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Comparing Roman and Roman-related Artifacts in Thailand and China: Materials, Contexts, and Networks

The Eastern trade of the Roman Empire, specifically Rome's possible contacts with China in the 1st–5th centuries—since the two great states are generally considered the Western and Eastern edges of the Silk Road—has been one of the most compelling fields of research as early as the 19th century. It is widely accepted that in early Antiquity the two empires had only indirect contacts, in which products were moved through a series of middlemen, particularly (but not exclusively) by using the vast networks of sea routes stretching between the Mediterranean, India, and beyond. However, the exact identification of these middlemen is still a matter of question. To obtain a deeper understanding of the possible ways certain Roman artifacts reached China, it is crucial to study other Roman-interpreted objects discovered in locations along the trans-Asiatic maritime routes particularly beyond India. The relatively significant amount of such items in Thailand gives an excellent opportunity to analyze and compare these materials.

Accordingly, this chapter aims to highlight certain differences between Roman objects discovered in China and in Thailand. It also explores the possible roles played by Roman products in local communities of these regions, and attempts to place these objects into the wider context of cross-cultural interactions in Antiquity. Its chronological frame spans from the beginning of Rome's Far Eastern interest around 200/100 BC to the development of more intense trans-Asiatic interaction networks in the 6th century AD.

Keywords: *Roman Empire; Southeast Asia; China; cross-cultural interactions; Antiquity; maritime networks.*