

From the Chin-shu, ch. 97

This excerpt offers another description of Roman lands from an official history of the Han dynasty compiled by Fang Ch'iao, who died in 648 CE.

Ta-ts'in [Roman Syria], also called Li-kan, is in the western part of the western sea [Persian Gulf]. In this country several thousand *li* in all directions of the compass are covered with cities and other inhabited places. Its capital is over a hundred *li* in circumference. The inhabitants use coral in making the kingposts of their dwellings; they use opaque glass in making walls, and crystal in making the pedestals of pillars. Their king has five palaces. The palaces are ten *li* distant from each other. Every morning the king hears cases in one palace; when he has finished he begins anew. When the country is visited by an extraordinary calamity, a wiser man is elected; the old king is relieved from his duties, and the king so dismissed does not dare to consider himself ill-treated. They have keepers of official records and interpreters who are acquainted with their style of writing. They have also small carriages with white canopies, flags, and banners, and postal arrangements, just as we have them in Zhongguo [China]. The inhabitants are tall, and their faces resemble those of the Han [Chinese], but they wear foreign dress. Their country exports much gold and precious stones, shining pearls, and large conches; they have the "jewel that shines at night," the *hsieh-chi-hsi*, and asbestos cloth; they know how to embroider cloth with gold thread and weave gold-embroidered rugs. They make gold and

silver coins; ten silver coins are worth one gold coin. The inhabitants of Ar-hsi [Arsacids, or Parthia] and T'ien-chu [India] have trade with them by sea; its profit is hundred-fold. When the envoys of neighboring countries arrive there, they are provided with golden money. The water of the great sea which is crossed on the road thither is salt and bitter, and unfit for drinking purposes; the merchants travelling to and fro are provided with three years' provisions; hence, there are not many going.

At the time of the Han dynasty, the *tu-hu* Pan Ch'ao sent his subordinate officer Kan-ying as an envoy to that country; but the sailors who were going out to sea said, "that there was something about the sea which caused one to long for home; those who went out could not help being seized by melancholy feelings; if the Han envoy did not care for his parents, his wife, and his children, he might go." Ying could not take his passage. During the T'ai-k'ang period of the emperor Wu-ti [280-290 C.E.] their king sent an envoy to offer tribute.

Source F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Shanghai & Hong Kong, 1885).