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Britain and China at opposite ends of the world?

Archaeological methodology and long-distance contacts in the sixth century

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Introduction

'Access to the courts of heaven is as easy from Britain as it is from Jerusalem, for the kingdom of God is within you'.¹ So wrote Jerome from his monastery at Bethlehem, in the closing decades of the fourth century.

Jerusalem being the centre of the Christian world, the implication was that Britain was at the extremity of that world, although still part of it. Jerome himself was living and writing in a Byzantine physical and conceptual context: he had been a monk in rural Syria, had spent time in Rome, Antioch and Alexandria, and was now writing to a flock scattered around the Near East. His perception of Britain as being 'at the end of the world', as he wrote in another of his letters, was shared, one can infer, by the people to whom he was writing; Britain was the geographical landmass at the western extremity of Byzantine thought. The British cleric, Gildas, writing more than a century later, and in western Britain, shared his impression: 'The island of Britain lies virtually at the end of the world,' he wrote, 'towards the west and north-west' (taking Jerusalem as his locus).²

This paper considers an aspect of the relationship between Byzantium and Britain in the sixth century, before turning to East Asia and those lands that might have been considered to lie at the eastern extremity of the Byzantine thought world, albeit probably not, in this case, a part of the Christian *oikoumene*. Comparison of the material transmitted and the method of its transmission enables us to interpret Byzantium's relationship with its two peripheries in new ways.

Coinage is the main category of material examined here. How was Byzantine coinage transmitted to the farthest point of the known West and East Asia, and why? What meanings, if any, can we attach to the transmission of such coins to both of these peripheries? How were the coins used in each of the recipient societies, and what points of comparison can be made which might

illuminate the study of long-distance contacts in this period?

Part One: Byzantine coinage in Britain

The question of Byzantine coin-finds in Britain remains a controversial one. Until relatively recently, most archaeologists dismissed these as modern losses, not without reason, as these coins were not discovered in secure archaeological contexts.³

However, in recent years the question of post-fifth century 'Eastern Roman' links with the West has come to the fore in a new way, as Britain has increasingly been considered in a late antique context, and as different categories of material have been considered together.⁴ Consequently, some new light has been shed on the numismatic evidence, although there is still room for considerable debate.⁵

Detailed studies of the ceramic evidence, in particular those by Ewan Campbell, have sketched out a context in which coin evidence might be studied anew.⁶ Yet in one sense the story of Byzantine ceramics in Britain has been one of disappointment and unfulfilled promise. It was initially supposed, after the publication (and publicising) of Raleigh Radford's work on the imported pottery at Tintagel in the 1930s, that Byzantine pottery would be found widely in Britain and that it would come to form key dating evidence for the fifth to sixth centuries, and

³ G. C. Boon, 'Byzantine and other Exotic Ancient Bronze Coins from Exeter', in *Roman Finds from Exeter*, eds. N. Holbrook and P. T. Bidwell (Exeter, Exeter County Council and The University of Exeter, 1991), pp. 38-45.

⁴ R. Collins and J. Gerrard (eds.), *Debating Late Antiquity in Britain, AD300-700* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports British Series 365, 2004)

⁵ The debate was reignited by K. R. Dark's discussion of the West Country coins in *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Stroud, Tempus, 2000), p. 162.

⁶ E. Campbell, 'The Post-Roman Pottery', in *Early Medieval Settlements in Wales AD 400-1100: a critical reassessment and gazetteer of the archaeological evidence for secular settlements in Wales*, eds. N. Edwards and A. Lane (Cardiff, University College Wales, Department of Archaeology, 1988), pp. 124-36; E. Campbell, 'New finds of Post-Roman imported pottery and glass from South Wales', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 138 (1989): 59-66; E. Campbell, 'The archaeological evidence for contacts: imports, trade and economy in Celtic Britain AD 400-800,' in *External contacts and the economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain*, ed. K. R. Dark (Woodbridge, Boydell, 1996), pp. 83-96.

¹ F. A. Wright (ed. and trans.), *Select letters of St. Jerome* (London, William Heineman, 1933), Letter 58:3. The idea that Britain lay at the extremity of the known world recurs several times in Jerome's writings: Letter 60:4; 77:10; 133:9; 146:1; *Dialogue against the Luciferians*, 15, in *Jerome: The Principal works of St Jerome*, ed. and trans. P. Schaff (New York, Christian Literature Publishing, 1892).

² Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and other documents*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom (Chichester, Phillimore, 2002), p. 16. Gildas was, of course, well acquainted with the works of Jerome (e.g. p. 156).

perhaps even the seventh century.⁷ The lack of dating indicators for the fifth and sixth centuries (with the exception of 'Anglo-Saxon' burials) has long been a source of frustration for archaeologists of this period. Hopes for a widespread new diagnostic tool were largely dashed, although several new sites with Byzantine pottery have been identified, almost all in western Britain. By the 1990s it had become clear that Byzantine pottery imports are found primarily within the south-western peninsula and south coast of Wales, with the largest assemblages known from Tintagel, Cadbury Congresbury, South Cadbury and Bantam, a sand-dune site on the coast of south Devon.⁸ Occasionally, Byzantine pottery has been found at sites further east, such as London and Verulamium; yet these are usually argued to represent 'British enclaves' and there is no evidence that Eastern Mediterranean amphorae reached the 'Anglo-Saxon' areas of the country.⁹

A welcome by-product of the perceived lack of quantity in terms of the ceramic evidence has been invaluable advances in methodology, which have been crucial in drawing out the relevance of this material to our understanding of Britain's place in the sixth-century world. Charles Thomas and others led the way, refining method in the identification of Eastern Mediterranean and other imported pottery types in the 1950s to 1980s, while since the 1980s new steps have been taken in interpretation.¹⁰ Campbell's work on the chronological and typological spread of the pottery indicated a period of importation lasting from about 475 to 550, permitting an early idea that these could represent one shipload to be deemed almost certainly incorrect.¹¹ Michael Fulford argued that the Tintagel material had a distinctly 'Constantinopolitan' signature, even if the ships were collecting additional material from the Byzantine colony in southern Spain before turning west and north up the Atlantic coast.¹² More recent work on Spanish ceramic assemblages, while confirming the presence of Eastern Mediterranean fine wares and amphorae in late-fifth and

sixth-century Hispania, has tended to support Fulford's thesis insofar as it has highlighted key differences in the Iberian and British assemblages.¹³ In brief, these are three-fold: 1) the majority of fine ware sherds at British sites are Phocaean Red Slip Ware (PRSW/Late Roman C), whereas African Red Slip Ware (ARSW) dominates the imports at sites on the Iberian peninsula; 2) North African amphorae are rare in Britain, but form up to 75.6% of the ceramic assemblage on key Iberian sites (e.g. Tarragona); 3) Eastern Mediterranean amphora type Late Roman 2 (LR2/British Bi) is the dominant amphora type in Britain, but is rare on most Western Mediterranean sites and is completely absent from Braga, the Visigothic capital on the Atlantic coast, which might have been expected to benefit from the long-distance exchange involving Britain. By contrast, amphora type Late Roman 1 (LR1/British Bii) is the most common Eastern Mediterranean amphora type on Iberian sites.

The extent to which these voyages were controlled by the state is uncertain. An entrepreneurial project by Eastern Mediterranean merchants has been suggested, but Anne Bowman has shown that strictly commercially-motivated contacts were unlikely, given the investment and time required to reach Britain. Research on late antique shipping technologies has also started to illuminate this question, starting with Jonathan Wooding's suggestion on comparative maritime grounds that deep sea-voyages provided a likely model for Byzantine contacts with Byzantium.¹⁴ Previously, it had been thought that short-haul merchant ships, perhaps trading via Gaul and Spain, might be responsible for the imports.¹⁵ Deep-sea voyages direct from Gibraltar explain the very 'Byzantine' assemblage at Tintagel, as well as the Frankish and Spanish material.

Whatever the motivation, there was, in all likelihood, a period of ceramic importation beginning at or before the reign of Justinian I and continuing well past the mid-century point, perhaps associated with diplomatic motives.¹⁶ It involved an assemblage deriving from the Eastern Mediterranean and Constantinopolitan in character, although the ships may have harboured in North Africa, possibly Alexandria or Carthage, before sailing west. The cargoes contained red-slipped tablewares and the standard range of amphorae along, possibly, with other Byzantine products. As we have seen, amphora type LR2 predominated, just as it did at

⁷ For example, C. A. R. Radford, 'Tintagel: the castle and Celtic monastery. Interim Report', *Antiquaries Journal*, 15 (1935): pp. 401-19.

⁸ For a summary, see A. Harris, *Byzantium, Britain and the West: the archaeology of cultural identity, AD 400-650* (Stroud, Tempus, 2003), pp. 144-52.

⁹ Verulamium: D. F. Williams, 'The Amphorae from the Lower Slope', in *The Excavation of a Ceremonial Site at Folly Lane, Verulamium*, R. Niblett, London, 1999, pp. 286-7. London: D. Williams and C. Carreras, 'North African Amphorae in Roman Britain: a reappraisal', *Britannia*, 26 (1995): 231-52.

¹⁰ A. C. Thomas, 'Imported pottery in dark-age western Britain', *Medieval Archaeology*, 3 (1959): 89-111; A. C. Thomas, *A provisional list of imported pottery in post-Roman Britain and Ireland* (Redruth, Institute of Cornish Studies, Special Report 7, 1981).

¹¹ J. Wooding, 'Cargoes in Trade along the Western Seaboard', in *External contacts and the economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain*, ed. K. R. Dark (Woodbridge, Boydell, 1996), pp. 67-82; J. Wooding, *Communication and commerce along the Western seaways, AD 400-800* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 654, 1996).

¹² M. Fulford, 'Byzantium and Britain: a Mediterranean perspective on Post-Roman Mediterranean Imports in Western Britain and Ireland', *Medieval Archaeology*, 33 (1989): 1-6.

¹³ P. Reynolds, 'Hispania in the Late Roman Mediterranean: Ceramics and Trade', in *Hispania in Late Antiquity: Current Perspectives*, eds. K. Bowes and M. Kulikowski (Leiden, Brill, 2005), pp. 369-486, esp. 423ff. and Tables 14-16. I am grateful to Simon Esmonde Cleary for drawing my attention to this article.

¹⁴ A. Bowman, 'Post-Roman imports in Britain and Ireland: a maritime perspective', in *External contacts and the economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain*, ed. K. R. Dark (Woodbridge, Boydell, 1996), pp. 97-107; Wooding, 'Cargoes in Trade', pp. 67-82.

¹⁵ C. Thomas, 'Gallici Nautae de Galliarum Provinciis. A Sixth/Seventh Century Trade with Gaul, Reconsidered', *Medieval Archaeology* 34 (1990): 1-26.

¹⁶ Harris, pp. 144-52.

sites receiving state supplies from the imperial government.¹⁷ Outside the south-west peninsula, this material is found only at high-status secular and religious sites; within the south-west peninsula, it is present at a wider-range of sites, including farming settlements. Byzantine glass is also found in this area. To my knowledge, no Byzantine metal objects have been excavated at 'British' sites.¹⁸

It would have been surprising if sailors arriving from coin-using societies in the Eastern Mediterranean did not carry some coin on them, if only for their own private purchases in the course of their journey. This might account for some of the sixth-century and earlier low-denomination Byzantine coins found in Britain, although it is notable that few Byzantine coins have been found at sites which have also yielded Eastern Mediterranean pottery. The discovery of a decanummium of Justinian I with a Nicomedia mint-mark, dated c. 560-561, at Padstow (Cornwall) in 2006 is an exciting, although isolated find.¹⁹ Wroxeter (Shropshire) is another rare exception: here, we have a bronze nummus of 430-5 at a site which also yielded imported (Palestinian) fifth- to sixth-century pottery.²⁰ In the light of recent research at Silchester (Hampshire), an old (and sometimes dismissed) find of a sixth-century follis of Justinian I might now be re-considered.²¹ Clwyd, Merseyside and Cheshire should also be mentioned here, for these adjacent counties have also yielded several low-value sixth-century Byzantine coins, although not, as yet, imported pottery from stratigraphically-excavated contexts.²² In fact, there might now be enough bronze

Byzantine coins from north-west England to suggest, tentatively, that they represent actual losses of the fifth-seventh century period.²³

Gold coinage appears very seldom in the west of Britain. A solidus of Justinian I, with the Constantinople mint mark, from Tenby (Pembrokeshire), is exceptional, as is a tremissis of the late-sixth century, also with the Constantinople mint mark, from the Lancashire/Cheshire border.²⁴ Silver coinage is equally rare, and is in any case likely to be associated with the ninth-century Norse expansion: as suggested by the seventh-century silver hexagram of Heraclius Constantine in the famous Cuerdale hoard and the recent find of an early seventh-century Sasanian silver drachm of Chosroes II (628) from Anglesey.²⁵

By contrast, in the east of Britain, gold Byzantine coinage is much more plentiful – even if we exclude those pieces that have been subject to alteration, probably for use as jewellery or amulets. To date, over 15 Byzantine gold coins of the fifth and sixth century have been identified and recorded from eastern Britain, in contrast to the three or four from the west and north.²⁶ Numbers have increased significantly since the establishment of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in late 1997 and are likely to continue to do so (the coverage of the PAS expanded to cover all of England and Wales only in 2003).²⁷ This raises the (rhetorical) question of how many coins were recovered but not recorded before the turn of the 21st century.

There are analogous numbers of seventh-century coins, whose importation (by definition) took place well after the Justinianic period of contact. These are often found in analogous places and contexts to the fifth- and sixth-century solidi; that is, principally in the southern and eastern areas of England.²⁸ This estimate excludes the so-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ In addition to the coin-finds, to be discussed below, there are some chance finds, which include the Byzantine liturgical censer from Glastonbury and lead weights, also from Somerset. C. Entwistle, 'A coin weight from Somerset', in *Byzantium: Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture*, ed. David Buckton (London, The British Museum, 1994), p. 86.

¹⁹ PAS Find ID CORN-72D1D7. www.finds.org.uk

²⁰ Nummus: R. Abdy and G. Williams, 'A Catalogue of Hoards and Single Finds from the British Isles, c. AD 410-675', in *Coinage and History in the North Sea World: c. 500-1250. Essays in honour of Marion Archibald*, eds. B. Cooke and G. Williams (Leiden, Brill, 2006), pp. 31. Pottery: P. Barker, R. White et al, *The Baths Basilica Wroxeter. Excavations 1966-90* (London, English Heritage, 1997), pp. 120, 168, 231, 318.

²¹ Abdy and Williams, p. 35; M. Fulford et al, *Life and labour in late Roman Silchester: excavations in Insula IX since 1997* (London, The British Academy, 2006), pp. 280-85: 'Occupation of our three properties [in Insula IX] continues through the fourth and, we suggest, the fifth/sixth centuries' (p. 282).

²² For the coin-finds, see: R. Philpott, 'Three Byzantine Coins found near the North Wirral Coast in Merseyside', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 1998, 148 (1999): 197-202. More recently, a follis of Justinian I with an Antioch mint-mark was found near the entrance to the Mersey Tunnel at Seacombe, Merseyside. (PAS Find number LVPL-874C64). Another follis of Justinian I was found at Preston Brook (Cheshire), just south-east of Runcorn (PAS Find ID LVPL-1440), although the find of a follis of c. 1042-c.1050 (reigns of Zoe and Theodora, and of Constantine IX Monomachus) less than ten miles away at Norley (Cheshire) does put a question-mark over this find (PAS Find ID LVPL-1883). Images at www.finds.org.uk and <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/coins/emc>. Although no pottery from stratigraphical excavations has yet been

found, there is a small number of chance finds, most notably a Saint Menas flask from nearby Meols. See also Bangert, this volume.

²³ However, not necessarily losses of the sixth century: witness the sixth-century decanummium of Justinian I from a rubbish pit at Hamwic, where there was apparently no activity during the sixth century itself. Abdy and Williams, 2006, p. 35. The discovery of a follis of Leo V (886-912) in a back garden at Wedmore, Somerset in 2005 also urges caution. PAS Find ID GLO-D4B576: www.finds.org.uk

²⁴ There is also a solidus of Tiberius III (698-705) from Tenby. Abdy and Williams, pp. 33-4.

²⁵ J. Graham-Campbell (ed.), *Viking Treasure from the North West: The Cuerdale Hoard in its Context* (Liverpool, Liverpool Museum, 1992). Anglesey: PAS Find ID LVPL-2174. www.finds.org.uk

²⁶ For an overview, see Harris, 2003, pp. 152-5, 163-4. More recent finds are reported in *Treasure Annual Reports* of 2003, 2004 and 2005 (London, Department for Culture, Media and Sport). Most notably, Byzantine gold solidi have been found in mid-Norfolk (Treasure case 2005 T474), Coddanham, Suffolk (tremissis of Anastasius (491-518) Early Medieval Coin corpus number 2001.0014) and Faversham, Kent (solidus of Maurice Tiberius (582-602), modified into a pendant by the addition of a gold suspension loop, EF-4810). Images at www.finds.org.uk and <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/coins/emc>.

²⁷ For up-to-date numbers, see www.finds.org.uk.

²⁸ Abdy and Williams, pp. 23-58. Finds since 2000 include: an incomplete struck/hammered copper alloy Byzantine follis of Heraclius, minted in Nicomedia in 610-11 from the parish of Middleton,

called 'pseudo-imperial' gold coins, although if these were to be factored into the analysis the picture would be even more pronounced.²⁹

However, and conversely, there are very few low-value sixth-century Byzantine coins in the eastern areas of Britain. Exceptions include coins (usually representing 40 nummi) of Anastasius (491-518) from Burwell (Cambridgeshire), of Justinian I to Justin II (i.e. 527-578) from Amersham (Buckinghamshire), of Maurice Tiberius (582-602) from Norfolk.³⁰ Another sixth-century follis (12 nummi) was found at Core's End (Buckinghamshire).³¹ There are also nummi from Richborough (Kent), Dunstable (Bedfordshire) and Thelnetham (Suffolk), all with a *terminus post quem* deposition date of c. 435. Yet another nummus with a *terminus post quem* deposition date of c. 435 was found at Verulamium, but this site must be considered an anomaly in eastern Britain, since it is often argued to have been a 'British' centre in the fifth to seventh centuries, and, indeed, has yielded Byzantine imported pottery.³²

Why might this distinct patterning, with west and east as two discrete distributions, have emerged? It is possible that the bronze nummi represent direct imports into Britain, brought in alongside the ceramic and other materials in the century leading up to c. 550. It is salient that almost all of them are issues of or before the reign of Justinian, which would enable them to be linked to this period of ceramic importation. There seem few other circumstances in which such low-value coins would make their way to western Britain during this period. Whether or not this point is accepted, it must be borne in mind that small bronze denominations of this kind often do not survive well in the archaeological record; this being the case, we are probably seeing a very small sample indeed of a larger quantity of such coins.

in Warwickshire (Find ID WMID-8FC217); a possible Byzantine follis from Gravenhurst, in Bedfordshire (Find ID BH-D28B76). A solidus of Phocas minted 607-709 was found at Bossall, in North Yorkshire (Find ID NCL-6A6EF5). Another solidus of Phocas, said to have been found in Sussex in 2005, was sold on Ebay in December 2005, without having been reported to the PAS. www.ebay.co.uk ID 8342462441.

²⁹ Abdy and Williams, pp. 23-58, where perhaps the most notable find listed (p. 14) (although now lost) is a hoard comprising ten tremisses, said to be of Justin I, found on the bed of the Thames in 1848, and likely to have been pseudo-imperial. More recently, examples reported to the PAS include: a fragment a late-sixth or early-seventh century silver-gilt Merovingian pseudo-imperial solidus, pierced for suspension, from Southease, in East Sussex (Find ID SUR-5B13A4). See also R. Abdy, 'After Patching: Imported and Recycled Coinage in Fifth- and Sixth-century Britain', in *Coinage and History in the North Sea World: c. 500-1250. Essays in honour of Marion Archibald*, eds. B. Cooke and G. Williams (Leiden, Brill, 2006), pp. 75-109.

³⁰ Burwell: PAS Find ID CAM-C730D3; Amersham: PAS Find ID BUC-6129B2. The Norfolk coin (PAS Find ID BH-781624) was minted in Maurice Tiberius's second regnal year 583/584. There is a possible sixth-century coin from North Yorkshire (PAS Find ID YORYM-0BEEF7), and a 5 nummi coin of Justinian I, possibly from Fressingfield (PAS Find ID SF-69E582). www.finds.org.uk

³¹ PAS Find ID BUC-4840C3. www.finds.org.uk

³² See above, note 8.

It is possible that Byzantine gold coins were also imported directly from the Eastern Mediterranean, but this is a much more problematical point and, in any case, the function of gold coinage (in monetary terms and otherwise) may have been very different from that of bronze coinage. The frequent association of genuine Byzantine gold coins with pseudo-imperial barbarian issues, often with Frankish mint marks but sometimes even Visigothic or Burgundian ones, militates against direct importation. It is likely, given the evidence for a Continental, overland, long-distance network of exchange, that the coins were brought into Britain via this second route, rather than via the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.³³

This second network of exchange involved overland and riverine passage along the Danube, over the Alps and down the Rhine to the North Sea, before passing up through the Thames estuary or further north to the Deben estuary. It is widely accepted as having brought into Britain a wide variety of objects from the barbarian world, not least Frankish glass, weaponry and dress items. Byzantine objects such as the bronze ('Coptic') bowls sometimes found in late sixth- and early seventh-century Anglo-Saxon graves, as well as the so-called 'exotic' items also found in early Anglo-Saxon graves, such as cowrie shells, ivory rings and objects incorporating semi-precious stones, are also confined to the east of Britain, are likely to have been imported via this second route.³⁴

Yet, the possibility of direct importation of Byzantine gold coins cannot be ruled out at this stage. If the Byzantine interest in western Britain had a diplomatic or political aspect, as well as an economic one, it is likely that gifts in the form of precious metals were also imported, in addition to the ceramic material.³⁵ Both textual and archaeological evidence suggests that the imperial government resorted to this practice elsewhere, including with the Franks, the closest neighbours of the British.

If this was the case, the otherwise puzzling absence of Eastern Mediterranean precious metal coinage in the Western British archaeological record may be explained by the secondary distribution of the material – from the British kingdoms to the emerging kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons, perhaps again in the form of diplomatic gifts or tribute. This might go some way towards explaining why East Anglia and Kent often yield the most high-status artefacts: as the most complex of the early Anglo-Saxon polities, these might have been expected to engage in diplomacy more readily. On this basis, the presence of Byzantine gold coins in Anglo-Saxon burial contexts might represent, in some cases, a tertiary distribution of material – perhaps from a regional

³³ Harris, ch. 5.

³⁴ Harris, pp. 139-94.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

ruler to a loyal local family. While necessarily speculative, this suggestion is consistent with theoretical models widely employed elsewhere in archaeology.

The frequent alteration of high-value coins (imperial and pseudo-imperial) and their subsequent deposition in burial contexts suggests a society with little concept of a monetary system. It should present no surprise, therefore, that this is where we see the clearest archaeological footprint of the imported coins. By contrast, societies with active concepts of monetary exchange tend to pass on coins fairly rapidly in exchange or, at a later point, melt them down for renewal. This is by no means to argue that imported coin was used in western Britain as part of a coherent monetary system; merely that it may have been exchanged with Anglo-Saxon elites, perhaps in extremis.³⁶

That several of the well-known high-status burial deposits (Sutton Hoo, Mound 1; Mound 17) included coins contained within a purse – or in the case of Mound 17 at Sutton Hoo, garnets within a ‘purse’ – might suggest a society aspiring to participation in a monetary system, or at least one whose elites had aspirations in this direction.³⁷ It might also lend tacit support to William Filmer-Sankey’s argument that the burials at both Snape and Sutton Hoo Mound 1 were intended to evoke the Roman imperial office in some way.³⁸

To what extent do these patterns compare with other areas? The second part of this paper turns from the western extremity of the Byzantine thought world, to its eastern extremity, and to China. If Britain provides a model for how interaction on the fringes of the Byzantine thought world took place, we might expect to see similar material and analogous patterns of activity occurring there, too.

Part Two: Byzantine coinage in China

Byzantine contacts with China have attracted rather less attention than Byzantine contacts with Britain, although this situation is slowly beginning to change. Friedrich Hirth’s late-19th century translations of Chinese reports of diplomatic missions to ‘the West’ first brought the subject to Western scholarly attention, while the few references to Chinese silk in the Roman and Byzantine textual sources are well-known.³⁹ Procopius’s story of silkworms being smuggled into the Empire is probably

the most cited of these.⁴⁰ Procopius also claims that in the mid-sixth century the Byzantine government tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Ethiopian merchants to travel to India in order to buy Chinese silk on their behalf.⁴¹

However, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that archaeologists started seriously to explore the question of linkages between the Byzantine Empire and East Asia. Scholars studying the material culture of the post-Han to Tang period in China drew attention to the quantities of ‘foreign’ goods imported into China between the fifth and the eighth centuries, largely on the basis of the study of museum collections.⁴² In the main, it was scholars working on the relationship between the Persian Empire and its eastern neighbours who first started to consider the possibility of a Byzantine component to this relationship, albeit one mediated through a Sasanian cultural world and facilitated by the fluctuating political dynamics of the Central Asian kingdoms.⁴³

Renewed interest in the study of the so-called Silk Road has also resulted in an exploration of Byzantine-Chinese contacts.⁴⁴ It is important to recognise from the outset that the Silk Road had both a northern, land-locked branch (itself divided into ‘sub-branches’) and a southern, maritime branch, and was a series of intermittently operating trading stations. It was not, therefore, a single ‘road’, along which organised groups of merchants rode from start to end, but a series of roads of varying lengths and quality. Rarely did merchants travel the entire length

⁴⁰ Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, (ed. and trans.) H. B. Dewing (London, William Heinemann, 1919), VIII.17.1-8.

⁴¹ Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, (ed. and trans.) H. B. Dewing (London, William Heinemann, 1979), I.20, 9, 11-12.

⁴² For example: M. Pfrommer, *Metalwork from the Hellenised East. Catalogue of the Collections* (Malibu, John Paul Getty Museum, 1993); P. O. Harper, ‘Iranian Luxury Vessels in China from the late first millennium BCE to the second half of the first millennium CE’, in *Nomads, Traders and Holy Men along China’s Silk Road: Papers presented at the Asia Society, New York, November 9-10, 2001*, eds. A. J. Julianio and J. A. Lerner (= *Silk Road Studies*, 7) (Turnhout, Brepols, 2002), pp. 97-100; B. Marshak, ‘Central Asian Metalwork in China’, in *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, ed. J. C. Y. Watt (New York, 2004), pp. 47-55. See Chen, this volume, for glass.

⁴³ M. Tampoe, *Maritime trade between China and the West: an archaeological study of the ceramics from Siraf (Persian Gulf), 8th to 15th centuries A.D.* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 555, 1989); S. Lieu, ‘Byzantium, Persia and China: Interstate Relations on the Eve of the Islamic Conquest’, *Silk Road Studies*, IV: *Realms of the Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern*, ed. D. Christian and C. Benjamin (Turnhout, Brepols, 2000), pp. 47-65; J. Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity: Historiographical and Historical Studies* (Aldershot, Variorum, 2006); V. S. Curtis, R. Hillenbrand and J.M. Rogers (eds.), *The art and archaeology of ancient Persia: new light on the Parthian and Sasanian empires* (London, I.B. Tauris Publishers/The British Institute of Persian Studies, 1998); P. O. Harper, *In search of a cultural identity: monuments and artifacts of the Sasanian Near East, 3rd to 7th century A.D.* (New York, Bibliotheca Persica, 2006).

⁴⁴ Publications on the Silk Road are too numerous to list here. For a recent bibliography, see S. Whitfield (ed), *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* (London, The British Library, 2004). For a sense of the variety of debates relating to the Silk Road, see the journal, *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* and Brepols’ series, *Silk Road Studies*.

³⁶ K. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom, British Political Continuity, 400-800* (Leicester, Leicester University Press).

³⁷ M. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (London, The British Museum Press, 1998), p. 183.

³⁸ W. Filmer-Sankey, ‘The “Roman Emperor” in the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, CXLIX (1996): 1-9.

³⁹ F. Hirth (ed. and trans.), *China and the Roman Orient: researches into their ancient and mediaeval relations as represented in old Chinese records* (Chicago, Ares Publishers, 1975); Friedrich Hirth, ‘The Mystery of Fu-lin’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 33 (1913): 193-208.

of the Silk Road; thus, objects traversing the entire route arrived at their destination (or at least their place of deposition in the archaeological record), in most cases, via down-the-line exchange.⁴⁵

Perhaps partly as a result of 20th and 21st century globalising tendencies, Chinese historians have themselves recently started to develop greater interest in the Byzantine world. Zhang Xu-Shan at Tsinghua University is one of the pioneers in this, recently examining the way that the Early Byzantine-Chinese relationship is presented in Chinese literature.⁴⁶ His study of both Procopius's work (ironically one of the few Early Byzantine texts that mention Britain) and Cosmas Indicopleustes's *Christian Topography*, a sixth-century text written by an Egyptian traveller to the East, has led him to conclude that the Byzantines had a geographically accurate idea of where China was located and were likely to know this from first hand experience.⁴⁷ Chen Zhi-Qiang's eagerly awaited translations of Chinese texts relating to Byzantium will transform the study of Byzantine-Eastern relations.⁴⁸ Xu Jia-Ling at Northeast Normal University in Changchun has also worked extensively on these texts, pointing out that from the Han to the Ming Dynasty periods, the Chinese were intensely interested in a land they knew as 'Fu-lin', and arguing that, whereas in before the fifth century this appellation referred to the Roman Empire, by the fifth and sixth centuries it seems to relate to the Anatolian region of the Byzantine Empire, and that by the T'ang Dynasty (618-907) it seems to be used to describe a rather vague and undefined area to the west of the Chinese Empire, which sometimes included the Central Asian khanates.⁴⁹

As far as archaeologists of Byzantium are concerned, it is numismatists who have started to explore the Byzantine-East Asian relationship most systematically – François Thierry and Cécile Morrisson in Europe and, more recently, Lin Ying in Guangzhou.⁵⁰ Outside of numismatics, however, the work of Marlia Mango has perhaps been most influential. She has explored, through studies on silverware, possible maritime links with China and elsewhere on the Asian Pacific coast, demonstrating that vessels with typically late antique motifs are to be found as far east as south-east China.⁵¹ Part of the reason may lie in the fact that the end of the Han period coincided with an increased interest in silver and gold within Chinese society, and coincided, too, with the opening up of links with India, as Buddhism gained popularity in China. Buddhist statuary was increasingly adorned with gold or with precious stones, transported from India (for example, the Goddess of Mercy statue from Xi'an, c. 547), and the use of these materials in funerary display indicates that their usage was not confined to religious use. This openness arguably brought Chinese and Byzantine elite-level aspirations into closer alignment, forming a cultural context in which contacts might be more readily archaeologically identifiable. After c. 589, gold and silver objects were produced in China itself, so the sixth century provides a unique opportunity to study imported material.

This is the background against which we must consider the variety of possible Early Byzantine objects that have been found in China, including glass, silver and silver-gilt vessels and coins. With the exception of the coins, most of the objects have only hesitantly been identified as 'Byzantine', and some have recently been re-classified as Late Roman or Sasanian, or even as Chinese imitations.⁵² The evidence (from texts) of at least eleven Sasanian diplomatic missions to China during the fifth to sixth century and at least two Chinese return missions to Persia has understandably led scholars to err on the side of

⁴⁵ C. Renfrew, *Approaches to Social Archaeology*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1984).

⁴⁶ Zhang Xu-Shan, 'The Name of China and its Geography in Cosmas Indicopleustes', *Byzantion*, 74 (2004): 452-462. See also Zhang Xu-Shan, *He Kina kai to Vyzantio: scheseis - emporio - amoivaies gnoseis apo tis arches tou bou hos ta mesa tou You ai* (= *Historicogeographica, Meletemata*, 3), (Athens, 1998). I am grateful to Zhang Xu-Shan for speaking to me on this topic and for alerting me to this publication.

⁴⁷ J. W. McCrindle, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (London, Hakluyt Society, 1987). For recent scholarship on Cosmas, see: M. Kominko, 'The Map of Cosmas, the Albi Map, and the Tradition of Ancient Geography', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 20 (2005): 163-186.

⁴⁸ Chen Zhiqiang, 'The Byzantines in the Chinese Eyes: Translation and Commentary of Relevant Ancient and Medieval Chinese Texts', *Dumbarton Oaks Fellowship Reports*, 2005-06, http://www.doaks.org/do_byz_fellowship_reports.html#_13. See also Chen Zhiqiang, 'Record of Byzantine food in Chinese texts', in *Eat, drink, and be merry* (Luke 12:19)—*Food and Wine in Byzantium. Papers of the 37th Annual Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, in Honour of Professor A. A. M. Bryer*, eds. L. Brubaker and K. Linardou (Aldershot, Ashgate, forthcoming 2007).

⁴⁹ Xu Jia-Ling, 'Byzantium or Seljuk Sultanate? On a piece of narrative on 'Fulin' in Sung-shih (History of Sung Dynasty)', abstract in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 21-26 August 2006*, eds. E. Jeffreys and F. Haarer (London, International Congress of Byzantine Studies, 2006), vol. 3, p. 19. I am grateful to Xu Jia-Ling for discussing her work and making the text of this paper available to me.

⁵⁰ For example: F. Thierry and C. Morrisson, 'Sur les monnaies byzantines trouvées en Chine', *Revue numismatique*, series 6, 36 (1994): 109-45; Lin Yin, 'Western Turks and Byzantine gold coins found in China', *Transoxiana*, 6 (2003) n.p. http://www.transoxiana.org/0106/lin-ying_turks_solidus.html [accessed 10 January 2007].

⁵¹ M. M. Mango, 'The archaeological context of finds of silver in and beyond the Eastern Empire', in *Acta XIII Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae*, eds. N. Cambi and E. Marin (Vatican and Split, 1998), pp. 207-52; M. M. Mango, 'Beyond the amphora: non-ceramic evidence for late antique industry and trade', in *Economy and Exchange in the East Mediterranean during Late Antiquity* eds. S. Kingsley and M. Decker (Oxford, Oxbow, 2001), 93-5. See also M. M. Mango, 'Action in the Trenches: A call for a more dynamic archaeology of Early Byzantium' (Lecture to Plenary Session II), *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 21-26 August 2006*, eds. E. Jeffreys and F. Haarer (London, International Congress of Byzantine Studies, 2006), vol. 1, pp. 83-98. See also, for example, E. J. Laing, 'Recent finds of Western-related Glassware, Textiles and Metalwork in Central Asia and China', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 9 (1995): 1-18.

⁵² Shih Hsio-Yen, 'Gold and Silver Vessels excavated in North China: problems of origin', *New Asia Academic Bulletin*, 4 (1983): 63-82, figs. 1-64.

caution and ascribe a Persian provenance where there is any doubt. Yet, conversely, some objects once thought to be Late Roman or Sasanian are now thought more likely to have a Byzantine provenance.⁵³ In several cases, what can be stated with any certainty is only that the object was produced in a 'late antique' cultural setting or, at least, in imitation of a late antique style. Much research is still necessary on Chinese 'foreign' finds of the fifth to eighth centuries.

The most frequently-occurring and securely identifiable Byzantine finds in China are gold solidi.⁵⁴ Lin Yin has recently described 24 Chinese graves that have yielded genuine Byzantine solidi minted before 800 (with sometimes more than one solidus to a tomb), drawing attention to the northern provinces of Gansu and Hebei as the regions which have yielded the most Early Byzantine solidi through archaeological excavation.⁵⁵ Byzantine coins are also found in the region of the Turfan Oasis, in what was the Gaochang kingdom in the fifth to sixth centuries, most notably from the well-known cemetery site at Astana, where several contemporary tombs have yielded Byzantine solidi.⁵⁶ Approximately 40 Byzantine solidi and imitation coins are presently known.

Solidi are, in most cases, found in graves in association with other high-status objects and materials, such as jade, glass, metalwork and jewels. For example, the grave of Li Xizong (d. 540), which contained three Byzantine solidi, also contained a silver cup of Sasanian origin.⁵⁷ Fifth- to seventh-century Chinese mortuary evidence has not received anywhere near the attention of its Western counterparts in theoretical terms; however, preliminary work suggests that the coins deposited in such tombs were intended to display status, actual or aspirational, in a hierarchical society and were not regarded as components of a monetary exchange system.⁵⁸ Some of the coins were retrieved from the mouth of the inhumed body – a practice which is well-known in the Graeco-Roman

tradition, including Byzantium, as well as in Chinese and Central Asian history.⁵⁹ One such solidus, for example, was found in the tomb of an Eastern Wei dynasty princess who died in 550 (534–550), thus providing a mid sixth-century *terminus post quem* for its deposition.⁶⁰ Byzantine coins are not found in analogous contexts in Britain, although Philip Grierson suggested that the Merovingian coins deposited at Sutton Hoo Mound One could be seen as an Anglo-Saxon equivalent of 'Charon's obol', the inclusion of money in the mouth to pay for passage to the other world.⁶¹ Of course, the practice was too widespread to tell us anything specific about sixth-century long-distance contacts, but it does perhaps permit an insight into the extent of the process of globalisation by this point in the first millennium AD.

By the time of their deposition, several Byzantine gold coins and their imitations had been pierced, almost always near the crown of the Emperor's head, suggesting that they were used as neck pendants or as head-dress accessories with the imperial image worn to the front. For example, four of the five Byzantine solidi from the tomb of Tian Hong (d. 575) in Ningxia Province, were pierced. The five solidi ranged in date from 457 to 542.⁶² One of them, a solidus depicting Justin I and Justinian I as co-emperors, issued in 527, was both clipped and pierced in four places. One of the other pierced coins was found in the dead man's mouth. Likewise, the solidus of the reign of Theodosius II, discovered at Xiangride, in Dulun County, in western Qinghai, in 2002, is pierced – in this case – in two places.⁶³ This coin was found in a burial context, in what is thought to be an early Tibetan (Tuyuhun) cemetery; since it was lying adjacent to the skull of the dead person, it is likely that it formed part of a head-dress. Interestingly, the coin showed signs of having been much worn at the time of its deposition. The location of this latter coin, incidentally, may point to the shift south of the Silk Road in response to internecine

⁵³ M. Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, 'Pour une archéologie des échanges. Apports étrangers en Chine-transmission, réception, assimilation', *Arts Asiatiques*, 49 (1994): 21–33. I am grateful to Craig Clunas for drawing my attention to this publication.

⁵⁴ Xu Pingfang, 'An Archaeological View of the Silk Road in China', in Xu Pingfang et al, *Land Routes of the Silk Roads and the Cultural Exchanges between the East and West before the 10th Century. (Desert Route Expedition International Seminar in Urumqi [Aug 19–21, 1990])*. (Beijing, New World Press, 1996), pp. 239–89. I am grateful to Wang Tao for drawing my attention to this publication and to Xu Jia-Ling for help with translation.

⁵⁵ Lin Yin, 'Western Turks and Byzantine gold coins'.

⁵⁶ Mu Shunying, Qi Xiaoshan, Zhang Ping, *The Ancient Art in Xinjiang, China* (Urumqi, Xinjiang Art and Photography Press, 1994), p. 61; H. Wang, 'How much for a camel? A new understanding of money on the Silk Road before AD 800', in *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* ed. S. Whitfield (London, The British Library, 2004), pp. 24–33.

⁵⁷ Lin Yin, 'Western Turks'; J. C. Y. Watt (ed.), *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 AD* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), p. 254, fig. 153.

⁵⁸ F. Thierry and C. Morisson, 'Sur les monnaies byzantines trouvées en Chine', *Revue numismatique*, series 6, 36 (1994): 109–45. See also Chen Zhiqiang, 'On the Mistakes in Research on Byzantine Coins Found in China', *Nankai Journal*, 5 (2004): 57–65.

⁵⁹ E. Ivison, 'Burials and urbanism in Late Antique and Byzantine Corinth', in *Towns in Transition: urban evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. N. Christie and S. T. Loseby (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 99–125; C. S. Lightfoot, E. A. Ivison, et al, 'The Amorium Project: The 1998 Excavation Season', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 55 (1999): 371–99; E. Ivison, 'Charon's Obol or Apotropaic Talisman? Coins in medieval Byzantine Graves', *XXe Congrès des Études Byzantines*, Paris, France, August, 2001; Table Ronde: *Rituel et Cérémonie* (Paris, *Congrès des Études Byzantines*, 2001).

⁶⁰ Hong Mei Xu, 'A Gold Coin of the Eastern Roman Empire, Excavated in Dulun County, Qinghai Province', www.nara.acu.or.jp/hp/English/topics/participants/report2.html [accessed 10 January 2007].

⁶¹ P. Grierson, 'The Purpose of the Sutton Hoo Coins', *Antiquity*, 44, (1970): 14–18.

⁶² M. Alram, 'Coins and the Silk Road', in *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia Provinces, 4th – 7th century*, eds. A. L. Juliano and J. A. Lerner (New York, Harry Abrams, 2001), pp. 271–91, nos. 96–99. See also: www.chnm.gmu.edu/whm/unpacking/objectanalysis2.html

⁶³ Hong Mei Xu, 'A Gold Coin of the Eastern Roman Empire, Excavated in Dulun County, Qinghai Province', www.nara.acu.or.jp/hp/English/topics/participants/report2.html [accessed 10 January 2007].

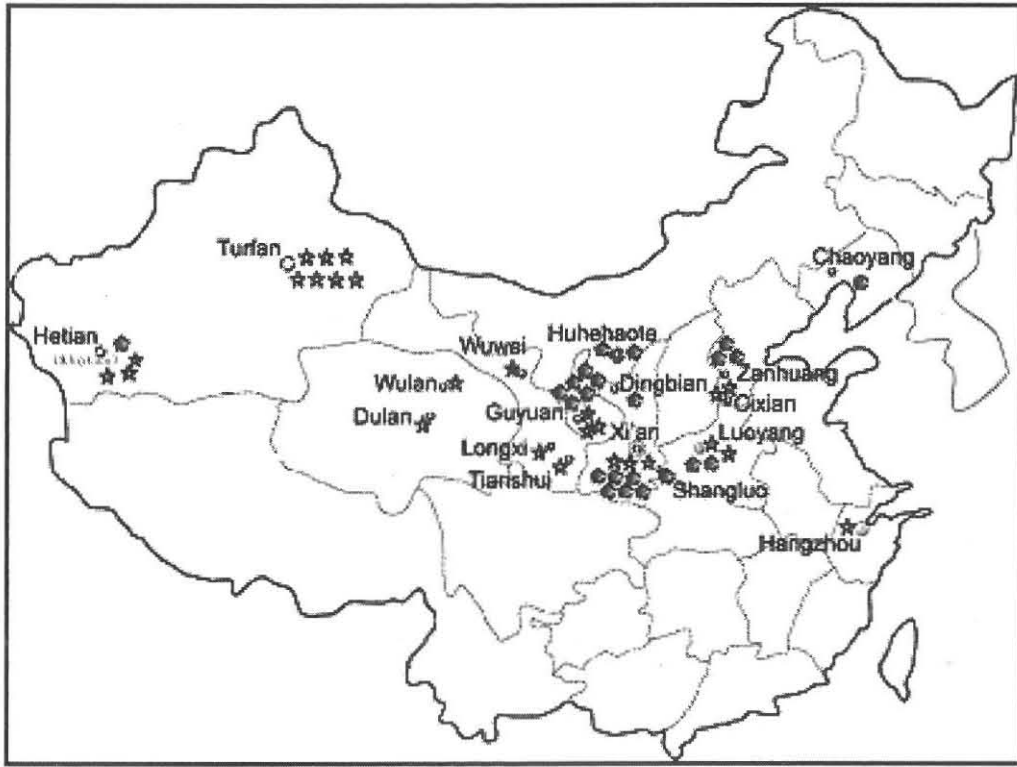


Fig. 1. Map showing geographical distribution of Byzantine gold coins across northern China.
Lin Yin, 2005 (with permission)

warfare amongst the small polities in the Central Plains region. Several analogous fourth-sixth-century coins have been found in this area, including a solidus of Justinian II, found in 1999 in Wulan County.

The imitation Byzantine coins are sometimes merely hammered gold foil, impressed with the image of the obverse of the coin, and have no reverse to speak of. It is highly unlikely that these were ever used as money. It is possible that they were produced specifically as funerary items, either from sixth- and early seventh-century genuine Byzantine coins or from imitation coins probably produced in Central Asia and passed onto the Chinese in diplomatic exchange. Imitation Byzantine coins are found in Chinese high-status tombs well into the eighth century, although the prototypes on which they are based are no later than the reign of Heraclius (610-641), suggesting that the flow of coins may have come to an end in the early seventh century.

Eastern Central Asia was a (bronze) coin-producing society in the late-fourth to sixth centuries, in contrast to northern China itself, and so local people would have been familiar with the concept of the purchasing capabilities of money. Coins were minted in the Qiuci Kingdom (present-day Kucha) and are thought to have continued in circulation until the seventh or eighth century. Gold and silver coins were not represented in the local monetary system, although silver coins are plentiful in tombs. Over 1,000 are known from Gaochang, mainly from the Astana cemetery, and these are usually Sasanian

or Arab-Sasanian in origin.⁶⁴ Gold coins are very rare and, when they do occur, are Byzantine solidi or their imitations. The discovery of a large hoard of silver Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian coins and 13 gold bars at Wuqia, in present-day north-western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, might suggest that while silver coins were directly imported from the Sasanian Empire, imitation gold coins were locally produced, although some authentic gold coins must have existed, as master copies.⁶⁵

Conveniently, many high-status tombs in sixth-century China can be dated by inscription, which has permitted Lin Yin to demonstrate that solidi were deposited within the borders of China itself between 575 and 612.⁶⁶ The tomb of Tian Hong in Ningxia province is particularly instructive in this respect.⁶⁷ The grave itself dates to 575, and five Byzantine solidi were included in the burial

⁶⁴ J. K. Skaff, 'Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian Silver Coins from Turfan: their relationship to International Trade and Local economy', *Asia Major*, 11 (1998): 67-115.

⁶⁵ Wang Binghua, 'Gold and Silver discovered in Boma, Xinjiang', in *The Glory of the Silk Road: Art from Ancient China*, ed. Lin Jian (Dayton, Dayton Art Institute, 2003).

⁶⁶ Lin Yin, 'Western Turks'; Lin Yin, 'Sogdians and Imitations of Byzantine Gold Coin Unearthed in the Heartland of China', *Erān ud Anērān: Studies presented to Boris Ilich Marshak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (= Transoxiana Webfestschrift Series I), 2003, http://www.transoxiana.org/Erān/Articles/lin_ying.html [accessed 10 January 2007].

⁶⁷ Lin Yin, 'Solidi in China and Monetary Culture along the Silk Road', *Silk Road Newsletter*, 3.2 (2005): n.p. http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/vol3num2/4_ying.php [accessed 10 January 2007].

assemblage, ranging in date from 457 to 542. So, at least one of these coins travelled from Byzantium to China between 542 and 575, a relatively short window of 33 years, spanning the mid-century point.

The Sasanians, as is often argued, dominated northern routes to China in the sixth century and it is likely that several of these coins did enter China as a result of Sasanian mercantile activity. However, given that the Sasanians were at war with the Byzantines for much of this period, it is perhaps unlikely that they would have had a ready source of solidi and certainly Sasanian diplomatic envoys to the Northern Dynasties' imperial court at Luoyang were unlikely to have brought Byzantine coin with them.⁶⁸

If, during this narrow window of time, Byzantine coins were not distributed by the Sasanians, then how did they arrive in China? It is possible that some were brought via India, as Michael Alram has suggested.⁶⁹ However, for northern and north-western China we may find part of the answer in considering those Central Asian kingdoms which played an important role in promoting the fortunes of one Chinese dynasty over another during the middle decades of the sixth century. It is salient that several of the tombs Lin Yin lists as having Byzantine coins have been identified as the graves of persons of Sogdian origin, either high-status officials or merchants. One such tomb yielded three Byzantine imitation solidi, as well as an imitation Sogdian gold coin.⁷⁰ It is necessary, therefore, to understand the relationship between the Sogdians and the Chinese in more depth.

The Sogdians were an important group in fifth- to seventh-century north-west Chinese society, and long-distance contacts cannot be understood without taking their role into consideration.⁷¹ They facilitated trade along the northern branches of the Silk Road, interacting with local Chinese, and by 439 Sogdian traders are recorded as being settled in several northern Chinese towns, their numbers continuing to expand throughout the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries.⁷² By the mid- to late-sixth century, some Sogdians had achieved high office in the northern Chinese imperial court, serving the Emperor particularly in the north-west: northern Shanxi and the Ganu corridor, the area linking China to the Silk Road.⁷³

The mid-sixth century document, 'Record of the Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang', records that there were in excess of 10,000 families from 'west of the Pamirs to Daqin [Byzantium]'.⁷⁴ Many of these families would have been of Sogdian origin.

It is possible that some Sogdians were in contact with the Byzantines as well.⁷⁵ During the fifth century, Syriac Christian literature started to be translated into the local Sogdian language, suggesting that there was a sizable group of Christians in Sogdiana by this date.⁷⁶ This is not necessarily evidence for Byzantines, for these were likely to have been Nestorian congregations, anathematised by the Constantinopolitan Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and, in any case, strongly represented in the Persian, as well as the Byzantine, Empires.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the 'Christianisation' of elements of Sogdian society brought them into closer cultural alignment with the Byzantine world, and may have created an implicit taste for late antique-style objects which facilitated relations with their western neighbours – both Persian and Byzantine.

Sogdiana was subject to demographic and political change, as well as religious change, which placed it in a vital position between east and west. By the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century, Turkic groups had populated much of the region. Like the Alans, who inhabited part of the steppe to the north-west, the Sogdians oscillated in their political loyalties.⁷⁸ Although initially allied with Persia, during the second half of the sixth century they were rebuffed by the Persians and, as a consequence, made deliberate contact with the Byzantine court instead. The late sixth-century Byzantine writer, Menander the Guardsman, describes this encounter of 568/9, writing, 'Maniakh, the leader of the Sogdians, took this opportunity and advised Sizabul

Watt (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), pp. 13–45, 36. Zhang Qingjie, 'New Archaeological and Art Discoveries from the Han to the Tang period in Shanxi Province', *Orientalia*, 34 (2002): 54–60.

⁷⁴ Watt, 'Art and History in China', p. 29.

⁷⁵ First explored by K. Harnstad, 'Les relations de Byzance entre la Transcaucasie au Ve et Vie siècles', *Byzantion*, 25–27 (1955–57): 421–56.

⁷⁶ N. Sims-Williams, 'The Sogdian Merchants in China and India', in *Cina e Iran: Da Alessandro Magno alla dinastia Tang*, ed. A. Cadonna and L. Lanciotti (Florence, Olschki, 1996), pp. 45–67.

⁷⁷ The famous stele, from Chang'an (Xi'an), describes the coming of (Nestorian) Christianity, claiming that Aluoben brought the 'True Scriptures' to Changan in 635. The stele itself dates to 781. S. H. Moffet, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1, Beginnings to 1500* (New York, 1992); N. Standaert (ed.), *Handbook of Christianity in China, Vol. One: 635–1800* (Leiden, Brill, 2001), pp. 1–4, 12–15. For recent scholarship on Nestorian monuments in China, see I. Gardner, S. Lieu and K. Parry (eds.), *From Palmyra to Zayton, Epigraphy and Iconography* (= *Silk Road Studies* X) (Turnhout, Brepols, 2005), pp. 189–278.

⁷⁸ For the Alans, see Agustí Alemany, 'Sixth Century Alani: between Byzantium, Sasanian Iran and the Turkic World', *Ērān ud Anērān: Studies presented to Boris Ilich Marshak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (= *Transoxiana Webfestschrift Series I*), 2003, <http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/alemany.pdf> [accessed 10 January 2007]; Agustí Alemany, *Sources on the Alans* (Leiden, Brill, 2000), pp. 79–111.

⁶⁸ The court was moved from Datong (Pingcheng) in 493.

⁶⁹ Alram, 'Coins and the Silk Road', p. 285, n. 3.

⁷⁰ Lin Yin, 'Sogdians and Imitations of Byzantine Gold Coin'.

⁷¹ B. I. Marshak and N. N. Negmatov, 'Sogdiana', in *History of Civilisations of Central Asia, vol. 3, The Crossroads of Civilisations, AD 250 to 750*, ed. B. A. Litvinsky (Paris, Unesco Publishing, 1996), 233–80.

⁷² *Nomads, Traders and Holy Men along China's Silk Road: Papers presented at the Asia Society, New York, November 9–10, 2001*, eds. A. J. Juliano and J. A. Lerner (= *Silk Road Studies*, 7) (Turnhout, Brepols, 2002). É. de la Vaissière, 'The Rise of Sogdian Merchants and the role of the Huns: the historical importance of the Sogdian Ancient Letters', in *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, ed. S. Whitfield (London, The British Library, 2004), pp. 19–23, 23.

⁷³ J. C. Y. Watt, 'Art and History in China from the Third to the Eighth Century', in *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 AD* ed. J. C. Y.

[the leader of the Western Turkic khanate] that it would be better for the Turks to cultivate the friendship of the Romans and send their raw silk for sale to them because they made more use of it than other people. Maniakhs said that he himself was very willing to go along with envoys from the Turks, and in this way the Romans and the Turks would become friends. Sizabul consented to this proposal and sent Maniakhs and some others as envoys to the Roman Emperor carrying greetings, a valuable gift of raw silk and a letter'.⁷⁹

While the Sogdians were concerned to sell silk and other commodities to the Byzantines, the Byzantine government's primary concern was to make a strategic alliance against the Persians. When Maniakhs returned to Sogdiana in 569 the Byzantine diplomat, Zemarchus (Symmachus), travelled with him, meeting with the khan three times, before travelling back to Byzantium in 571/2.⁸⁰ He took with him diplomatic gifts from the emperor, Justin II, and it is likely that these included large quantities of Byzantine solidi, as was customary in Early Byzantine diplomacy. It is not known whether he took gold and silver vessels with him, although if he had he would have found that they were not the only silverware in the khan's collection. Apparently, the khan showed the envoy an impressive array of vessels, 'golden urns, water-sprinklers and also golden pitchers... many silver objects, dishes and bowls, and a large number of statues of animals, also of silver'.⁸¹ The text gives no suggestion that Zemarchus's party recognised these as Byzantine in origin, so presumably they were Sasanian or Central Asian in origin.

As the Persian threat increased, the Byzantines again renewed their relations with the Sogdians. In 571, another embassy from the western Turkic kingdom travelled to Constantinople and, in 576, Byzantine diplomats, led by the envoy Valentinus, set out for Sogdiana. In an act that testifies to the regularity of contacts between the two polities, Valentinus was accompanied by 106 'Turks', then resident in Constantinople, probably as merchants. The Sogdian diplomatic service was kept busy: within a generation the Chinese also engaged in intensified diplomatic activity with the Sogdians, sending Pei Ju, a Sui Dynasty official there in 605.⁸²

Diplomatic gifts from the Byzantines to the Sogdians may have increased in number in the early seventh century as the military situation worsened and as the Sogdians ('Western Turks') aided the Byzantines in Transcaucasia. As Lin Yin has pointed out, the

Byzantines perceived the Sogdians to be 'thirsty for gold' and, given that Heraclius gave 200,000 solidi to the Avars at this time, in return for their help against the Persians, it is likely that the Sogdians were given analogous gifts.⁸³

No coin hoards have been found in Sogdiana itself, and so (while allowing for the possibility of them having been melted down) it is credible that the coins were subject to secondary distribution; they may have been offered as gifts to superiors, or as bribes to perceived inferiors. That Byzantine coins were brought into China by the Sogdians themselves is, of course, suggested by the finds of solidi in the graves of Sogdians (or people of Sogdian descent) living within China. Contact with, or at least knowledge of, Byzantium is suggested by the discovery, in 1999, of a carved stone sarcophagus in Taiyuan (Shanxi province), identified as the tomb of Yu Hong, an official of Sogdian origin, and his wife.⁸⁴ Yu Hong's interment in the sarcophagus took place in 592. The sarcophagus comprises nine main carved panels, four of which have been identified by Boris Marshak and James Watt as representing 'foreign' polities or peoples: India, Arabia, Iran (or Sogdiana) and the Byzantine Empire.⁸⁵ That the latter should be represented on such a tomb (incidentally, next to Iran) might indicate that it occupied a key position in the world-view of the dead man and his community.

Taiyuan and its vicinity have yielded at least two other archaeological finds of immense interest to scholars of sixth-century East-West relations, although neither of them are themselves western in production. An agate and amber necklace, together with a carved amber plaque, from the tomb of Kudi Huiluo and his wives, has an uncertain origin, but it has been suggested that the amber may derive from the Baltic region. If this is the case, it would have been imported in 'raw' form, since the motif on the plaque is distinctly Northern Qi.⁸⁶ Perhaps more important is a glazed earthenware flask from Taiyuan, dated to the Northern Qi dynasty (550-577), bears a depiction of a lion tamer flanked by two lions.⁸⁷ The motif is close enough to the popular early Christian image of Daniel in the Lions' Den, which also appeared on pottery flasks in this period, to warrant comment. In composition, it is also analogous to the depictions of St Menas flanked by two camels, which appear on fifth- to seventh-century Menas flasks.⁸⁸ It is possible that the flask is based on a Byzantine design which was either

⁷⁹ R. C. Blockley (ed. and trans.), *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1985), frag. 10.1, p. 115. However, compare Theophanes, who claims that Justin II was able to show silk to the Turkic envoys: Harry Turtledove (1982) (ed. and trans.), *The chronicle of Theophanes: an English translation of anni mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813)* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), frag. 3.

⁸⁰ *History of Menander the Guardsman*, frag. 10.3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Xu Jia-ling.

⁸³ Lin Yin, 'Western Turks'.

⁸⁴ Shaanxi Archaeological Institute et al., 'Taiyuan Suidai Yu Hong mu qingli jianbao', *Wenwu [Cultural Relics]*, 1 (2001): 27-52. See also A. L. Juliano, 'Chinese Pictorial Space at the Cultural Crossroads', *Ērān ud Anērān: Studies presented to Boris Ilich Marshak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (= Transoxiana Webfestschrift Series I), 2003, <http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/juliano.html> [accessed 10 January 2007].

⁸⁵ B. Marshak and J. C. Y. Watt, 'Sarcophagus', in *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, ed. J. C. Y. Watt (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), pp. 276-81.

⁸⁶ Watt, *China: Dawn of a Golden Age*, pp. 249-50, fig. 147.

⁸⁷ Watt, *China: Dawn of a Golden Age*, p. 250, fig. 148.

⁸⁸ Bangert, this volume.



Fig. 2. Panel from Sui dynasty sarcophagus, said to depict the Byzantine Empire. Note vine-scroll and figures trampling grapes in a vineyard (After Shaanxi Archaeological Institute, 2001).

consciously adapted to specifically Chinese cultural norms or was misinterpreted as a circus motif.

It is possible, although perhaps unlikely, that the Sogdians were even given a Byzantine dog as part of their dealings with 'the west', for a curious note in a Tang dynasty biography (*cefu yuangui*) records that in 619 representatives of the Gaochang kingdom, possibly accompanied by Sogdians, presented two 'Fu-lin' (a term usually referring to Byzantine provenance) dogs to the Chinese emperor.⁸⁹ The dogs were said to be able to run as fast as a horse while holding a candle in their mouth. Even if the dogs were only *said* to be of Byzantine origin, it could suggest a desire on the part of the Sogdians and other Central Asian political authorities to appear to be in close contact with the Byzantine Empire, at least in the eyes of the Chinese Emperor. This might be expected to deter any potential mistreatment by the Chinese imperial government, which was expressing an interest in absorbing the eastern Central Asian kingdoms and in 630 was successful in doing so.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Lin Yin, 'Western Turks'.

⁹⁰ The eastern Turkic kingdom was revived in the 680s, before being defeated in 744 by the Uighurs, one of their subject peoples.

It is more likely that coins, not dogs, were exchanged in the course of Chinese – Sogdian / Central Asian diplomacy and, given the prestige of gold, solidi were probably amongst these. These might explain the presence of solidi in Chinese royal graves, and permit those in the graves of high officials to be interpreted as secondary gift-giving.

Coin was not the only material expression of prestige and wealth, of course; neither was coin the only means of transacting an economic exchange. Recent research on the economy of eastern Central Asia has illuminated the extent to which coins were supplemented by other forms of exchange.⁹¹ Contracts from the Turfan region concerning sales of large items such as houses, land and renting of property refer to prices in bolts of silk between the fourth and early sixth centuries, but in silver coin from the mid-sixth century onwards. By the early seventh century, for example, five silver Sasanian coins could apparently buy a house; two Byzantine gold coins a slave. Helen Wang describes this as a 'major change' in the use of currency in Central Asia and observes that there appears to have been a hierarchy of currency, with silver (and presumably gold) preferred for expensive transactions, especially those involving labour. Before the mid-sixth century the concept of coinage was much weaker, with gold and silver measured by weight, rather than by units (coins). Moreover, of the 40-plus tomb inventories from the Turfan region, those dated between 567 and 592 do not mention gold and silver at all. Thereafter, gold is mentioned in the tomb inventories, although it remains absent from the contracts themselves. As Wang suggests, 'the knowledge of, and desire for, gold and silver coins preceded and remained far greater than their general availability'.⁹² In such an environment, Byzantine coins or their imitations would have been sought-after objects, serving an important role in emerging Central Asian socio-economic complexity.

Wang has also observed that while Sasanian coins in eastern Central Asia are predominantly fourth century and late-sixth and early-seventh century in date, Sasanian coins in central China are mainly fifth and sixth century in date. She suggests that this reflects the use of different routes from the Sasanian Empire to the East. The eastern Central Asian coins may have been brought via the northern Silk Route to Qiuchi and Gaochang, whilst the central Chinese coins may have been brought by a more southerly route, via Bactria-Wakhan across the Pamirs-Tashkurgan-Yarkand-Khotan-Kroraina, then eastwards either via Dunhuang, or through the Tsaidam Basin to the Koko Nor lake, then via Lanzhou to central China.⁹³

⁹¹ Evgeniy Zeimal, 'The circulation of coins in Central Asia during the Early Medieval period (Fifth to Eighth centuries AD)', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 8 (1994): 245-67; Wang, 'How much for a camel?', pp. 24-33; H. Wang, *Money on the Silk Road: the evidence from Eastern Central Asia to AD 800* (London, British Museum Press, 2004).

⁹² Wang, 'How much for a camel?', p. 32; Wang, *Money on the Silk Road*.

⁹³ Wang, 'How much for a camel?', p. 29.

This is likely to reflect the political vicissitudes of the Central Plains in the fifth-sixth centuries and the need to move to a more southerly route. Caution must be exercised, however, and the mere date of a coin's minting does not indicate its date of deposition: witness the solidus of Theodosius II (408-450) from the tomb of Li Xizong (576), at Zanzhuangxian (Hebei province).⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the lack of fifth and sixth-century Sasanian coins in eastern Central Asia might suggest a lack of Sasanian activity here during those years, and would be consistent with the suggestion earlier in this paper that a plentiful supply of Byzantine coins was unlikely to have been available to Sasanian merchants and envoys during the mid-sixth century. If so, this suggests that the Byzantine coins, along with the Sasanian silverware and other Western objects, were less likely to have been mediated through Sasanian activity, than through Sogdian or even Byzantine activity.

It is still unclear whether direct contacts were made between the Byzantines and the Chinese during the mid-sixth century, whether diplomatic or mercantile or even religious. The mode and pathway of transmission of 'Byzantine' objects is uncertain, while the lack of jade and porcelain on Byzantine (or other 'western') sites argues against direct contacts.⁹⁵ However, what does seem clear is that after the re-unification of China under the Sui dynasty in 589 and the increase of Chinese influence in Central Asia, the Chinese made diplomatic overtures to the Byzantines.⁹⁶ The negotiations probably involved gifts of coin on the part of the Byzantines and gifts of silk on the part of the Chinese. These diplomatic activities were to peak in the Tang dynasty, perhaps in response to the Arab incursions into former-Persian territory and Central Asia, before falling away again thereafter.

The presence of fifth- and sixth-century Byzantine coins at the Astana cemetery in Gaochang, and elsewhere in the western Hexi corridor and north-west China could, therefore, represent diplomatic gifts from subordinate Central Asian elites to the rulers of newly-emerging Chinese kingdoms which, while divergent, were

sufficiently organised to demand 'tribute missions'.⁹⁷ It is possible, in addition, that some of the coins found on Chinese sites represent a small component of monies given as part of the Byzantine government's negotiations with the Sogdians between 568 and 576. Given that most of the Early Byzantine coins in China date from the reign of Justinian I and earlier, yet were not deposited until after 575, this might just be the case.

Comparing Britain and China in the sixth century

Simplistic comparisons between the Byzantine-British and the Byzantine-Chinese relationship on the basis of the Byzantine numismatic evidence are impossible. Not only is the archaeology of Britain very different from the archaeology of China, but archaeological agenda vary widely, and the organisation of field archaeology is very different; this has implications, of course, for the way that the evidence is treated.⁹⁸ For example, the energies channelled since the 1930s into identifying imported pottery in Britain have no parallel in the Chinese archaeological community. While the evidence for imports into fifth- to seventh-century Britain has been greeted with enthusiasm because of its potential diagnostic value, in China the evidence for imports has not received such a positive reception. For a long time, some areas of Chinese archaeology were resistant to the idea of 'foreign intervention', and the large-scale archaeological campaigns undertaken in the Cultural Revolution years tended to emphasise Chinese indigenous achievements instead.⁹⁹ It is perhaps salient, in respect of this point, that two of the key sites for 'foreign' influence, the Astana and Karakhoja cemeteries in the Turfan region, were initially dug between 1966 and 1969.¹⁰⁰ One wonders whether some of the evidence from those excavations would have been interpreted differently had the sites been dug at a later date.

In the last decade, perhaps the greatest challenge of Chinese archaeology has been trying to keep pace with urban development, which continues to take place on a

⁹⁴ M. Alam, 'Coins and the Silk Road', in *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia Provinces, 4th - 7th century*, eds. A. L. Juliano and J. A. Lerner (New York, Harry Abrams, 2001), pp. 271-91, 284.

⁹⁵ After the end of the Han period, jade became more available to wealthy elites, and was no longer solely the preserve of the aristocracy. Given that it was imported from the Xinjiang region in western China, one might expect it to appear on 'Western' sites if direct and consistent exchange had taken place. White porcelain vessels were first produced in the period of the Northern Qi dynasty (550-577), and are found in a high-status tomb dated to 575 in Anyang, Henan Province. Li Li, *China's Cultural Relics* (Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2004), pp. 25-6, 124.

⁹⁶ D. A. Graff, 'Strategy and Contingency in the Tang defeat of the Eastern Turks, 629-630', in N. di Cosmo (ed.), *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500-1800)* (Leiden, Brill, 2002), pp. 33-71; S. Adshad, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2004); Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and trade in the Chinese world, 589-1276*, (Leiden, Brill, 2005).

⁹⁷ Alam, 'Coins and the Silk Road'.

⁹⁸ K. C. Chang, 'Archaeology in China since 1949', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 36 (1977): 623-46 (esp. 624-5); J. Olsen, 'The Practice of Archaeology in China Today', *Antiquity*, 61 (1987): 282-90; Enzheng Tong, 'Thirty Years of Chinese archaeology (1949-1979)', in *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*, eds. P. L. Kohl and C. Fawcett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 177-97.

⁹⁹ Chang, p. 634: 'Chinese archaeologists tend to emphasize the indigenous nature of Chinese civilization and sometimes regard the external-origin advocates as cultural imperialists. Such indigenous views are in their turn dismissed by Western writers as Chinese ethnocentrism and chauvinism'. Cheng Te-K'un, 'Archaeology in Communist China', *The China Quarterly*, 23 (1965): 67-77; L. von Falkenhausen, 'On the historiographical orientation of Chinese archaeology', *Antiquity*, 67 (1993): 839-849; L. von Falkenhausen, 'The regionalist paradigm in Chinese archaeology', in *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*, eds. P. L. Kohl and C. Fawcett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 198-217.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, *New Archaeological Finds in China: Discoveries during the Cultural Revolution* (Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1974), p. 3.

vast scale. Comparisons with even the 'rescue' period of British archaeology are unsatisfactory, for the rate of the destruction of the Chinese archaeological resource is unprecedented.¹⁰¹ One wonders what percentage of the overall assemblage of Byzantine coins is represented by the sample actually identified. Chinese archaeology is a growth discipline and there are vast quantities of archaeological work being undertaken in present-day China; yet the pressure under which excavators (and those involved in post-excavation) labour is phenomenal.¹⁰² In such conditions, one would hardly expect a few sherds of unglazed pottery to be identified as 'Byzantine' by an excavator dealing with several thousand sherds of pottery, let alone other finds and features. We must, therefore, for methodological reasons, hesitate before declaring a definitive lack of Byzantine pottery on Chinese settlement sites.

Present-day archaeological practices aside, the respective sixth-century geopolitical situations in China and in Britain were also different. Britain covered an extremely small landmass by comparison with China, which then, as now, stretched from India in the south to Mongolia in the north, from the Pacific in the east to Afghanistan and the Central Asian kingdoms in the west. Britain, much of which had formally been part of the Roman Empire, was well-known to the imperial government in Constantinople and its adjuncts in Ravenna and Rome, although its precise relationship with the Empire after 410 is a matter of some debate. China, by contrast, had always existed beyond the periphery of the Roman Empire, and there has never been any suggestion that the Romans developed a 'foreign policy' towards it. China had been a highly developed state society for far longer than the Roman Empire, with complex bureaucracies, systems of warfare, literacy and monumentality.¹⁰³ In many ways, the contrast with Britain could not be stronger.

However, there are some points of similarity. The sixth century witnessed population movement and cultural change in both China and Britain. James Watt writes, 'The situation with regard to the ethnic groups in China in the third to early sixth century is not unlike that in Europe in the early Middle Ages, and many approaches employed in recent scholarship relating to ethnicity in early medieval Europe can also be applied to China'.¹⁰⁴

At mid-century point both northern China and Britain were experiencing severe political disorder. In China, like Britain, the sixth century witnessed political unrest and war.¹⁰⁵ After the collapse of the Han dynasty in the early third century, a succession of dynasties and kingdoms vied for power. The country was eventually divided into two main political sectors, one each side of the Yangtze River (i.e. 'Northern-Southern dynasties' period). Successive 'Northern Dynasties' ruled between 386 and 589: the Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, Northern Qi, Western Wei and Northern Zhou. However, in 557, northern China was plunged into a form of intermittent civil war which lasted until 589 when the Sui dynasty came to power. The south, incidentally, was successively ruled by the 'Southern Dynasties' of the Song, Qi, Liang and Chen, all with Nanjing as capital, before partially being absorbed into the Sui kingdom. China was largely re-unified under the T'ang dynasty in 618.

For Britain, the mid-sixth century situation is described vividly by Gildas in his well-known *De Excidio Britanniae*.¹⁰⁶ Gildas's evocation of a Britain torn apart by warring factions, and by the encroachment of the Saxons, cannot be taken as historical 'fact', of course, but archaeologists have, nonetheless, not dismissed Gildas when interpreting the archaeology of this period, not least in the way that they have tended to focus on *either* the 'British' evidence *or* the 'Anglo-Saxon' evidence and studies have constructed sixth-century life in terms of a series of binary oppositions – British and Anglo-Saxon; Christian and pagan; inhumations and cremations; unfurnished graves and furnished graves.¹⁰⁷ Culturally, Britain and China were following different trajectories. While the 'Britons' shared a Christian religious identity and knowledge of the Latin language with the Byzantines, the Chinese entered into these exchanges with a very different set of religious beliefs, languages, and norms and expectations as their cultural framework.¹⁰⁸ Ironically, one might argue that the relationship between the Byzantines and the Anglo-Saxon areas of Britain was more analogous to the Byzantine-Chinese relationship than either the Byzantine-Western British relationship or the Western British-Anglo-Saxon relationship.

The same point could be made in relation to methodological differences. The archaeology of sixth-century China differs greatly, in many aspects, from the archaeology of sixth-century Western Britain. Most saliently, while cemetery evidence dominates the archaeology of China, Western British graves of this

¹⁰¹ Chan Wai-Yin, Ma Shu-Yun, 'Heritage preservation and sustainability of China's development', *Sustainable Development*, 12 (2003): 15-31.

¹⁰² The Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is the best starting point for news about recent Chinese excavations: <http://www.kaogu.cn/> and also provides links to the abstracts of Chinese archaeological journals, including *Kaogu* (Archaeology), *Kaoguxuebao* (Acta Archaeologica Sinica), *Kaoguxuejikan* (Archaeology Periodicals) and *Wenwu* (Cultural Relics).

¹⁰³ D. Twitchett, M. Loewe and J. K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 1., The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.-A.D.220* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁰⁴ Watt, 'Art and History in China', p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Watt, 'Art and History in China', p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and other documents*.

¹⁰⁷ E.g. S. Lucy and A. Reynolds (eds.), *Burial in early medieval England and Wales* (London, Society for Medieval Archaeology, 2002).

¹⁰⁸ Paul Demiéville, 'Philosophy and Religion from Han to Sui', in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 1., The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.-A.D.220*, eds. D. Twitchett, M. Loewe and J. K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 808-72.

period are devoid of grave-goods.¹⁰⁹ For many more years, therefore, than their Chinese counterparts, archaeologists here have been forced to focus on settlement excavation and analysis and have, as a by-product, refined techniques and methodologies to a high level.¹¹⁰

By contrast, archaeologists of the Anglo-Saxon areas of sixth-century Britain have a wealth of mortuary data available to them and have, until relatively recently, often been criticised for over-reliance on this body of evidence.¹¹¹ Yet whatever the shortcomings of Anglo-Saxon archaeology as a discipline, the archaeological record of sixth-century eastern Britain, like that of China in the same century, is well equipped to identify elite-level interaction, constructions of identity via high-status objects and the use of material culture in funerary display.¹¹² Methodologically, these are helpful similarities, which might permit a comparative archaeological study of these two regions experiencing rapid social and political consolidation during the sixth century.

Conclusion

During the course of the sixth century, links between the Byzantine Empire and these two regions at the fringes of what was, to it, the 'known world', were initiated and exploited. While political considerations may have been instrumental in both sets of linkages, these were very

different relationships, despite the points of commonality in their archaeology. Byzantine interest in Britain, despite the enigmatic flourish at mid-century point that we see reflected in the ceramic evidence, appeared to have waned towards the end of the century. By contrast, contacts between the Byzantine Empire and China appear to have been strengthened towards 600, as the Chinese state achieved re-unification. The seventh-century evidence, outside the scope of this paper, suggests a more direct relationship between the two empires.¹¹³

For most of the sixth century, however, contacts between Byzantium and China were conducted indirectly, via intermediaries such as the Sogdians and other Central Asian peoples. Yet these relations, too, were principally political in content: the Byzantine government's initial motivation for approaching the Sogdians had been to acquire allies against the Sasanians. While down-the-line exchange, particularly that involving the Sasanians, may have played a part in taking Byzantine objects into China, the overall assemblage of Byzantine, or Byzantine-derived, objects found in China (glassware, and silver-gilt and gold vessels) is more consistent with high-level political contexts, for these are not the sort of goods exchanged as part of trading practices. It would seem that, for both Britain and China, inhabiting different part of the periphery of the Byzantine thought world, politically-driven relations may have been the catalyst for the creation of links with the Byzantine Empire.

¹⁰⁹ E. O'Brien, *Post-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England: burial practices reviewed* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 289, 1999).

¹¹⁰ Contrast this with the way that Chinese archaeological publications focus principally on material culture. E.g. Xiaoneng Yang (ed.), *The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from The People's Republic of China*, (Washington DC, National Gallery Washington, 1999), although see also Xiaoneng Yang (ed.), *New Perspectives on China's Past: Twentieth-Century Chinese Archaeology* (Yale University Press, 2004).

¹¹¹ S. Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death: Burial Rites in Early England* (Stroud, Sutton, 2000), chapter 1; S. Lucy and A. Reynolds, 'Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales: Past, Present and Future', in *Burial in early medieval England and Wales*, eds. S. Lucy and A. Reynolds (London, Society for Medieval Archaeology, 2002), pp. 1-23.

¹¹² H. Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Britain* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹³ Zhang Xu-Shan.