

5th Ex Oriente luxuria conference – Arras (France) – December 6-7, 2022

Diplomatic gifts and exotica

G. I. S.
Groupement
d'Intérêt
Scientifique

Méditerranée - Océan Indien



Meeting organised by Pierre Schneider (University of Artois) and Jean Trinquier (École normale supérieure), in connection with the GIS (research network) "Méditerranée - Océan Indien".

The Ex Oriente luxuria programme

Since 2014, the *Ex oriente luxuria* programme, led by Jean Trinquier and Pierre Schneider, has been studying the history of East-West connections, exploring this subject from the angle of "histoire matérielle". In other words, we organise meetings focusing on the products and objects that circulated between the Indian Ocean area (including inner Asia) and the Mediterranean world over a long period of time (6th century BC - 6th century AD). Four conferences and workshops have already been held: 1) What is a luxury object - 2) Pearl and tortoise shell - 3) Pepper - 4) Ivory. Comparative approaches being a great benefit to the *Ex Oriente luxuria* programme, specialists from other societies and other periods are systematically invited to take part in our research work.

In 2020, the main partners of the *Ex oriente luxuria* project decided to form a research network (GIS) named "Mediterranean - Indian Ocean".

Ex oriente luxuria 5: the case of 'exotic' diplomatic gifts

This fifth meeting is not intended to focus on a particular material or object, but rather on a category: that of things that circulated between East and West as gifts, in contrast with things obtained by trade. Although there are various ways of offering objects and living creatures as presents, ancient documents provide consistent information about diplomatic gifts only. Therefore the latter, which have been a fundamental element of international relations over millenia, will be the subject of this meeting.

In the vast area stretching from the Mediterranean to the Far East which falls within the scope of our research work, some diplomatic gifts happened to be 'exotic', in the sense that they had some peculiarities due to their origin: a sovereign, who was offered products, things or animals that the territory he controlled did not produce, received what we term exotica. These precious and exceptional diplomatic gifts must be distinguished from other gifts.

Various examples of "diplomatic exotica" are mentioned in ancient documents— among which animals frequently figure: the silk received by the Parthians from Chinese ambassadors ; the Indian dogs offered to Alexander by the Indian prince Sopeithes; the precious materials (ivory, tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn) offered by the so-called envoys of An Tun to a Chinese emperor; the gifts sent by an Indian king named Poros to Augustus (a man without arms, snakes, a bird, a freshwater turtle...) etc.

The *Ex oriente luxuria 5* conference aims at examining the case of 'exotic' diplomatic gifts which circulated in the connected space stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (and to China) in antiquity. Our main objective is to gather and reflect on new or neglected documentary material, but we also encourage reassessing well-known sources. We also invite colleagues specialising in other societies and other periods, particularly medieval and modern, to submit proposals and enhance our research work in ancient history.

Some suggestions for contributors

Reflecting the notion of *exotica*:

- How to define *exotica*, given that it is not an ancient concept? What is the relevance of this concept?
- How important were *exotica* among diplomatic gifts?
- Should we consider means of subsistence, gifts from merchants to rulers, tributes etc. as diplomatic *exotica*?
- How do *exotica* differ from other diplomatic gifts? Are they intended to express otherness? Do they have a particular meaning or prestige?
- Concerning animals or plants, how specific are they when compared to objects? Are they more exotic, or more wonderful?

Production, circulation and distribution:

- By what means and through what channels could political powers obtain the *exotica* they offered? Were they obtained from peripheral regions? What kind of relationships may have resulted from this process ?
- Regarding the problem of value: to what extent diplomatic gifts were at the same time goods available on the markets? Were they prestige objects without market value?
- In the case of animals and plants: how were they moved from one place to another (transport, caring, conservation, transplantation, etc.)?
- What was the future of diplomatic *exotica*? Public exhibition, consecration in sanctuaries, redistribution, abandonment, sale ...?

Diplomatic language :

- Was the language of exotic gifts well understood by both parties? How important were the risks of misunderstanding?
- To what extent studying this kind of diplomatic gifts may contribute to improving our knowledge of international relations?
- What was the role of *exotica* in the political, diplomatic and fiscal practices of empires?

Diplomatic *exotica*, science and culture

- To what extent did *exotica* improve scientific knowledge?
- To what extent were visual cultures impacted by this phenomenon?

Transport and accommodation costs will be covered by the organisers.

Please submit your proposal to :

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