



COMMERCE I. IN THE PREHISTORIC PERIOD

COMMERCE

i. In the prehistoric period

In this early period “commerce” is best defined as the movement or exchange of material or goods between cultures within the present boundaries of Persia and those in other regions. From as early as the 3rd millennium b.c.e. there is evidence of the movement of people and goods, primarily to and from Mesopotamia, either through Elam or farther north across the Zagros mountains. Although some of this evidence is archeological, most of it is in written sources from Elam and Mesopotamia; except for Elam, there was no local writing in Iran before the Achaemenid period. Surviving texts from the 3rd to the 1st millennia b.c.e record items and materials sought by Mesopotamians as well as trading episodes, incursions, and conquests, including details of booty taken by both sides. The only evidence of trade contact with the Indian subcontinent in these early years is a single weight and perhaps one or two pieces of sculpture recovered at Susa (Amiet, pp. 143-44).

Aside from pottery, weapons, seals, and other archeological evidence for the movement of goods over the millennia, at least three major products were of continuous importance in Near Eastern economy and exchange:



chlorite vessels, lapis lazuli, and tin. All seem to have originated in the east, and all were essential to political centers west of the Zagros. Iran was thus an important stage in the transit trade. The patterns of movement of these three products reveal the existence of a major institutionalized long-distance trade over a long period of time. The active role of Iran in this distribution network was a crucial factor in the growth and prosperity of urban centers, especially in Elam and points east.

Neolithic to 3rd millennium b.c.e. Already in the Neolithic period there is evidence of human movement and exchange, both within the country and with neighboring parts of Mesopotamia. Pottery types and figurines are similar to those known from Mesopotamia; in particular, pottery designs from the archeologically defined Hajji Firuz (Ḥājī Fīrūz) culture in western Iran (late 7th-6th millennia b.c.e.) are related to those of the Ḥassūna-Sāmarrā culture of northern Mesopotamia (see [ceramics ii](#)). Those of the Pisdali (Pers. Pīsdālī) culture (late 5th-4th millennia b.c.e.) in the basin of Lake Urmia are related to those of the Ubaid (‘Obayd) culture in northern Mesopotamia (see [ceramics iv](#)).

During the Uruk period (4th millennium b.c.e.) Susa in present-day Kūzestān, southwestern Persia, was under strong political and economic influence from Mesopotamia (Carter and Stolper, pp. 115ff.). Farther north, in Kurdistan, numerical texts, glyptic, and pottery of Uruk-Susa forms and style have been recovered from a separate enclosed area of the period V level at the site of Godin (Gowdīn; Weiss and Young; Carter and Stolper, pp. 130-31), apparently an intrusive phenomenon. These finds have been interpreted as evidence for the presence of a Susa-dominated trading post on a route connecting points east and north with Susa and probably also with Mesopotamia. The remains were not sufficient to determine what goods were traded, however.

By the early 3rd millennium Lorestān, in the Zagros, began to show evidence of trade with Mesopotamia and Susa and perhaps also population movements, perhaps nomadic migrations (Carter and Stolper, pp. 141-42). Hundreds of bronzes of Mesopotamian type, some bearing inscriptions dating to the 3rd and 2nd millennia b.c.e., have recently been plundered from sites unknown to archaeology. They have been attributed without documentation to Lorestān and adduced as evidence for exchange and interaction with Mesopotamia. The nature and intensity of the actual interaction have thus been strongly distorted (Muscarella, 1988, pp. 112ff.).



One manifestation of long-distance trade or exchange is documented from the 26-25th centuries b.c.e. and perhaps continued until some time later. Hundreds of chlorite objects, primarily vessels, carved with a common repertory of designs have been excavated at sites in central, south-central, and eastern Iran and along the Persian Gulf coast, as well as in Syria, Mesopotamia, Elam, Pakistan, and Central Asia (Kohl, 1979; Lamberg-Karlovsky, 1988). The distribution of this Intercultural Style indicates organized exchange and interrelations across a vast area. At Tepe Yaḥyā (Tappa Yaḥyā) in Sīstān there were a chlorite workshop and a local source for the stone; chemical analysis of objects reveals that some were also manufactured elsewhere. Whether the mechanism of distribution was long-distance trade or targeted exchange, south-western and eastern regions of Iran were actively involved in it, and the objects were also used in those areas.

From the late 4th millennium b.c.e. and continuing (with gaps) across the millennia lapis lazuli was much sought after in all areas of the Near East (Brown). Cylinder seals, jewelry, inlays, fittings, and the like were manufactured from it. Lapis objects are first attested archeologically from Mesopotamia and documented in texts—with references to an eastern derivation—from the mid-3rd millennium b.c.e. Until recent times the only known source of the mineral was in northeastern Afghanistan. It has recently been noted, however, that, according to ancient Near Eastern, Roman, and Islamic records, there were also several sources in western Persia; there is also a modern geological report for this region (Brown, pp. 7ff.), but it remains to be confirmed. At any rate, whether Afghanistan was the only source for lapis lazuli or the material also came from Īrān, Iranian politics played a role in distributing it to the west. Lapis lazuli was traded across Iran and also by sea from the Indus valley, paralleling the tin route (see below). Iran was probably also the source, through local production and trade, for other semiprecious stones recovered farther west, certainly including turquoise (Fleming, p. 84).

Bronze, an alloy of tin and copper, is first attested from the mid-3rd millennium b.c.e.; from that time on tin was manifestly a valued material in all Near Eastern cultures. Aside from a source of tin recently claimed for southern Turkey (Yener and Özbal), which surely was not exploited before the 18th century b.c.e., when there are references in Anatolian texts to tin transported from Aššur in Assyria (Belli), the only known Near Eastern source is Afghanistan (Stech and Pigott, pp. 44ff.). There are also reports, yet to be confirmed, of tin in eastern Iran. That Elam in the southwest played a



fundamental role in the transit trade of tin to the west is documented by texts from Mari on the Euphrates (Dossin). These texts reveal that tin came to Mari from Elam, passing through Elamite-controlled areas in Mesopotamia. Elam no doubt received the tin from farther east, either overland or by sea, via the Indus, from Afghanistan (Stech and Pigott, pp. 44ff., 57). The tin trade must have contributed enormously to the wealth of southern centers. Because gold is also found in Afghanistan, it is tempting to think that tin, lapis lazuli, and gold were traded collectively across Iran or reached Elam by sea in transit to destinations farther west (Stech and Pigott, pp. 45ff.). It should also be noted that Iran, which is rich in copper, may have shipped that metal west (Stech and Pigott, p. 42).

The 2nd and 1st millennia b.c.e. The 2nd millennium b.c.e. is not well documented archeologically outside Elam, from which there is evidence of continued exchange with Mesopotamia. In Azarbaijan two sites, Hasanlu (Ḥasanlū) and Dinkha (Denkā), located ca. 30 km apart, have yielded remains of a culture closely related to the Khabur (Kābūr) culture that extended across northern Mesopotamia and Syria between the 18th and 15th centuries b.c.e. (Kramer). Whether this limited geographical presence in the northwest represents a trade network with the west or the eastern boundary of population movement from the west is unclear, but either alternative provides documentation for exchange across the Zagros passes. In Assyrian texts of the 9th-7th centuries incursions into Iran and the taking of booty are recorded; the booty included horses (see [asb](#)), cattle (see *dāmdārī*), [camels](#), agricultural products, gold, silver, bronze, and lapis lazuli. These animals and animal products, as well as other materials, many of which ultimately originated in the east, had surely been traded to the west or taken there as booty in previous centuries; in fact, the Mesopotamian incursions recorded in the 3rd and 2nd millennia probably were aimed at obtaining them.

Evidence for the 1st millennium is much more plentiful. Exchange between Mesopotamia and northern and western Iran is vividly documented both from the aforementioned Assyrian texts and from archeological research. The best archeological evidence for exchange across the Zagros comes from Hasanlu. There the Bronze Age Khabur culture was replaced sometime in the 15th century by the people represented in levels V-IV. In the last years of the 9th century b.c.e. Hasanlu IV was destroyed. In the ruins thousands of artifacts were recovered; some of them are sumptuous and reflect great local wealth (Muscarella, 1988, pp. 15ff.). Many were of foreign manufacture (Muscarella,



1980, pp. 210ff.), including ivory carvings (as well as some motifs) from northern Syria and ivory carvings, wall tiles, seals, and possibly iron from Assyria. Writing was apparently not one of the foreign imports, however, for it is absent at the site. Some of the objects recovered—glass and stone vessels and stone maces—are of Mesopotamian origin and belong to the 2nd millennium b.c.e.; they were probably heirlooms, and it may be inferred that in this area exchange with the west continued after the termination of the Khabur culture (Marcus). The luxurious nature of the imported objects suggests that exchange of gifts was the mechanism for their distribution, which implies that some materials must have traveled in the opposite direction, perhaps those mentioned as booty in the Assyrian texts. There is no evidence, however, that Hasanlu was involved in either tin or lapis lazuli trade (Muscarella, 1980, pp. 215ff.).

Two Median sites of the late 8th-7th centuries b.c.e. have been excavated, Godin II and Nush-i Jan (Nūš-e Jān), but they have yielded very little evidence of exchange; the sites had both been abandoned, however, and perhaps the inhabitants took with them whatever foreign objects they owned. In any event, contemporary texts attest to the Assyrians' interest in obtaining Median goods. The latter are usually listed as tribute, but, as in Assyrian texts, all goods acquired are designated as booty; it is possible that some were exchanged by more peaceful means.

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