

Along the Silk Roads, between Western and Eastern Asia

Roma Sinica

Mutual Interactions between Ancient Roman
and Eastern Thought

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Andrea Balbo and Chiara O. Tommasi

Introduction

Along the Silk Roads, between Western and Eastern Asia is the title of the new volume in the Roma Sinica series that we present here to the scholarly community. It gathers the research outcomes of the final stages of the SERICA project, formally concluded in 2023 but actually still ongoing thanks to the work carried out within several nationally funded initiatives (PRIN), such as Classica Serica and MARE. Since its inception, the SERICA project has embraced the plurality of voices that have connected West and East across the centuries: missionaries, merchants, explorers, and warriors traveled the many Silk Roads, by land and by sea, leaving behind rich traces of their passage in epigraphic documents, artifacts and texts in various languages. These materials are now gradually being collected, catalogued, and, where possible, analysed from linguistic and historical perspectives on the SERICA website (serica.unipi.it). Edited by the heads of the two units that have worked in close collaboration throughout the project, the proceedings are organised into four thematic sections. The first illustrates ancient West-East connections in antiquity through objects, maps and book artifacts, exemplified in the works of Whitfield, Candotti-Pontillo, De Romanis and Piras. The historical dimension is approached by Fregosi on Giovanni Pietro Maffei's *Historiarum Indicarum Libri XVI*; by Borghesi and Bottanelli on Ricci's *Commentari* and Ruggieri's *Relatione*; by Brancato on the first translations of the four books; and by Fezzi on Trigault's translation of the *Entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*. Turning to more recent history, De Togni explores the Christian presence in Sichuan in the 19th century, while Ferrari examines De Guignes' *Histoire des Huns*. Three further contributions address the philosophical domain: Meynard's essay on the reception of Aristotelian philosophy, Ferrero's study on Mencius, and Mollea's analysis of the presence of Seneca the Younger in the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*. Finally, the fourth section, devoted to future perspectives, features studies by Careddu on epigraphy and by Paccara and Stella on automatic linguistic analysis. In particular, computational approaches to textual interpretation and distant reading are expected to offer significant advances in the coming years. These methods hold the potential to uncover new insights into the conceptual density, linguistic richness, and historical significance of texts illuminating Silk Road exchanges, and to foster deeper connections with material culture — an integrative perspective that lies at the very heart of SERICA's mission.

Andrea Balbo

Chiara Ombretta Tommasi

Andrea Piras

On Rome, Diadems and other Topics Between Iran and Turfan

1 Premise

The aim of the present contribution is to approach a series of items related to cultural interrelationships amid a vast geographical area stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to Central Asia, on the footsteps of those networking paths of the Silk Roads. This Sino-Indo-Mediterranean continent was a cultural and commercial web of Antiquity, the importance of which is currently well-known in the realm of geo-politics, energy policy, trade and economics. My essay will focus on textual data concerning the attestation of “Rome” or the adjective “Roman” and the title “Caesar” as evidence of the renown and prestige of that city and *imperialium*. Furthermore, I will cite other evidence to illustrate the knowledge and diffusion of western (Greek-Hellenistic) subjects in the Middle East, Central Asia and China.¹

2 Rome, Parthians and Persians

The history of relations (war, diplomacy) between Rome and the Iranian world is a highly studied theme, with a huge bibliography.² We begin then with the Arsacid period and the Parthian defeat of Crassus at Carrhae (53 BC), with the ignominious removal of the *Aquilae*-insignia of the Roman army, a symbolic trophy of honour returned after a long time to Rome in the course of Augustus’ regency. Needless to say, the defeat was *magistra vitae* and the Roman army began to adopt Iranian weaponry and cataphract cavalry.³ Within the geopolitical scenario of Late Antiquity, the two superpowers of Rome and Sasanian Persia were the protagonists of a long history of wars and diplomacy, which paved the way for

1 For an in-depth analysis of a wide series of oriental texts mentioning Rome, cfr. Aalto (1975). For the perception and denomination of Rome into Chinese sources, cfr. Lieu (2016) and Basso (2018).

2 Just to quote a few basic titles: Dodgeon/Lieu (1991), Greatrex/Lieu (2002); Dignas/Winter (2004) and Howard-Johnston (2021) (the latter for the 7th century).

3 Cfr. the thorough investigation of Traina’s book dedicated to this battle and its consequences in Roman society, mentality and publicity (Traina [2010]).

the contemporary study of international relations, according to the clever judgement of J.B. Bury.⁴ From the very beginning of the Sasanian dynasty we detect remarkable attention being paid to Rome and the Romans in two Sasanian royal inscriptions: the trilingual (Middle Persian, Parthian, Greek) inscription of Šābuhr I at the Ka'ba-i Zardušt and Narseh's inscription (Middle Persian and Parthian) at Paikuli.⁵ Both epigraphs display a few, yet important, references to the political entity of Rome (Middle Persian *Hrōm*, Parthian *Frōm*). In many passages of Šābuhr's inscription there are references to the rival empire of Rome and its military force, gathered from different countries and people of the Roman empire (*Hrōmayīn šahr*), ranging from western to eastern provinces; furthermore, the inscription mentions the administrative staff of the Roman empire, such as commanders (*hēgēmōn* < Greek ἡγεμών), *senatores* (in Parthian transcription: *sānātor*) and the *praefectus praetorio*. The list of Roman cities of Middle Asia, conquered by the Sasanians, and the mention of Anatolian regions (such as Cappadocia, Bitinia, Pontus) and Caucasian regions (Armenia, Georgia, Albania) gives the impression of a prestigious conquest made against an estimable enemy of the Late Antique world. Also, the artistic representation of Šābuhr's seizing of Valerian reflects an impressive motif of iconic propaganda.⁶ For this reason, the inscription is a true achievement of the royal Sasanian agenda, sometimes with elaborate language,⁷ showing all viewers the power of the Persian king and the impressiveness of his victory over three emperors:

When at first we had become established in the empire, Gordian Caesar [*Kēsar*] raised in all of the Roman Empire [*Hrōmayīn šahr*] a force from the Goth and German realms and marched on Babylonia [*Assyria*] (Asuristan) against the Empire of Iran and against us.⁸

⁴ For a general survey on Byzantine-Iranian relationships, cfr. Shahbazi (1990); Millar (1988) for the Roman-Iranian (Parthian and Sasanian) relations of the 1st-3rd centuries; Mazza (2005) 121–167, 171–217, for the 4th and 5th centuries. The book of Nechaeva (2014), is a detailed analysis of structures and patterns of ceremonials of embassies, diplomacy, negotiations and gifts (not only referred to Persians but also to Goths, Avars, Huns, Arabs, Franks).

⁵ For the inscription of Šābuhr I at the Ka'ba-i Zardušt, see Huyse (1999); for Narseh's inscription at Paikuli, cf. Humbach/Skjærvø (1983).

⁶ This motif of royal iconography, and its importance as a visual text related to oral texts and phrasing, has been deeply investigated by Mancini (2021).

⁷ Especially in the Greek version, addressed to a western audience with an intended contrast in communicative style, about which see Mancini (1988) 92–93, and Rubin (2002) 271 for a different evaluation.

⁸ Translation of Frye (1984) 371, §3; Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek texts in Huyse (1999) 26, §6.

The second inscription of the king Narseh at Paikuli, on the contrary, gives a very scanty report concerning Rome, within a unique passage denoting a condition of peace between the two superpowers at the time of emperor Diocletian and related to a treaty stipulated during the period of Narseh's ascension to throne:

And Caesar and the Romans were in gratitude (?) and peace and friendship with Us.⁹

The general tone of this document consists in a description of political trouble inside the royal family of the Sassanians, the prince Narseh and his grandnephew Warahrān, the king of Sakas, accused of treachery and usurpation for having taken away the royal insignia of the kingdom, among which were the throne and the diadem. The diadem is an object and a word that patently displays the Greek heritage within the Iranian world and its languages and texts. The Greek word diadem (διάδημα) reveals a persistent Hellenistic aspect of royal ideology that existed throughout Iranian cultures and their royal praxis, habits and mentalities. The remarkable point in the diffusion of the word 'diadem' after its entering the Iranian language (Middle Persian and Parthian *dydymy*) is the fact that, notwithstanding the presence of some Iranian words to designate such an object (a round coronet put around the head), there are texts that prefer this Greek loan-word over a corresponding Iranian term.¹⁰ This serves as proof of a durable Hellenistic influence in royal practices of investiture and emblems after the Seleucid and the Parthian periods, during which Hellenistic flourished, all the way up to Sasanian times and the strong 'Iranisation' of ethno-memory and identity that was a consequence of the rise of this new dynasty.¹¹ We must notice, this Iranisation notwithstanding, the permanence of Hellenistic cultural vestiges in the Iranian domain, of which only one is the diadem and its employ in investiture and royal legitimisation as attested in a variety of situations and documents (rock reliefs, coins, seals).

⁹ Humbach/Skjærvø (1983) 70 § 91.

¹⁰ Avestan *pusā-* refers to the goddess Anāhitā (*Yt.* 5, 128); Pahlavi *abesar* (from **upa-sarah-*, denoting something on the head), *pusag* ("garland"). I dealt with this subject of emblems of royalty in Piras (2004) and Piras (2017).

¹¹ Cf. recently Shenkar (2018) 123, 131, where he rightly points to a specific Sasanian aspect of this Hellenistic artifact, in that this emblem was not just a normal diadem but a great (*wuzurg*) one, i.e. a *wuzurg didēm* (great diadem).

3 The Roman Empire in Manichaean texts

The diffusion of the name of Rome in Iranian transcriptions of these Sasanian inscriptions — Hrōm (Middle Persian) or Frōm (Parthian) — is by no means an isolated fact, given the frequency of the name Rome or the adjective Roman in other Iranian texts, such as the Manichaean sources that exist in several Iranian languages (Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian). Herein the western city and empire are recorded in missionary texts describing the diffusion of Mani's religion into the Mediterranean countries of the Roman Empire (especially Egypt and Alexandria). In this case, unlike the perspective of a political and military enemy, the outlook of the text is chiefly doctrinal and religious, because of the confessional reasons that prompted the Manichaean *electi* to spread their message (and to defend it in many public disputations according to the rhetorical conventions of Late Antiquity).

They [the Manichaeans] went to the Roman Empire (and) saw many doctrinal disputes with [among?] the religions. Many elects and hearers were chosen . . . Many wonders and miracles were wrought in those lands. The religion of the apostle was advanced in the Roman Empire.¹²

The Manichaean missionaries, remarkably, entered Eastern Roman territories and crucial border zones such as Palmyra, where they made a few important conversions in the royal house of the city: Palmyra was a center, together with Hatra and Edessa, where one could see features of syncretism between and among Hellenistic (Graeco-Roman) and Oriental (Semitic and Iranian) cultures and an interfacing political context displaying the use of peculiar Iranian titles in Aramaic garb. All of this attests to the cultural exchange and transfer of ideologies in this Middle Eastern hub, positioned on the crossroads of trade and communication linking the Mediterranean to the Silk Routes.¹³

4 A Christian Persian Tomb in Constantinople

Another interesting iteration of the name of Rome in Iranian languages is provided by the sarcophagus of Constantinople that belonged to a Christian of Iranian stock, coming from Iran (*Ērānšahr*), who, after having lived one year in Byz-

¹² Middle Persian text M 2 R I, translation in Gardner/Lieu (2004) 111. For the Manichaeans' rhetorical skills in public disputations in Roman culture, cf. Lim (1995) 70–108.

¹³ An interesting study on this area, and on the interrelationship between Greek and Aramaic (but of Iranian origin) titles for rulership, is Gnoli (2007).

antine lands (*Rūm*), left his body in a tomb (*gōr*) that bears a Middle Persian epitaph of a certain Xurdāδ (approximately dated to the 9th/10th century):

This tomb belongs to Xurdāδ, son of Hurmuzd-Āfariδ – on whom, oh Lord, mayst thou have mercy! – from the country (lit. ‘house’) of Ērānšahr, from the district of Čālakān (?), from the village of Xišt (?), who dwelt for one year in Byzantium [*Rūm*] in hope and studious desire for the Lord Christ the just and victorious.¹⁴

There are not many data helpful for understanding the presence of Xurdāδ in Rūm/Constantinople; at most one could speculate. Probably he belonged to the Melkite confession, because the majority of Iranian Christians were Nestorian and lived in Ērānšahr, unlike Xurdāδ, who ordered his sarcophagus in Byzantium, a place towards which he was led by his hope and desire to search for Christ (Masīḥ), the just (*rāst*) and victorius (*pērōz*).

5 Rome in Zoroastrian Texts

The most ideological and antagonistic use of the adjective “Roman” comes from a Zoroastrian book in Middle Persian (Pahlavi), the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag*, a text chiefly dealing with eschatological matters — a kind of ‘Zoroastrian Divina Commedia’, to use a customary definition — but with a remarkable proem. In the proem, the historical situation of the Iranian state — experiencing frequent turmoils, dating back to ancient times — has been provoked by the coming of Alexander the Great.¹⁵ The name given to Alexander, “the accursed Alexander” (*gizistag Aleksandar*), and his epithet “Roman” (*hrōmāyīg*), offer an interesting case of cultural stereotyping of Persia’s worst enemy — that is, of Iran and Iranian identity. Alexander — Greek by origin, yet Roman in his role as emblem of a Western empire, is presented through a striking conflation of two terms (Greece and Rome; Greek and Roman), condensed into the label ‘Rome’ (*Hrōm*) and ‘Roman’ (*hrōmāyīg*), the western superpower opposed to the eastern one, the Sasanian Empire of Iran (*Ērānšahr*). In many passages the text is a noteworthy work of Iranian and Sasanian propaganda, centered on ethno-cultural identity, religious belonging, priestly mastery and royal dominion, under the threat of Alexander. In fact, the primary cause of decadence, going backwards to Achaemenid times, is presented as no other than Alexander the Great, conquerer of the

¹⁴ De Blois (1990a) 218. For other interpretations and chronologies (5th century) of this epitaph, cf. Gignoux/Fessel (1986).

¹⁵ For a close look at Alexander in Zoroastrian literature, see Kotwal/Kreyenbroek (2006).

first Persian empire to be dismembered from its royal and cultural unity into different kingdoms. According to the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag*, Chapter 1:

Then the accursed Evil Spirit, the sinful, in order to make men doubtful of this religion, misled the accursed Alexander the Roman, resident of Egypt, and *sent him to the land of Iran with great brutality and violence and *fear (?). He killed the Iranian ruler and destroyed and ruined the court and the sovereignty. That wicked, wretched, heretic, sinful, maleficent Alexander the Roman, resident of Egypt, took away and burnt those scriptures, namely all the Avesta and Zand which had been written with gold water on prepared cowhide and deposited in Staxr ī Pābagān in the Fortress of Writing. He killed many of the high priests and judges and Herbād and Mōbads and the upholders of the religion and the able ones and the wise men of Iran.¹⁶

But there is another Zoroastrian text in Pahlavi that emphasizes the link between Alexander and Rome as town of origin. The book of creation (*Bundahišn*) records this passage:

Then during the reign of Dārāy son of Dārāy, Emperor [*Kēsar*] Alexander invaded from Rome and came to Iran. He killed King Dārāy, destroyed all the family of the lords and the magi and the notables of Iran. He extinguished many fires. He took the Mazdean *dēn* and the *Zand* and sent them to Rome and burned the *Avesta* and divided Iran among ninety provincial lords.¹⁷

This piece of propaganda could be a useful tool for storytelling. It helps to shape the language of vindication into a claim for the supremacy, legitimation and cultural dignity of a political personality withstanding any enemy of the Iranian empire. For this reason, the Iranian apocalyptic narrative frequently mentions the Romans and Alexander as a representation of the traditional enemy of the Iranian empire, together with other people (Turks, Huns, Arabs) that appear in Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts. This genre of narrative structure encodes historical facts mixed up with eschatological expectations, prophecies, cataclysmic phenomena, astral events and invasions, such as those related to “Alexander the Roman” (*hrōmāyīg*) and other demons who usurped the sovereignty for a period of thousand years.¹⁸ Thus, the mention of Alexander the Roman (i.e. the Greek) is recognizable as a hint of the millenary struggle between Greece (Rome) and the Iranian empire, also imbued with an apocalyptical and eschatological flavor, containing vaticinations and the mythical reshaping of historical facts in a narrative mold, easily accessible for ideological and political use.

¹⁶ Wahman (1986) 191.

¹⁷ *Bundahišn* 33.19 in Agostini/Thrope (2020) 173.

¹⁸ *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 7.32, in Cereti (1995) 165.

A further manipulation of Alexander's name, again producing a stereotype within the apocalyptic narrative, is *Aleksandar ī kilisāyīg* ("Alexander the Christian"), wherein the epithet *kilisāyīg* "ecclesiastic, Christian", points to another denomination addressed to the traditional enemy of the Iranian culture. It entails the Christians and their religion that faced the Sasanian empire for many centuries: so Alexander the Christian encoded and encased different evaluations of an Iranian perception of its western antagonist in succession: not only Greece but its Roman heirs as well, and finally Christianity's second Rome, Constantinople.

The symbolic and ideological impact of this cluster of notions is very helpful for understanding the tone of propaganda embedded in the genre of Zoroastrian apocalyptic literature and its depiction of struggles and enemies, among which Rome was surely the most representative and illustrious rival. It is truly a remarkable point that the last period of the Sasanian dynasty (from the 6th to 7th centuries) witnessed a series of wars against Byzantium, was characterized by a flourishing of political prophecies and apocalyptic imageries diffused across imperial cultures in different writings and languages (Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Iranian) and denoting messianic expectations and figures portending salvation.¹⁹ The wars between Rome and Persia, the 'Two Eyes of the World' in Late Antiquity, prepared the way for the new era of the rise of Islam and a renewed geopolitical and cultural situation in which the mission of Rome, after the defeat of the Sasanian empire, gained further prominence in history and as an apocalyptic collective image of the last frontier and stronghold against the Arabs.²⁰

6 The 'Caesar' in Kušan Kingdom

A further Iranian context with remarkable syncretistic aspects — ranging from Hellenistic features to Semitic and Indian traits — is the Bactrian kingdom of the Kušan rulers, which contains an appreciable hint of Roman influence amid a vast network — it must be said — of Bactrian and Roman interrelationships during the time of Roman emperors such as Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (2nd century).²¹ Valuable objects such as the glassware of Beghram's Gladiator (from Afghanistan) point to cultural exchanges of goods, objects, precious stones and metalwares be-

¹⁹ Cfr. Stoyanov (2010) for the last Byzantine-Persian war and its apocalyptic atmosphere (also due to the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614).

²⁰ Iranian and Byzantine apocalyptic trends at the eve of Islam have been approached in Piras (2021).

²¹ On early Kušan takes from Rome, see Mahler (2008).

tween Rome and Battriana. The diffusion of an exotic taste for oriental and Indian fashion is recognizable in a Roman male torso showing the typical Indian hair-knot on the upside part of the head. An epigraph from Punjab provides further information about the Roman influence on the royal titulature of the Kušan king Kaniška II (r. 200–222): the Ārā inscription, in Indian script and language (Karoṣṭi), displays a series of epithets in multicultural titulature: *Mahārāja Rājātirāja Devaputra Kaisara Kaniška*.²²

Once again, “Caesar”, as previously seen in the Iranian Sasanian epigraphies (*Kēsar*) and Pahlavi texts and now in an Indian rendering of *Kaisara* (from the Greek *Kāīσαρ*), together with a manifold series of royal titles: the Indian *Mahārāja* (Great King), the Achemenid Persian *Rājātirāja* (King of kings), and the Chinese *Tian-zi* (天子) “Son of Heaven”, corresponding to the Indian *Devaputra* (“Son of Heaven/god”).²³

7 Roman Epithets in Turkic Central Asia

Moving from Bactrian lands to northeast of Afghanistan and then to Central Asia we observe an interesting phenomenon of cultural diffusion concerning Rome and its charisma, variously attested in different aspects and ethno-social environments. Michael Maas discussed this issue in terms of the “Byzantinization of the Steppe”, detecting a Byzantine influence over a vast area of Eurasian nomadic culture from the Danube to the Volga.²⁴ Thereby the steppes “acquired a subtly altered place on the Roman mental map as a projection of changing imperial beliefs and experiences”.²⁵ In this interfacing with the Roman empire, even if the peoples of the steppes did not share the Roman Empire’s objectives, they participated to various degrees “in its [i.e. Rome’s] web of power as agents or victim of imperial designs”. With regard to “agents”, in my opinion we can move a little bit further than the Volga region. In fact, a particular case of agency, namely of an intentional reference to the Byzantine sphere, is recognizable in Turkic Central Asia. The Turkic factor — that is to say, the rising of the Turks in 6th century, alongside the Sasanian and Chinese kingdoms — deserves particular attention

²² Konow (1929) 162. Cf. Falk (2010) 76–79 for a detailed survey on Kušan epithets from a wide ethno-cultural area (Indo-Greeks, Indo-Scythes, Kidarites, Huns).

²³ An essay about royal titles and epithets, with divine nuance in ancient asiatic cultures, is that of Chen (2002).

²⁴ Maas (2018).

²⁵ Maas (2018) 19.

due to certain ideological and political situations that involved the prestige of Rome.

The item I will focus on is the case of the Turkic ruler of the Turkšāhi dynasty in Zabulistan (southeast Afghanistan) called Fromo Kēsaro, a Bactrian title patently recognizable as the “Caesar of Rome”, a sovereign of the Western Turk (also mixed with Hephtalite tribes) whose reign lasted from 738/739 to 745. Fromo Kēsaro (Fulin Jisuo in Chinese sources of the Tang dynasty, where “Fulin” was the term for the Byzantine empire) is an outstanding sample of active ‘Byzantinization’ originating from the Steppe, with an epithet denoting a multifarious ideological setting, boasting Iranian (Bactrian and Sasanian), Byzantine and Chinese features. The numismatic material provides us with a Bactrian title (an Iranian language written in Greek alphabet) and Sasanian royal iconography, together with a representation of Persian fire altars. The reutilization of Persian-Sasanian models of coinage points to the strong influence of the imperial culture of the Sasanians and of a particular Eastern Iranian language (Bactrian). The inscription on the coin runs as follows:

φρομο κησαρο βαγο χοαδηο κιδο βο ταζικανο χοργο

Fromo Kēsaro the Lord Ruler who defeated the Arabs.

The prestige of the Iranian titlature (βαγο χοαδηο, “the Lord Ruler”), belonging to a great tradition of linguistic repositories — transmitted through the centuries and with remarkable echoes into a vast geopolitical zone, from the Iranian countries to the Central Asia ones (into a Sino-Turkic-Chinese hub) — is here mixed with a Roman epithet joining the name of the *Urbs* and the ruling title of *Caesar*.²⁶ This coin is emblematic of political ideological imitation. Such a twofold recall to both superpowers of Late Antiquity is intended to shape an image of victorious charisma against the ‘Abbasid Caliphate and its unstoppable conquests in Middle East and Central Asia.²⁷

To complete this scenario, there is another point to notice: the permanence of Rome and of Fromo Kēsaro farther eastward, in the Tibetan culture and the epic cycle of Dru Gu Gesar or Gesar deLing. This echo in such a far region of Central Asia testifies to the fame and prestige of Roman ideological conceptions within broader euroasiatic relief, affecting different nomad peoples. The case of the title

²⁶ Similar to βαγο, cf. the Inscriptional Parthian *bay*, Inscriptional Middle Persian *bay* and Sogdian *βay* as a title of majesty (“sir, lord”); for χοαδηο, a term of rulership, cf. the parallel Middle Persian and Parthian *xwadāy* and the contribution of Shayegan (1998).

²⁷ Cf. Piras (2013); cfr. Sims-Williams (2020–2021) for the recent find of the inscription of Jaghori (Afghanistan).

Dru Gu Gesar (the “Caesar of the Turk”) is an example of the cultural diffusion and installation of a title in a different context (the Tibetan culture) that survived through a heterogeneous literary production and textual circulation until Mongolia. The nomadic medium and the vehicle of this diffusion probably has to be ascribed to the Khazars because of their geographical situation and extension within a large zone from the Black Sea to the Transcaucasian and Transcaspiian regions linked to the Central Asian steppes.²⁸

8 Byzantine-Iranian Connections against the ‘Abbasid Caliphate

The rise of the Arabs and the Caliphate involved a series of interesting histories and cultural phenomena exhibiting political reaction to the new power and religion. The fortune of the epithet *Fromo Kesaro* and its Tibetan developments (*Dru Gu Gesar*) is significant as a reflection of Rome/Byzantium as the last line of defence on the frontier of Islam. This pushed a few people to cite a Roman inspiration for fighting against Islam, thereby tapping into Rome’s ideological aura of prestige and bravery. It was also possible to switch from one faith to another in order to enter the Byzantine army because of a strong feelings of resistance against the Muslim Caliphate. This happened in the 9th century and within a heterodox religious group of Iranian believers called the *Khorrami*, professing a Mazdakite Iranian ideology of anti-Islamic sentiment. This force of rebel soldiers was under the command of *Naṣr*, a member of the Iranian aristocracy who decided to enroll himself and his warriors (forming a *Persiana turma*, a “Persian squadron”) in the Byzantine army of the emperor Theophilos I (829–842) in the period of his struggle with the ‘Abbasid caliph Mo’taṣem (833–841).²⁹

The historical events that led to this transfer of military forces produced two interesting consequences: the confessional shift of *Naṣr* from his ancestral Iranian religion to Orthodox Christianity, culminating in his baptism with the new name of *Theophobos*, and his ascension to the imperial dignity of *basileus*, albeit for a short time, as proclaimed by his troops. The episode quoted by Byzantine sources testifies to military and political interrelationship between the Iranians and the Byzantines due to a common anti-‘Abbasid feeling, and also points to the prestige of Byzantium (albeit in an opportunistic way) that is emphasized by the

28 Kordosis (2019) and Grenet (2022). On *Fromo Kēsar/Caesar*, see also Kordosis (2021).

29 On the Iranians *Khorrami* and *Naṣr/Theophobos*, cf. Venetis (2005) and Piras (2016).

story of this process of cultural remaking (or camouflage). The purpose was to assume a new religion (probably nominal and fictitious) and especially a political identity that included the entire Iranian troops of Khorrami as well. This choice favoured their settlement into the Byzantine empire as a strategic defense of the eastern frontiers against 'Abbasid incursions for many decades. Both historical episodes quoted above, of Fromo Kēsaro and Naṣr-Theophobos, denote a knot of intentions, strongly motivated by political issues. Even the change of nomenclature (in a Roman epithet and name) underlines the ideological propaganda centered on Rome. In this case, the aura of Rome/Byzantium possessed a aura of awe and persuasiveness in the life and choices of two adversaries of the Arab Caliphate, a Turkic ruler of Central Asia (8th century) and an Iranian commander of Khorrami (9th century), on the eastern border of the Byzantine empire.

9 Romulus and Remus at Samarkanda

In the eastward provinces of Sogdiana and its rich town of Samarkanda we find further evidence of a western presence and a few hints of Roman culture. The wall-fresco of the she-Wolf breastfeeding the Twins (Romulus and Remus) is iconography representative of a renowned episode of Roman national myth, and it is positioned here within a residential structure in Panjikent.³⁰ The fresco entails a twofold meaning: not only is this an example of western aesthetic and artistic inspiration, implicitly invoking the refined taste of Roman art; it also highlights the role of the Turkic people and culture in Samarkanda (mixed up with Indian, Iranian and Chinese aspects). Given a peculiarity of ancestral Turkic mythology focused on the Wolf as a supernatural and totemic animal, it is by no means far-fetched to imagine a special Turkic appreciation for this iconography as denoting an ethnic story of another people and culture, Rome, that might harken this typical myth of Turkic ethno-history. Tales of ancestral origins mention the grey or blue Wolf and its miraculous wonders and surrounding events as describing the emergence of the Turkic people, tribal families and personalities of the steppes and of sedentary places such as the city Samarkanda. Other frescoes of this area underline the spread of western motifs borrowed from Hellenistic culture (e.g., Aesop's fables) and a matching narrative taste for animal allegories with a moral-didactic flavour, which entered into wide circulation in ancient China,³¹ Indian

³⁰ Compareti (2012) 304–305.

³¹ For the diffusion of Aesop's fables in Central Asia and Chinese culture, cf. recently Pei-lin (2017).

literature (*Pañcatantra*) and its Iranian and Arabic remaking in *Karatag ud Dam-anag* and *Kalilah wa Dimnah*.³²

10 Roman Echoes in Sogdian Texts

The final step of our survey deals with the geography of Xinjiang and the historical remains (archaeology, iconography and texts) of the Turfan area, strictly connected with Dunhuang in the Gansu region. Within this route flourished important kingdoms, societies and religious cultures such as Buddhism, Christianity and Manichaeism. The scriptural heritage of many texts and literary genres allows us to pursue the eastward circulation of ideas, words and motifs of western provenance. For example, a particular text in Sogdian, a Manichaean parable with a series of Hellenistic features, describes a surreal plot with a funny situation where a ‘Caesar’ is tricked by some Persian thieves into the belief that he is dead. One of the thieves assumes the aspect of the personal *genius* of the Caesar in the form of his Farn (a kind of luminous charisma of fortune) but with the aspect of the god Hermes as psychopomp. The text of this hilarious piece of fiction, trickery and disguise runs as follows:³³

. . . and the Caesar there . . . thereupon those thieves entered the . . . and so he. When the lights and lamps had been lit in the tomb, one of those thieves placed the diadem of majesty on his head and put on royal garments. He approached the coffin where the Caesar was lying, and spoke thus to him: ‘Hey, hey, Caesar, awake, awake! Fear not, I am your Farn! Now, besides I am the guardian Farn for (?) many thieves and jugglers (??), I shall lift you now . . . to guide you [through the] air, so there shall not be . . .

Here we find again not only the Roman title of “Caesar” but also the diadem in its Greek form, transcribed in Sogdian language as *dyδym* and especially linked with the royal charisma of majesty and fortune³⁴ — the Pan-Iranian notion of *farn* — a fact that claims a clear and istic reference to title and emblems of sovereignty. As we have seen, the Iranian texts of Central Asia show evidence of a wide transmission of western motifs of Graeco-Hellenistic origin that entered some narratives, even with implications of mockery, such as in this case of a Caesar

³² On the origin and textual history of this book of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, see de Blois (1990).

³³ Henning (1945) 478–479.

³⁴ Sogdian *farn*, Bactrian φαρρο, Pahlavi *xwarrah*, Avestan *x^varənah-*, Old Persian **farnah-*. Cf. the linkage between the diadem/garland and this charisma of the *farn* as discussed in Piras (2017).

facing the supernatural apparition of a false Hermes/Farn and charged with the task of guiding the soul of this alleged dead person to the otherworld. May we surmise an echo of the Caesar Valerian (*Waliyāranus Kēsar*), defeated by Šābuhr I at Edessa in 260? If so, targeted with insult and mockery (in this case: of Persian thieves!), did Valerian live on in a common tradition in Iranian culture from the Sasanian period until the time of the Manichaean Sogdian literature?

This is not an isolated case. The bulk of the Turfan literature in its variety of languages and texts provides many examples of words and items of western origin: and surely, apart from Buddhism, the Christian and Manichaean texts were a repository of a Mediterranean stage of elaboration, containing languages (Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, Greek) carried to eastern countries by means of missionary expansion on the Silk Roads into Central Asia, the Turfan region and the kingdom of Qočo. Latin words such as *orarium* (“stole, veil”) entered the Christian Sogdian language as *urarā* (*wrr*) via an in-between Syriac form *’ōrārā* (according to this line of transmission: *urarā* < *’ōrārā* < ὠράριον < *orarium*). In the commentary on the Sogdian baptismal and eucharistic liturgies, this veil is mentioned in this passage:

The orarium, the veil on the head of the neophytes, indicates the liberty which they have received from Christ.³⁵

In the Turfan area, remnants of the Greek language even coexisted with Christian Sogdian texts on the same sheet of paper, evidence of interaction between important church languages (Greek, Syriac, Sogdian). In this case, it is conceivable that a liturgical text containing *Psalm* 33 signals a certain preeminence of a Christian Melkite community, rather than a Nestorian one, given a Greek text more typical of the western adherence to Byzantine and Melkite doctrine. The Sogdian version of Psalm 33, discovered at Bulayīq (fragment T II B 66), comprises the only Greek text in the whole of the Turfan collection, and it shows a certain familiarity on the part of the scribe with both Syriac (Peshitta version) and Greek (LXX version).³⁶ The Greek quotation opens the fragment and is a sort of the headline that precedes the Sogdian text, with this incipit: Ἀγαλλιᾶσθε δίκαιοι ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ (“Glory o Righteous in the Lord”).

To conclude with a seal, joining the East to the West via textual circulation, in the Turfan area were discovered Turkic and New Persian fragments of the story of *Bilawhar wa Budīsāf*: the intricate ramifications of this story (Sanskrit, Iranian,

³⁵ Sims-Williams (1985) 113 (*57R, § 17).

³⁶ Sims-Williams (2004) 626.

Turkic, Arabic, New Persian) moved to Caucasian Iberia (Georgian version) and then to Mount Athos (Iviron monastery) to produce the Greek version of the famous Byzantine ascetic story of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, demonstrating that influence went in both directions between the Greek and Latin Mediterranean and the cultures, Iranian and otherwise, farther East.³⁷

³⁷ I am happy to announce the forthcoming work of Deeg/Lourié/Piras that is dedicated to this fascinating text.