

## Pliny the Elder, The Natural History, Chapter 20, The Seres

Pliny the Elder was a Roman scholar who compiled a vast geography of the world as he knew it. This excerpt is his description of Seres, a land far to the East that modern scholars recognize as China.

Text After we have passed the Caspian Sea and the Scythian Ocean, our course takes an easterly direction, such being the turn here taken by the line of the coast. The first portion of these shores, after we pass the Scythian Promontory, is totally uninhabitable, owing to the snow, and the regions adjoining are uncultivated, in consequence of the savage state of the nations which dwell there. Here are the abodes of the Scythian Anthropophagi, who feed on human flesh. Hence it is that all around them consists of vast deserts, inhabited by multitudes of wild beasts, which are continually lying in wait, ready to fall upon human beings just as savage as themselves. After leaving these, we again come to a nation of the Scythians, and then again to desert tracts tenanted by wild beasts, until we reach a chain of mountains which runs up to the sea, and bears the name of Tabis. It is not, however, before we have traversed very nearly one half of the coast that looks towards the north-east, that we find it occupied by inhabitants.

The first people that are known of here are the Seres, so famous for the wool that is found in their forests. After steeping it in water, they comb off a white down that adheres to the leaves; and then to the females of our part of the world they give the twofold task of unravelling their textures, and of weaving the threads afresh. So manifold is the labour, and so distant are the regions which are thus ransacked to supply a dress through which our ladies may in public display their charms. The Seres are of inoffensive manners, but, bearing a strong resemblance therein to all savage nations, they shun all intercourse with the rest of mankind, and await the approach of those who wish to traffic with them. The first river that is known in their territory is the Psitharas, next to that the Cambari, and the third the Laros; after which we come to the Promontory of Chryse, the Gulf of Cynaba, the river Atianos, and the nation of the Attacori on the gulf of that name, a people protected by their sunny hills from all noxious blasts, and living in a climate of the same temperature as that of the Hyperborei. Amometus has written a work entirely devoted to the history of these people, just as Hecatæus has done in his treatise on the Hyperborei. After the Attacori, we find the nations of the Phruri and the Tochari, and, in the interior, the Casiri, a people of India, who look toward the Scythians, and feed on human flesh. Here are also numerous wandering Nomad tribes of India. There are some authors who state that in a north-easterly direction these nations touch upon the Cicones and the Brysari.

Source Pliny the Elder, The Natural History, first century