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# CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS II. ISLAMIC PERIOD TO THE MONGOLS

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ii. Islamic Period to the Mongols

It is difficult to distinguish between specifically Chinese relations with Persia and more general relations between the Far Eastern states and the early Muslim caliphates: *Ṣīn* in Arabic sources referred not only to China but also to eastern Turkestan and the Far East as a whole, whereas Chinese texts rarely distinguished among Persian, Central Asian, and Arab Muslims. Especially in the 3rd-4th/9th-10th centuries, it was the ʿAbbasids in Baghdad who undertook the diplomatic initiatives (Gibb, 1922-23). Early Muslim sources give little information on Chinese-Persian relations and even fail to record, for example, Zīād b. Ṣāleḥ's victory over the Chinese at Ṭarāz (Talas) east of Samarkand in 133/751 (Gibb, 1923, pp. 95-98). The Chinese sources, on the other hand, rarely distinguish clearly among diplomacy, tribute missions, and commercial enterprises under flags of convenience, and in fact such distinctions may not have existed.

Nevertheless, in the early Islamic period there was a distinct weakening of Chinese influence in Central Asia. Chinese were depicted among eastern

embassies to King Varhuman of Sogd (late 1st/7th century) in the audience hall of a palace excavated at Afrasiyab (Afrāsīāb) outside Samarkand (Al'baum, pp. 58-73), but these paintings may well have been executed after the Arab conquest of Samarkand in 93/712 (Gibb, 1923, pp. 95-98). T'ang interference in the murky politics of the western Turk qaghanate helped to eliminate the most serious obstacle to the triumph of Islam in Central Asia and Khorasan and thus brought about the eclipse of Chinese diplomatic and political activity in the region. The defeat at Ṭarāz was merely an episode in this decline.

The only early embassy to the Chinese known from Muslim sources was that of Qotayba b. Moslem (d. 96/715) in 94/713 (Gibb, 1922-23). On the other hand, the Chinese annals record nineteen Muslim embassies between 94/713 and 142/759 (Minorsky, 1937, pp. 223-34), ten of them from Persia and one (in 128/746) from Ṭabarestān, which may still have been independent. Nevertheless, the extreme vagueness of the early Muslim geographers about routes and stages in northwestern China suggest both that diplomatic contacts were sporadic and did not result in the preservation of official accounts in the archives. Subsequently, the most important embassies seem to have been from the caliph Hārūn-al-Rašīd (182/798 ); from the Samanids (ca. 330/941) to Qālīn b. *Čaḵir, ruler of the Sarï Uighurs; and from the ʿAbbasids to the Liao court in ca. 363/974 and to the Northern Sung in ca. 401-02/1011.

These more or less official missions were, however, supplemented by periodic reports from merchants and others traveling via either the overland route to northwestern China or the sea route to the southern part of the country. Restrictions on travel inside China meant that information from those two regions long remained discrete. The sea route was far more important for commerce. In 141/758 the large Muslim colony at Canton (Ḵānfū) rioted and sacked the city (*EI*[2], s.v. Khānfū; *Chao-Jukua*, pp. 4, 14-15), but little is otherwise known of Canton in this period (see vii, below). In fact, the first description of the city in an Islamic source is found in the *Ketāb aḵbār al-Ṣīn wa'l-Hend* (completed ca. 235/850) attributed to the Persian merchant Solaymān. The Qorayšī merchant Ebn al-Wahhāb, who reached the T'ang capital at Changan (Ḵomdān) shortly after 256/870 (Masʿūdī , *Morūj* I, pp. 312-21), mentioned the rebellion of Huang Chao and his massacre of the Muslim population in 264/879; the rest of his account is somewhat fanciful, however. As for the northern route, there is little information from the 3rd/9th century. The account of a journey to the wall of Gog and Magog by the interpreter Sallām in the reign of the caliph al-Wāṯeq (227-32/842-47; Wilson) is in the tradition of

marvel literature; he probably never traveled farther east than Farḡāna. Abū Dolaf’s claim to have accompanied a Chinese embassy on its return from Bokhara around 331/941 is now regarded largely as a fabrication (See abū dolaf yanboʿī). In about 206/821, however, the traveler Tamīm b. Baḥr reached Qara Balāsāḡūn on the river Chu (Minorsky, 1948), the capital of the Uighurs, who, until the breakup of their empire in 226-27/840, were allied by marriage to the T’ang emperors and conducted large-scale trade with China, exchanging horses (*arḡamak*) for woven silks (Minorsky, 1948, p. 299, citing Chinese sources).

The earliest systematic attempt to describe the overland route was a geographical work, the lost *Ketāb al-mamālek wa’l-masālek* of the Samanid vizier(s) Jayhānī (completed ca. 330/941-42; *EI*[2], s.v. al-D̲jayhānī). It was the principal source for the information on China and the east reported by Gardīzī in his *Zayn al-aḵbār* (ed. Nazim) compiled in the mid-5th/11th century. The anonymous author of *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam* (completed 372/982-83; Minorsky, 1937, p. 226; idem, 1955) also made extensive use of it. Nevertheless, Jayhānī’s text contained much information that was out of date, for example, reports that the Chinese were Manicheans (Manicheism had been proscribed by the T’ang in 843; See chinese turkestan. manicheism in central asia and chinese turkestan) and that Changan was still the capital, though the Liao had transferred it to Lo-yang after 907 and then to Kai-feng in 936. The fact that later writers, like Yāqūt and Abu’l-Fedā, who drew on these treatises made no mention of Canton, which had become an important trading port for Muslims after 850, is evidence of the inaccessibility of information on southern China.

In about 417/1026 the Liao (Kitan) emperor Sheng Tsung (983-1031) and probably the Sarï Uighur ruler of Gansu (Kansu) sent a joint embassy, led by *Qul-tongs and Qāšī, to the Ghaznavid sultan Maḥmūd (388-421/998-1030). It was from questioning these ambassadors that Bīrūnī obtained the data about the stages on the way to Qeṭāy and the coordinates of principal Far Eastern cities for his *Qānūn al-masʿūdī* (completed shortly after 428/1030; Minorsky, 1951). Furthermore, an official report of this visit was used by Šaraf-al-Zamān Ṭāher Marvazī, a physician at the court of the Great Saljuq sultan Malekšāh, in his *Ṭabāyeʿ al-ḥayawān* in about 514/1120 (Minorsky, 1942; idem, 1955). He also drew on Jayhānī and Gardīzī, and some of his information was thus seriously out of date. His other sources included an anonymous merchant’s account of a visit to the early Liao capital Yn.jur/Honanfu/Yongchu (after 907), Abū Zayd Sīrāfī’s edition and continuation of the *Ketāb aḵbār al-Ṣīn wa’l-Hend* (ca.

304/916), and possibly other works of this type; he also included some of his own observations, for example, an account of the Chinese-Uighur twelve-year animal cycle, which was evidently a novelty to the Saljuqs, as it had been to the Ghaznavids a century earlier (Minorsky, 1942; idem, 1955). The importance of *Ṭabāyeʿ al-ḥayawān*, which remained a basic source for the later Muslim geographers, lay in the fact that for the first time Muslim information on China from both the northern overland and the southern sea routes was combined.

Even before the fall of the Liao empire to the Jürched (Bretschneider; Wittfogel and Feng, pp. 627-57; *EI*[2], s.v. Ḳ arā Khitāy) a Kitan kinsman, Yeh-lü ta-shih, had fled westward (ca. 1124) and established the Qara Khitay dominion with its capital at Balāsāḡūn on the river Chu. He defeated the ruler of Samarkand, Maḥmūd Khan, in 531/1137 and the combined forces of Maḥmūd and the Saljuq sultan Sanjar in 538/1142. By 562/1165 the Qara Khitay controlled a vast area extending from the Kirghiz steppe in the north to Balḵ in the south and from Ḵᵛārazm in the west to the Uighur lands on the borders of China. The last Qara Khitay ruler, or Gürḵan (*gūr ḵān*), *Küčlük, was executed by Čengīz Khan in Badaḵšān in 615/1218. The Qara Khitay appear to have been a military aristocracy, primarily sinicized Mongols but leading troops of very diverse origins. They were sparsely distributed over a large area, with a decentralized administration in parallel with that of vassals whose chief function was to furnish them with money. The coinage was of Chinese type on the Liao model, but vassals continued to strike their own coins; although no chancery documents survive, they must have been written in Arabic, Persian, and forms of Turkish, as well as in Chinese. The Qara Khitay never converted to Islam, though their tolerance of all religions was praised. They may well have installed Chinese artisans at Samarkand, though, if so, their activity, like the Qara Khitay state itself, has left no material trace (*EI*[2], s.v. Ḳarā Khitāy).

There is little archeological evidence for the foreign goods that Marvazī mentioned as having been in demand in T’ang and Liao China: ivory (*dandan-e fīl*), frankincense (*lubān*), Baltic amber (*kahrubār*), and rhinoceros horn (*ḵotū*). Islamic glass found in recent Chinese excavations shows that it was also imported. Fine wheel-cut glass vessels, identical in type to fragments discovered by Ernst Herzfeld at Sāmarrā in Mesopotamia, have been found at the Famensi pagoda (Famensi, pp. 4-28), established in the 9th century. The finds also included an earthenware bowl with yellow slipped decoration imitating lusterware (see ceramics xiii. the early islamic period); it may have been

imported from Nīšāpūr in about 287/900, a curiosity like the occasional pieces of Persian metalwork found in graves of the period, or it may have been made in China. In any case, the glass pieces are not of a quality comparable to that of a fine collection of glass from a Liao princely tomb dated 1018 (Institute of Archaeology, 1988),which includes two jugs with elaborate openwork handles, a shallow dish with tonged nipples, and a wheel-cut flask, all of 4th/10th-century Persian type.

The earliest report that Chinese artisans captured at the battle of Ṭarāz in 133/751 brought the manufacture of paper to Samarkand is in *Laṭāʾef al-maʿāref* by Ṯaʿālebī (d. 429/1038; p. 140). A type of paper named for Samarkand is mentioned in the sources, but examples have so far not been identified; in the later Middle Ages the term may have referred to a format, rather than to a fabric. Moreover, there is very little evidence for the use of Chinese papers in early Islamic manuscripts. Although to Masʿūdī (*Morūj* I, pp. 323-24) and his successors it was a commonplace that the Chinese were especially skilled in the representational arts, Chinese painters do not seem to have been employed before the Mongol period. Ṯaʿālebī described Chinese sculptures in such vivid terms as to suggest, possibly misleadingly, direct acquaintance with T'ang pottery funerary figurines or with figurines of straw and plaster manufactured in northwestern China. Among other famed Chinese products he listed (pp. 141-42) waxed-cloth garments, fine steel, asbestos textiles, and felts, the last, however, on the authority of the *Tabaṣṣorr be'l-tejāra*, attributed apocryphally to Jāḥeẓ (Ṯaʿālebī, pp. 30-31, 142).

The most famous Chinese export, however, was porcelain, which Ṯaʿālebī (p. 141) described as apricot-colored (probably celadon; cf. Kahle, 1956, pp. 327-50) and white; white wares were being imported into the Near East in significant quantities by the first third of the 3rd/9th century. The ʿAbbasid governor of Khorasan ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā b. Māhān (*Camb. Hist. Iran* IV, pp. 70-73) is reported to have sent Chinese porcelains (which may well have been stonewares) as a gift to Hārūn al-Rašīd in 189/804. It is conceivable that, if he had acquired them in Khorasan, they had come via the overland route, but the rarity of porcelain finds in excavations in Persia other than along the Gulf coast bears out historical reports from which it is clear that most of the porcelains reaching the Near East came by sea. In addition to celadons and white wares, *san-ts'ai* (three color) wares of both the T'ang and the Liao periods are now known to have been important: Recent research has identified hitherto unrecorded types of T'ang *san-ts'ai* in material from

Sāmarrā (Rawson et al.). Under the mercantilist Sung dynasty the porcelains would have reached Ceylon in Chinese ships (Gray, 1987) and then have been transshipped (Carswell, pp. 25-68). The numismatic evidence suggests a shift in maritime trade from the Persian Gulf ports, notably Sīrāf, to the Red Sea around 442/1050 (Lowick). It is possible that by the early 6th/12th century the production of white fritwares at Kāšān and other potteries in the Persian hinterland, originally in response to unsatisfied demand for Chinese white wares, had resulted in a lessened demand for Chinese porcelains. Porcelain finds from Fosṭāṭ in Egypt (Gyllensvärd), with a vast preponderance of celadon wares but including Liao white wares, monochrome green Yue wares, Northern Sung *qingbai* from about 1100, and very small amounts of Ding wares and Cizhou, doubtless reflect, at least in their proportions, the types of porcelains that were also reaching the ports of Southern Persia in the mid-5th/11th century.

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