

JUSTINIAN AND CHINA:
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND CHINA
DURING THE REIGN OF JUSTINIAN I

Jason Freewalt
Late Antiquity and Byzantium - HIST533 B001 Sum 15
Dr. Michael Ng
American Military University
August 23, 2015

From the reign of Augustus (27 BC-14 AD) to the fall of Constantinople (1453 AD), the Roman and Byzantine Empires engaged in some degree of contact with China. This contact was almost exclusively indirect, through intermediaries such as the Parthians and the Kushans (during the Principate), the Sassanids and the Sogdians (through the Heraclian Dynasty), and the Muslims and Mongols (during the Byzantine “Golden Age,” the Crusader era, and the *Pax Mongolica*). After the “fall” of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire became the most important destination for merchants traveling west along the Silk Road. During the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527-565 AD), Constantinople continued its development into a cosmopolitan city that served as a hub of commerce and culture along the Silk Road, maintaining the ancient connection between the Romans and the Chinese. Despite strains on this connection, such as Justinian’s creation of a domestic silk production industry, conflicts with the Sassanid Persian intermediaries, and the Justinianic Plague, Constantinople and China maintained an important relationship on the western and eastern ends of the Silk Road throughout Justinian’s reign.

Trade, particularly in silk, dominated the connection between the two civilizations during the reign of Justinian, helping to fuel a prosperous commercial enterprise.¹ However, there was more to the connection between Constantinople and China than silk. After all, Justinian’s creation of a domestic silk production industry (discussed below) did not end contact between China and the West. On the contrary, Marco Polo traveled from Italy to China in the thirteenth century despite active Italian and Greek silk industries. In addition to silk, the Romans imported

¹ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian, Volume 2* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 332.

other luxury goods from China, such as perfumes, pepper, incense, and cosmetics.² Additional items included furs, iron, cinnamon, and rhubarb.³ One form of rhubarb in high demand was *radix Pontica* (root from Pontus), a type of rhubarb used for medicinal purposes, that passed along the Silk Road from China through Pontus.⁴ The Roman Empire, continuing through Byzantine Empire, had a long tradition of trade with the “Seres” (the Chinese).⁵ Meanwhile, the Chinese imported gold and silver, other precious metals, precious and semi-precious stones, coral to make jewelry, and various forms of glass and glassware. The *Hou Hanshu* (Book of the Later Han) states that China received fighting cocks, rhinoceroses, gold-threaded and multi-colored embroideries, woven gold-threaded net, delicate polychrome silks painted with gold, and other products from the “Da Qin” (the Romans).⁶

By the reign of Justinian, Constantinople developed into a “halfway house” for trade to and from China.⁷ Constantinople’s geographic location facilitated both land and sea trade. During times of peace, the land route from Constantinople to China traveled through Sassanid Persia, while the sea route passed through the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean to Taprobane (probably Ceylon, known today as Sri Lanka), which Persian merchants also controlled.⁸ In this way, Persia served as the primary intermediary between the Byzantine Empire and China. This

² John Thorley, “The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus,” *Greece and Rome, Second Series* 16, no. 2 (October 1969): 219, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642851> (accessed August 22, 2015).

³ G. F. Hudson, *Europe and China: A Survey of their Relationships from the Earliest Times to 1800* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1931), 96.

⁴ Thorley, 215.

⁵ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, founded on Andrews' edition of *Freund's Latin Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. “Seres,” <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=seres&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059> (accessed August 22, 2015).

⁶ *Hou Hanshu* 88.12, John E. Hill, trans., *Hou Hanshu, chapter 88, “The Xiyu juan ‘The Western Regions,’”* 2nd ed., (University of Washington, September 2003), https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.html (accessed August 22, 2015).

⁷ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*

arrangement was somewhat unstable, however, as violent conflict between the Byzantines and Persians was a constant threat during Justinian's reign.⁹

During times of turbulent Byzantine-Persian relations, Justinian negotiated alliances with many neighboring civilizations in an effort to bypass Persia to reach China. For example, the Ghassanid Empire, which controlled territory from Yemen to the Golan Heights, allowed spices from India, silk from China, and slaves from throughout Asia to pass along trade routes through Mecca and Yathrib (Medina) in the Hijaz to Constantinople.¹⁰ Another route Justinian used to circumvent the Persians passed through the Bosphorus to Cherson (Kherson in modern Ukraine) or Lazica (in modern Georgia).¹¹

The northerly route brought the Byzantines into contact with people of the steppe, such as the Russians, Avars, and Turks. The Russians adopted the use of the Byzantine "solidus" coin, which became the basis of their economy and a testament to the influence of Constantinople on trade in the region.¹² In 558 AD, Justinian first met the Avars, who were heavily armed mounted warriors who utilized an important Chinese invention, the stirrup.¹³ The Turks, who would later conquer the Byzantine Empire nearly a millennium after Justinian, allied during Justinian's reign with the Persians against the Ephthalites ("White Huns") of Central Asia. The conquest of the Ephthalites allowed the Sogdians (in modern Tajikistan), a long-time intermediary between Rome and China, to reopen their trade along the Silk Road. Justinian's successor, Justin II, received an embassy from Sogdia to negotiate an alliance between the Byzantines, Sogdians, and

⁹ Bury, 331; see also Ostrogorsky, 74.

¹⁰ J. A. S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (London: Routledge, 1996), 87, Adobe Digital Editions eBook, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=10070712> (accessed August 20, 2015).

¹¹ Ostrogorsky, 74.

¹² Richard N. Frye, "Byzantine and Sasanian Trade Relations with Northeastern Russia," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26 (1972): 268, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1291322> (accessed August 2, 2015).

¹³ Evans, 260.

the Turks against the Avars to reconnect Sogdian merchants with the Byzantine Empire in an attempt to bypass the Persians in the trade with China.¹⁴ Although Justin II did not make the alliance, the negotiations illustrate the complex political conditions that existed throughout the lands between the Byzantine Empire and China.

All of this political maneuvering was probably worth it to Justinian because of the value of silk, the primary commodity traded between the Byzantine Empire and China. According to Robert Lopez, the control of silk products was almost as powerful a weapon as the control of oil, coal, and iron are today.¹⁵ The silk trade was important and unique in that silk products were both imported and exported. Byzantine merchants imported raw silk from China through intermediaries. Then, Byzantine workshops modified the raw silk by dyeing it, often with the purple dye of the nobility, and adding gold embroidery and other embellishments. These modified silks were then released for export, providing substantial revenue from customs duties and stimulating the flow of foreign gold into the Empire.¹⁶ Ironically, these modified silks became a hot commodity in China, completing their round-trip journey through the Byzantine Empire and creating a very lucrative business for the Byzantines.¹⁷

The influx of money from the silk trade, as well as other avenues of revenue, was very important to Justinian. His military effort to reclaim the fallen Western Roman Empire from the barbarians drained the imperial treasury, requiring additional revenue. In addition, the many building projects that beautified Constantinople, such as the Hagia Sophia, were extremely

¹⁴ Evans, 265.

¹⁵ Robert Sabatino Lopez, "Silk Industry in the Byzantine Empire," *Speculum* 20, no. 1 (January 1945): 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2851187> (accessed August 20, 2015).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷ Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 80, EBSCOhost eBook Collection, http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=327480&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_83 (accessed August 20, 2015).

expensive. To make matters worse, the Justinianic Plague of 541-542 AD killed tens of thousands of Constantinople's residents, ravaging the Empire in the midst of an already strained economic situation.¹⁸ Thus, Justinian was keen to find creative ways to increase revenue to rebuild the imperial treasury.

One way Justinian attempted to improve the Empire's economic condition was to fix the price of silk. Procopius, Justinian's primary historian, wrote rather disparagingly of this event in his *Secret History*, primarily because it led to a state monopoly of the silk industry, the ruin of the silk industries at Tyre and Berytus (Beirut), and the downfall of some of the Empire's prominent citizens.¹⁹ Justinian ordered his bureaucrats of commerce, the *commercarii*, to buy up all of the available raw silk, funneling this silk into state-controlled workshops and putting great strain on non-imperial factories due to the lack of raw silk. When supplies dwindled completely, the silk industries of Tyre and Berytus raised their prices due to supply and demand.²⁰

In response to the higher prices, Justinian set a price ceiling of eight gold pieces per pound of silk. This infuriated the foreign importers who had already purchased raw silk at higher prices. They would now have to sell at a loss due to Justinian's price ceiling. Many merchants, mechanics, and craftsmen lost their businesses. Some of the unemployed craftsmen flocked to Justinian's state-controlled workshops.²¹ Others fled to Sassanid Persia to find work. There they imparted their skills to the Persians, who eventually developed their own silk industry.²² Some importers attempted to sidestep the legislation by selling their silk on the black market, but Justinian's clever wife Theodora learned about the scheme and had some of the most well-known

¹⁸ Procopius *Wars* 2.22.

¹⁹ Procopius *Secret History* 25.

²⁰ Bury, 331.

²¹ Lopez, 5.

²² Liu, 81.

offenders stripped of their stocks and heavily fined. Justinian's chief economic official, Peter Barsymes, used the crisis to create a state monopoly on the silk industry. Some of the private silk workshops that failed were converted into state-controlled workshops, channeling their revenue into the imperial treasury.²³

While Procopius's account of the creation of the state silk monopoly is unflattering to Justinian, there are certainly other perspectives to consider. Anna Muthesius points out that the timing of the event, often dated to c. 540 AD, is uncertain and is a point of debate for historians.²⁴ The Byzantine silk industry may have developed gradually over time, not overnight as Procopius described.²⁵ It is possible that Procopius exaggerated or modified the details of the creation of the state silk monopoly to discredit Justinian and Theodora. J. B. Bury dates Peter Barsyme's creation of the state monopoly to 542 AD.²⁶ If Bury's date is correct, the Justinianic Plague may have created the conditions that led to the state monopoly. Such a catastrophe would have devastated the population, causing silk workshops to collapse for lack of workers. It is possible that Justinian and Barsyme hoped to favor state-controlled workshops in an effort to ensure that the state's workshops remained open, helping the Empire recover economically from the plague. Procopius made no mention of the plague in his narrative of the creation of the state silk monopoly in his unofficial historical text, *The Secret History*, but it is unlikely that he would have given his aim to discredit Justinian. Mention of the plague may have generated sympathy for Justinian and vindication for his actions.

²³ Bury, 331.

²⁴ Anna Muthesius, "Essential Processes, Looms, and Technical Aspects of the Production of Silk Textiles," in *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002), 151, <http://www.doaks.org/resources/publications/doaks-online-publications/economic-history-of-byzantium> (accessed August 2, 2015).

²⁵ Ibid., 150.

²⁶ Bury, 331.

However, Procopius did describe the devastating effects of the plague in vivid detail in his official history, *History of the Wars of Justinian*. In his account, Procopius identified Pelusium, in Egypt's Nile Delta region, as the origin of the plague.²⁷ Recent DNA studies show, however, that China, not Africa, was the origin of the Justinianic Plague.²⁸ The studies show that the plague was a form of *Yersinia pestis* (bubonic plague) that originated in the Xinjiang region of northwestern China. This location contained sufficient rodent and flea populations to incubate the bacteria.²⁹ It is quite ironic that China, the source of the Byzantine Empire's most important trade item, was also the origin of the Empire's worst biological disaster. The plague's Chinese origin highlights a negative aspect of the connection between the Byzantine Empire and China, showing that not all aspects of the Byzantine-Chinese connection were desirable.

China's prominence as the key supplier of silk to the Byzantine sphere of influence suffered a major blow c. 553 AD, when Justinian smuggled silk eggs into Constantinople to build a domestic silk production industry.³⁰ Two Nestorian monks allegedly told Justinian about silk's origins and the way it was produced. Silk production was a highly prized secret for the Chinese, so this would have been big news for Justinian. The emperor asked the monks to obtain some of the worms for him, so the monks smuggled some eggs on mulberry leaves into Constantinople. Thus, a domestic silk production industry was born.³¹ As with many such stories from the ancient and medieval worlds, some scholars doubt the veracity of Procopius's account

²⁷ Procopius *Wars* 2.22.

²⁸ Michaela Harbeck et al., "Yersinia pestis DNA from Skeletal Remains from the 6th Century AD Reveals Insights into Justinianic Plague," *PLoS Pathogens* 9, no. 5 (May 2, 2013): 5, <http://journals.plos.org/plospathogens/article?id=10.1371/journal.ppat.1003349> (accessed August 19, 2015).

²⁹ David M. Wagner et al., "Yersinia pestis and the Plague of Justinian 541-543 AD: A Genomic Analysis," *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 14, no. 4 (April 2014): 323, [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(13\)70323-2/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(13)70323-2/fulltext) (accessed August 19, 2015).

³⁰ Procopius *Wars* 8.17.1-8; for various interpretations of this event, see Bury, 332; Evans, 235; Jacoby, 198; and Ostrogorsky, 75.

³¹ Bury, 332.

and believe it to be an oversimplification of the development of the Byzantine silk production industry. According to David Jacoby, Byzantine “sericulture” (silk production) was not an overnight creation. He contends that it gradually developed throughout the Byzantine Empire, and it did not at first keep pace with the domestic demand for silk products. In fact, Jacoby contends that the Byzantine silk production industry did not become self-sufficient until the early tenth century.³² Therefore, Chinese silk imports remained important throughout Justinian’s reign. As a result, Justinian had to continue to import silk into the Byzantine Empire through Persia during peaceful times and bypass Persia during times of conflict.³³

Chinese silk remained an important trade commodity throughout Justinian’s reign, and it shaped much of his foreign policy with the civilizations east of Constantinople. In addition to silk, other products that the Byzantines exported to or imported from China, including the Justinianic Plague, played an important role in shaping Justinian’s reign. Justinian exerted considerable energies trying to reclaim lost lands in the West for the Roman Empire, but he also kept his eye on trade and diplomacy with the East. Although it is likely that all Roman/Byzantine contact with China through Justinian’s reign was indirect, the connection along the Silk Road between the two great empires clearly had a direct impact on the Byzantine Empire. The silk industry, the Justinianic Plague, and the interaction between the Byzantine Empire and the numerous intermediaries between it and China bear witness to the great amount of societal interconnectivity during Late-Antiquity, and it foreshadowed the monumental journey of Marco Polo other explorers who eventually made direct contact with China.

³² David Jacoby, “Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004): 198-199, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3591386> (accessed August 2, 2015).

³³ Bury, 332.

Bibliography

- Bury, J. B. *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian, Volume 2*. New York: Dover Publications, 1958.
- Evans, J. A. S. *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*. London: Routledge, 1996. Adobe Digital Editions eBook.
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=10070712> (accessed August 20, 2015).
- Frye, Richard N. "Byzantine and Sasanian Trade Relations with Northeastern Russia." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26 (1972): 263-269. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1291322> (accessed August 2, 2015).
- Harbeck, Michaela, Lisa Seifert, Stephanie Hänsch, David M. Wagner, Dawn Birdsell, Katy L. Parise, Ingrid Wiechmann, Gisela Grupe, Astrid Thomas, Paul Keim, Lothar Zöller, Barbara Bramanti, Julia M. Riehm, Holger C. Scholz. "Yersinia pestis DNA from Skeletal Remains from the 6th Century AD Reveals Insights into Justinianic Plague." *PLoS Pathogens* 9, no. 5 (May 2, 2013): 1-8.
<http://journals.plos.org/plospathogens/article?id=10.1371/journal.ppat.1003349> (accessed August 19, 2015).
- Hudson, G. F. *Europe and China: A Survey of their Relationships from the Earliest Times to 1800*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1931.
- Jacoby, David. "Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004): 197-240.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3591386> (accessed August 2, 2015).
- Lewis, Charlton T. and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*. Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary, rev. ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=seres&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059> (accessed August 22, 2015).
- Liu, Xinru. *The Silk Road in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. EBSCOhost eBook Collection.
http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=327480&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_83 (accessed August 20, 2015).
- Lopez, Robert Sabatino. "Silk Industry in the Byzantine Empire." *Speculum* 20, no. 1 (January 1945): 1-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2851187> (accessed August 20, 2015).
- Muthesius, Anna. "Essential Processes, Looms, and Technical Aspects of the Production of Silk Textiles." In *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, edited by Angeliki E. Laiou, 147-168. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002.

<http://www.doaks.org/resources/publications/doaks-online-publications/economic-history-of-byzantium> (accessed August 2, 2015).

Ostrogorsky, George. *History of the Byzantine State*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969.

Thorley, John. "The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus." *Greece and Rome, Second Series* 16, no. 2 (October 1969): 209-223.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/642851> (accessed August 22, 2015).

Wagner, David M., Jennifer Klunk, Michaela Harbeck, Alison Devault, Nicholas Waglechner, Jason W. Sahl, Jacob Enk, Dawn N. Birdsell, Melanie Kuch, Candice Lumibao, Debi Poinar, Talima Pearson, Mathieu Fourment, Brian Golding, Julia M. Riehm, David J. D. Earn, Sharon DeWitte, Jean-Marie Rouillard, Gisela Grupe, Ingrid Wiechmann, James B. Bliska, Paul S. Keim, Holger C. Scholz, Edward C. Holmes, Hendrik Poinar. "Yersinia pestis and the Plague of Justinian 541-543 AD: A Genomic Analysis." *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 14, no. 4 (April 2014): 319-326.
[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(13\)70323-2/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(13)70323-2/fulltext) (accessed August 19, 2015).