

Luce Boulnois, The Silk Road,
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Introduction

In the early summer of the seven hundredth year following the foundation of Rome (53 B.C. by our reckoning), Marcus Licinius Crassus, Consul-triumvir of Rome and Governor of Syria, committed the folly of leading seven legions across the Euphrates in pursuit of a fleeing and elusive enemy.¹

Long days of uncertainty spent waiting for a battle which never seemed to materialize sapped the courage of his men. Ever since their departure from Syria, they had been haunted by a series of evil omens, including Crassus and his son falling as they left the temple of Heliopolis and the death of Marcus Licinius's horse, which had bolted and been drowned in the Euphrates. Far from their bases, in an atmosphere of doubt and anxiety, the superstitious troops could not forget that even in Rome itself mysterious and ancient curses had been uttered against Crassus in the open streets. And who could estimate the power of such curses?

The army well knew that this war, unpopular in Rome, was sheer folly. They felt that its sole purpose was to enhance the personal glory of their general, who was jealous of the other two triumvirs, Caesar and Pompey.

Morale was low, and the attack when it came was terrible. The hirsute Parthian warriors, uttering inhuman cries, accompanied by the deafening noise of big leather drums filled with bells, and preceded by a veritable hail of arrows, advanced and surrounded the Roman formation. The armies clashed. The Romans, the hands of some of them literally nailed to their shields by the Parthian arrows, were shocked and bewildered. They made repeated efforts to get to close quarters—which would have been to their advantage—but the Parthians always remained close enough for their arrows to take effect and far enough away to avoid a mêlée.

Moreover, they were supported by a number of camels laden

¹ Plutarch—*Life of Crassus*.

with arrows, so that there was not even a hope of them running out of ammunition. Their long arrows went through everything, piercing both shields and tunics, and even felling two men at once. Thanks to the skill of the archers firing at the legs of men and horses, they even managed to stave in the Romans' testudo formation and breach the wall of shields.

For a long time the Romans held firm. But when, towards mid-day, the Parthians suddenly unfurled their gleaming banners, the effect was such that, added to exhaustion, thirst and fear, the famous valour of the Roman legions came abruptly to an end. It was a rout. A few hours later, the campaign had come to an end with the death of Crassus, lured by the enemy into a trap. His son had had himself killed so as not to fall into the hands of the Parthians. 20,000 Roman soldiers had lost their lives, and a further 10,000 had been taken prisoner. So ended the battle of Carrhae, one of the most disastrous in the history of Rome.

The head of Crassus was sent to the Parthian king, Orodes, who was at that time in Armenia, and some time later the prisoners were taken to Antioch in Margiana, a town which had been founded by Alexander the Great. They were never heard of again. Crassus had dreamed the ancient dream of Alexander—and how many more were to have that same dream later?—but instead of entering the country as conquerors, his men had entered it as prisoners. After their long advance, the Roman eagles had ended up decorating the temples of the Parthians.

As for the brilliantly coloured, gold-embroidered banners which had so dazzled the legionaries in the course of this disastrous battle, they were, if the historian Florus is to be believed, the first articles of silk that the Romans had ever seen.¹

But it was not long before silk, a material more iridescent than any known hitherto, became familiar to the Roman world. This generation who fought in the Syrian campaigns was the first to come by it, whether by trade or as booty in more fortunate encounters, but less than ten years after the defeat of Carrhae, the crowd witnessing Caesar's triumph at Rome were astonished to find that, among the luxuries exposed to the public gaze, the triumphant general had caused canopies of silk to be stretched above the heads of the spectators. So much at least is related in the account written by Dion Cassius several generations after the event. It is certainly possible that this was the first time silk had been seen by the

¹ Varron; Tesnières.



1. Roman Expansion in the eastern Mediterranean at the time of the Battle of Carrhae

Romans, apart from those who had had an opportunity of travelling to the East.

As years went by, the taste for silk grew. To such an extent that in the year A.D. 14, a few months after the death of Augustus, the Senate had to issue a decree banning silk to men (who were 'dishonoured' by it) and limiting its use to women.¹ In barely fifty years, the use of this new and exotic product had grown to such proportions that it could be considered a social menace.

Ignorant as they were of its true nature, the Romans called it 'Seric cloth' (*sericum*),² after the inhabitants of its land of origin, a people to whom the Greeks had given the name Seres. They called it *sericum*, in fact, as we say nankeen, astrakhan or loden. Naturally, it could not be the Parthians, those wild archers and ferocious warriors, who manufactured this marvellous cloth—so light and yet so warm, so supple, fresh and soft, so iridescent—which lent itself so well to embellishment and ornamentation. Nor was it the Greeks; they had done no more than give it its outlandish name.

It was no mere coincidence that silk should appear in Rome after the conquest of Syria. After being for so long cut off from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean by the triple barrier of enemy Parthians, the hostile Greek kings of the Black Sea and pirates so virulent and so numerous that a large-scale campaign had had to be mounted against them, the Romans, once they had taken root in Syria about 70 B.C., at last found themselves on the frontiers of a completely unknown world: the Orient. It was now that they discovered silk and learnt that it came from neither the Parthians nor the Greeks, but was manufactured by a distant people called the Seres. This was something not conceived of hitherto, for the first author to mention the Seres, a Greek who had died some thirty years before the battle of Carrhae, had said little about them beyond indicating that they lived somewhere east of the territories once conquered by Alexander, in a land which no one had ever visited.³ In short, this new material came from the very edge of the world.

How had it made its way from the edge of the world to that battle in which it was seen by the legionaries of Crassus? How had it come about that it now joined with purple mantles and golden crowns to enhance the splendour of great and solemn occasions in Rome?

¹ Varron.

² Tesnières and Laufer.

³ Needham.