

The Silk Road and the Iranian political economy in late antiquity: Iran, the Silk Road, and the problem of aristocratic empire¹

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Abstract

The Iranian Empire emerged in the third century in the interstices of the Silk Road that increasingly linked the markets of the Mediterranean and the Near East with South, Central, and East Asia. The ensuing four centuries of Iranian rule corresponded with the heyday of trans-Eurasian trade, as the demand of moneyed imperial elites across the continent for one another's high-value commodities stimulated the development of long-distance networks. Despite its position at the nexus of trans-continental and trans-oceanic commerce, accounts of Iran in late antiquity relegate trade to a marginal role in its political economy. The present article seeks to foreground the contribution of trans-continental mercantile networks to the formation of Iran and to argue that its development depended as much on the political economies of its western and eastern neighbours as on internal Near Eastern factors.

Keywords: Iran, Silk Road, Late antiquity, Trade, Political economy, Sasanian

The Iranian Empire emerged in the third century in the interstices of the Silk Road that increasingly linked the markets of the Mediterranean and the Middle East with South, Central, and East Asia. The ensuing four centuries of Iranian rule corresponded with the heyday of trans-Eurasian trade, as the demand of moneyed imperial elites across the continent for one another's high-value commodities stimulated the development of long-distance networks. Despite its position at the nexus of trans-continental and trans-oceanic commerce, accounts of Iran in late antiquity relegate trade to a marginal role in its political economy. The Silk Road provides a backdrop to Iranian history rather than playing a determinative role in its development, a phenomenon occurring within the empire rather than a cause, among others, of its emergence and endurance.² The

1 An earlier version of this article has appeared in Chinese translation in Wang Qingjia and Li Longguo, *Duanlie yu zhuanxing: Diguozhi hou de Ouyalishi yu shixue* [断裂与转型：帝国之后的欧亚历史与史学] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017). The author would like to thank Frantz Grenet, an anonymous reviewer, and audiences at Peking University, the University of Chicago Center in Beijing, and Princeton University for their critical comments and suggestions.

2 Recent overviews do not connect long-distance commerce with internal political developments: Daryaei 2003; 2010.

present article seeks to foreground the contribution of trans-continental mercantile networks to the formation of Iran and to argue its development depended as much on the political economies of its western and eastern neighbours as on internal Middle Eastern factors. It seeks to resolve a paradox in recent accounts of the Iranian political economy by demonstrating the potential contribution of long-distance commerce to the imperial fisc. In so doing, it illustrates some of the incipient interdependencies discernible in the various political-economic systems across Eurasia in late antiquity. The agents driving and determining the course of inter-imperial interaction – in political, economic, and cultural domains respectively – resided not in the metropolises of Rome, Iran, or China, but rather in the interstices of Central Eurasia.

As a historiographical concept, the Silk Road simultaneously obscures and reveals the ancient Central Eurasian societies usually studied within its framework. The privileging of long-distance commerce reduces societies no less complex than their East and West Asian counterparts to unidimensional corridors for transit and trade, passive passageways rather than active agents in their own histories.³ The revival of archaeological and historical scholarship in these regions has shown that their nomadic elites developed sophisticated, trans-territorial political orders and that their economies were by no means dependent on trans-continental trade.⁴ The concept of the Silk Road should therefore be retired as a historiographical framework for Central Eurasia, whether in the Bronze Age or late antiquity. It remains useful, however, as the name of a complex of institutions in operation circa 50–750 CE, when mercantile networks trafficking largely if not exclusively in silk took shape. If a wide range of South Asian commodities had long attracted Mediterranean and Middle Eastern consumers, the arrival of raw silk from East Asia in the first centuries BCE and CE stimulated the massive, almost insatiable, demand of Roman elites for a commodity that could only be procured from China, or, from the third century onward, from Central Asia, until the transmission of the technology of silk production to the Iranian and Roman empires in the early sixth century.⁵ The Chinese courts' use of silk as a medium of exchange with outsiders delivered a surplus into the hands of Central Eurasian elites, who found a market for the material in a Mediterranean witnessing unparalleled rates of economic and demographic growth.⁶ The compact, lightweight nature of this exceptionally high-value

- 3 Chin (2013) emphasizes how the political origins of a concept that rendered Central Eurasia a mere highway to legitimate early-twentieth-century colonial-capitalist projects remain inescapable. Alternative historiographical and geographical frameworks for understanding these regions, such as those of Élisée Reclus, deserve to be recovered.
- 4 For overviews of the burgeoning literature on nomadic political and economic complexity, see Honeychurch 2014 and 2015; and Brosseder 2015. The greater importance of local rather than trans-regional economies in Central Eurasian societies is a major theme of Hansen 2012.
- 5 Trombert (2000: 113) dates the earliest production of silk at Khotan to the late second or third centuries CE. Turfan became a major production centre by the fourth century. For westward transmission, see Zuckerman 2013, re-dating the arrival of silk technology in the Roman Empire to the 530s.
- 6 Trombert 2000: 108.

material made the trans-continental overland trade sufficiently efficient to become profitable.

From the first century BCE onward, merchants from Sogdia and Bactria established networks linking the cities of northwestern China with the ports of the Indian Ocean via the Hindu Kush, likely under Kushan patronage.⁷ In the fourth century, however, Sogdian merchants began to dominate trans-continental trade and, in a sense, to construct the Silk Road as a single Central Eurasian route with corresponding political infrastructure that would continue to function into the eighth century. The Sogdian merchants established a network whose nodal points extended from the major Chinese cities to the Indian Ocean and as far westward as the frontiers of Iran.⁸ Based in Sogdian cities such as Samarkand and Paykend and organized in patrilineal houses, they transmitted silk, silver and other high-value commodities in overland caravans. Such capital-intensive enterprises enabled the Sogdians to act as bankers in Chinese cities and to facilitate long-distance financial transactions. The Sogdian network developed in tandem with the Hun and Turk empires that integrated Central Eurasia in increasingly extensive and stable political orders.⁹ Nomadic political elites aimed to profit from the commerce passing through their territories, through both imposing levies on merchants and investing in their enterprises. The Hun and Turk imperial formations characteristic of Central Eurasia in late antiquity were designed, in part, to protect and support trans-continental commerce, and the Sogdian network of inter-personal mercantile relationships was transformed into urban infrastructures, as a belt of cities and smaller scale settlements with their own dynamic local agrarian economies came to extend from Sogdia into the Ili Valley towards the northwestern Chinese city of Turfan.¹⁰ The security nomadic imperial structures afforded the Sogdian merchants minimized what practitioners of New Institutional Economics call transaction costs, the obstacles to efficient, low-risk, and profitable trade.¹¹ An alternative, more accurate term for the Silk Road would be “nomadic political-economic network”, a complex of political institutions nomadic elites established in order to facilitate trans-continental commerce.

The Iranian court was a beneficiary of political-economic developments occurring far beyond the frontiers of both its empire and its knowledge. The influx of high-value commodities into Iranian territory, whether destined for Middle Eastern or Mediterranean markets, gave the nascent imperial house of the Sasanians a source of revenue independent from the various aristocratic houses that maintained a high degree of political-economic autonomy over their vast patrimonial territories within the empire. The basic interpretive problem of Iranian history in late antiquity has been the emergence of an Iranian court significantly more powerful, in economic and infrastructural terms, than

7 De la Vaissière 2005: 34–41. For the debates on Kushan involvement in trade, see Mehendale 1996. Oceanic routes via Southeast Asia also continued to supply Indian ports with silk throughout late antiquity, albeit on a smaller scale: Sen 2011: 42–6.

8 De la Vaissière 2005: 30–70; Wertmann 2015: 22–5, 135–7.

9 De la Vaissière 2005: 107–10, 199–215.

10 De la Vaissière 2005: 112–7.

11 See, e.g., Bresson 2015.

its Parthian predecessor that coexisted with almost equally powerful Parthian aristocratic houses.¹² Recent research has sharpened the terms of the debate. On the one hand, archaeological work has demonstrated the massive scale of the infrastructural projects the Iranian court undertook, at least in the middle and late Sasanian periods, notably in the very regions where aristocratic autonomy was most pronounced: Khurasan, the Caspian littoral, and Azerbaijan.¹³ The court was able to invest in the development of infrastructures on a far grander scale than the Parthians. On the other hand, historical scholarship has documented the dependence of the court on aristocrats to fulfil its basic functions.¹⁴ Representatives of the great houses, often of Parthian descent, possessed a virtual monopoly on the major fiscal, religious, military offices, while only expanding the extent of their autonomous patrimonial landholdings. The question then arises: whence the resources that enabled the Sasanians to become more powerful than the Parthians, if the aristocracy had preserved its powers and privileges? Zoroastrian institutions played a crucial role in the consolidation of the court's powers, but they required funds to establish and maintain. A purely cultural or religious answer to the question will prove inadequate.

The financial foundations of the early Iranian court need to be uncovered. The primary source of revenue was of course taxation on agricultural production, and commerce formed only a marginal sector within what was an overwhelmingly agrarian economy. In the absence of documentary evidence, one can do no more than make the general presumption that the early Sasanians will not have been more effective than the Parthians at extracting an agrarian surplus, as extensive aristocratic territories remained beyond the reach of the court. And yet already the first Sasanians engaged in capital-intensive infrastructural projects on a massive scale. Chief among these were the foundations of royal cities, known in the late Sasanian period as *šahrestān*, centrally planned urban centres named after their rulers and forming part of the royal domain. The first two Sasanians, Ardashir I and Shapur I, founded nearly a dozen such cities, often displacing pre-existing *poleis* that were refounded as royal centres. If the continued stability of aristocratic power makes the rapid expansion of revenues within the empire implausible, there are clear indications of the importance of extra-imperial sources, not least the foundation of *šahrestān* at – and often in place of – strategic emporia. To extract revenue from trans-Eurasian trade, the early Sasanians had to assert control over mercantile routes, establish infrastructures facilitating mercantile activity and its taxation, and cultivate a mercantile network operating in their service. Not only did each of these appear as overriding priorities for the earliest kings of kings, but the court also created centres of production for the reworking of raw materials into high-value commodities in demand across Eurasia. The package of institutions the Iranian court developed functioned in tandem with the Silk Road to foster the unprecedented circulation of goods between East and West Asia characteristic of late antiquity. In the process, the court secured an autonomous source of revenue that facilitated the formation of the infrastructurally robust imperial apparatus of the middle and late

12 On the evolving infrastructural powers of the Iranian court, see Payne 2017.

13 Sauer et al. 2013; Rante and Collinet 2013; Alizadeh 2014; Simpson 2014.

14 Rubin 2000; Pourshariati 2008.

Sasanian periods, when the royal fisc gradually augmented its revenues from agrarian production throughout its territories as well as from the continued conduct of commerce.

The early Sasanians and trans-Eurasian corridors

The early Sasanians carefully consolidated their control of the Persian Gulf. Their native region of Fars encompassed its northern coastline, and a series of intermontane routes linked their power-bases of Istakhr, Ardashir-Xwarrah, and Bishapur with the sea. Immediately after conquering the highland core of Fars, Ardashir I turned to its coast, as far north as the southern shores of Khuzestan.¹⁵ The Persian Gulf formed the nexus of the emerging Iranian Empire, facilitating communication and commerce between the regions of Mesopotamia, Khuzestan, and Fars where the early Sasanian court's powers were concentrated. Of the nine cities attributed to the first Sasanian, five were arrayed around the Iranian sea: Astarabad-Ardashir and Wahman-Ardashir replacing the *polis* of Spasinou Charax and its nearby entrepôt Forat in southern Mesopotamia; Ohrmazd-Ardashir in Khuzestan; Revardashir, the port of Fars; and another eponymous settlement, whose precise name remains unclear, in Bahrain.¹⁶ At the same time, third-century rulers enthroned their most powerful dynasts as *Mēšān-šāh* in the southern Mesopotamian coastal region of Maishan (MP. Mēšān, Gr. Characene) and as *Sagān-šāh* in Iran's southeastern quadrant, on the northern shores of the Indian Ocean.¹⁷ Subsequent Sasanians developed additional cities along these northern coasts. The famed medieval emporium of Siraf in southeastern Fars seems to have been established in the late fourth or early fifth century, while in the middle of the fifth century Daibul, near modern Karachi, extended the reach of the Iranian court as far as the frontiers of Guptid India.¹⁸

The urban network the Sasanians created on the northern coast of the Persian Gulf gradually displaced Arabian mercantile centres. In the Hellenistic and Parthian periods, the eastern Arabian sites of Failaka, Mleiha, Thaj, al-Dur, and Qala'at al-Bahrain flourished as nodal points of a commercial network extending from Oman to Spasinou Charax.¹⁹ Each of these sites, however,

15 Widengren 1971: 736–9.

16 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, ed. de Goeje, 820, trans. Bosworth, 16; al-Dīnawārī, *Al-akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, ed. al-Mun'im 'Āmir, 45; Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Ta'riḫ sinnī mulūk al-ard*, ed. Maskūnī, 43; Gaube 1973: 32–8; Hansman 1967: 36–53; Whitehouse and Williamson 1973: 35–43; Gyselen 1989: 55–8, 60–61, 76–7. The city in Bahrain is the most problematic foundation to localize, or to substantiate: Potts 1990: 233–4. Kervran 1994: 330–332; Højlund 2006.

17 *Inscription of Shapur I on the Ka'ba-ye Zardusht*, ed. and trans. Huyse, 47; *Inscription of Paikuli*, ed. and trans. Humbach and Skjaervø, 29–31, 45–7. The Sasanian period on the coast of Makran remains generally uncharted: Piacentini Fiorani 2014: 12.

18 Whitehouse and Williamson 1973: 33–5. For Sasanian strata at Banbhore and its likely identification with Daibul, see Kervran 1994: 337–8, Ghosh 2008, and Piacentini Fiorani 2014: 40. A network of ancillary sites extended southward along the coast from Siraf: Carter 2005: 167, with reference to the unpublished dissertation of Williamson.

19 Kennet 2007: 103–4. The Seleucids and Parthians sought to penetrate Arabia in order to derive tax revenues from trade: Martinez-Sève 2014: 374–6.

was either abandoned or drastically downsized in the early Sasanian period, as part of a general contraction of settlement in eastern Arabia.²⁰ Iranian settlements on the southwestern shores of the Gulf were modest in size and comparatively disparate, often military installations. The archaeology thus corresponds well with the literary evidence, which records military campaigns to discipline Arabian powers – notably under Ardashir I and Shapur II – with only rare references to settlements of political significance.²¹ At the sites of Mleiha and al-Dur in the United Arab Emirates, the excavators have connected evidence of abandonment or destruction in the middle of the third century with historiographical accounts of the first two Sasanian interventions in the region.²² The third century inaugurated an economic decline not only in eastern Arabia, but also in the central and southern regions of the peninsula that continued into the early seventh century.²³ The causes of such contraction were manifold. The loss of control of trans-regional trade was nevertheless a leading factor, especially in Eastern Arabia where settlements were precarious even at their peak. The early Sasanians, moreover, intervened in eastern Arabia at the very moment when its sites began to participate in long-distance trade by the Indian Ocean on a significant scale. Evidence for the importation of high-value commodities from India appears for the first time in the mid-second and early third centuries, immediately preceding the eclipse of the eastern Arabian sites, as Palmyrene merchants created an alternative to the traditional commercial route to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea.²⁴ Ardashir I rerouted the nascent network through the ports of the *šahrestān* under the control of the court.

Iranian mercantile ties with the wider Indian Ocean and, in particular, the emporia of the Malabar coast, continued to develop unbroken throughout late antiquity. In a comprehensive quantitative review of the ceramic evidence, Seth Priestman has demonstrated a remarkably continuous rate of long-distance exchange during the Sasanian period.²⁵ The ceramics, of course, do not easily divulge the contents they once conveyed. New commodities, such as Indian glass beads, were introduced during these four centuries, while others disappeared.²⁶ The total value of goods exchanged will therefore have varied, even if the total quantity of ceramic-based trade was consistent. The institutions the court installed from Daibul to Maishan securing the route to the Mediterranean via the Persian Gulf resulted in Iranian merchants gradually surpassing their Roman counterparts in the Indian Ocean.²⁷ The route through the Persian Gulf offered merchants a distinct advantage: their cargo would reach

20 Kennet 2007: 104–6.

21 Piacentini Fiorani 1985; Ulrich 2011.

22 Cuny and Mouton 2009: 123.

23 Schiettecatte 2013.

24 Mouton and Schiettecatte 2014: 109. Potts (1997: 94–7) spoke of a “Characene corridor” through late Parthian eastern Arabia, in which Whitehouse (2000: 122) locates the site of al-Dur.

25 Priestman 2013: 399, 415.

26 For the appearance and subsequent popularity of Indian glass beads, see Kennet 2009: 154.

27 Winter 1987: 71; Whitehouse 1996: 345; Morony 2004a: 185–8; Banaji 2006: 286–8; Rubin 2008: 188–90.

Antioch at least three months sooner than vessels docking at the Roman ports of the Red Sea.²⁸ Whenever the monsoon made the journey possible in the spring, merchants departing from the Persian Gulf would reach their Indian destinations faster than those based in the Red Sea. As a consequence, Iranian merchants were climatically and geographically positioned to outmanoeuvre the Romans. According to the famous report of Procopius, sixth-century Aksumite merchants – Roman intermediaries – could not access silk markets in India, as the Iranians purchased the available stock before they could arrive.²⁹ The emporia of South Arabia and the Red Sea yielded control of Indian Ocean networks to merchants based in the Persian Gulf in the fourth and fifth centuries, despite the sixth-century attempts of the Romans to compete with the Iranians via their Aksumite allies.³⁰ By the middle of the fourth century, the great bulk of commerce between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean passed through Iran.

Simultaneously with its interventions in the Persian Gulf, the Iranian court incorporated the western termini of the Silk Road. Ardashir I conquered not only Merv, but also Balkh, where the Sasanian is thought either to have subordinated and co-opted the previous Kushan regime or to have installed a new dynasty in its place, known in the literature as Kushano-Sasanian.³¹ The conquest of the core territories of the Kushan kingdom gave the court control over the primary route for the traffic of East Asian silk and other eastern commodities to the Mediterranean in the first two centuries CE, via the passes of the Hindu Kush and the port known as Barbarikon in the lower Indus Valley.³² Shapur I expressly asserted Iranian control over the intermontane route through the relief at Rag-e Bibi, located along one of the possible paths across the mountains between Bactria and Kapisa.³³ It is telling, moreover, that the position of the *Sagān-šāh*, the “king of the Sakas”, always a member of the Sasanian dynasty, played so important a role in early Sasanian politics, competing with the king of Armenia for the right to succeed the kings of kings.³⁴ In the two centuries preceding the Sasanian conquests, the king of “Scythia” – a Parthian sub-king – protected and regulated trade between Kushan territories and the Indian Ocean at Barbarikon.³⁵ Whether or not the authority of the *Sagān-šāh* extended to the Indus, the title indicated an aspiration to displace the Scytho-Parthian kingdom and its ports.

28 Seland 2011.

29 Procopius, *Bella*, ed. and trans. Dewing, 192–3.

30 Sedov 1992: 127–8; Schiettecatte 2008; Sidebotham 2011: 279–82. Cobb (2015: 368, 390) suggests Romans had begun to withdraw from direct participation in the Indian Ocean already in the second century. Power (2012: 61–86) argues for continuity in the Red Sea, demonstrating trade continued, albeit on an attenuated scale. The archaeological evidence for the reorientation of networks remains incontrovertible.

31 Grenet 2005: 129–30; Schindel 2015: 147–55; Rezakhani 2017: 72–86.

32 The site remains unidentified (Bukharin 2007: 134).

33 Grenet 2005: 131–2.

34 See Weber and Wieschöfer 2010 for competition between these two Sasanian sub-kings in the third century.

35 *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, ed. and trans. Bukharin, 40 and 56; Seland 2010: 50–6.

In the latter half of the fourth century, the Iranian court yielded Bactria, as well as even the pretence of ruling regions to the south of the Hindu Kush or in the Indus Valley, to the conquering Huns. But there is no indication of an interruption in trade with East Asia. To the contrary, the western conquests of the Huns in Central Asia appear to have intensified trans-Eurasian trade. Ruling from the Sogdian cities, the Kidarite and Hephthalite Huns – and later the Turks – sought to advance the interests of their Sogdian associates and to develop their network.³⁶ Crucial for the operation of the Sogdian Silk Road was access to Iranian cities, Merv in particular, or to northwest Indian ports. In either case, eastern commodities had to pass through Iranian intermediaries before reaching either Near Eastern or Mediterranean markets, for even if the Sogdians travelled via the Indus – often under Hun rule in the fifth and sixth centuries – Iranian merchants dominated the Indian Ocean.³⁷ As a consequence, the vast majority of the goods exchanged between East Asia, the Near East, and the Mediterranean – whether travelling westward or eastward – entered Iran and its *šahrestān*, that is, infrastructural arenas in which the court could impose taxes. At the Roman frontiers, the Iranian court consistently sought to restrict commerce in high-value commodities to emporia under its control, especially Nisibis, in order to guarantee that only its own dependent merchants trafficked wares to the Mediterranean.³⁸ In the late sixth century, the Turks sought to bypass Iran with an alternative route across the steppe to the Black Sea.³⁹ The attempt is suggestive of the profits that could be preserved through avoiding the customs houses of the Iranian court. It was nevertheless a temporary exception to the normal course of the Silk Road through Iran in late antiquity. The Roman court's attempts to circumvent Iranian control of its access to the Silk Road, whether under Diocletian or Justinian, were wholly unsuccessful, even if the latter's acquisition of the technology of silk production reduced Roman dependency on eastern sources.⁴⁰

Iranian mercantile networks

The Sasanians created corridors linking Roman markets with Central Asia and the Indian Ocean that were likely more efficient and more secure than preceding political arrangements, giving Iranian merchants a decisive advantage over their Roman counterparts. But the question then arises: who were “Iranian” merchants? Thus far, the term has been used in a general sense to designate merchants operating within the empire. It should also distinguish agents operating under Sasanian rule from their Parthian predecessors, for the rise of the Sasanians coincided with the disappearance of a group of merchants that had dominated the Near East and Indian Ocean in the preceding century: the

36 For the urban centres of Hun and Turk rule, see Grenet 2010 and Stark 2008: 210–28.

37 For possible Sogdian competition with Iranian merchants in the Indian Ocean, see Grenet 1996.

38 See Winter (1987) for an unsurpassed survey of Roman–Iranian agreements on trade.

39 Menander the Guardsman, *History*, ed. and trans. Blockley, 114–7; de la Vaissière 2005: 234–7. For evidence of a Sogdian colony on the Black Sea, see de la Vaissière 2006.

40 Winter 1987: 49–50; Brandes 2002: 277; Zuckerman, 2013: 335–6.

Palmyrene network. In the first two centuries CE, the Parthian court had invited merchants from Palmyra to establish bases in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, enabling them to create a network rivalling the route via the Red Sea that had largely supplied Roman demand for eastern goods in the first century CE.⁴¹ The Parthians granted Palmyrene agents extensive political privileges, even installing them as their own governors, in an effort to facilitate trade and to enrich the fisc. Unlike the Greek merchants in Parthian *poleis*, the Palmyrenes were dependent on the kings for their privileges and therefore more likely to provide a share of their profits in customs to a court with minimal capacities for surveillance and coercion.⁴² The comparatively short-lived heyday of Palmyra took place during these two centuries of Parthian–Palmyrene cooperation. The early Sasanians, however, immediately removed the Palmyrene merchants from their territories and dismantled their network. The Roman dependency conducted a war against Iran in the 260s, but failed to re-establish its mercantile communities in the East.⁴³ Indeed, the route to the Mediterranean from the Persian Gulf along the Euphrates went into desuetude until the sixth century.

In place of the Palmyrenes, an alternative network began to form in the third century that linked the Sasanian royal foundations with the northern Mesopotamian cities of Edessa and Nisibis via the Tigris rather than the Euphrates. Already in the early third century, the Christian author of the *Acts of Thomas*, writing in Syriac from an Edessene perspective, could describe the journey of a merchant to the Indus Valley as a mundane event.⁴⁴ Its tale of the conversion of a Parthian king at the hands of a merchant captured the combination of commerce and Christianity characteristic of the network of communities that took shape in late antiquity between Edessa and South India, via Mesopotamia, Khuzestan, and the Persian Gulf. It is revealing that, in the late Sasanian period, East Syrian Christians located their origins in trans-imperial mercantile communities.⁴⁵ The sixth- or early seventh-century *History of Mar Mari* recounted how the merchants of Khuzestan and Fars had been the first inhabitants of the Iranian world to convert to Christianity.⁴⁶ Although its projection of Christian origins into the first century was more hagiographical than historical, the account of the co-development of the religion and commerce retains plausibility.

A network of Christian merchants writing – and perhaps speaking – in Syriac, the Aramaic dialect of Edessa, and capable of crisscrossing the imperial frontiers emerged in the course of the third to fifth centuries. The early Sasanian urban foundations in Khuzestan and Fars, especially Revardashir, served as its nodal points, together with ancillary settlements in eastern Arabia. Significantly, the *History of Mar Mari* specified that “the merchants of Khuzestan reside in cities”,

41 Potts 1990: 145–7; 1997: 95; Gregoratti 2011: 219–23.

42 On competition with the *poleis*, see Gregoratti 2012.

43 Their caravans disappeared from the east by the 260s: Millar 1998: 131.

44 *Acts of Thomas*, ed. Wright, 173, and trans. Klijn, 20.

45 On the role of merchants in the diffusion of Christianity, see Jullien and Jullien 2001; and Harrak 2002.

46 *History of Mar Mari*, ed. and trans. Harrak, 70–75.

that is, the *šahrestān* of Ērān-Xwarrah-Shapur/Karka d-Ledan and Jundishapur/Beit Lapat.⁴⁷ They were directly subject to the authority of the court, and East Syrian agents frequently operated in its service. Christian merchants from Khuzestan, for example, supported the military campaigning in fifth-century Khurasan, facilitating transregional transfers on its behalf.⁴⁸ The Iranian court, moreover, used East Syrian bishops to regulate the mercantile activity in which their co-religionists played a leading role. There were doubtless other, largely undocumented, mercantile communities that took advantage of the opportunities the Sasanians afforded.⁴⁹ What the evidence for the East Syrian network demonstrates is that the court possessed at least one set of dependent agents capable of conducting trade along its continental and oceanic corridors.

The Iranian development of mercantile networks took place more or less in concert with the Hun and Turk development of the Sogdian network in late antiquity, at least between the late fourth and early seventh centuries. The number of political frontiers a commodity had to cross between Chang'an and Constantinople was reduced to three or four, and the interstitial Iranian, Hun, and/or Turk empires provided protection and patronage for their own mercantile networks, reducing the risks of long-distance trade. The demand for eastern goods in West Asia and western goods in East Asia, meanwhile, only increased, as silk garments became almost obligatory for Roman elites and Chinese elites adopted an ever-more exoticized habitus. The Iranian court stood at the very nexus of such trans-Eurasian trade, and merchants operating in its *šahrestān* possessed a virtual monopoly on the traffic in high-value commodities between Central, East, and South Asia and the Near East and Mediterranean. Iranian merchants were far more dependent on the court than their Greek or Palmyrene predecessors, who remained tied to cities with a high degree of political autonomy vis-à-vis the Parthian court. The East Syrian merchants were politically dependent on the kings of kings, even if they operated autonomously in the pursuit of their own profits.

The mutually beneficial relations between Iranian merchants and the court emerges from two historical episodes. In the first, Yazdgird I (r. 399–420) dispatched the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon to investigate a case of piracy: the son of the governor of Fars, the ruler's brother, had reported that "bandits" (Ar. *luṣūṣ*) had stolen a ship load of "of goods and jewels brought from the lands of India and China".⁵⁰ Comparative evidence with the early modern Persian Gulf that such violent competition, often acting on behalf of rival emporia, was characteristic of the pre-modern Indian Ocean.⁵¹ What is important here is the effort of the court to intervene in such an interruption of trade, the surveillance and protection of commerce by a provincial governor, and the role of a bishop as a liaison with East Syrian merchants. The episode is suggestive of how the court sought to secure its trading routes and to protect its merchants

47 *History of Mar Mari*, ed. and trans. Harrak, 74–5.

48 Łazar P'arpec'i, *Patmut' iwn Hayoc'*, ed. Ter-Mkrtschean, 94, and trans. Thomson, 143.

49 See Pourshariati (2014) for an attempt to connect the historical geography of Jewish communities with mercantile routes.

50 *Chronicle of Seert*, v. 1.2, ed. and trans. Scher, 324.

51 Margariti 2008: 573.

through a combination of martial, administrative, and religious powers. The second episode underlines the investment, in the metaphorical and literal sense of the word, of the Iranian court in its mercantile networks. In 568–9, a Turk–Sogdian embassy appealed to the court of Husraw I to allow Sogdian merchants to sell silk within Iranian territories.⁵² The king of kings responded definitively, with a dramatic flourish: he purchased the silk and burned the cargo before the eyes of the envoys, asserting the control of the court and its merchants over traffic in silk through the empire. He poisoned another Turk–Sogdian embassy, severing commercial ties with the qaghanate and provoking the Turks to develop the aforementioned alternative route across the steppe to the Black Sea. The westward transfer of the technology of silk production in the course of the fifth century emboldened Husraw I to attempt to dispense with Central Asian intermediaries altogether. What deserves to be emphasized is the court’s active protection and promotion of its mercantile network.

The Iranian customs house

The involvement of the court in the conduct of commerce implies its stake in mercantile profits. The Iranian fisc, or “treasury” (Middle Persian: *ganj*), will have derived significant revenues from trade, even if taxation of agricultural production was always the primary source of state income.⁵³ In the first instance, the care exhibited for cargo likely reflected the interest of the court in its own investments. As Étienne de la Vaissière has argued for the Huns and Turks, political elites along the Silk Road provided not only protection, but also capital for trans-Eurasian merchants in exchange for a share of their profits.⁵⁴ Such investment remains merely a probability in the case of the Sasanians in the absence of evidence. A more conventional and common mechanism for an ancient state to profit from long-distance trade is the imposition of taxes on imports. Nicholas Purcell has recently underlined that the fiscal demands of ancient states were rarely more effectively asserted than at the ports which merchants were constrained to use.⁵⁵ Although neither the rate of the tax the Iranian court imposed on incoming cargoes nor the scale of importation have been documented, comparison with the Roman evidence suggests revenues from trade could have formed a significant percentage of the court’s income, even rivalling revenues from agricultural production.

Estimates of Roman revenues from trade depend on the evidence of the Muziris papyrus, a record of the cargo of a second-century vessel. It documents the contents, value, and tax assessment of a shipment in transit from a port in Kerala to the Red Sea: nard, ivory, and garments worth 7 million sesterii, of which 25 per cent was yielded to the Roman authorities in the form of the *tetarte*

52 Menander the Guardsman, *History*, ed. and trans. Blockley, 111–5; de la Vaissière 2005: 230–32.

53 On the treasury as an abstract administrative institution, see Gyselen 2003.

54 De la Vaissière 2014: 108–9.

55 Purcell 2005. Bresson (2012) demonstrates how pervasive and onerous such levies typically were in the pre-modern Mediterranean, on the basis of Ptolemaic papyrological evidence.

tax.⁵⁶ At the apex of Roman trade in the Indian Ocean in the first centuries CE, conservative estimates suggest upward of 100 such vessels arrived in the ports of the Red Sea annually. The value of the Muziris cargo is generally considered to have been typical for individual shipments.⁵⁷ If 100 vessels a year passed through the offices of Roman assessors at the ports, the state would have collected roughly 175 million sesterii in revenues on an annual basis in the Red Sea alone.⁵⁸ At between 5 and 10 per cent of the state budget, taxation on trade represented a far more significant contribution to the Roman fisc than an earlier generation of scholarship could have imagined.⁵⁹

It is unlikely that the Sasanians derived less revenue from trade, for they controlled not only the rerouted corridor through the Indian Ocean, but also the overland routes from Central Asia and across Mesopotamia to the Roman Near East. The combination of these various routes of the Silk Road under Iranian control will have enabled the court to extract a share of mercantile profits at least comparable to what the Roman state arrogated at only a handful of its ports in the Red Sea. Even if Roman demand for eastern luxuries declined in the third and fourth centuries, the increased demand of Iranian aristocrats benefiting from demographic and economic growth throughout the Sasanian period would have compensated for a Mediterranean contraction. A plausible estimate places between 100 and 200 million sesterii in the Iranian treasury through taxation on trade, roughly equivalent to between 50 and 100 million drachms. Early Islamic historiographical accounts of the late Sasanian fiscal system reckon its revenues from the wealthiest province of the empire, Southern Mesopotamia, to be between 100 and 150 million drachms and an overall revenue of approximately 300–360 million drachms.⁶⁰ Taxes on trade could have amounted to as much as a third of the court's gross revenue in the late Sasanian period, when the court's mechanisms of agricultural taxation were at their most effective. For the early Sasanian court, revenues from trade would have been far more important as a source of capital, and the rise to dominance of an Iranian mercantile network operating in *šahrestān* helps to explain how the third- and fourth-century court was already able to undertake infrastructural projects on a far grander scale than its Parthian predecessor. In beginning to consolidate power around the Gulf, Ardashir I recognized the importance of trade as a source of fiscal revenue.

The royal cities: production and Eurasian markets

The early Sasanians did not simply seek passively to profit from merchants operating within their territories, but also actively to generate high-value commodities in urban production centres that were marketable along the Silk Road. The establishment of royal cities in Mesopotamia and Khuzestan was

56 De Romanis 2006: 58; Sidebotham 2011: 216–8; Wilson 2015: 23.

57 Sidebotham (2011: 218) argues for far higher average values of incoming cargo, but see the more measured evaluation of Scheidel (2015: 160–1).

58 For the imposition of the *tetarte* at Palmyra, see De Romanis 2006: 62–7.

59 Wilson 2015: 23–4.

60 Banaji 2006: 275.

characteristic of early Sasanian rule, marking a departure from the Parthian period that witnessed only a handful of such foundations. The early Sasanians described the cities they usually named after themselves as their *dstgird*, a Middle Persian term for the rural aristocratic estate together with its dependent labourers.⁶¹ The application of an institution of agrarian exploitation to urban centres highlights how the kings of kings conceived of their cities, namely as sources of labour enlisted on their behalf. The labourers in early Sasanian cities were often deportees from the Roman Empire. The Iranian court engaged in deportation on a Neo-Assyrian scale, beginning with Shapur I's marching of tens of thousands of Romans from Antioch and other Syrian and Anatolian cities eastward to Iran.⁶² Shapur II similarly undertook mass deportations from Roman territory, as did the sixth-century conquerors Kawad and Husraw I. If initially scattered to sites across the empire, Shapur I and Shapur II concentrated deported population at their respective urban foundations in Khuzestan, Weh-Antiyōk-Šāpur (Better [than] Antioch Shapur, more commonly known as Jundishapur) and Ērān-Xwarrah-Šāpur (known today as Ivan-e Kerkha).⁶³ The deported populations of Roman cities included some of the most highly skilled artisanal labourers in the ancient world, and the early Sasanians acknowledged the value of the human capital in their possession. The captives resettled in Khuzestan were organized in artisanal communities under the direct management of the court that specialized in metal-working and textile manufacturing. According to the early fifth-century *Martyrdom of Pusai*, Shapur II regrouped artisans from across the empire in a hierarchically organized "assembly" (Syriac: *knušya*) located in a "house of artisanry" (Syriac: *beit 'umanuta*) alongside the royal palace at Ērān-Xwarrah-Šāpur.⁶⁴

What they produced became leading commodities along the Silk Road. The most important industry at Ērān-Xwarrah-Šāpur was the reworking of silk and wool into the high-quality, polychrome embroidered garments, often adorned with pearls, characteristic of Iranian elite textiles.⁶⁵ Khuzestan's proximity to pastoralist sources of wool and leather in the highlands, to silk and pearls via the Persian Gulf, and to mercantile networks made the region an ideal centre for the manufacture of textiles.⁶⁶ The highest office in Shapur II's artisanal organization was invested in the manager of brocade production, an East

61 *Inscription of Shapur I on the Ka'ba-ye Zardusht*, ed. and trans. Huyse, 42.

62 *Inscription of Shapur I on the Ka'ba-ye Zardusht*, ed. and trans. Huyse, 43; Morony 2004b. On the assimilation and acculturation of Christian Roman captives, see Payne 2015: 64–78 and Smith 2016: 135–45.

63 Schwaigert 1989: 23–33 108–11.

64 *Martyrdom of Pusai*, ed. Bedjan, 209–10. The list of signatories at a synod in Jundishapur in 544 included the heads of tin-, gold-, and silver-smiths: *Synodicon Orientale*, ed. and trans. Chabot, 80 and 332. Pigulevskaya 1963: 159–69, remains the most complete discussion of urban artisanal production.

65 Yatsenko 2006: 215.

66 The extensive development of so-called "hollow ways" around Sasanian settlements in Khuzestan indicates the regular influx of pastoralists to urban centres together with their wool, an indirect testament to the importance of textile production in the region: Casana 2013: 263–5. For the exploitation of pearl resources in the Gulf, see Carter 2005: 166–8. Gyselen and Gasche (1994: 26) emphasize Ērān-Xwarrah-Šāpur's access to mercantile ports.

Syrian Christian named Pusai, who was the descendent of a third-century Roman captive. The origins of the large-scale production of silk brocade known from early Islamic Khuzestan therefore reside in the early Sasanian period. The influence of Iranian textiles on Roman, Central Asian, and Chinese silk garments suggests the production of brocade took place on a massive scale in Sasanian *šahrestān*, for export to extra-imperial markets as well as for distribution to Iranian elites. The court gave its aristocratic office-holders garments and headgear of an otherwise unattainable extravagance that distinguished aristocrats allied with the Sasanians from their lesser peers. Well documented in texts and art, no examples have been recovered archaeologically. The deserts of Egypt and Xinjiang have, however, preserved numerous silk textiles of an Iranian style that attest to the circulation of brocade produced at court far beyond the frontiers of the empire.

At Antinoe, several silk riding coats with roundel decorations corresponding with the garments Iranian aristocrats are known to have worn reveal that even middling Roman elites had begun to adopt an Iranian sartorial style by the sixth century at the latest.⁶⁷ Surviving textiles in Central Asia and China are largely post-Sasanian in date, *c.* 650–750 CE, but exhibit the widespread, almost overwhelming, influence of royalty-produced Iranian brocade on the silks Hun, Turk, and Chinese elites wore.⁶⁸ Art historical evidence for the use of Iranian garments in the East, at Kizil in Xinjiang, dates to the fifth century, although a preference for Western textiles appears as early as the third.⁶⁹ It is unclear whether preserved Iranian textiles were produced in the empire or were the imitations of Roman, Central Asian, or Chinese artisans.⁷⁰ What is clear is that the Iranian-style silk robe or caftan decorated with roundels became a signal feature of the elite habitus across Eurasia, part of what Matthew Canepa calls “aristocratic common cultures”.⁷¹ However indirectly, the textile fragments of Egypt and Xinjiang attest to the widespread export of reworked silk from Iranian reduction centres, westward to the Mediterranean and northeastward into Central and East Asia.

Iranian metal-working similarly attracted consumers across Eurasia. The object most characteristic of Iranian art is the silver vessel, either a deep bowl with a medallion portrait in the early Sasanian period, or plate displaying a portrait in the middle and late Sasanian periods.⁷² Iranian silver portrays the kings of kings and their courts, almost without exception, a subset of the vessels were produced according to identical standards from the same source of silver, while exhibiting stylistic development across the Sasanian period.⁷³ Such vessels are

67 For the carbon-dating of the textiles, see De Moor et al. 2004: 184.

68 Verhecken-Lammens et al. 2006. Iranian textiles preserved in European collections are also almost exclusively post-Sasanian (Overlaet 1999).

69 Gasparini 2014: 145. Trombert (2000: 115) describes a report in the *Weishu* on the arrival of “Persian” textiles at the court of the Northern Wei.

70 Calament (2004: 63–4) argues that the Antinoe garments were most likely imported from Iran. For the dynamism of Central Asian textile production, see Gasparini 2014.

71 Canepa 2010: 121; 2014: 9.

72 Harper 2006: 78.

73 Grabar 1967: 45–6; Harper and Meyers 1981: 124–5, 157; Harper 1998: 217; Harper 2006: 82.

therefore regarded as productions of the court. Khuzestan was likely the primary centre of production, with its concentration of dependent, centrally organized artisans, extensive sources of silver, and access to mercantile networks.⁷⁴ Silver bowls and plates circulated primarily within an aristocratic gift economy, as disbursements from the court to officeholders alongside silk garments. But the cash value so often inscribed in Middle Persian on the vessels indicates their ready convertibility into drachms on the market.⁷⁵ It was the market in Iranian silver that brought plates and bowls to the Mediterranean and Central and East Asia.⁷⁶ The majority of examples were recovered from Central Eurasian contexts, ranging from Siberian excavations to Chinese tombs. The documented influence of Iranian silver on ceramics during the Sui and Tang dynasties attests to its widespread appeal – alongside Sogdian and other Central Asian productions – among Chinese elites.⁷⁷ The cross-pollination evident in Roman and Iranian silver production suggests, moreover, that vessels crisscrossed imperial frontiers, whether as gifts or commodities.⁷⁸

The Iranian court profoundly shaped the course and the content of commercial cargo along the Silk Road. No longer merely a corridor for East Asian silk and other high-value eastern goods, Iran became a site for the reworking of raw materials, most frequently at the court's centres of production, into commodities that became features of the elite habitus within the empire and beyond, as far as the Chinese and Roman capitals. The economic effects of such proto-industrial activities are impossible to measure, even comparatively. The production of signature commodities nevertheless enhanced the political-economic power of the court in two distinct, if interrelated, ways. On the one hand, the crafting of authorizing objects unique in style and splendour gave the court a means not simply of compensating its aristocrats, but of cultivating an inter-visual culture of aristocratic competition. Privileges and titles were communicated through *kulāh*, robes, and silver plates only the court could provide, which definitively surpassed the pre-existing repertoire of status-conferring objects in their ability to impress and to elicit assent.⁷⁹ Aristocrats in the service of the court obtained

74 The silver was largely sourced from the Zagros, where a number of mines have been surveyed (Harper and Meyers 1981: 146). The mints of Khuzestan emitted high volumes of silver coinage throughout the Sasanian period (Daryaee 1999: 140–1; Howard-Johnston 2014: 159–60). The list of signatories at a synod in Jundishapur in 544 included the heads of tin-, gold-, and silver-smiths: *Synodicon Orientale*, ed. and trans. Chabot, 80 and 332.

75 Brunner 1974.

76 As was the case with silk textiles, however, many vessels of Iranian style were produced in Central Asia, where Sogdian artisans produced distinctive forms of silverplate while engaging with Iranian models (Marshak 1971: 38–41).

77 Rawson 1991.

78 Cutler 2005.

79 For the granting of robes (Armenian *patmučan*, Middle Persian *paymōzan*) together with offices, and their role in the articulation of aristocratic hierarchies, see, e.g., *Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk'*, ed. Patkanean, 49, 207, and trans. Garsoïan, 99, 221–2, *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr*, ed. and trans. Grenet, 58–9, *Letter of Tansar*, ed. Minovi, 19, and trans. Boyce, 44. Grabar (1967: 50) suggested the specific crowns of hunters accompanying the kings of kings on silver plates corresponded with the personal crowns of the aristocrats to whom they were granted.

objects that both enriched and empowered them simultaneously, as the earliest allies of the Sasanians were quick to boast.⁸⁰

The diffusion of Iranian textiles and metalwork beyond the empire, on the other hand, suggests the production of a surplus for export. If garments of the highest quality were reserved as the distinctive adornments of the Iranian aristocracy, the same centres could also simultaneously have produced the reworked silk textiles exported to the Roman Empire. Procopius reported the importation of such textiles (*esthēs*) on so large a scale that price increases on the Iranian side attracted the attention of the court of Justinian.⁸¹ The Roman evidence is also suggestive of the revenue of the profits to be gained from the sale of reworked silk textiles: on account of “fabulous profits”, the mid sixth-century Roman court entrusted a class of fiscal administrators, the *kommerkiarioi*, with oversight of the exchange production of silk.⁸² The interest of emperors presiding over a fiscal system far more extensive and intensive than Iran’s in the income from the sale of silk textiles attests to its potential profitability. It is more difficult to assess the scale of trade in silver, but the export of vessels – perhaps the lesser quality examples often described as “provincial” productions – would have complemented revenues from textiles. It is important to stress, moreover, that these commodities were exported to Mediterranean as well as Central Asian and East Asian markets. At the most general level of observation the evidence permits, the sale of commodities produced in the proto-industrial centres of Iranian *šahrestān* could have rivalled taxes on trade as a source of fiscal revenue.

Conclusion

High-value commodities formed only a fraction of the goods exchanged in Iranian markets, in what remained a fundamentally agrarian economy. As Seth Priestman has shown on the basis of a comprehensive analysis of ceramics and the Persian Gulf, the vessels of long-distance trade comprised no more than 3–5 per cent of the containers exchanged at coastal centres.⁸³ Even along a trans-Eurasian corridor, local and regional exchanges far outpaced trans-oceanic traffic. But high-value commodities contributed more to the political economy than to the economy as a whole, for the court could tax them more straightforwardly than agrarian production, especially in light of the challenges of a continental political geography and an aristocratic political culture. The geography of Iran posed major disadvantages to empire formation, not least the difficulty of extracting revenues from disparate, highland territories and the high costs and slow pace of transferring agrarian produce overland to imperial centres. But its predicament also represented a potential advantage: located at the nexus of the largest Eurasian markets for high-value commodities, Rome and China, the court could derive profits from the exchange of goods whose value-to-weight ratio made long-distance, overland trade profitable.

80 *Inscriptions of Kirdir*, ed. and trans. Gignoux, 56 and 68.

81 Procopius, *Anecdota*, ed. and trans. Dewing, 296–7.

82 Brandes 2002: 274–5, 281, 394–5; Zuckerman 2013: 336, 341–4.

83 Priestman 2013: 404–6.

The early Sasanians deliberately took advantage of the mercantile traffic that had increased markedly in the century preceding their rise. Originating in the highlands of Fars, they were keenly aware of the fortunes accruing to Palmyrene merchants and their Parthian patrons on the coastal periphery of the Sasanian heartland, and controlling trans-Eurasian corridors and rerouting them to the court's advantage were major priorities of early Sasanian military campaigns and infrastructural projects. Combining control of mercantile routes, the construction of *šahrestān*, the cultivation of dependent mercantile networks, and the creation of proto-industrial centres enabled the early Sasanian court to maximize the profitability of its geographical advantage. If in the third century the Silk Road chiefly exported raw silk from China to the Mediterranean via the Near East, in the sixth its merchants trafficked silk, silk and woollen textiles, silver vessels, and other commodities in multiple directions. While silk continued to be imported from Central and East Asia, reworked Iranian-style garments were exported from Iranian production centres eastward and westward, giving rise to a pan-Eurasian pattern of elite representation that prefigured the nineteenth-century rise of the business suit. It was the more complex, multidirectional, and multidimensional commerce the Iranian court helped to generate that sustained the expansion of the Silk Road, in infrastructural and economic terms, in late antiquity. It also sustained the expansion of an Iranian court that gradually augmented its infrastructural and economic powers across four centuries without undermining the economic foundations of the aristocracy. Its investments in irrigation, for instance, brought new lands and their cultivation under the purview of the fisc, while respecting – and even reinforcing – aristocratic territorial autonomy. The political economy underpinning Iranian imperialism depended as much on political, economic, and cultural developments far beyond the Near East as on internal preconditions. Even as the Roman and Chinese states at either end of the continent fractured, novel interstitial networks generated unprecedented interconnections and interdependencies among Eurasian cultures, economies, and political orders in late antiquity.

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