



ECONOMY IV. IN THE SASANIAN PERIOD

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The Sasanians, who inherited the economic conditions left by the Parthians, were quick to forge an economic state so powerful and distinctive that its fame spread well beyond their political frontiers and their period. Although it is impossible in this brief article to take note of all the factors that shaped Sasanian economic power, whether successively or in conjunction, it is possible to highlight several elements that contributed to its particular character, which became a model for the economic evolution of the Near East.

The Sasanian economy, like any economy, was fundamentally conditioned by two sets of factors: natural elements and human intervention. Among the former were climate, topography, streams, fertility of the soil, richness of the subsoil, and availability of water. Among the latter were the activities of peasants, administrators, priests, nobles, and the ruler, as well as the impact of international relations. It was the nature of the interaction among these elements that determined the degree of economic development or regression at any given moment. The Sasanian empire has often been treated as a centralized state, but as far as the economy was concerned state control remained relatively circumscribed. Although the royal house arrogated to



itself certain monopolies, it seems that most economic production was in the hands of private entrepreneurs. Rather than participating directly in economic activity, the government was more concerned with siphoning off taxes, levies, and customs duties from it. Nevertheless, the revenues from part of its territories remained outside its control, in particular the large estates in the hands of powerful nobles. It is within this framework that the Sasanian policy of centralization, culminating in the administrative reorganization by Kavād I (484-531, with interruptions) and Kōsrow I Anōšīravān (531-79), must be understood (see below). Before successfully bringing the entire country under direct control, however, the Sasanians, like the Parthians before them, tried to appropriate whole regions piecemeal whenever the opportunity presented itself. One means of achieving this goal was the “foundation” of cities, which were often existing towns “rebaptized” with names incorporating that of the sovereign (for administrative glyptic, see Gyselen, 1989, p. 17; for literary sources, see Gignoux, 1974; cf. Altheim and Stiehl; Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*; Schwarz, *Iran*). The practice was initiated by Ardašīr I (224-40) and continued under his successors. In this way each new city and, equally important, its surrounding districts came under the direct tutelage of the crown, which could thus control the entire economic life of a given region: agriculture, crafts, mining, trade, and transportation. The Sasanian kings took care to promote the economies of these royal cities and their hinterlands by ensuring security and by transporting to them highly skilled labor drawn partly from conquered populations (see [DEPORTATIONS ii](#)). On the other hand, the central administration installed local officials who collected levies and taxes, an important source of revenue for financing warfare, which, if successful, in turn enriched the dynasty through booty: metals, precious materials, and skilled workmen.

It is difficult to assess the exact role played in different economic enterprises by each social group: royalty, nobility, free “citizens,” prisoners of war, and slaves. Attempts at reconstruction of Sasanian economic life and its development founder on the inadequacy of the sources. On one hand, there is a profusion of information from much later periods, which must be used with caution; on the other, there is a serious absence of contemporary evidence, both textual (excepting only Syriac texts and the Talmud) and archeological. Reconstruction must thus in most instances be based on inference, though somewhat facilitated by the long-term nature of certain essential phenomena.

[Agriculture](#) was the basis of the economy. In the absence of significant climatic



change it can be supposed that the types of crops and animals raised in the different natural zones remained, with slight variations, about the same as in the preceding millennium. Crops included cereals (barley, rye, millet), legumes (lentils, chickpeas), forage (alfalfa), fibers for spinning (flax, hemp, cotton), fruits (grapes, figs, dates, nuts), and vegetables. Only rice, emmer (hard wheat), and apricot and olive trees were perhaps introduced relatively late. Similar continuity can be assumed for **domestic animals** (oxen, sheep, chickens, ducks, geese), which furnished labor, meat, milk, and materials for textile manufacturing and tanning. Text sources and archeological surveys (Adams; Wenke; Rahimi-Laridjani) seem unanimous in confirming the expansion of the agrarian economy, which must have reached a peak under the Sasanians, though it seems that the occupation of the land and population were clearly declining in certain regions toward the end of the period (Adams, pp. 205, 209). The overall growth can be explained only by the economic policies adopted in the royal domains. It is hardly known to what extent the regions that belonged to the great traditional families contributed to this “national” economic growth. Nor is there much information on the exact status of the free peasants, who were organized in associations: whether or not they were entirely independent proprietors of the lands that they worked or received them from the royal house as concessions. That private property, whatever the precise nature of ownership, was not limited to land but also included canals, *qanats* (underground aqueducts), and mills is clear from juridical documents reproduced in texts (de Menasce; Macuch, 1993, p. 649 and *passim*). From the beginning of the Sasanian period lands were granted to relatives and friends of the ruler, but the relations between these new proprietors and the peasants already on their land are obscure. Small pieces of land were also granted to soldiers at the end of their military service. At any rate, the intensive agriculture practiced under the Sasanians both ensured production of agricultural surpluses and required construction of considerable infrastructure, particularly that connected with irrigation: bridge dams, wells, canals, *qanats*, and the like. Such projects were beyond the means of individuals; only associations of individuals or institutions could make authoritative decisions and engage technically trained personnel (Adams; Goblot). This hydraulic infrastructure was equally indispensable in supplying water to cities, where population growth went hand in hand with high agricultural yields and the manufacturing and commercial activities that they supported (see, e.g., Gyselen and Gasche, p. 31).

It is also difficult to evaluate the part played by each social group in the



different conservation industries (drying of fruits, milk processing, preservation of meat) and the transformation of agricultural products (wine making, oil pressing, milling, tanning, weaving, dyeing), but it is likely that these activities accounted for a large portion of the private, that is, domestic, economic sector. The pattern in the storage of agricultural products (in granaries, warehouses, and silos) was different, for, though supplies for local consumption and surpluses intended for regional exchanges and even exports were probably managed by the producing community, the portion of those commodities owed to the state as taxes and imposts was perhaps stored locally under the supervision of state functionaries.

Many other sectors of economic life, including extraction of raw materials from mines (Raschke, n. 747), quarries, forests, salt deposits, and bitumen fields (Forbes), as well as all processing industries, are even less well documented, particularly as far as the degree of state intervention is concerned. It is uncertain whether the government was content simply to levy taxes and imposts on individuals and products; whether, on the contrary, it completely controlled some of those activities; or whether it adopted a more varied policy ranging between the two extremes. About the organization of industries that today would be labeled “sensitive,” that is, the entire chain of metal production from extraction of ores (Hallier) to manufacture of weapons and coins, nothing at all is known. The only state monopolies on which the sources contain information were those producing precious goods (Pigulevskaïa, 1963, p. 168).

In the royal cities such artisans as masons, woodworkers, ceramicists, metalworkers, jewelers, and stone cutters (Tafazzoli) were organized in corporations, unless they belonged to royal workshops (Pigulevskaïa, 1963, p. 160); with the exception of the narrative of the seventh-century Chinese traveler Hsüan Tsang, documentation survives only in Syriac sources from the western part of the empire (idem, p. 161 et passim); from the latter sources it appears that a large majority of the craftsmen were Christians, and it is possible that there was a cause-and-effect relationship with exemption from military service, enjoyed by artisans but not by peasants.

Particularly problematic is what happened in the domains of the nobility at different periods. It is, for example, not clear whether the state had any control over economic activity on the nobles’ estates or whether the latter were absolute masters on their own lands. Nor is anything known about lands belonging to the clergy, mainly Zoroastrian. It is entirely probable that the



state levied imposts and taxes on these lands, but it can be supposed that the amounts collected depended upon the relative political strength of the parties. Collection must have been relatively efficient when the central authority was strong but more sporadic when the ruler was under the influence of either the nobility or the clergy.

At least one aspect of the economy was always completely under control of the king, that is, the minting of coins. Aside from several experiments at the beginning of the Sasanian period, when coins of different alloys were struck, Sasanian coinage consisted of three types: gold, limited to a few commemorative issues; bronze, copper, and lead for regional, or perhaps only local, circulation; and silver, of which the *drahm* was the basic unit (see [COINS AND COINAGE](#); [DIRHAM i](#)). Its theoretical weight was about 4 grams, sometimes a little more (Göbl, pp. 25-30; Gyselen, 1989; idem, 1990); the *dang* was a fraction (one-sixth) of the *drahm*. *Pašiz* was the generic name for the small copper coin. The *drahm* as a weight, as well as the *ster*, four times greater, is well attested in the weight indications on silver vessels (Vickers), but, aside from rare references in Pahlavi texts, little is known of the Sasanian weight system. The decipherment of the many papyri and ostraca that contain accounts and inventories will no doubt furnish some of the missing information (Gignoux, 1991; Weber). Whether the entire process of minting operations was directly controlled by the state or whether certain steps were farmed out under state supervision is not yet known. It is, however, clear that periods of intense monetary production corresponded to periods of war, when it was necessary to pay mercenary troops, or to military defeats, requiring payment of indemnities. With rare exceptions sums of money for taxes and payments for services are expressed in *drahms* in the texts (Macuch, 1993, passim), which certainly did not preclude frequent commerce, as well as collection of taxes and levies, in kind (Harmatta). Ransom and war debts had to be paid in coinage by weight, with the result that large quantities of minted silver were drained off to foreign countries. It is not certain whether international commercial transactions were conducted in currency or by means of drafts. Nor is stable value or consistent weight a sufficient explanation for the success of the Sasanian *drahm*; other factors, probably related to international trade, must have contributed, for, as monetary finds as far away as Sweden (Hovén) and China (Thierry) attest, it continued in use in international commerce well beyond the Sasanian period and was often imitated.



Throughout the Sasanian period internal economic life was characterized by the struggle between the royal house and the vassals for political and economic power. The government's interest in the prosperity of the country was dictated in the first place by the benefits that it drew from a highly productive agriculture and a class of competitive artisans. As a result, both farmers and artisans lived in relative comfort, but, when peaceful conditions were interrupted and the state had temporarily to withdraw its economic support, the situation soon became precarious; the economic infrastructure, especially irrigation facilities, and the living conditions of the population deteriorated. Such a period of relative hardship seems to have occurred after the reign of Šāpūr II (309-79), at least if foundation of royal cities is taken as an indicator. According to the Islamic sources, none of Šāpūr's successors founded a new city until Kavād I (Altheim and Stiehl, p. 24). On administrative glyptic, however, the names of cities and provinces founded by Pērōz (457/459-84; Gyselen, 1989) are mentioned. It is nevertheless certain that at the end of the 4th century there was a decline in state investment, for several reasons. Crown lands were overpopulated, but the state seems to have become more circumspect about investing in available new lands that did not promise high returns or in cities offering no new economic or political advantage. In fact, it was deprived of a portion of the important revenues that the first Sasanian kings enjoyed, particularly the loss of profits from war. But this slowing down in efforts to expand cultivation and find new markets was not geared to the needs of a population that had expanded rapidly as a result of intensive agriculture and flourishing industry. The resulting disequilibrium contributed to impoverishment of the masses and ensuing discontent.

That the social situation did not immediately become untenable was probably owing to the fact that Šāpūr II's successors, profiting from a period without major political and military problems, concentrated on developing international trade over land, in particular the Silk Route, and sea, thus benefiting all active levels of society. Provisioning and providing armed protection for caravans and shipbuilding were doubtless in the hands of private entrepreneurs organized in merchant companies (Pigulevskaïa, 1963, pp. 178-81). The state was content to levy taxes on the transit trade entering and leaving cities and national territory. Connected with local, regional, and international commerce there were markets and fairs, which provided another source of revenue for the state (Pigulevskaïa, 1956; idem, 1963, pp. 175-76; Macuch, 1993).



Šāpūr II's successors reigned too briefly and pressure from the nobles and sometimes the clergy was too great to permit development of long-term economic programs that would have resolved socioeconomic ills that had become entrenched. Furthermore, when the state sought desperately to recover the enormous sums swallowed by the disastrous wars with the Hephthalites, especially the ransom for King Pērōz, the situation deteriorated considerably. As the nobles had already succeeded in reducing their contributions in taxes to the government, the latter turned to the peasants and artisans to fill the gap, but after several bad harvests, with resulting terrible famines, they were unable to do so.

The population was thus predisposed to listen to calls for revolt. For example, Mazdak, perhaps a contemporary of Pērōz and certainly of Kavād I, preached the common ownership of all wealth and found a large audience in every producing group within the population. The dynasty, which saw in this movement potential assistance in subduing the nobility, intervened only mildly and sometimes even supported the revolt, which eventually destroyed the entire social and economic fabric of the country. Once the Mazdakite rebels had delivered the fatal blow to the nobles, however, the state intervened and crushed the revolt in a bloodbath. The king, at last free of the nobles' demands, introduced administrative reforms that tightened his control of the empire and made it possible to drain its riches into the treasury. The entire empire, not only crown lands, was divided into administrative districts; a cadastral survey was instituted; and some new offices were created (probably including that of "judge and advocate for the poor" and perhaps also those of provincial *āmārgar*, and district *maguh*). Taxes and imposts were systematized: A poll tax was levied on the entire male population between the ages of twenty and fifty years; taxes were assessed on the actual production of the land, which was more equitable than assessing them on the surface area under cultivation; and the monetary type was fully evolved, with the inclusion of the mint name and year. The near-equalization of the status of the different regions must have favored state control of trade among provinces, facilitating the collection of supplementary taxes. The political role of the nobility was thenceforth limited to honorary functions at court, high administrative office in the provinces, and command in the new national army.

These reforms, begun by Kavād I, were pursued by his son Khosrow I (531-79), who brought the Sasanian empire to the peak of its prosperity. Renewed state power went hand in hand with a new series of wars, particularly with



Byzantium. It also brought an intensification of international commerce, for example, through the conquest of Yemen in 570, control of the port of Alexandria, and similar gains. Nevertheless, the struggles for “national” power and “international” prestige that were to bring about the fall of the Sasanian empire were already manifest in the reign of Ohrmazd IV (579-90). The new nobility, in particular the army commanders, and the great traditional nobility again challenged the royal house, even seizing the throne (see [BAHRĀM vii](#)); the pomp displayed by Khosrow II Parvēz (591-628) and his generally unsuccessful military campaigns signaled the end of an empire that would nevertheless go down in history as a model of administrative organization, so economically powerful that its fame has survived the centuries.

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