



COMMERCE IV. BEFORE THE MONGOL CONQUEST

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There were no centers of trade of supraregional importance in either Persia or Central Asia during the Middle Ages. In the Islamic world [Baghdad](#), the seat of the [caliphate](#), was the primary center for the exchange of goods, which arrived overland or by sea through the port of [Başra](#) at the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Such merchandise was not only destined for Iraq itself but was also redistributed to all parts of the Islamic world and beyond. Persia and Central Asia thus obtained a large proportion of their imports by way of Baghdad, and an effectively functioning Persian economy was inconceivable without the Baghdad trade (see e.g., [Dūrī](#), pp. 143-47).

The main sources of information on the eastern trade in the first centuries of the caliphate are the works of Muslim geographers writing in Arabic in the 10th century. Only in later centuries did geographical works of real importance appear in Persian. Many works in both Arabic and Persian were, however, based on information and descriptions provided by earlier authors, and it is therefore frequently unclear whether the later geographers were describing contemporary circumstances or merely repeating reports of earlier conditions. Trade in the 10th century is therefore better understood than trade



in later periods.

Routes. The major overland routes east of Baghdad were the old Persian Royal Road and the Silk Route (see ii, iii, above), which extended east through the Tarim basin as far as China. For centuries trade between China and the periphery of eastern Europe along the Silk Route and its western extensions had been dominated by Sogdians (cf. Şoğdaq, now Sudak, on the Crimean peninsula; Spuler, 1950, pp. 315-17; idem, *Iran*, p. 400; see [Central Asia iii](#)), but by the end of the Sasanian period Persians appear to have taken over trade within the empire (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 125). Jewish communities were active traders in many cities of Persia and Transoxania (see. e.g., Moqaddasī, pp. 366, 400; see [Bukhara vii](#)). Jewish merchants of southern France, known in the Muslim world as Rāhḡāniya, were prominent in international trade in the 9th century. They traveled over land or by sea to North Africa, southern Russia, the Middle East, Khorasan, Transoxania, India, and China and could speak Persian, Arabic, Greek, “Frankish,” Slavonic, and Spanish. From Europe they brought eunuchs, male and female slaves, brocade, skins of beaver and marten, and swords, and in India and China they bought musk, camphor, aloes, cinnamon, and similar products (Ebn Ḳordāḡbeh, pp. 153-55; Ebn al-Faqīh, pp. 270-71). From the most distant part of the Slavic lands came “Russian” merchants, who brought skins of beaver and black fox, as well as swords. They sailed down the river Don, then traveled to Ḳamlīj, the major city of the Khazars, and finally crossed the Caspian Sea to the ports of their choice. From there they carried their merchandise overland on camels to Baghdad, where eunuchs served them as interpreters. These traders professed Christianity and paid the poll tax (*jezya*; Ebn Ḳordāḡbeh, p. 154-55; Ebn al-Faqīh, pp. 270-71; Ebn Esfandiār, pp. 80-81). At the end of the 9th century a series of raids by the “Rus” on the Persian ports along the Caspian coast put an end to this direct commercial relationship. After that merchants had to procure commodities like felt, wax, and furs from the Khazars, who in turn obtained them from the land of the Slavs (Mas‘ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, pp. 218-21; Idem, *Tanbih*, pp. 62-63; Eṣṭakrī, pp. 221-22; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 293; Ebn Rosta, p. 141; Ebn Esfandiār, p. 266). The Arabs are not known to have played a significant commercial role in the eastern caliphate.

The Royal Road ran from Baghdad (located near the old capitals at [Babylon](#), and Seleucia-Ctesiphon) through the Zagros mountains by way of the Ḥolwān and Asadābād passes to Hamadān, finally joining the Silk Route at Ray (near present-day Tehran). The latter then continued by way of [Dāmḡān](#), Nišāpūr,



Marv-e Šāhījān, and Āmol, crossing the Amu Darya (Oxus) and passing through Bukhara, Samarkand, and in the Farḡāna valley Aḵsikaṭ and Ūzgand (Özgänd). At the eastern edge of this valley the Silk Route left Islamic territory and crossed the Tien Shan mountains, forking to skirt the Tarim basin on the north and south and reuniting again in the Turfan oasis. A major branch reached India via Bost, Ġazna, and Kabul in present-day Afghanistan (Eṣṭaḵrī, pp. 245, 280; Moḡaddasī, p. 304; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 450; *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 110-11). The Ghaznavid Seboktegīn constructed roads leading to the Indian frontier which his son and successor Maḥmūd, used for devastating raids on India (Bīrūnī, I, p. 22). K̄vārazm was the main center for trade with the northern peoples and eastern Europe (*Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 121; Barthold, p. 235).

The Silk Route was the focus for a dense network of roads, many of which were already very old, linking major urban trading centers (see, e.g., Kleiss, fig. 1 facing p. 302). The main trading routes were usually clearly marked, often with small piles of stones or wooden posts, which were particularly important after sandstorms or when the ground was covered with snow (see, e.g., Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, p. 8). Nor were extremes of climate the only difficulty encountered on the way. Especially during periods of political and economic chaos bridges were often in a state of disrepair, and it was therefore necessary to ford rivers when the water was low. Military campaigns and frequent brigandage were other dangers. The strength of the government generally determined the degree to which brigandage could be controlled.

The trade routes to the north are fairly well known, for they have been documented by coin finds, especially along the banks of major rivers like the Don and the Volga. Extraordinarily large numbers of Islamic coins were transported by these river routes to Russia, Poland, the Baltic coast, Scandinavia, northern central Europe, England, and even Iceland during the 9th and 10th centuries (see, e.g., Miles, p. 374). In fact, silver coins and jewelry from the east must have formed the basis of economic life in those areas, especially Sweden, where the major finds were on the islands of Gotland and Öland. Almost all the coins date from the 9th and 10th centuries, 90 percent of them minted by the Samanid dynasty in Khorasan (see [coins and coinage](#)); the latest examples are from the beginning of the 11th century, after which time Persian traffic to the north apparently ceased, probably owing to fighting among Russian princes around 970-80 and the division of Transoxania and northeastern Persia between the Ghaznavids in the south and the Īlek-ḳāns



(Qarakhanids) north of the Oxus after the fall of the Samanids in 389/999 (Rispling, pp. 105-10).

Normally a trading caravan was made up of **camels**, preceded by a donkey wearing a bell, which served to announce the caravan's approach. During the winter the road often had to be cleared by animals herded in front of the caravan. **Caravansaries** (also called *ayvān* and later *rebāṭ*) were established along the Persian portions of these roads at intervals of a day's journey, approximately 12-18 km, depending on the terrain. They provided lodging, food, and opportunities to engage in trade. In Transoxania alone there were said to be more than 10,000 *rebāṭs*, constructed and maintained by means of private funds (Eṣṭakrī, p. 290; Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 466-67). In Kūzestān buckets of water brought from long distances were placed at roadsides one league apart (Moqaddasī, p. 416). Beginning in about the 10th century the authorities undertook supervision of the construction, maintenance, and security of facilities like caravansaries and bridges, which provided important sources of income (see **caravan**). Many private patrons, including rulers, also built caravansaries and bridges. The system of pious foundations (*awqāf*) greatly favored the allocation of funds for such purposes, especially as the donors' heirs could be appointed to administer the foundations.

In comparison to traffic on the Silk Route and connecting roads, sea trade on the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea was of only moderate importance. **Ābaskūn** on the southern coast of the Caspian was the hub of local trade between points on the southern, eastern, and western coasts (*Ḥodūd al-ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 134). Unlike the Euphrates and the Tigris in the west and the Oxus and the Jaxartes in the northeast, the rivers on the Persian highlands were not large enough to serve as trade routes.

Baṣra was the main harbor for import and export trade. Nevertheless, in the early Islamic period the Persian Gulf port of Sīrāf played an important role in trade with India, Indonesia, and China, where Muslim merchants were mentioned as early as 141/758. It was the wealthiest town in Fārs, through which almost all the direct overseas export and import trade of Persia passed until the late 10th century, an entrepôt for the trade in pearls, camphor, ivory, aloes, spices, perfumes, and the like. Sīrāfi merchants, known for their great wealth, spent much of their lives on the sea. The city annually paid 325,000 dinars in taxes, including the tithe levied on ships (Eṣṭakrī, pp. 34, 138-39, 154; Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 49, 282, 290-91; Ebn al-Balkī, p. 171). The decline of Sīrāf followed an earthquake that reportedly lasted seven days and destroyed much



of the town in 366/977. The rise of the island of Qays (Kīš) in the 11th century and later of Hormoz as the main centers of Persian Gulf trade finally sealed the fate of Sīrāf as a trading center (Moqaddasī, pp. 426-27; Ebn al-Balkī, pp. 136-37; Schwarz, *Iran* I, pp. 61-64; Solaymān; Wilson, pp. 92-109; see also [Chinese-Iranian Relations](#), ii, vii). Persians sailed from these ports on the Persian Gulf to Dabīl in Sind and on to Masqaṭ and Aden, even reaching Egypt via the Red Sea; they also established settlements along the western coast of the Indian Ocean (Benjamin of Tudela, p. 65). The role of the Persian language was so important in this context that it represented a kind of lingua franca; even the language of Arab seafarers included many Persian expressions (e.g. *nākodā* “ship captain” and *dīdbān* “watchman”; see *Mémorial*, pp. 198, 207; Wehr, p. 305).

Organization. Trade between Persia and neighboring countries involved payment of the same kinds of duties that were in force all over the Islamic world. The fact that they were so familiar may account for the failure of most contemporary authors to mention them. Very little is known about the nature of trade contracts, as no documents have been preserved. Wealthy merchants and bankers used checks and letters of credit, and money transfers were known everywhere. The currency was based on the silver [dirham](#), which in normal times generally fluctuated between 1:12 and 1:15 in relation to the gold [dinar](#). The dinar, originally based on the Byzantine gold *solidus*, had been in use in Mesopotamia since about 900, but invoices were usually figured separately in both dirhams and dinars. Smaller denominations were minted in the form of the copper *fals*.

In the north Persian trade was organized on a slightly different basis. To the degree that it was in the hands of Muslims, it was also based on caravans and caravansaries, but the method of exchange was that of “silent barter,” in which goods to be sold or traded were deposited at certain well-known locations, where they were picked up by the “northern peoples,” who brought goods that were considered to be of equal value (Mas‘ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, II, p. 408).

Commodities traded. There is considerable information on the goods that were traded in the eastern part of the Islamic world (see, e.g., Spuler, *Iran*, pp. 400-08). Naturally enough most were produced for use in the immediate area. There is thus a significant distinction between goods reported by geographers to have been manufactured in a certain place and those that were actually traded from there. Furthermore, the volume of trade is not mentioned in the



sources and cannot be reliably deduced from present evidence. Trade goods from the eastern part of the caliphate fell into two categories—domestic products and foreign imports. Among domestic products were clothing and textiles of all kinds; Kūzestān and Fārs were important areas for textile production (Eṣṭakrī, pp. 92-93, 153; Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 256-57, 299; Moqaddasī, pp. 409, 411, 416-17, 420, 433-34, 442-43; *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, ed. Minorsky, pp. 126, 131; Ebn al-Balkī, pp. 145-46; cf. Serjeant, chap. 10). Khorasan, K̄vārazm, and the areas around Ray and Qom were also renowned for such products (Serjeant, chs. 9-10). Silk and silk products (see [abrīšam](#)), as well as [carpets vii](#), came from the cities along the Silk Route, for instance, Samarkand, Marv, and Nīšāpūr, which were also centers of cotton manufacture, as were Ray, Yazd, and Fārs (Serjeant, chaps. 8, 5). Especially renowned silk textiles were manufactured in Bukhara and surrounding villages. Such products, particularly silk, were exported to the western parts of the Islamic empire and also to Europe (see, e.g., Shepherd and Henning). According to Eṣṭakrī (p. 199; cf. Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 362-63; *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 131), Isfahan was a major hub of trade not only in textiles from all over Persia but also in fruit and saffron. Northwestern Persia and Khorasan also produced dyestuffs; madder (*rūnās*) was shipped from both areas to India. Cultivation of indigo ceased in Persia in the 13th century, after which it was imported from India and Egypt (see [carpets ii](#)). Leather goods of various kinds also came from cities in Transoxania and from Ābaskūn, Ardabīl, and Qom (see [čarm](#)). Perfumes were specialties of Fārs and Azarbaijan (Eṣṭakrī, pp. 153-54; Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 298-99; Moqaddasī, p. 432).

In addition, Persia was the most important supplier of foodstuffs in the caliphate, including sesame oil, fats, honey, fresh and dried fruits (particularly dates from Kermān), grapes, sugar (from Kūzestān), and spices (*Ḥodūd-al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 130; Eṣṭakrī, p. 93; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 257; Moqaddasī, pp. 408, 469; Ebn al-Faqīh, pp. 125-26). Trade in wine is not mentioned in the sources, presumably because of religious disapproval, but it can be assumed that the famous red wine of Persia was consumed at least locally. Citrus fruits from India became known only in the 10th century and reached the eastern provinces of the caliphate later than they reached the Arabian peninsula, Syria, and Egypt (Mas‘ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, p. 108). The shipment of sheep and grain from Persia followed a similar pattern. Persia also supplied large quantities of dried fish, particularly sturgeon from the Caspian and Aral seas and Lake Van and fish from the Persian Gulf. The Bactrian camel, which was bred in the eastern part of the caliphate, was far more important than the



horse as a riding animal (Eṣṭakrī, p. 280; Moqaddasī, p. 482).

Precious metals—particularly silver—and gemstones were usually worked locally and seem rarely to have been exported as raw materials. Wood for building or furniture came from the Caspian regions and from the mountains. Sal ammoniac was traded from Transoxania (Eṣṭakrī, p. 313; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 505; Moqaddasī, p. 326). Petroleum, from the area near Baku or from Mesopotamia, was used mainly for medicinal purposes; its properties as a fuel were not yet known. Finally, snow was an important article of export from Persia. During the winter it was transported in large quantities from the western mountains to Baghdad, where it was stored in underground vaults. During the summer it was used not only for cooling foodstuffs but also for tempering the underground living rooms (*sardābs*) of the caliph and wealthy residents of the city.

The most important trading partners for Persia were India, China, northern Central Asia, and eastern Europe. From India came cotton clothing and furnishings, silk and hemp, indigo, wheat, barley, millet, and dried peas, in exchange for Turkish and other slaves from the northern countries, weapons, and armor (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 450, *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 110; cf. Benjamin of Tudela, pp. 62-63). The main imports from China were silk and porcelain. Trade with eastern Europe involved mainly the importation of slaves. Among other so-called “northern wares” obtained from Slavs and Norsemen were falcons for hunting (see *bāz*), quicksilver, wax and honey, leather goods, and furs of all kinds, for which clothing, cotton, silk, fruit, and nuts were traded (Moqaddasī, p. 325; cf. Ṭa‘ālebī, *Laṭā‘ef*, pp. 128-29; cf. Eṣṭakrī, p. 221-22; Ebn Rosta, p. 141).

Goods originating in Persia or transported across it were essential to the high standard of living in the caliphate and were also a contributing factor to the high economic and political standing of the Islamic world in relation to other peoples and states. The role of Baghdad as the center of the Islamic world and as mediator among its various parts is clear not only from the eastern and northern trade but also from the activities of merchants who looked west and south. There, and to a lesser extent in other important Islamic trading centers, merchants met and exchanged goods, knowledge, and experience of the known world. The caliphate, rather than China, thus seems best to merit the title Middle Kingdom. Muslim geographers had more comprehensive knowledge than most of their contemporaries in Europe, Africa, India, Indonesia, China, and Central Asia because they were neighbors to them all.



The Mongol invasions of the eastern part of the Islamic empire, beginning in about 617/1220, and the advance to Baghdad and Damascus in 656-58/1258-60 rendered many important trading centers useless for many decades. A border was established between the eastern portion of the Islamic world, which came under Mongol control, and the western lands of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, which remained in the hands of the Mamluks. It functioned as an obstacle to trade, all the more so because of the bitter enmity between the Mamluks and the Il-khanids, exacerbated by relations between Egypt and another major Il-khanid foe, the Golden Horde (Qepčāq) in the Crimea.

The Il-khanid rulers of Persia must soon have developed an interest in reestablishing the economic life of the country, even though their need to pasture large herds of horses may have hampered their efforts. But trade in foodstuffs and consumer goods for daily use was soon set in motion again. After only a few decades the old commercial centers had regained their importance. The exploitation of the traditional trade routes, the mines, and agricultural land was naturally in the interests of the Il-khanids, both as sources of taxation and for military purposes.

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