

# Bazaars, Merchants, and Trade in Late Antique Iran

Touraj Daryaee

---

Much of Sassanian-era trade in the Near East is overshadowed by interest in the economic history of the Islamic period. This is unfortunate, since many of the structures that came to fore in medieval Near Eastern history were formed and constructed by the Sassanians in late antiquity. In this essay I examine information on the bazaars, merchants, and trade of late antique Iran, including its economic exchanges with Asia and the West. In this way, strands of continuity and rupture in the economic history of the Sassanian and caliphal periods can be gauged.<sup>1</sup> Agricultural production was the main source of income for the Sassanians, but in time trade became as important, especially with the East, as relations with Rome deteriorated. It was not the case that the markets of China directly affected the bazaars in Iran, but networks were being built, based on religious affiliation and guilds, making manufactured commodities or silk production important for Eurasian trade. Some of the agricultural production was not only for local consumption but had a wider distribution in other markets.

## Agricultural Production: Iran and Beyond

The main mode of production and source of income and livelihood in late antique Iran was farming and agriculture. In addition to rice and apricot and olive trees, crops included cereals such as barley, rye, and millet; legumes; forage; fibers for spinning; fruits such as grapes, figs, and dates; nuts; and vegetables.<sup>2</sup> The Sassanians were very much interested in the development of agriculture, and we know that there was an expansion of agriculture and cultivable lands in Khuzistan and Iraq.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the characteristics of land tenure or “feudal” makeup in the Near East and in particular in Iran have similarities with European feudalism.<sup>4</sup> Still, there are major differences as well. These are confirmed by the archaeological evidence from southwestern *Ērānšahr* (Realm of the Iranians), where, unlike in Europe, there are neither

1. Michael G. Morony is a leading scholar in the field of economic history of this region. See Michael G. Morony, “Land Use and Settlement Patterns in Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Iraq,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 2, *Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, ed. G. R. O. King and Averil Cameron (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1994), 221–29; and Morony, “Landholding and Social Change: Lower al-‘Iraq in the Early Islamic Period,” in *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, ed. Tarif Khalidi (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1984), 209–22.

2. Rika Gyselen, “Economy: IV. In the Sasanian Period,” [www.iranica.com/articles/economy-iv](http://www.iranica.com/articles/economy-iv) (15 December 1997).

3. On Khuzistan, see Robert A. Adams, “Agriculture and Urban Life in Early Southwestern Iran,” *Science* 136 (1962): 109–22; and Fereydoun Rahimi-Laridjani, *Die Entwicklung der Besäzterungslandwirtschaft im Iran bis in Sasanidisch-fruhislamische Zeit* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Reichert, 1988). On Iran, see Morony, “Land Use and Settlement Patterns.”

4. Scholars dealing with the Sassanians emphasize this fact. See the early works of Franz Altheim and Ruth Stiehl, *Ein asiatischer Staat: Feudalismus unter den Sasaniden und ihren Nachbarn* (Wiesbaden, Germany, 1954); and Geo Widengren, *Der Feudalismus in alten Iran: Männerbund-Gefolgswesen-Feudalismus in der iranischen Gesellschaft im Hinblick auf die indogermanischen*

Comparative Studies of  
South Asia, Africa and  
the Middle East

Vol. 30, No. 3, 2010

DOI: 10.1215/1089201X-2010-023  
© 2011 by Duke University Press

villages along castles nor fortifications.<sup>5</sup> The reason is that there were several different types of land tenure, such as “state lands,” “endowment land,” and “land with collective ownership,” as well as “land as charitable endowment.”

Even more important than landownership was the issue of water control and, consequently, the development and ownership of *qanāts* (water-supply systems).<sup>6</sup> The building and management of *qanāts* reveal the importance that the Sassanians placed on agricultural development, especially for the arid and hilly regions.<sup>7</sup> Some *qanāts* were several kilometers long and designed to bring water to large settlements.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to the feudal society of medieval Europe, in the Sassanian Empire water was a precious resource, as evidenced by the discussions of the control of water sources in legal texts. In the *Mādayān ī hazār Dādestān* (Sassanian records of court proceedings), chapter 22 deals with the use of *qanāts/katas* (Middle Persian form of *qanāts*). The text includes cases of legal disputes between parties over the use of *qanāts*.<sup>9</sup>

Khuzistan and Iraq were the two Sassanian provinces with the most land under agricultural production. Khuzistan was the richest in terms of the fertility of the soil and the abundance of water, which was channeled through constructed irrigation systems, allowing crops such as rice and sugarcane to be grown and exported. This in turn ensured a tax base for the government, generating revenues and tributes for the royal coffers.<sup>10</sup> Thus the development of irrigation in *Ērānšahr* can tell us much about state reaction to agricultural development and its control. Evidence from the Susiana plain suggests that smaller irrigation canals gave way to larger ones, which cost more money and were labor intensive.<sup>11</sup>

In some Pahlavi texts agricultural products, specifically fruits, are associated with specific regions, suggesting the importance of agriculture and trade in connecting or tying bazaars in Eurasia together. An example comes from a text titled *Khusro and the Page*, which lists the best fruits in the following manner:

anārgil ka abāg šagar xwarēnd pad hindūg  
anārgil xwānēnd ud pad pārsig gōz ī hindūg  
xwānand (ud) bistag ī gurgānig ka pad sōrāpag  
brēzēnd ud naxōd ū tarun ka pad ābkāmag brīšt  
xwarēnd (ud) xormā ī hēratīg kē pad gōz āgand  
ēstēd ud bistag ī tarun ut šiftālūg ī armanīg ud  
balūt ī šāh-balūt abāg sagar ī tavarzatag.<sup>12</sup>

[The coconut when with sugar they eat it, in Indian they call it anārgil and in Persian gōz ī hindūg (Indian nut), and the Hyrcanian pistachio nut, when in saltwater they roast it, and tender chickpeas, when they eat them roasted in ābkāmag (and) the date of Hira which is stuffed with walnut, fresh pistachio nuts and the Armenian peach and chestnuts with solid sugar.]<sup>13</sup>

This passage suggests that, indeed, fruits from different regions were moved about, at least in the last Sassanian period (from the sixth to the seventh centuries CE). The passage acknowledges that Indian nuts, Hyrcanian pistachios, and dates from Hira were all desired by at least the upper class and hence there was a market for them. Moreover, in the eastern Mediterranean region the peach was associated with Iran, as it was in China as well. Peaches were sent to China from Samarqand, which was considered the proxy of all exotic goods in medieval China.<sup>14</sup> Thus there was interest in regional agricultural products throughout Iraq, the Iranian plateau, and Asia.

*Verhältnisse* (Cologne: Westdeutscher, 1969). For the most recent discussion, see Mohsen Zakeri, *Sasanid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society: The Origins of 'Ayyaran and Futuwwa* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1995), 13–22.

5. Robert J. Wenke, “Western Iran in the Partho-Sasanian Period: The Imperial Transformation,” in *The Archaeology of Western Iran: Settlement and Society from Prehistory to the Islamic Conquest*, ed. Frank Hole (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 255. For Iraq, see Adams, “Agriculture and Urban Life in Early Southwestern Iran,” 73.

6. Richard N. Frye, “Feudalism in Iran,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 14.

7. Maria Macuch, *Rechtsskizistik und Gerichtspraxis zu Beginn des siebenten Jahrhunderts in Iran. Die Rechtssammlung des Farroḥmard ī Wahrāmān*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1993), 649.

8. Wenke, “Western Iran,” 255.

9. Jean de Menasce, “Textes pehlevi sur les Qanats,” *Acta Orientalia* 30 (1966): 649.

10. Wenke, “Western Iran,” 253.

11. *Ibid.*, 255.

12. Davoud Mochi-Zadeh, “Xusrov I Kavatan ut Retak, Pahlavi text, Transcription, Transliteration and Translation,” in *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne*, vol. 2, *Acta Iranica* 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 50–52.

13. *Ibid.*, 74.

14. Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 117.

### The Domestic Economy

As for the domestic economy, the seals and bullae from mainly the fifth to the seventh centuries tell us about the Sassanian bureaucracy, administrative organization, and structure.<sup>15</sup> They also provide information on the scope and degree of economic activity, on who was in charge of these activities and the location of markets.<sup>16</sup> In terms of economic activity, we can tell that there was a vibrant domestic exchange, based on the placement of bullae and seal finds in the empire that bear the name of one of the cities or districts of the province of Persis. Several storehouses of bullae have been found, namely, those at Taxt ī Suleymān, Qasr ī Abū Nasr, Āq Tepe, and Dvin (Armenia), from which we can draw certain conclusions. In Āq Tepe, sealings with the names of Kerman and Ardaxšīr-xwarrah from Persis have been found, which should persuade us that there was trade among individuals or companies in different provinces. At Dvin, sealings from Ardaxšīr-xwarrah have been found. The evidence suggests that commodities were brought from a port at Fars and eventually ended up in Armenia.<sup>17</sup> The bullae were used to seal packages destined for caravan or maritime trade, as later historical evidence supports.<sup>18</sup> It is also important to note that bullae finds in East Asia, especially in Mantai in Sri Lanka, attest to Iranian economic activity beyond the Sassanian realm.<sup>19</sup>

The nature of trade depended on who engaged in it. Trade was conducted by companies and religious communities that combined their resources and formed partnerships. The term used for joint partnership in the Middle Persian legal texts is *hambāyih*, which really meant “holder of a common share,” whose joint invest-

ment would have brought a better return and a larger purchasing power. These joint partnerships were probably based on religious association as well (e.g., the Zoroastrians created their own *hambāyih*), but they may have dealt with other religious groups outside of their regional reach. In regard to this form of ownership common in the late Sassanian period, not only the *Mādayān ī hazār Dādestān* but also the fifth book of Ishoboxt, which was composed in Syriac, is devoted to the principle of company or joint partnership.<sup>20</sup> We are well informed as to the legal aspects of trade and business agreements. Drafts of agreements were made, signed, and sealed, with a copy kept at the local *dīwān* (office of registry). These agreements were legally binding and, depending on the violation, were taken before a lesser magistrate (*dādwar ī keh*) or a higher magistrate (*dādwar ī meh*), both of them certainly high-ranking priests.<sup>21</sup> Thus not only was there an organized trade, but the government attempted to control and to regulate and tax commodities, be it by individuals or companies, which mainly appear to have been formed based on religious affiliation.

### The Persian *Wāzār* / Bazaar: The Market Place

The principal economic activity in the cities was undertaken by the merchants (*wāzārgānān*) from the *hutuxsān* (artisans) estate, and commerce (*wāzārgānīh*) was conducted in the bazaar (*wāzār*). Each group of artisans occupied a specific section (Persian *rāste*) of the bazaar. This information is gained from the *Dēnkard* (8.38), where a specific rule existed “about the series of shops in the bazaar belonging to various artisans” (*abar ān ī kirrōkkārān ek ek rastag ī wāzār*).<sup>22</sup> A list of various professions that occu-

15. Robert Göbl was one of the first scholars to classify the seals and sealings based on typology. See Robert Göbl, *Der sāsānische Siegelkanon* (Braunschweig, Germany: Kinkhardt and Bierman, 1973). See also Richard N. Frye, “Sassanian Clay Sealings in the Baghdad Museum,” *Sumer* 26 (1970): 240; Frye, “Methodology in Iranian History,” in *Neue Methodologie in der Iranistik*, ed. Richard N. Frye (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1974), 68; Rika Gyselen, *La géographie administrative de l'empire sassanide, les témoignages sigillographiques* (Paris: Centre National pour la Recherche Scientifique and Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 1989).

16. Philippe Gignoux, “Sceaux chrétiens d'époque sassanide,” *Iranica Antiqua* 15 (1980): 299–314. For a thorough bibliography, see Philippe Gignoux and Rika Gy-

selen, *Sceaux sasanides de diverses collections privées* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 1982); Gignoux and Gyselen, *Bulles et sceaux sassanides de diverses collections*, *Studia Iranica Cahier* 4 (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 1987).

17. Vladimir G. Lukonin, “Political, Social, and Administrative Institutions: Taxes and Trade,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 742–43.

18. Richard N. Frye, “Sasanian Seal Inscriptions,” in *Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte und deren Nachleben, Festschrift für Franz Altheim zum 6.10.1968 (Contributions on Ancient History and Its Influences: Festschrift for Franz Altheim, for 6 October 1968)*, ed. Ruth Stiehl and Hans E. Stier, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969, 1970), 1:79, 84.

19. Richard N. Frye, “Commerce: III. In the Parthian and Sasanian Periods,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 6:62.

20. See Nina Pigulevskaya, “Economic Relations in Iran during the Fourth through Sixth Centuries A.D.,” *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute*, no. 38 (1956): 67.

21. Jamsheed K. Choksy, “Loan and Sales Contracts in Ancient and Early Medieval Iran,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 31 (1988): 210.

22. D. M. Madan, *The Pahlavi Dinkart* (Bombay: Fort, 1911), 757.10, trans. Ahmad Tafazzoli in his “List of Trades and Crafts in the Sassanian Period,” *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 7 (1974): 192.

pied a section of the bazaar included the blacksmith (*āhengar*); iron molder (*āhen-paykar*); silver-smith (*asēmgar*); silver molder (*asēm-paykar*); roof maker (*āškōb-kardār*); string maker (*bandkār*); those who worked with mortar (spice makers?) (*čārūgar*); ironsmith (literally *steelsmith*, *čēlāngar*); “ironsmith” tailor (*darzīg*); dressmaker (*wastarg-kardār*); porcelain-pot maker (*dōsēngar* or *jāmīg-paz*); carpenter (*durgar*); washerman (*gāzar*); shoemaker (*kafšgar*); shoemaker of a kind of shoe made of strings (*surgar*); potter (*kulwārgar*); baker (*nānbāg*); book painter (*nibēgān-nigār*); painter in general (*nigārgar*); cup maker (*payālgar*); tanner (*pōstgar*); ironsmith (*pōlāwad-paykar*); dyer (*rangraz*); various builders (*rāzān*); barber (*wars-wirāy*); tent maker (*wiyāngar*); cook, in the sense of making sweets and other finger foods in the bazaar (*xwāhligar*); tablecloth maker (?) (*xwāngar*); goldsmith (*zarīgar*); and saddler (*zēngar*).<sup>23</sup>

There were various other professions, but whether they were in the bazaar cannot be confirmed. Each artisan (*kirrōg*) guild was overseen by a guild master (*kirrōgbed*; Syriac *qārūbed*). As some of the skilled workers were either settled people from Syria or Roman prisoners, we find that some of the guild masters were Christians. These included Posi and Barāz, who served in this function.<sup>24</sup> Of course, many of the better craftsmen were settled in the royal workshops, which produced commodities for the king of kings and his family. The activity and prices of the bazaar were overseen by the bazaar inspector (*wāzārbed*), who probably represented the artisan class. The office was already in existence in the third century CE, since it is mentioned in the court of Šābuhr I.<sup>25</sup> It was in these centers where local items were produced and commodities from other provinces as well as some foreign products entered the cities via the caravans (*kārwan*). These caravans went into other cities of the empire or farther and were guided by a caravan leader (*sārtwā*), who was either hired by the merchant or in joint business with him.<sup>26</sup>

## The Merchants

While there were Iranian merchants living as far as China trading in the markets, the Zoroastrian merchants were looked down on and treated differently from the three traditional classes of priests, warriors, and farmers. This is apparent by looking at class structure in relation to the various duties of men in the Middle Persian text *Mēnōg ī Xrad* (*Spirit of Wisdom*) (chaps. 30–31), where the chapters are organized by questions. Question thirty asks about the responsibility of the priests, the warriors, and the peasantry. One was to hold the religion, the other to strike the enemy and keep the empire safe, and the last to cultivate the land. The merchants curiously are treated separately in the next question (32) and are spoken of negatively: “The function of the workers is this that they would not or should not engage in a work that they are not familiar with and do well and with precision what they know, and receive a fair wage.”<sup>27</sup> This may be one reason the Sogdian Christians and Manichaeans were the main traders in Central Asia and China.

## Money and Exchange

While the barter system was in use at the local levels in villages, the Sassanians minted a large number of coins, perhaps more than at any time in the history of the premodern period. The units and types of coins struck were the gold *dēnār*, silver *drahm*, one-sixth-silver *dang*, and copper *pašiz*, which was used for local daily transaction. The increase in the use of copper and bronze coinage attests to the increase in trade with money;<sup>28</sup> however, the minting of silver coinage was much more prevalent. The silver *drahm* weighs about 4.25 grams. Coins found from the time of Ardashir, the founder of the Sassanian dynasty, are uniformly of this weight but vary typologically. Until the late fifth century CE, the coins did not indicate where they were minted, making it difficult to gauge the number of mints and the amount of minting at

23. Tafazzoli, “List of Trades,” 193–96.

24. *Ibid.*, 192.

25. Šābuhr Ka’be-ye Zardošt 35, trans. Michael Back, *Die sassanidischen Staatsinschriften. Studien zur Orthographie und Phonologie des Mittelpersischen der Inschriften zusammen mit einem etymologischen Index des mittelpersischen Wortgutes und einem Textcorpus*

*der behandelten Inschriften*, Acta Iranica 18 (Tehran and Leiden: Brill 1978); and more recently Ph. Huyse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka’ba-l Zardušt* (ŠKZ), Band I, *Corpus inscriptionum Iranicarum* (London: University of London. School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999).

26. Tafazzoli, “List of Trades,” 195.

27. *Mēnōg ī Xrad* (Tehran: Tus Publishers, [1380] 2001), 48–49.

28. On the widespread use of bronze coinage in the Susiana plain, see Wenke, “Western Iran,” 271.

each location. While more than one hundred mint marks are known, no more than twenty mints were producing the majority of the mint marks in the Sassanian Empire.<sup>29</sup>

The mint marks on the reverse and the date (a date indicates which monarch ruled at the time the coin was struck) give us an idea of the regularity of the mints and which were most productive and stable. Certainly, those close to economic centers such as the province of Persis had a huge output that supported the Persian Gulf trade, while the mints of Media had far less output.<sup>30</sup> Mints also went into overproduction during times of war. For example, during the reign of Xusrō II (590–628 CE), a huge amount of coinage was produced and used to finance the long war with Rome. The silver *drahms* were so well known that places as far as India imitated Sassanian coinage, which attests to the economic power and prestige of the Sassanian Empire in the eyes of its neighbors. It is important that, although we do not have evidence of an agreement between the Romans and Sassanians in terms of what types of coins were to be struck, the Romans' metal of choice for minting was gold, while the Sassanians used silver. This may have been a tacit agreement between the two empires, wherein Sassanian silver would be acknowledged as the silver coin of choice, as is apparent from its use as far as western China.

### Local Production

According to the Chinese chronicle *Ko-Ku-Yao*, steel was also produced in Iran and then exported to China.<sup>31</sup> The Romans considered "Persian steel" to be secondary in quality only to "Indian steel," as the Sassanians themselves also confirm, for Middle Persian texts, to signify a good Indian sword, mention that it was made of

steel.<sup>32</sup> In the *Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Pabag (Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān)*, Ardashir fights with an "Indian sword" (*šamsēr ī hindīg*), which was taken from the Parthian royal treasury.<sup>33</sup> We have evidence of silver smelting in Khorasan, Azerbaijan (the Qara Dagħ mountain range, close to modern-day Tabriz), and also near Rasht and Massula, in Qazvin. The abundant availability of iron, as scholars suggest, can be found in many regions of Iran.<sup>34</sup> The textile industry, specifically carpet weaving, was also known in Iran.<sup>35</sup> From the Achaemenid period, sources tell us, the Persians had carpets (*psilotapis*) from Greece, which were used by the king. In the seventh century, when Heraclius sacked Xusrō II's royal treasury (628 CE), carpets (*tapis*) are mentioned, which may have given rise to the Byzantine Greek word for carpet weaver, *tapi-dyphos*, from Persian.<sup>36</sup>

### Eurasian Trade in Late Antiquity

Early Sassanian economic interests were manifested through several major activities and through politics. The first factor in the development of the Sassanian economy was the control of the Persian Gulf. This, as we know, was done from the time of Ardashir I onward, with ports established on the Persian and Arab sides of the Persian Gulf.<sup>37</sup> We are told that once Ardashir had defeated Ardavan and controlled the plateau, he made incursions into Oman, Bahrain, and Yamama, defeating Sanatruq, the king of Bahrain.<sup>38</sup> The reason for the establishment of forts along the coast, however, is not clear, since it is implausible that a Sassanian navy would have been present at these forts. Still, they could have acted as hospices or storage. Arabic sources state that during the Sassanian period the Persians controlled the shores and strands of the

29. Robert Göbl, "Sassanian Numismatics," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3, pt. 2: 332.

30. Touraj Daryaee, "The Persian Gulf Trade in Late Antiquity," *Journal of World History* 14 (2003): 1–16.

31. See Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica; Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran, with Special Reference to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products* (Field Museum of Natural History: Chicago, 1919), 515.

32. R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, vol. 3 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 62.

33. Henrik S. Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1964), 6, line 7; also see F. Grenet, *La Geste d'ardashir fils de pābag, Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, editions A Die, Paris, 2003.

34. M. Maczek estimates that Persia contains 13 million tons of iron. M. Maczek, "Der Erzbergbau im Iran," *Montan Rundschau* 7 (1956): 198; see also Hans E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia: Their Development, Technology, and Influence on Eastern and Western Civilizations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1955), 273.

35. Bagher Parhām, "Tārikh-e khoan-e farš-bāfi-e fārs" ("The Ancient History of Carpet Weaving in Fars"), *Ayandeh* 7 (1981): 262–63.

36. Wulff, *Traditional Crafts of Persia*, 213.

37. Andrew Williamson, "Persian Gulf Commerce in the Sassanian Period and the First Two Centuries of Islam," *Bāstān Chenāsī wa Honar-e Iran* 9–10 (1972): 97–109; Monique Kervran, "Forteresses, entrepôts et commerce: Une histoire à suivre depuis les rois sassanides jusqu'aux princes d'ormuz," in *Itinéraires d'orient, hommages à Claude Cahen*, ed. Raoul Curjel and Rika Gyselen, *Res Orientales* 6 (1994), 325–50.

38. Dinawari, *Akhbār al-tivāl*, translated into Persian by Mahmud Mahdavi Dāmghāni (Tehran: Nay, 1364/1985), 44; Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 27–28.

sea, while the Arabs lived in the mountains and deserts.<sup>39</sup> We have very little information on the Sassanian navy, and it does not appear to have been a major force. Yet sources mention the Sassanian navy several times, once during the time of Ardashir and again during the time of Khusro I.

In the *Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Pabag*, we encounter one of these ports, called Bokht-Ardashir (modern Bushehr), which among other evidence demonstrates the importance of the Persian Gulf for the early Sassanians.<sup>40</sup> The importance of this port is that Bokht-Ardashir was linked to Kazerun and Shiraz inland by a road that carried commodities for export to other regions. Also, its closeness to the center of Persis, that is, to Shiraz, must have made it a significant port.<sup>41</sup> Another active Sassanian port was Siraf, linked by road to Firozabad and also to Shiraz, where pottery shards and coins are among the other finds suggesting a Sassanian port.<sup>42</sup> Other ports included the site of Hormuz, at the Strait of Hormuz, which was connected to the northeast, via Julfar to Sirjan.<sup>43</sup> Also, the port of Guzeran, or Kujaran-Ardashir, was located near Bandar ī Lengeh, which, again, had a role in trade and met the needs of the city of Darab in Fars.<sup>44</sup> One can also mention the island of Khark which appears to have been a late Sassanian settlement in the fourth century CE, thirty-seven miles northwest of Bushehr.<sup>45</sup>

These ports were probably important centers for trade, not only as sites where com-

modities were imported into Iran and taken to the inland cities, but also as stopping places for cargo going from Mesopotamia to Asia and to East Africa and back.<sup>46</sup> We know that in the early Islamic period the houses that were built at the port of Siraf were made from a wood called Sāj, which was brought from India and Zanzibar, suggesting the import and export of commodities from Asia and East Africa.<sup>47</sup> Sassanian coin finds at Siraf demonstrate the occupation of the site from the Sassanian period as well.<sup>48</sup> However, it should be mentioned that neither the Sassanian navy nor the state appears to have actively pursued this control of the seas and that the Persian merchants dominated the trade without heavy state intervention.

The Sassanians competed with the Romans and disputed trade as far as Sri Lanka, and there appears to have been a Sassanian colony composed of merchants in Malaysia.<sup>49</sup> Persian horses were shipped to Ceylon, and a Persian colony was established at that island, where ships came from Persia to its port.<sup>50</sup> Sassanian control of the Sind region is also apparent from the recent coin finds that are copies of the King Piruz type, suggesting a fifth-century presence or influence.<sup>51</sup> The Iranians built other ports to expand their trade, in places such as Muscat in Oman during the sixth century, with the importance of this port for Persian traders continuing into the Islamic period, as the ships sailing from India to Aden stopped there.<sup>52</sup>

At Suhar, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf in the Sea of Oman, there appears to have been

39. S. M. Awtab, *Kitāb ansāb al-'arab*, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Arabe 5019, 271r.; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 28.

40. Valeria Fiorani Piacentini, "Ardashir I Pāpakān and the Wars against the Arabs: Working Hypothesis on the Sasanian Hold on the Gulf," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 15 (1985): 57–78.

41. Rémy Boucharlat and Jean-François Salles, "The History and Archaeology of the Gulf from Fifth Century B.C. to the Seventh Century A.D.: A Review of the Evidence," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arab Studies* 11 (1981): 66.

42. Valeria Fiorani Piacentini, *Merchants, Merchandise, and Military Power in the Persian Gulf (Sūriyān/Shahriyāj-Sirāf)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale Dei Lincei, 1992), 117.

43. Boucharlat and Salles, "History and Archaeology of the Gulf," 66.

44. Beatrice de Cardi, "A Sasanian Outpost in Northern Oman," *Antiquity* 46, no. 184 (1972): 306.

45. Boucharlat and Salles, "History and Archaeology of the Gulf," 71; Roman Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg* (Tehran: Iranian Oil Operating Companies, 1960), 10.

46. For Sassanian presence in eastern Africa, see Neville Chittick, "Kilwa: A Preliminary Report," *Azania: The Journal of the British Institute of History and Archaeology of East Africa* 1 (1996): 7.

47. Istaxrī, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, ed. Iraj Afshar (Tehran: Bongah-e Tarjomeh, 1347/1968), 113.

48. For Sassanian presence at Siraf, see David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, "Sasanian Maritime Trade," *Iran* 11 (1973): 35; Dietrich Huff, "Archaeology: IV. Sasanian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, www.iranica.com/articles/archeology-iv (accessed 16 November 2010); and Nicholas M. Lowick, *The Coins and Monumental Inscriptions*, Siraf 15 (London: British Institute of Persian Studies, 1985), 11–16.

49. David Whitehouse, "Maritime Trade in the Arabian Sea: The Ninth and Tenth Centuries AD," in *South*

*Asian Archaeology*, ed. Maurizio Taddei (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale; Naples: Seminario di Studi Asiatici, 1977), 2:868.

50. J. Kröger, "Sasanian Iran and India: Questions of Interaction," in *South Asian Archaeology*, ed. H. Härtel (1979), 447; *Kosma aigyptiou monachou Christianika topographi: The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (New York: Kakluyt Society and Burt Franklin), 365.

51. B. Senior, "Some New Coins from Sind," *Oriental Numismatic Society*, no. 149 (1996): 6. I thank William B. Warden for bringing to my attention this fact and pictures of other similar coins found in the Sind area.

52. H. M. al-Naboodah, "The Commercial Activity of Bahrain and Oman in the Early Middle Ages," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 22 (1992): 81; Bertold Spuler, "Trade in the Eastern Islamic Countries in the Early Centuries," in *Islam and the Trade in Asia*, ed. D. S. Richards (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 14.

a Sassanian fort that may have participated in trade, as well as ports at Damam and Jurrafār.<sup>53</sup> A Persian outpost at Ghanam, in the Strait of Hormuz, may have overseen shipping in the Persian Gulf.<sup>54</sup> The same can be said for Banbhore in Sind, and Kilwa on the east coast of Africa, where few Sassanian-Islamic wares were found.<sup>55</sup> In the Umm al-Ma region, there is also evidence of a Sassanian presence, where green-glazed pots from Iraq were found.<sup>56</sup> Evidence of Sassanian material has also been found at Salihyah near Khawran in Ras al-Khaimah.<sup>57</sup> The presence of Iranians at these ports suggests a campaign in controlling the shipping close to these outposts.

By the sixth century it appears that the Sassanians were not only bent on controlling the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea but were also looking farther east, bringing them into conflict with Rome. Silk appears to have been an important commodity the Romans wanted, and they were intent on circumventing the Iranian traders to obtain a cheaper price for it and other commodities. Consequently, the Romans had to seek the aid of Christian Ethiopians, who with the backing of the Sassanians were expelled from the region by the Yemenis.<sup>58</sup>

For Sassanian trade with China, evidence of imported objects such as Tang dynasty export wares and other items from Rome were found at the port of Siraf.<sup>59</sup> This trade with China was conducted through two avenues, the famous Silk Road, for which we have much information, and the sea route. The rate of trade from these two avenues differed according to the time period. That is, the rate of trade was not constant in either way and tended to fluctuate. The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus tells us that in the fourth century, "all along the

coast (of the Persian Gulf) is a throng of cities and villages, and many ships sail to and fro."<sup>60</sup> This maritime trade became more important because of the political situation, and hence ports of Persis became increasingly central to this trade. From these ports, Persian traders went to China for silk, since the Romans also decided to do the same. The Persian merchants, we are told, did not sit idly by but established their centers in China as well. Rome could do little about the establishment of ports and Persian colonies in East Asia, even though Justinian attempted to co-opt Ethiopian merchants in the sixth century. But we are told that it was "impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbors where the Indian ships first put in, (since they inhabit the adjoining country) and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes."<sup>61</sup>

Finds of Sassanian coins off the coast of China again suggest the maritime trade between this region and Persia. At least three sites where Sassanian coins were found near the sea in southeast China make it probable that ships from the Persian Gulf sailed to East Asian ports. These sites are Kukgong, Yangdak, and Suikai, which had connections with trade in the Persian Gulf.<sup>62</sup> That many of the coins belong to the late fifth through the seventh centuries again attests to the importance of the Persian Gulf in the late Sassanian period.<sup>63</sup> The date of the coins demonstrates that they were deposited at Kukgong and Yangdak in the Ch'i period (497–501).<sup>64</sup> Finds of Sassanian coins in the southeast coastal region of China also attest to this exchange.<sup>65</sup> Although their number is small, it may be suggested that these coins came through the sea trade. Kavad I's coins were found in the mari-

53. J. C. Wilkinson, "Sūhār in the Early Islamic Period: The Written Evidence," in Taddei, *South Asian Archaeology*, 2:888.

54. De Cardi, "Sasanian Outpost," 308; D. T. Potts, "A Sasanian Lead Horse from North Eastern Arabia," *Iranica Antiqua* 28 (1993): 197.

55. Whitehouse, "Maritime Trade," 2:874–79.

56. Beatrice de Cardi, "The British Archaeological Expedition to Qatar, 1973–1974," *Antiquity* 48, no. 191 (1974): 199.

57. Beatrice de Cardi, "Archaeological Survey in N. Trucial States," *East and West* (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente), 21 (1971): 260, 268.

58. Spuler, "Trade in the Eastern Islamic Countries," 81–82.

59. For Persians in China, see Edward H. Schafer, "Iranian Merchants in T'ang Dynasty Tales," *University of California Publications in Semitic Philology* 11 (1951): 403–22. On Siraf, see David Whitehouse, "Chinese Stoneware from Siraf: The Earliest Finds," in *South Asian Archaeology*, ed. N. Hammond, 1971, 241–43.

60. Ammianus Marcellinus, translated by J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 13.6.11.

61. Procopius, *History of Wars*, translated by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), I.xx.12.

62. Hsia Nai, "A Survey of Sasanian Silver Coins Found in China," *K'ao Ku 'Hsiieh Pao*, no. 1 (1974): 93, 107.

63. *Ibid.*, 95; Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 101.

64. Hsia Nai, *Studies in Chinese Archaeology* (Peking: Institute of Archeological Academia Sinica, 1961), 171.

65. François Thierry, "Sur les monnaies sassanides trouvées en Chine," in *Circulations des monnaies: Des marchandises et des biens*, ed. Rika Gyselen, *Res Orientales* 5 (Bures-sur-Yvette, France: Peeters, 1993), 90, map.

time province of Guangdong, with mint signatures from Persis and adjoining regions, and appear to have come via the sea route.<sup>66</sup> The presence of Persian colonies in China has also been confirmed by the existence of Zoroastrian fire temples found in the Ch'angan region in southern China.<sup>67</sup>

Land trade is much better documented, and the importance of the Silk Road should be mentioned, because it connected the East to the West, where Iran became the *enterpôt*, or middle region, of this international commerce. The various taxes and tolls placed on commodities going from east to west would certainly have benefited the royal treasury, which kept up good roads along with good amounts of tolls. Michael G. Morony mentions that the creation of new settlements may be seen not only in the campaign of the Sassanians to create new cities and populate the region but also in the shift from remote, less accessible locations to locations that lay on the trade routes concentrating on the commercial economy.<sup>68</sup> The one product that was in demand in the Roman Empire and which the Sassanians sought to control the trade of was silk. The Sassanians created workshops at Susa, Jondishapur, and Shushtar to rival the Chinese and the Syro-Phoenician workshops, importing raw silk yarn and creating designs that were to be imitated in Egypt and into the Islamic period.<sup>69</sup>

The large finds of Sassanian silver coins from the end of the fifth and sixth centuries in China suggest intense trade by the Sassanians with the East, which was part of what has been called "diplomatic commerce."<sup>70</sup> The Sogdians were prominent merchants on the Silk Road, known for their involvement in the silk trade and their control of the Central Asian trade. Al-

though they were active in trading, the change in the monetary policies coincides with the Sassanians economic involvement with the Chinese. Beginning exactly with the sixth century we can see, based on coinage, a new stage in economic development and trade in Central Asia, specifically Sogdiana.<sup>71</sup>

Another important point is that rather than engage in commerce and the purchase of goods from Syria, where some of its products such as glass were in demand, the Sassanians had decided that, by deporting the skilled workers of the region and settling them in the newly developed imperial cities, they would be able to compete against the Romans.<sup>72</sup> There seems to have been steady exchange and commerce in late antiquity between the Sassanians and the Romans, but the Perso-Roman rivalry must have brought pressures on various trade routes. For example, Armenia, a scene of rivalry between the two sides, was also a market where trade and exchange took place. The Byzantine historian Procopius states that Persarmenia (eastern Armenia under Sassanian control after the middle of the fifth century CE) was an important center for the Sassanians and the Romans to trade in Indian and Iberian products.<sup>73</sup>

Now, depending on the political problems in Armenia, Mesopotamia became an important route and expanded the volume of trade. Of course, during the heated wars in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, these routes must have been reduced significantly, making Arabia in turn a very important route, which probably had far-reaching consequences for the development of the Arabian economy and Islam as well. The two empires had made various treaties, and the economic interests became more important and the rivalry more intense as

66. Joe Cribb, "Far East," in *A Survey of Numismatic Research, 1978-1984*, ed. Martin Price, Edward Besly, David MacDowall, Mark Jones, and Andrew Oddy (London: International Numismatic Commission, 1986), 2:814.

67. Rose Chan Houston, "A Note on Two Coin Hoards Reported in Kao Ku," *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes* 20 (1975): 158-59.

68. Michael G. Morony, "Land Use and Settlement Patterns in Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Iraq," in G. R. O. King and Averil Cameron, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, II Land Use and Settlement Patterns* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994), 227.

69. N. N. Chegini and A. V. Nikitin, "Sasanian Iran—Economy, Society, Arts, and Crafts," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, ed. B. A. Litvinsky, Zhang Guand-da, and R. Shabani Samghabadi (Paris: UNESCO, 1996), 3:43. One can view the Sassanian influence on silk cloth patterns as far as Egypt. See Prudence O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire* (New York: The Asia Society, 1978).

70. Thierry, "Sur les monnaies sassanides trouvées," 125-28.

71. B. I. Marshak and N. N. Negmatov, "Sogdiana," in Litvinskiy et al., *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, 3:234; Etienne de La Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005).

72. Michael G. Morony, "Trade and Exchange: The Sasanian World to Islam," *The Late Antiquity and Early Islam Workshop, Trade and Exchange A.D. 565-770*, unpublished draft, 7.

73. Procopius, *The History of the Wars*, 480-81; Morony, "Trade and Exchange," 11.

time went by. By the sixth century, the *Codex Justinianus* (4, 63–64) mentions that both Roman and Persian merchants must trade in areas designated by the two empires, with neither side trespassing on the other's trade zones.<sup>74</sup> This policy was devised to keep the economic secrets of the state and consequently encouraged Persian merchants to stay in Persia and travel east as far as China and the Roman merchants to stay within their imperial domain and use other subjects such as the Ethiopians to make their way to the east via the waterways. The heavy tariffs and tolls placed by both sides, sometimes as high as 10 percent in certain regions where the meeting of merchants was agreed on, made regions not under Roman or Persian control such as the market place at Ash-Shihr, on the southern Arabian coast, much more popular.<sup>75</sup>

### Conclusion

This overview of the trade and economic situation in late antique Iran should provoke certain conclusions. First and foremost is that there was a break from the preceding Parthian period, wherein no attempt at the centralization of the economic outlook was made. Second, the Sassanians created rules, regulations, and, above all, an infrastructure for trade within the empire and for interregional trade, which introduced a new phase over the *longue durée* of the economic history of the Iranian plateau. Furthermore, this infrastructure became the existing model for the subsequent Umayyad and especially the Abbasid caliphates. While the Umayyad drew on both the Iranian and Roman traditions and economic models, the Abbasids from the eighth century CE emphasized and continued the Iranian tradition. Of course, there were changes and the creation of an economic system from North Africa to India. The Sassanians had aspired to such a worldview, especially during the time of Khusro II, after his forces had taken over Egypt and made inroads into Libya. Sassanian coinage was being copied and minted in the Sind region in India, but the Iranians were never able to create a lasting economic foothold in the Eurasian

world. The Abbasid Empire was the successful heir to this worldview and outlook.

But there is something else that is indicative of Sassanian economic importance for the Islamic period. The surviving Persian terminology of the Sassanians, including words such as *drahm*, *pašiz*, *kārwan*, *wāzār*, and others, suggests the impact that the late antique period had not only on the Iranian plateau and Iraq (Mesopotamia) but beyond the traditional home of the Iranians. We should be mindful that when the Arabs conquered Iran and Iraq, Iranian merchants and traders were already stationed as far as China, Arabia, and Syria. Their business did not stop, nor did their tradition. They had only now to continue under the rule of a new world empire. S

74. Morony, "Trade and Exchange," 11.

75. Menander Protector, *Excerpta historica iussu imp. Constantini Porphyrogeniti confecta*, I, ed. C. de Boor, Berlin, I, 180; Morony, "Trade and Exchange," 12.