



FISCAL SYSTEM I. ACHAEMENID, II. SASANIAN

FISCAL SYSTEM in Persia.

i. ACHAEMENID PERIOD

There probably was no clear distinction between state and royal incomes in the Achaemenid empire. All state receipts were considered royal property, as was the income from the king's estates (Dandamayev and Lukonin, p. 208).

Taxes constituted the most substantial source of government income. Beginning from ca. 519 B.C.E., when Darius I (q.v.) established a new tax system, the peoples subject to the Persians paid 7,740 Babylonian talents of silver (i.e., 232,200 kg) a year, not counting the Indian satrapy, which contributed an assessment in the form of gold dust (Herodotus, 3.90-94). In addition to direct taxes, the state income was also derived from various sources such as port and market duties, etc. (Pseudo-Aristotle, *Oeconomica* 2.4). A certain part of royal income was received from temple estates of the empire. In any case, such a practice is attested in Babylonian documents, according to which, royal control in the temples was exercised by fiscal agents who were the managers of the royal fisc and checked on prompt and precise payment of state taxes (Dandamayev, pp. 590-92).

Silver ingots in the shape of little bars, rods, circles, wires, and stars as well as in other forms, served as money and were weighed each time they were used



as payment. Taxes were also paid in unminted silver which contained varying parts of alloy.

Temples and palaces in the Near East had worked out techniques for collecting large amounts of taxes, voluntary gifts, and other revenues; this system was adopted by the state administration of the Achaemenids. Taxes were paid in silver of rather poor quality which was evaluated by official experts. In order to obtain the necessary uniformity, the silver was sent to temple and state workshops for refining and smelting into ingots of standard size and quality, after which these ingots were deposited in treasuries (Torrey, p. 298; Oppenheim, pp. 116-20). One document drafted in Babylonian and discovered in Persepolis records the payment of state taxes in the 19th to 20th regnal year of Darius I (502 B.C.E.). The silver that had been submitted by four individuals was evaluated in terms of purity and weight, after which a final calculation was made; it was determined what sum the taxpayers still had to contribute, proceeding on the basis of the fact that taxes had to be paid in silver of a certain standard. The paid silver was of three types (white, second-grade, and third-grade) and, depending on the quality of the metal, the sums paid were marked down from 0.416 to 10 percent (Cameron, p. 4 and n. 85, pp. 200-03).

The medieval Arabic *jahbad*, which denoted professional assayers, goes back to the Old Persian **gaiθāpati-* with its original meaning “overseer of the livestock.” This word is attested in the form of *gitepatu* in a Babylonian document drafted in 419 B.C.E. in Nippur in order to designate a financial official of a fiscal department who assayed silver paid as tax to the royal treasury (Torrey, pp. 299 f.).

The treasury functioned as the center for the financial administration of the state. The chief of the treasury (*ganzabara*, q.v.), his assistant, accounting clerks, and scribes were engaged in the receipt, verification, sealing, storage, and issuance of gold, silver, and various valuable things. Royal treasuries were located in Susa, Persepolis, Ecbatana, Babylon and in other important cities (Hinz, p. 265; Koch, pp. 235-55; Young, pp. 83 ff.).

Precious metal belonging to the state was subject to minting only at the discretion of the king, and a large portion of it was left unminted (Pseudo-Aristotle, *Oeconomica* 2.1-4). According to Herodotus (3.96), when money was needed, the king indicated how much molten precious metal had to be cut off. Besides, the Persians kept a lot of gold and silver in the form of utensils (Strabo, 15.3.21). Thus, the king could manipulate the ratio of exchange



between gold and silver in his favor, on the basis of the vast reserves of unminted metal accumulated in his treasuries (Altheim, pp. 192-93, review of Cameron).

According to the opinion of Olmstead accepted by many scholars, gold and silver paid as state taxes were deposited in treasuries and withdrawn from circulation for many decades. This, Olmstead assumed (p. 298), caused a disastrous drain on precious metals, a shortage of specie, and disrupted local markets. But this opinion has been rejected by Matthew Stolper, according to whom, documentary evidence from Babylonia and recent historical studies show that there was no shortage of specie and no general decay in Achaemenid Mesopotamia. It is true that Achaemenid treasuries had accumulated huge amounts of precious metals. However, according to some calculations, the Achaemenid kings hoarded in all their treasuries no more than 5 percent of annual tax income and 95 percent was put back into circulation (Stolper, pp. 143-46).

See also [DARIC](#).

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ii. SASANIAN PERIOD

Given the lack of true primary sources, knowledge of the Sasanian fiscal system is based on a few rare passages in Pahlavi documents, e.g., *Madīgān ī hazār dādestān*; *Syriac texts of the Sasanian and post-Sasanian eras, essentially the Acts of the Persian Martyrs and the treatise of Īšōboḳt and of Yošīa (or Jesus) the Stylite*; and *Arabic historical texts such as those by Ṭabarī, Ya'qūbī, Dīnavarī, Ḥamza Ešfahānī, Mas'ūdī, Ṭa'ālebī, and Balāḍorī*.

It is above all through the Arabic texts that we learn about the fiscal reform effected by Ḳosrow I Anōšīravān (531-79), which has been considered by all authors as a radical transformation of the Sasanian fiscal system. This reform had been carefully planned by Ḳosrow's father, Kavād I, who reorganized the Sasanian empire after the suppression of the Mazdakite revolt, which had resulted in the liquidation of a large segment of the traditional nobility. The nobles had been ferociously attached to their privileges and had always levied their own taxes on land, remitting to the crown only a more or less high percentage thereof, probably proportional to the distance of the lands from the capital (Altheim and Stiehl, 1954, pp. 9-10). Moreover, the management of the state budget had been in the hands of nobles: the *wāstaryošān-sālār* controlled the regular revenues, and the *ratēštārān-sālār* the irregular revenues, which included war booty. The hope for spoils, however, disappeared when the war became defensive, and the state then had to provide for the payment of troops and the maintenance of garrisons



established in towns. Wars on foreign soil had the potential to yield tribute, but to finance such wars the king had to be able to count on substantial regular revenue.

It is clear that the fiscal reforms launched by Kōsrow I were elements of a policy that he had attempted to put into effect from the start of his reign, and which also included the foundation of royal towns (which allowed the monarch to control the activities of a town and the production from the crown lands in its environs).

Surveys of both the plains and mountainous lands as well as the counting of palm and olive trees, which had been ordered by Kavād I, were completed under Kōsrow I. The establishment of such cadastral surveys made possible a calculation of land tax to be based thenceforth on the area and quality of the land, and no longer on the amount of production. The latter system suffered from some disadvantages: on the one hand, the obligation to keep the cereals on the farm until an agent could calculate the production often prevented the farmers from harvesting at the optimal time; on the other hand, fluctuations in the amounts of the harvest resulted in varying tax revenues from one year to another, a fact that complicated management of the state budget. The new fiscal system, while increasing state revenues considerably, particularly through the integration of numerous landed estates belonging to the nobility, also regularized them considerably.

If land tax underwent a fundamental reform, very probably inspired by the Byzantine fiscal system (Althem), nothing in the sources appear to indicate that there was any modification in the taxation system of other economic sectors, about which we know very little. One can assume that there existed a toll on caravans transporting merchandise and goods and that there was a fee for using water brought in for irrigation, but what part of these revenues may have been appropriated by the state is unknown. We are well informed about the poll-tax imposed on city inhabitants, especially the artisans belonging to the guilds. Little is known about the other categories: millers, tradesmen, laborers, etc. According to Christian sources, the Sasanians in certain periods imposed a double personal tax on Christians, but it was abolished under Šāpūr II.

The collection of personal taxes was traditionally assured by the heads of the guilds and of the religious minority communities, Jews and Christians; they were accountable directly to the king. The land tax was probably collected in



the same manner. The fiscal reform of Kōsrow I, accompanied by the establishment of an administrative network in the provinces, certainly brought about changes also in the method of collection of taxes, which perhaps was one of the duties of the *maguh*, the district administration which is widely attested in Sasanian glyptics but of which there is no trace in other sources. In addition, administrative glyptics as well as other sources designate the *āmārgar* (q.v.) as the official in charge of taxes at the level of one or more provinces.

The amount of land and poll taxes was often stipulated in monetary terms, particularly in dirhams (q.v.), but the actual payment was probably not, or at least not entirely, made in cash. Just as in the Achaemenid empire, or in the first centuries of the Islamic era (see, e.g., Ebn Kōrdādbeh; Qodāma, *Ketāb al-ḵarāj*), a good part of the taxes was paid in kind, either as produce (such as cereals, wine, and oil) or corvée. It is not clear how a distribution between the two modes of payment was arrived at, but the amount in kind received by the state provided, no doubt, a source of profit, if not speculation.

The fiscal system of the late Sasanian era continued to be used in the Omayyad period and the beginning of the 'Abbasid period.

See also [ECONOMY iv](#).

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Ṭabarī constitutes the principal, if not unique, source of information for the majority of articles and works devoted to the question of the Sasanian fiscal system.

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