

The Cultural Impact of Sasanian Persia along the Silk Road – Aspects of Continuity¹



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My paper focuses on the Sasanian Empire's impact on its surrounding world and explores the question of why its cultural achievements had such a long-lasting influence far beyond the borders of the Iranian lands, even after the decline of the dynasty. This relates to the role of the Sasanians in international trade and their political aim of controlling the land and maritime trade networks that connected Iran with the Mediterranean world, Central Asia, China, India, and the Arabian Peninsula.

These land and maritime trade networks subsumed under the term “Silk Road”, a romantic notion which was coined in the 19th century and is still very popular today. However, the scholarly concept of the “Silk Road” as trade routes connecting China with Rome and Byzantium often neglects or underestimates the important role that the Persian Empires played in this political and cultural interaction between East and West.² We should also not forget that the primary aim of all participants in this power game was not to enable merchants to transport silk – which incidentally was just one of the many trade goods that were transported from east to west or vice versa – or to enable pious monks to travel from China to India, but to extend and secure their political influence, facilitate and expedite communication between administrative units, and to move troops from one point to another as quickly as possible. Although I agree with my colleague Khodadad Rezakhani that the Silk Road *stricto sensu* never existed,³ I would not go so far as to eliminate the notion of the Silk Road from our scholarly concepts, for it has become a synonym for cross-cultural interaction and attracts public interest on our academic endeavours; it is, however, vital that we clearly define what we are talking about!

Trade connections between Central Asia and the Mediterranean world go back to the third millennium BCE, when for example the precious lapis lazuli and tin-bronze from Afghanistan was sent to Troy.⁴

In the middle of the first millennium BCE, the Persians created the first world empire in history, uniting Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Libya, Arabia, as well as parts of Central Asia and India, under their kingship.⁵ It was the Achaemenid system of administration and infrastructure that paved the way for the astonishing economic prosperity of the empire, while facilitating lively cultural exchange between the various satrapies.⁶

¹This article is the enlarged version of a paper presented at a conference organized by the Abegg-Foundation, Riggisberg (Switzerland) in September 2011.

²Rezakhani 2011.

³Rezakhani 2011.

⁴Pernicka 2001.

⁵Wiesehöfer 1993, pp. 25-148.

⁶Briant 2012.



In the social relations between the Achaemenid king and the members of his court, gifts played an important role in expressing the king's gratitude for loyalty and services rendered. A famous example of this is the Persian and Median dress as described in Greek literature which had to be worn at court and indicated the rank of the bearer according to its colour and quality. In addition, weapons, golden jewellery, and vessels made of precious metals were used as royal gifts and became status symbols for their owners.⁷ In return, the king also received gifts from his subjects, which were presented on special festive occasions.⁸

With the Macedonian king Alexander the Great and his successors – the Seleucids, the Greco-Bactrians, and the Indo-Greek kings – Greek language and culture was disseminated across the Iranian world as far as Central Asia and northwest India.

In the core of the Iranian lands, on the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia, the Greek Seleucids were displaced by the Parthians, Iranian nomads from the Central Asian steppes, who penetrated into Seleucid territory before the middle of the third century and finally conquered Mesopotamia with its capital Seleucia in 141 BCE. With the conquest of Mesopotamia the Parthians also became a serious threat to the Roman Empire, which had succeeded the Seleucids in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁹

Although the Parthians or Arsacids were very much attracted by Greek culture, they also revered their Iranian heritage. Under their rule, which lasted until the beginning of the 3rd century CE, life in Iran and Mesopotamia was characterized by economic prosperity and vibrant cultural exchange between the Iranian, Greek, and Semitic populations. In international trade, the semi-independent caravan cities such as Hatra and Palmyra occupied the most prominent positions. The wealth of their population is reflected in the monumental architecture of official and private buildings as well as in the sculptures and funerary monuments which served to express the elite's rank and status.¹⁰

Astonishing evidence of international trade relations in the first century CE was discovered by French archaeologists in 1937 outside the eastern borders of the Parthian Empire, in Begram, an ancient settlement 80 km north of Kabul on the southern fringes of the Hindu Kush. At that time, the ancient province of Paropamisadae, in which Begram was situated, was already under the rule of the rising Kushan dynasty. This treasure, which was interpreted as being part of some commercial stock, was stored in two rooms and included among other artifacts carved Indian ivories (some of which may also have been locally produced), Roman glassware from Egypt and Syria and lacquerware from the Chinese Han dynasty period.¹¹

The evidence provided by the Begram treasure is complemented by the exceptional findings from Tillya Tepe, a necropolis of nomadic aristocrats situated outside the north-eastern border of the Parthian Empire in the western corner of ancient Bactria and dating to the second half of the first century CE. Besides the breathtaking golden artifacts which follow mainly nomadic traditions but also reflect Hellenistic and Indian influences in their visual vocabulary, the tombs contained a Chinese mirror, an Indian gold medallion, Parthian silver coins, a golden imitation of a Parthian silver drachm, and one Roman aureus of emperor Tiberius (14–37).¹² These items derive partly from the same stock as those found at Begram and shed light on the fascinating interaction between the nomadic world and the sedentary population.

At the beginning of the third century the Arsacids were challenged by a local dynasty which had ruled as petty kings in Fars in southwest Iran for more than 400 years. Fars was the homeland of the Achaemenids, and its local aristocracy had already achieved a certain degree

⁷Wiesehöfer 2010a, pp. 514-515.

⁸Pfisterer 2000, pp. 85-89.

⁹Wiesehöfer 1993, pp. 163-204.

¹⁰For Hatra cf. Sommer 2003; for Palmyra cf. Hartmann 2001.

¹¹Mehendale 2008; Cambon 2008.

¹²Sarianidi 2008; Schiltz 2008.



of independence from the Seleucids which it maintained under Parthian rule.¹³ On their coins, the kings of Fars presented themselves like their Achaemenid predecessors as adherents of the Zoroastrian religion, and in contrast to their Parthian overlords, who inscribed their coins mainly in Greek, the kings of Fars used Middle Persian as their official language. In a way they felt themselves to be the true heirs of the Persian tradition and regarded their Parthian overlords as dishonourable apostates, unworthy to rule the land of the Aryans. The leader of this revolt was a certain Ardashir, who made himself king of Fars (fig. 1) and eventually killed the Parthian king of kings Artaban IV in battle, an incident that is supposed to have taken place in the year 223/24.¹⁴



Figure 1: Silver drachm of Ardashir I as king of Fars, after 205/6-224. Private Collection.

To legitimize his rule Ardashir developed the politico-religious concept of an “Aryan” and “Mazdaist” nation that was based on an “invention of a tradition” or a myth whose roots lay in the distant past.¹⁵ It was a reference, on the one hand, to the glorious but obscure Achaemenid past and, on the other, to the religious tradition of Zoroastrianism. The monarchy and religion were to be the cornerstones of the new Sasanian state from that time on.¹⁶

The kings had superhuman qualities; they were of divine origin and descended from the gods. This is clearly expressed by the title that Ardashir (figs. 2 and 3) created for his concept of kingship: *mazdēsn bay Ardašīr šāhānšāh Ērān kē čīhr az yazdān* – “the Mazdean Lord Ardashir, king of kings of the Aryans/Iranians whose lineage (image / brilliance) is from the gods”.¹⁷

The divine descent of the king whom the gods had chosen to reign over Iran also became a prominent topic for the empire’s discourse through visual language. One of the most magnificent examples of Sasanian rock art is without doubt Ardashir’s investiture relief at Naqsh-e Rostam near Persepolis which was executed in the final decade of his reign. The king is depicted as the mirror image of the supreme god Ohrmazd, who is handing Ardashir a diadem, the symbol of the right to rule (fig. 4).



¹³Wiesehöfer 1994 and Wiesehöfer 2007; Klose / Müsseler 2008; Curtis 2010.

¹⁴Alram / Gyselen 2003, pp. 135-152.

¹⁵Gnoli 1989.

¹⁶Wiesehöfer 1993, pp. 205-295 and Wiesehöfer 2010b.

¹⁷Panaino 2004, pp. 556-564; Soudavar 2006; Skjærvø 2007.



Figure 2: Silver drachm of Ardashir I (224-240) as King of Kings. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. MK_OR_6379.



Figure 3: Silver drachm of Ardashir I (224-240) as King of Kings; on the king's tiara a falcon with a diadem in his peak. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. MK_OR_6379.



Figure 4: Relief of Ardashir I at Naqsh-i Rostam (1), showing his investiture by Ahura Mazda, after 228/29 CE (Photo M. Alram).


Ardashir's son, Shapur I (fig. 5), is best known for his victories over the Romans which he had immortalized in five monumental rock reliefs (fig. 6). He also extended the royal title from *šāhānšāh Ērān* to *šāhānšāh Ērān ud Anērān*, i.e. “king of kings of the Iranians and Non-Iranians”. This new title represented a further step in the dynasty's efforts to create a distinct Iranian identity. For Shapur, *Anērān* primarily stood for those countries he had been able to conquer from the Romans. Thereafter it might also have assumed a religious connotation, differentiating between those who followed the right religion (i.e. Zoroastrianism) and those who did not.¹⁸



Figure 5: Silver drachm of Shapur I (240-272). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. MK_OR_2184.



Figure 6: Relief of Shapur I at Naqsh-i Rostam (6), showing his triumph over the Roman emperors Philip the Arab and Valerian, after 260 CE (Photo M. Alram).

From the beginning of the fifth century onwards we can observe a change in the royal ideology: new titles such as *rāmšahr* (“he who maintains peace in his dominion”), *kay* 

¹⁸Huyse 1999, II, p. 11; Drayae 2009, p. 5; Wiesehöfer 2010b, p. 146.

(“Kayanid”) instead of *šāhānšāh*, or the form *xwārrah abzot* (“increased the glory”) reveals an increasing affinity with the mythical Kayanid kings in the Avesta as ancestors of the royal lineage.¹⁹

The *xwārrah* or “Divine Glory” was an essential element of legitimacy and divine sanction in the royal Iranian ideology. It distinguishes the king from any other human being and gives him the right to rule. In the visual arts the *xwārrah* was expressed in multiple ways from the Achaemenids to the post-Caliphate period: a pair of wings, a falcon (fig. 3), a ram with flying ribbons (fig. 7), pearl roundels or a halo around the king’s head were all interpreted as signs of “Divine Glory.”²⁰



Figure 7: Stucco panel showing a ram’s head above a pair of wings; diadems with long ribbons are tied around the neck and the wings, 5th century CE. Chicago, The Field Museum of Natural History, inv. no. 228840 (Cat. Brussels 1993, p. 149, no. 8).

As Boris Marshak has pointed out, the Senmury, a composite creature, also stood for the royal *xwārrah* and symbolized prosperity.²¹ We find it for example on the precious robe of king Khusro II at Taq-i Bustan (figs. 8 and 9) and as a favoured emblem on silver vessels (fig. 10). A similar concept can be seen in the image of a pheasant holding a necklace in its beak (fig. 11). Such necklaces were worn by the King of Kings and were part of the royal insignia.

The crowns of the Sasanian kings played a special role in this context, which can be seen as representations of the king’s *xwārrah*.²² Each Sasanian king wears his own individual crown, which consists of a diadem tied with ribbons at the neck, to which different theophoric emblems are attached.²³ A characteristic feature is the *korymbos* on the top of the head, originally a bunch of hair, covered with a thin veil. Over the course of time – from their coinage,

¹⁹Panaino 2004, pp. 556-562; Daryaei 2009, pp. 24 and 34.

²⁰Soudavar 2003, pp. 1-39.

²¹Marshak 1998.

²²Panaino 2004, pp. 571-572.

²³Erdmann 1951.



we know at least of 31 Sasanian kings – the composition of the crowns became ever more complicated as a variety of different emblems were used and their individual characteristics diminished (cf. figs. 2, 3, 5, 12 and 13).



Figure 8: Hunting scenes on the side wall of the niche at Taq-i Bustan with Khusro II (Photo M. Alram).



Figure 9: Senmurv on Khusro's II robe at Taq-i Bustan (Photo M. Alram).



Figure 10: Silver-gilt dish with a Senmurv, 7th / 8th century. London, The British Museum, inv. no. BM 124095 (Cat. Brussels, pp. 220-221, no. 71).



Figure 11: Silver-gilt dish with a pheasant holding a necklace in his peak, St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, inv. no. S-18 (Cat. Brussels 1993, p. 217, no. 69).



Figure 12: Silver drachm of Khusro II (591-628), 25th regnal year, mint of Hamadan. Private Collection.



Figure 13: Silver drachm of Khusro II (591-628), 37th regnal year. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. MK_OR_7264.

The crowns which were made of gold and silver and were decorated with pearls and precious stones became so heavy that the kings were no longer able to wear them. It is supposed that from the time of Khusro I (531–579) they were suspended on a golden chain in the throne room above the throne at a height where they just brushed the monarch's head. The crown of Khusro II (591–628) is said to have been made of pure gold and had a weight equivalent to 60 men (figs. 12 and 13). When Ctesiphon was conquered by the Arabs in 637, Khusro's crown was sent to Caliph 'Umar, who had it hung in the Ka'aba in Mecca.²⁴ The custom of the hanging crown was also adopted in Byzantine court ceremonial as reported by Benjamin de Tudela, who visited the palace of Emperor Manuel I Comnenus (1143–1180) in Constantinople around 1170.²⁵

The image of Khusro II with his prominent crown is also present on the so-called Arab-Sasanian silver coinage issued by the Arab governors after the downfall of the Sasanian Empire. Only the name of the governor or the caliph was inscribed beside Khusro's bust and on the margin the formula *bismillah* ("in the name of God") was added in Arabic (fig. 14). This only changed with the reform of 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) in 77 AH (696/97) when the Sasanian model was replaced by purely Islamic iconography.²⁶

However, more than 150 years later, the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (847–861) revived the Sasanian iconography when he commemorated his victory over the camel-mounted

²⁴Erdmann 1951, pp. 114-115 with further references.

²⁵Erdmann 1951, p. 117. However, it is still unclear how far the Sasanian court ritual has influenced the Roman one, cf. Canepa 2009.

²⁶Gaube 1973.

Bigah tribe in Sudan on a silver medallion (fig. 15).²⁷ The Buyid Amir Rukn ad-Dawla (c. 935–976) used the Sasanian model for his depiction on a gold commemorative medallion from the year 970 / AH 359, choosing the old Sasanian title “may the Shahanshah’s *xwārrha* increase.”²⁸



Figure 14: Silver drachm of ‘Abdallah ibn al-Zubair (680-692), 63 Hira (=682 CE), mint of Darabgird. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. MK_OR_6988.



Figure 15: Silver medallion of al-Mutawakkil (847-861), 241 Hira (=855 CE). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. MK_OR_7283.

During the ninth and tenth centuries, the epic stories of the Persian heroes and kings had already become an integral part of Islamic civilization and the various dynasties of Iranian origin who succeeded in seizing power in the former Sasanian realm, although observing the Islamic faith and being more or less Arabized, attempted to revive the glory of the Iranian past and linked their lineage to that of their Sasanian predecessors.²⁹ The Buyids (930–1062) chose Wahram (V) Gur (420–438) as the dynasty’s ancestor, while the lineage of the Samanids (819–1005) was traced back to Wahram (VI) Chobin (590–591). Both these Sasanian monarchs are very popular figures in the Persian epics.³⁰

It was mainly the extraordinary splendour and luxurious lifestyle of the Sasanian kings, their courtiers, and the aristocracy that attracted the surrounding world, as well as the Arab conquerors, who partly adopted and reshaped the Sasanian cultural heritage in various ways, thus ensuring its long legacy in Islamic times.³¹

²⁷Ilisch 1984/85, pp. 16-17, no. 5; Alram 2009, no. 27b.

²⁸Miles 1964; Ilisch 1984/85, p. 33, no. 20; Treadwell 2003.

²⁹Wiesehöfer 1993, pp. 297-305;

³⁰Bosworth 1973; Bosworth 2009; Pourshariati 2010.

³¹Cf. Cat. Brussels 1993 with further references.

The most typical and impressive elements of the Sasanians' cultural heritage included the magnificent palaces (fig. 16) and manor houses, richly decorated with stucco, mosaics, and carpets; the huge hunting grounds in which all kinds of animals were gathered to serve the king's pleasure in the chase (figs. 8 and 17); the precious silverware produced both at the royal court and in the provincial workshops of the local aristocracy (figs. 10-11, 17, 18, 20). Another legendary feature was the royal banquets, where all kinds of luxury dishes, wine, and other drinks were served while the king and his courtiers were entertained with music and various games (fig. 18).³² These banquets at court constituted an important part of the social interaction between the king and his nobles and were also intended to express the empire's high level of prosperity.³³ The king as a glorious heroic hunter as well as the banquet scenes became prominent topics in the visual arts of the empire, and like the Persian epics, continued to be highly popular during the Muslim era.



Figure 16: Ardashir I's palace at Firuzabad (Photo M. Alram).

A prominent image of Sasanian court art which has quite a long-lasting influence is the depiction of the enthroned king as cosmocrator (figs. 19 and 20). It underlines the superior and divine role of the king on earth and shows him as the guarantor of the cosmic order created by Ohrmazd, the supreme god. The person of the king was linked to the sun and the moon, as reported by Ammianus Marcellinus (17, 5, 3), who quotes a letter which Shapur II had sent to Emperor Constantius II in which Shapur calls himself “particeps siderum, frater solis et lunae”. In this context it should also be mentioned that the Sasanians regarded the Byzantine emperors as their brothers and compared the latter and themselves to the two luminaries, the sun and the moon.³⁴

³²Melikian-Chirvani 1992; Daryaei 2009, pp. 50-52.

³³Daryaei 2009, p. 51.

³⁴Panaino 2004; Börm 2010, pp. 190-191 with further references.



Figure 17: Silver-gilt plate with Ohrmazd II hunting lions, 4th century CE. Cleveland Museum of Art, acc. No. 62.150.



Figure 18: Silver-gilt dish with king seated on a banqueting couch accompanied by servants and musicians, 7th / early 8th century (St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, inv. no. S-47 (Cat. Brussels 1993, p. 210, no. 64).



Figure 19: Gold, rock-crystal, and glass bowl with enthroned king, 6th century CE. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques.



Figure 20: Silver-gilt plate from Qazvin with enthronement scene, 7th century CE. Tehran, National Museum of Iran, inv. no. 904 (Cat. Vienna 2000, pp. 284-286, no. 156).

In foreign policy, the Sasanians faced the problem of having to secure their borders against Rome (later Byzantium), their arch-enemy, on the one side, and against charging Central Asian nomads on the other. In late Antiquity, this strategic dilemma was also shared by

Rome/Byzantium. Both superpowers sought to avoid war on multiple fronts and, therefore, engaged their adversaries in accordance to this strategy.³⁵ The Sasanians had to deal predominantly with the Romans, the succeeding Byzantine state, the Huns, and the Western Turks, both on the battlefield and in the diplomatic theater. Behind the political game of constantly changing alliances, there were tangible economic interests in controlling the flow of trade to and from China and India, whether by sea or by land.

When Ardashir I seized power from his Parthian overlord Artaban IV, it became clear that, from the very beginning, his strategy was to increase Sasanian influence in all surrounding regions and thus try to expand the territory of the empire beyond the old borders of the Parthian state.

In the west, Ardashir I was successful in conquering Nisibis, Carrhae, as well as Hatra, and thus, strengthened the Sasanians' position against the Romans, their archenemies, in northern Mesopotamia. The conquest of Armenia, however, occurred only later under the reign of his son and successor, Shapur I, in 252 CE. Ardashir's eastern campaign took him deep into Central Asia, and the city of Marw (in today's Turkmenistan) was to become a key strategic position in the northeast of the Sasanian Empire, controlling the crossroads leading from Central Asia to the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia. In conquering al-Bahrain, Ardashir finally gained control of the sea routes that linked the Persian Gulf to India.³⁶

If we believe Shapur I's inscription on the Ka'aba-i Zardusht, which dates to around or after 260 CE, the territory of the Sasanian Empire stretched from northern Mesopotamia and Armenia in the west to Peshawar in the east and from Kashgar in the north to Oman in the south.³⁷ Thus, the Sasanians established themselves as the leading force in the Near East, the Iranian plateau, western Central Asia, and the western half of the Indian Ocean world. There were of course military and political backlashes throughout the 400 years of Sasanian rule, which resulted in territorial concessions to Rome/Byzantium in Mesopotamia, or to the Huns and Western Turks in Central Asia and northwest India.³⁸ The Sasanians, however, succeeded in maintaining their position as one of the leading world powers of their time.

Despite political crises, the Sasanian monetary system, which was based on the silver drachm, proved to be considerably stable and indicates a well-organized administrative system and prudent economic policies.³⁹ Mints were distributed throughout the empire, thereby ensuring the local supply. Via land and maritime trade routes, Sasanian coinage reached Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, India, Ceylon, and China. In Central Asia, the Sasanian drachm became the model for numerous local coinage systems, among them those of the Huns and Western Turks.⁴⁰ Even the new Arab rulers held on to the Sasanian drachm for half a century before creating their own coinage. The crowned image of the Sasanian "King of Kings" together with the fire altar – a symbol of the Zoroastrian religion and of the royal fire lit at the ascension of each king – became a universally valued trademark which remained largely unchanged for centuries.

Sasanian economy was mainly based on agriculture, handicrafts, and interregional trade.⁴¹ Military excursions in neighboring countries, however, were also important economic factors which extracted all sorts of resources, including knowledge and manpower, in the form of deportations to the Iranian heartlands.⁴² The importance of long-distance trade for the overall

³⁵Howard-Johnston 2010.

³⁶Afram / Gyselen 2003, pp. 135-152; Afram 2007.

³⁷Huyse 1999, I, § 2-3.

³⁸Howard-Johnston 2010.

³⁹Schindel 2013.

⁴⁰Vondrovec 2014.

⁴¹Rezakhani 2010; Daryaee 2011.

⁴²Kettenhofen 1996; Morony 2004b; Rezakhani 2010, pp. 50-56



economy was not high and merchants belonged to the lowest stratum of the Sasanian social system.⁴³ On the other hand, the demand for luxury goods for the royal household and the local aristocracy must have been enormous, and could not have been satisfied by local goods and production. For this reason, the Sasanians aimed to provide the necessary security to enable merchants to journey safely via land and sea. Moreover, the tax for importing and exporting goods constituted a welcomed income for the king's coffers.

To ensure Sasanian predominance in the sea trade to India and further east the control of both coasts along the Persian Gulf was vital. As Ammianus Marcellinus (22, 6, 11) reports, the towns and harbours along the Gulf were already prospering by the 4th century. On the Persian side, the island of Kharg, the Bushihr peninsula, and the city of Siraf further south were important entrepôts.⁴⁴

Another Sasanian stronghold for controlling the sea routes to India was the province of Sind, located at the mouth of the Indus river (in present-day Pakistan), close to the Khatiawar peninsula, which was one of the main trading centres on India's west coast. The location of Sind was also crucial for trade via the Indus from Gandhara downstream to the Indian Ocean. The importance of Sind for the Sasanians is underlined by the fact that Shapur II (309–379) opened a mint in that area for striking exclusively gold coins, a practice that continued until the reign of Peroz (459–484).⁴⁵ The location of the mint is unknown. It might have been situated in the port of Daibul (which can probably be identified with the site of Banbhore) which – according to Tabari⁴⁶ – Wahram V (421–438) had received as dowry from his wife, an Indian princess. This, however, remains pure speculation for the time being.

It has been suggested that Nestorian merchants might have played a leading role in the Persian sea trade with India in connection with the missionary activity of the Nestorian church of India and beyond, which was pursued by the Nestorian metropolitan of Rev Ardashir in Fars.⁴⁷ Referring to the situation in the early sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes, another member of the Nestorian church, states that Persian Nestorians had a strong community on Taprobane (Ceylon) which was one of the main transshipment centres for traded goods between China, India, the Persian Gulf, Yemen, and Ethiopia.

According to Procopius (I, 20), the Sasanians tried to block all Asiatic trade connections for the Byzantines, which finally induced the emperors Justin (518–527) and Justinian (527–565) to force the Axumite king to intervene. In 524/25, the Axumites occupied Yemen and tried to break the Sasanians' predominant trading position in the Indian Ocean. However, the Axumites' success was of short duration, as Khusro I (531–579) threw them out again and installed a Sasanian governor who also controlling the entrance to the Red Sea.⁴⁸

It is still unclear whether Persian merchants ever had direct contact with China via maritime routes, or if Chinese ships ever reached the Persian Gulf.⁴⁹ The literary sources are somewhat difficult to interpret and the archaeological evidence is meagre. It is certain that Sasanian goods reached China by sea, but it is unknown whether Persian merchants transported them. A striking find in this context is a hoard of Sasanian drachms of Peroz which was discovered in Suikai (Guandong) in southern China.⁵⁰ This hoard, which was probably buried in the first half of the sixth century, also contained a silver vessel bearing a Sogdian inscription

⁴³Daryaee 2009, pp. 42-50; Rezakhani 2010, pp. 42-47; Daryaee 2011, p. 404.

⁴⁴Whitehouse / Williamson 1973; for Persian Gulf trade in late antiquity see also Daryaee 2003 and Daryaee 2011, pp. 405-408 with further references.

⁴⁵Schindel 2004, III/1, pp. 507-509; III/2, pl. 145.

⁴⁶Nöldeke 1879, p. 108.

⁴⁷Whitehouse / Williamson 1973, pp. 42-43, 47-48; Gropp 1991; Baum / Winkler 2003.

⁴⁸Tabari, p. 227-237. Cf. Bosworth 1983, pp. 604-608; Potts 2010, pp. 37-44.

⁴⁹Whitehouse / Williamson 1973, 45-49; for the presence of Persian merchant Diasporas in the Indian Ocean see Morony 2004a; cf. also Daryaee 2003 and Daryaee 2011, pp. 407-409.

⁵⁰Thierry 1993, p. 95, no. 52 and pp. 104-106.

mentioning that its owner came from Chach (Tashkent).⁵¹ Chinese scholars have taken this as a possible clue that Sogdians may have joined Persian merchants who traded directly with southern China via the sea route. Be as it may, it was not until the end of the 8th or the early 9th century that direct sailing from the Persian Gulf to China became standard practice, not least to supply the Abbasid's court in Baghdad with silk and other luxury goods.⁵²

As mentioned above, Shapur I claimed in his inscription on the Ka'aba-i Zardusht that the Sasanians also conquered great parts of Central Asia, as far as Kashgar, which is rather an exaggeration. Sasanian expansion into Central Asia is closely connected with the still unsolved question as to when the Sasanians overthrew the Kushan Empire which under Kanishka I and his son Huvishka had stretched from Bactria deep into middle India. The Kushan Empire was one of the most powerful empires of its time, playing a leading role in international trade and cultural exchange between Central Asia, Iran, and India.

The various Sasanian military excursions into Central Asia eventually resulted in the temporary occupation of Bactria, which was put under the rule of princes, most probably from the royal family of the King of Kings. On their coins, they used the title of "king of the Kushan" or even "king of kings of the Kushan". The Sasanian presence in Bactria is also documented by the recently discovered rock relief of Rag-i Bibi, although it is still unclear who the depicted king is.⁵³ Finally, we should mention the Bactrian documents deriving from the archive of the local kings of Rob, whose kingdom was situated in the northern part of the Hindu Kush.⁵⁴ These documents are of utmost importance for Bactria's local history and show that the Sasanians succeeded in maintaining their rule in Bactria with a number of interruptions until the devastating defeat of Peroz against the Hunnic Hephthalites in 484 CE.⁵⁵ South of the Hindu Kush, in the Kapisa/Kabul area and further east in Gandhara, the Sasanians' presence had already ended by the last quarter of the 4th century, when Shapur III lost these territories to two other Hunnic peoples, the Kidarites, and the Alkhans.⁵⁶

Although Sasanian rule in Bactria came to an end, as we have seen, by the end of the 5th century – only Khusro I was able to re-establish Sasanian power for a short period after 560 CE – the influence of Sasanian culture and lifestyle on Central Asia was fairly strong. North of Bactria, in Sogdiana – the region of Samarkand and the valleys between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya – Sasanian culture was adapted and transformed by the local elite, but the various Hunnic tribes followed by the Western Turks, who held sway over Sogdia from the late 4th century onwards, were also influenced by Iranian traditions. Huns and Turks participated in this lively cultural exchange, encouraged international trade between Iran, Central Asia, India and China, and profited highly from it.

A key position in these trade activities was played by the Sogdian merchants, who seemed to have inherited this role from the Kushan traders, developing a network of merchant communities along the main routes between Sogdiana, India and China.⁵⁷ That the Sogdians were also involved in the Indian trade is documented by hundreds of rock inscriptions along with petroglyphs discovered by a Pakistani-German research expedition in the Upper Indus valley. The Sogdian inscriptions are concentrated in the area of Shatial, the furthest point downstream with rock carvings and, seemingly, the final destination of the Sogdian merchants, where they met and exchanged their goods with their Indian counterparts.⁵⁸ In the middle of

⁵¹Yoshida 1996.

⁵²Whitehouse / Williamson 1973, 48-49.

⁵³Grenet / Lee / Martinez / Ory 2007.

⁵⁴Sims-Williams 2000; Sims-Williams 2007.

⁵⁵Howard-Johnston 2010, pp. 41-46.

⁵⁶Cribb 2010; Alram / Pfisterer 2010.

⁵⁷La Vassière 2005; Cat. New York 2001.

⁵⁸Sims-Williams 1996.

the 6th century CE the Sogdians, supported by their Turkish overlords, were able to establish direct trade relations with Byzantium via the northern Caucasus.⁵⁹

To sum up, the Sogdians became the leading trading community in Central Asia and were important contributors to the economic and cultural flowering of Transoxiana, which continued under the Arabs and promoted the early dissemination of Islam in that region.⁶⁰

The Sasanians seemed to have concentrated their trading activities with the east on the Indian Ocean's maritime routes and tried to exclude the Sogdians from their territories. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out that Persian and Sogdian merchants formed partnerships at some time to conduct business more effectively.

To strengthen their position in the East, the Sasanians also sent diplomatic missions to the Chinese court and, in return, received delegations from the Chinese emperor.⁶¹

At the very end, after the defeat of Sasanian troops by the Arabs and the murder of the last Sasanian King of Kings, Yazdgard III, in 651, the surviving members of the royal family sought refuge at the court of the Tang emperor.⁶²

However, despite the downfall of the dynasty and the spread of the new religion of Islam, the Sasanian heritage lived on and has remained an integral part of Iranian identity up to the present day.

⁵⁹Hennig 1933, p. 304-305; Hannestad 1955/1957; Howard-Johnston 2010, pp. 48-51.

⁶⁰Frye 1993.

⁶¹Pulleyblank 1991.

⁶²Daryaee 2009, pp. 37-38.

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