

THREAD OF TIME ~ A HISTORY OF SILK

PART 3: THE ROMANS

by Clive Garner

In 31BC the Romans invaded Greece, took control of the Greek Empire and Augustus Caesar became the first emperor. The empire grew rapidly along with the wealth of its citizens. Along with this increased wealth grew a desire for luxury goods including - silk. Roman citizens became fascinated with silk although they had no idea how the fabric was produced. They thought that it quite literally grew on trees. The Chinese did nothing to correct their thinking but were happy to supply the growing demand. Very soon vast quantities of silk began to be imported into Rome to feed the ever growing desire for the smooth sumptuous fabric. In a surprisingly short time, less than forty years, The Roman economy began to suffer.

By 14AD, the situation had become so bad that the Senate discussed the idea of banning the wearing of silk clothing, arguing it was decadent & immoral rather than admitting that the Roman economy was on the verge of bankruptcy. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that the silk fabric produced at the time of the Roman Empire was much thinner than the silks we are used to today. One trader noted that a birthmark could still be seen through five layers of silk. It was perhaps this fact that prompted the great orator and enormously wealthy senator, Seneca the Younger to include the following in an impassioned speech designed to persuade the senate to ban imports of silk:

"I can see clothes of silk, if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one's decency, can be called clothes... wretched flocks of maids labour so that the adulteress may be visible through her thin dress, so that her husband has no more acquaintance than any outsider or foreigner with his wife's body."

In spite of Seneca's oratorical powers, silk imports continued and indeed increased. By the end of the first century a maritime "silk route" had been established. It began at the port of Giao Chi in modern Vietnam to Roman controlled ports, a faster, safer route to supply Roman demand for silk. The cost of importing silk continued to impact on the Roman economy throughout the entire period of the empire's dominance and it was to be another 400 years before the Romans learned the secret of how silk was produced.

However, the Romans were not the only people interested in learning how silk was produced.

The more the Chinese opened their borders to international trade, the greater the risk that their carefully guarded secret of sericulture would be revealed. It's possible that migrant workers from China took the secrets of sericulture with them to their new homes and we know that silk production was founded in Korea in about 200BC. However, it did not arrive in India until around 300CE, approximately 500 years later, an indication of how determined the Chinese authorities were to protect their interests.

One notable story that illustrates the desire to gain the knowledge of sericulture is the legend of a Chinese princess betrothed to a prince of Hotan, a province near the border of modern day China with Tajikistan. In 400AD, a marriage was arranged between a prince of Hotan and a Chinese princess. Her fiancée persuaded her to smuggle eggs & mulberry leaves in her turban as proof of her commitment to him. Reluctantly, she agreed but not before she had decided to protect the most important part of the secret: not allowing moths to escape cocoon because a break in the thread meant inferior cloth.

Meanwhile, The Roman Empire passed its peak and fell into decline. In an attempt to reassert the empire's authority its government was divided into eastern and western regions in around 300AD. Ultimately, the western empire, centred on Rome collapsed leaving the eastern empire based in Byzantium unsupported. However, the eastern empire continued. Later the city was renamed Constantinople (now Istanbul). In 527AD Justinian 1 was made emperor although he had effectively been in charge already for six years. He had built up a reputation as a clever military tactician and spent his reign trying to restore the empire's greatness by reconquering the western half of the empire. Heralded as one of the greatest and most controversial emperors of the late Roman era, after early successes there was stagnation. He was genuinely concerned with promoting the well being of his subjects so he rooted out corruption and established easily accessible justice. Among his many achievements was rebuilding the cathedral of Hagia Sophia.

However, in order to achieve his goals he needed to increase the empire's revenue to fund his military campaigns. He figured that if he could establish a silk manufacturing industry in Byzantium it would bring Chinese dominance to an end. The story is, that in 552AD, Justinian sent two monks to China to learn the secrets of sericulture. They would have joined a caravan travelling east, no doubt made friends and building good relationships with their fellow travellers. By the time they got to China I'm sure they would

have become trusted members of the party and probably used their contacts to discover the secrets of silk production. The story goes that they then hid cocoons inside their hollow walking sticks, joined a caravan travelling west and walked out of China back to Byzantium where they revealed their achievements to the Emperor. Could this have been the first recorded incident of industrial espionage? The only problem with the story is the time it would have taken to travel the 5000 miles to Byzantium on foot. How did they keep the hatched moths alive?



The reality is that Justinian probably negotiated for a regular supply of silkworms from Sogdiana (Samarkand & Bukhara) to be delivered to Byzantium in the care of experts. He may have used monks to negotiate the deal and manage the process, who knows? Eventually The Byzantines achieved an independent supply with raw silk and silk fibres coming under government monopoly - thus ensuring income for the treasury. Also, by

the 7th century, sericulture had been established in the Turkish city of Bursa. This meant that now the government controlled all aspects of silk production from raising silk Worm to produce the filaments through to dyeing and weaving. It ensured that supply never quite matched demand ensuring that prices stayed high so that there was plenty of revenue for the treasury. It is likely that this nationalised industry was one of the reasons that the Byzantine empire continued long after its Roman counterpart. In fact, the Byzantine government stayed in control of silk output in Europe until a weaving industry developed in Venice and Luca in the 12th century.