



COMMERCE III. IN THE PARTHIAN AND SASANIAN PERIODS

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iii. In the Parthian and Sasanian periods

The Parthian period. There are few contemporary sources on commerce in the Parthian period, and no archeological site on the Persian plateau has yielded finds that shed light on the subject. Some ostraca from Nisa (D'yakonov and Livshits) provide information about the production of wine there but little about its export. It is necessary therefore to rely on information from the caravan cities of Mesopotamia and Syria, which flourished in this period. The *Parthian Stations* by Isidore of Charax (Schoff, 1914) of the 1st century c.e. attests to the Parthians' active interest in trade, both by sea and overland. The main route described by Isidore began in central Mesopotamia, where Babylon, Seleucia, and Ctesiphon were located. A system of canals had linked the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at this point since the Seleucid, and perhaps even the Achaemenid, period; it was continually dredged and enlarged both for irrigation and for boat traffic. One of them, the famous King's Canal (see, e.g., *Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed I*, pp. 108a, 523; *Seder Nashim IV*, pp. 70b, 357; Ammianus Marcellinus, 24.2.7, 24.6.1), was enlarged and somewhat rerouted in the Parthian period and served as a major link in trade between



the west and the Persian plateau. From this region the main road passed near the present towns of Qaṣr-e Šīrīn, Kermānšāh, Hamadān, Tehran (Rhages/Ray), then east through the Caspian Gates to the Parthian capital, Hecatompylos (Kūmeš) near *Dāmḡān*. It continued through Khorasan to Herat, where it branched; the northern branch led to Marv and Sogdiana or northeast to Bactria, the southern branch to Qandahār and on to the Indian plain.

The most flourishing caravan cities were Charax (see *charax and characene*), Hatra in northern Mesopotamia, and Palmyra (Tadmor) in the Syrian desert (Rostovtzeff). The contemporary *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* provides additional detail on the sea trade with India (Schoff, 1912). Excavations at Palmyra and Hatra have revealed the important role of these centers as middlemen in the trade in spices, condiments, and precious stones between India and the Mediterranean (for inscriptions relating to commodities and tariffs, see Charlesworth, p. 49; Cantineau; Seyrig, pp. 252-66). Similar commercial prosperity characterized Dura Europus on the Euphrates (for inscriptions, see Welles).

The Silk Route from the east is the best-known trade route of the Parthian period (see *chinese-iranian relations i*; camel). Although the Chinese histories of the early and later Han dynasties furnish few details about commerce with the western lands, they do mention the “heavenly” or “blood-sweating” horses of Farḡāna, jade from Khotan, and exotic plants and minerals. The envoy Chang Ch’ien, who visited Bactria in the 2nd century b.c.e., related that the people of An-hsi (probably Aršak = Arsaces) made wine from grapes and used silver coins bearing the king’s portrait; he also reported that Parthian merchants traveled long distances in carts and boats (Dubs, *passim*). The Silk Route was, of course, the conduit for many commodities beside Chinese silk (see, e.g., Lukonin, pp. 738-44; Schippmann, pp. 90-92), which was highly prized by the Romans. China exported sal ammoniac and other salts, which were used for medicinal purposes, and imported spices. From Sogdian documents found at Dunhuang (see *ancient letters*) it may be inferred that Sogdian merchants were already dominant along the Silk Route in the Kushan and Parthian periods, as they continued to be in later centuries. Chinese silks, glass from Alexandria, and Indian carved ivories have all been excavated at the site of Begram (ancient Kapiśa) in Afghanistan (Hackin, 1939; *idem*, 1954), dating from the Kushan period, and there is little reason to doubt that Parthians also participated in such long-distance trade.

There were additional trade routes from the Persian plateau through Central



Asia to the Volga river and beyond, as well as to India and to the west (see Haussig, p. 11). These routes were probably already in use before the time of the Parthians (see i, ii, above). In the mid-2nd century c.e. Ptolemy reported information about Central Asia and China that he had received from merchants, especially the Macedonian Maes Titianus (Charlesworth, p. 103), who sent agents to Seres. He also mentioned a stone tower near the Pamirs, where merchants from all points of the compass met to exchange their wares. In the Byzantine empire furs from Russia were still known as “Parthian furs” (*Codex Justinianus*, Digest 39, 4.16; cf. Frye, 1972, pp. 266-67). There are no surviving ancient texts on the trade route to Russia, but early Islamic sources show that the Russian trade was not an innovation of that period but followed time-honored routes (see, e.g., Ebn Faẓlān)

Although trade flourished in the Parthian period, warfare between the Romans and Parthians disrupted it at times, and it was further hampered by many restrictions, including tariffs imposed by the Romans. The Romans craved such luxuries as silks and precious stones, and spices (used as preservatives), drugs, and condiments were also in demand. Most of these products came from India and Indonesia, rather than from Persia. The Parthian merchants acted as middle-men for caravan goods coming from the east, but the sea routes through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf were more important in this long-distance trade. The discovery of the monsoon winds in the 1st century c.e. had made it possible for traders to cross the Indian Ocean, rather than merely coasting along the shores, and direct trade between the Roman empire and India expanded greatly. The large profits from international trade, particularly spices from India and silk from China, made it worthwhile for merchants to invest in cargoes, despite dangers posed by shipwreck, fires, and pirates at sea or sandstorms, landslides, and brigands on land. The Parthian rulers, despite the weakness of their central power, actively promoted trade by maintaining the roads and providing for their security; they tried as well to maintain a monopoly on many items of trade, but they were not as successful as their Sasanian successors (see below). Nothing is known about the amounts of road taxes and tolls on merchants entering the towns, though Isidore does mention such levies. Nor is it known whether merchants received protection or other services in exchange for payment of these fees. Harbor fees were charged to seagoing merchants, who presumably did receive protection while in port.

The Sasanian period. The centralization of the Sasanian government brought



about changes in trade, including the loss of independence for the caravan cities of Syria and Mesopotamia. For some time trade actually declined, but at the end of the 3rd century a revival occurred. Commerce under the Sasanians was generally well organized with many legal facets. Nomadic invasions of Central Asia and eastern Persia in the latter part of the 4th century interrupted trade in the east to a considerable degree, but nonetheless the development of stable bureaucracies in both the Byzantine and Sasanian empires and the growing importance of trade between them and with the Far East contributed to prosperity in the time of Kōsrow I (531-79) and his successors (see [byzantine-iranian relations](#)). The Sogdians remained the most active merchants on the Silk Route. The Chinese imported Sogdian fruit and wine, metalwork (especially iron), armor, glassware, and entertainers of all kinds. Sasanian Persian artistic motifs and fashions, for example, confronted peacocks and winged horses on linen robes, were popular in Central Asia, China, and even Japan, though few surviving objects of this kind appear to have originated in Persia (see, e.g., Hayashi, pp. 69-71 figs. 72-74, pp. 73-75 figs. 76-79, p. 78 fig. 82, pp. 80-81 fig. 84, pp. 88-89 figs. 91-93, pp. 91-95 figs. 96-102).

In addition to clay [bullae](#) used for sealing goods, Syriac (Sachau), Middle Persian (Perikhanian; Macuch), and Talmudic (Neusner) sources provide information about the trade of the Sasanian empire. The discovery of Sasanian bullae in excavations at Mantai in Sri Lanka (unpublished) reflect the far-flung trade relations of Persian merchants. Africa, too, was part of Sasanian international trade, as coin finds attest. By Sasanian times the city of [Ctesiphon](#) had succeeded Babylon and Seleucia on the Tigris as the great Mesopotamian trading center. The main road still ran from Mesopotamia up onto the plateau, past the site of present-day Hamadān to Tehran (ancient Rhages/Ray), then skirting the desert through Khorasan to Central Asia or to India. The medieval *Tabula Peutingeriana* (Miller) and other maps and itineraries reveal the continuity of the same trade routes as in antiquity, and most are still in use today. There are also surviving Sasanian itineraries indicating the continuity of trade routes following the paths from Syria and northern Mesopotamia south to the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates that had been in use in the Parthian period. Along all the roads tolls and tariffs were levied on caravans, and Romans and Parthians, followed respectively by Byzantines and Sasanians, vied with each other for control of such trade. Despite frequent wars, fairs and markets flourished along the main routes, and the volume of trade continually increased.



From the Syriac law books and the Pahlavi *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* it can be inferred that under the Sasanians trade was largely in the hands of associations, companies, or families of merchants and that the laws and regulations governing the purchase and sale of products were complex and sophisticated. The rights of division and inheritance of property are spelled out in the law books (see [children iii](#)), of which only small parts have been preserved. Common possession of goods, land, and houses seems to have been more prevalent than single ownership. In Middle Persian the term *hambāyīh* “partnership” referred not only to trade relations but also to other partnerships, as for constructing irrigation canals and the like. Trade was conducted primarily on a monetary basis, rather than by barter. The Sasanian government struck coins with a high silver content (Bachrach and Gordus, p. 283; see [coins and coinage](#)). They were used as currency as far away as the Turfan oasis in [Chinese Turkestan](#) (Yoshida; Frye, 1993) and were also valued in trade up the Volga river into Russia and the Baltic Sea. This latter trade was continued on an even larger scale in the Islamic period (Frye, 1972). The Sasanian silver [dirham](#) (Mid. Pers. *drahm*, written ZWZN) became the model for other currencies in the east, especially those of the Hephthalites and the oasis of [Bukhara](#). It was debased for political purposes only on rare occasions during the long period of Sasanian rule: once during the reign of Šāpūr I (240-70) and again when Pērōz (459-84) had to pay a large indemnity to the Hephthalites.

Both high interest on loans and taxes restricted merchants in Persia during the Sasanian period, and their social standing was not high. In Central Asia, on the contrary, merchants were more highly esteemed, primarily because the oases depended on international trade for their prosperity. Under the Sasanians the landed nobility was at the top of the social ladder (see [class system iii](#)), but in areas like Bukhara and Samarkand the great merchants had a preponderant influence in all state matters. It is significant that written sources from Central Asia, both inscriptions and letters, are devoted mainly either to the construction of canals or reservoirs for water or to financial matters, whereas Sasanian inscriptions are either religious (or funerary) or imperial in content.

Toward the end of the Sasanian period competition with Byzantium for control of the trade with India became intense. [Bahrain](#) and Oman were under Sasanian control, and by 570 Yemen had become a Persian outpost. In the 6th century Cosmas Indicopleustes described the rivalry between Byzantine and Sasanian merchants on the west coast of India, and Procopius (*De Bello Persico*



1.20.9) claimed that the Persians dominated the Indian trade. There is no comparable information about trade to the north, but the large quantities of Sasanian and Central Asian silver coins, plates, and other objects found in Russia, especially when compared to the meager amounts of Byzantine silver, are evidence for Sasanian predominance in that direction as well. From the north the Persians imported furs, amber, honey, beeswax, and other articles (Frye, 1972).

Throughout history gold has fetched high prices in India, apparently the principal reason why gold objects, not to mention gold coins, were absent from Persia and Central Asia almost from the beginning of the common era. The Kushans in the east, in the first two centuries c.e., were the last dynasty on the Iranian plateau to issue substantial quantities of gold coins in antiquity; subsequent rulers issued mainly silver. This pattern does not mean that the gold mines in the Altai mountains, the Tien Shans, and elsewhere ceased to produce; rather, gold must have been attracted from Central Asia and Persia to the south.

Commerce within the Sasanian empire was also important. The main commodities were less often luxury objects and more often foodstuffs: grains, wine, dried fruits, cooking oils, and the like. Local and imported cloth and clothing, utensils, and pottery were also to be found in markets in various parts of the Sasanian empire and in Central Asia. In both areas pastoralists probably exchanged meat and dairy products, wool, and woven carpets for utensils, pots, and food produced by settled villagers. Laws and rules regulated internal transactions, just as they did international trade. Corporations and partnerships ensured deliveries of products to *bāzārs*, where family or larger businesses sold products or services. There is no information on whether there was a postal system like that under the Achaemenids, but couriers and caravans carried messages and goods in all directions. It can be assumed that both private and state organizations managed commerce within the borders of the empire, but the evidence is indirect, through the law books. The great expansion of trade in the Islamic period (see iv, below) owed a great deal to earlier Sasanian and Central Asian practices, but, as the boundaries of the Omayyad caliphate extended far beyond the confines of the Sasanian and Central Asian empires, trade and commerce reached previously unattained levels. The collapse of many internal boundaries, not to mention the Byzantine and Sasanian restrictions on trade, brought a remarkable prosperity, especially to the oasis states of Central Asia.



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