship.

## Limits and future tasks of research

Despite the intentions of the thesis, towards a deeper understanding on factors of cross-cultural interactions and perceptions, further multidisciplinary approaches would be essential. Such

24 NÉMETH 1996, 95, 98, 100, 101.



as critical debates on mediator cultures, peripheries and temporal cultural situations, or on eligibility of world-system theories – taking limits and boundaries into account.

Hybridization – especially in context of Xinjiang – and application of complex network analysis – as used in context of Byzantine and Tang Empires – might also play an important role in future studies.<sup>25</sup>

However, considering the limits of research (problems on accessibility, documentation, determination of provenance, etc.), a demanding and multileveled discourse through an interdisciplinary research project is required.

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