

Merchants in Central Asia in Pre-Islamic Times

Richard N. Frye

There are a number of questions in regard to the role of merchants in pre-Islamic Central Asia. One is the nature and products of trade between China and Iran and the Near East. Another is the place of merchants in Central Asian society, as compared with their station in China and Iran. A third question is the change in nationality and of the lingua franca of the merchants throughout time, and a fourth is the role of merchants in the propagation of religions in Central Asia.

1) In very early times trade between regions similar to each other, and not far distant, was primarily in objects of daily use, usually motivated by excess production in one place and scarcity in another. Obviously if similar goods or edibles were produced in two areas, there was little incentive for trade between the two. If one region, however, had certain products which were absent in another, and then conditions for trade were propitious. But best of all situations was the development of fads in non-essential luxuries, and this was the basis for long distance trade. For example, from archaeology we know that at least as early as the third millennium B.C., if not earlier, throughout the Near East as far as Egypt lapis lazuli jewelry was in demand, probably mainly by women of powerful chiefs or rulers. Lapis on the whole came from the mountains of Badakhshan in Afghanistan, and in one instance known to archaeologists, was brought to Shahr-e Sukhta in Sistan or Tepe Yahya in Kerman, where local artisans fashioned various decorative objects or jewelry, and then passed them to customers farther west. Thus, even at a very early date the principles of long distance trade were formed, viz. trade only precious objects which brought great rewards justifying great expenses of energy and risk on the part of merchants. It would seem that at very ancient periods trade primarily functioned in the manner described for lapis lazuli. Gold, silver and precious stones joined lapis as objects of desire.

By the time of the Achaemenid Empire long distance trade had both become more sophisticated, with many more objects in demand, and also we find companies of merchants, which organized even longer distance trade, such as between India and Egypt. For, after the Persian conquest of the Indus valley, the importance of pepper and spices in the preservation of food became wide spread. Spices from the east became almost a necessity rather than a simple luxury, and caravans or ships were sent far distances and, as we know, coinage now became current, which made trade and commerce even more easy, profitable and desirable.

Before the Achaemenids, however, there is no evidence of organized trade between very distant lands, such as between China and Iran. What was happening in East Asia at this time? From Chinese sources we learn of the importance of silk in trade between Chinese settled kingdoms and nomads on the steppes of Mongolia and Manchuria. A small trade had developed between central China and Khotan where silk from the former was exchanged for jade from the latter. Otherwise the west was relatively unknown to the various Chinese states which existed before the Han unified empire. The rise of Han China coincided with the establishment of the Graeco-Bactrian state in Central Asia and the first evidence for the 'Silk Route' between east and west.

Silk remained the most important object of trade of the Chinese in historical times, but in addition many other objects were exchanged. By the time of the opulent Chinese courts of the Sui and Tang dynasties, trade in many wares and exotic objects -flowed across Central Asia, and by sea with India and southeast Asia as part of the rich international trade throughout the entire continent. The extent of trade expanded enormously and the variety of objects traded has been the subject of several books.¹ There is no need to reproduce the list of objects traded between east and west as found in works already published.

2) To turn to the second point, how were merchants regarded in the societies of China, Central Asia and Iran? Of course everywhere, and at all times, merchants were regarded with suspicion and envy by customers in the societies in which they lived. Did merchants not take advantage of ordinary people and feather their own nests? On the other hand they took risks and frequently led adventurous lives. Furthermore, they were necessary providers of wares which could not be obtained otherwise. In China from early times merchants were both highly regarded, and considered as low members of society, but on the whole by the populace they were respected for the risks, they took and the services they provided. With the development of the Confucian, mandarin dominated bureaucracy in late Tang times, however, the latter considered merchants' low class, as they did others as well.

The Parthians, with their nomadic background, maintained a favorable attitude towards merchants and trade. Under their rule the so-called "caravan cities" flourished. The best known of these were located in or near the western part of their domains, Hatra, Charax, Palmyra, Gerrha in Arabia, and others. In the nature of Parthian rule, these trading centers

¹ The standard works are: B. Laufer, *Sino-Iranica* (Chicago, Field Museum, 1919), and E. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, (Berkeley, California, 1963).

were practically independent, but trade flourished and riches accumulated in the various mercantile centers. This was the era of the Roman Empire when demand for luxuries expanded enormously, and with the discovery of the monsoons trade with India and Southeast Asia by sea matched or even overtook the more perilous overland trade. The Kushan Empire in Central Asia, straddling the oasis states of present day Xinjiang and Uzbekistan-Tajikistan, with an extension to Mathura in the subcontinent, was well placed to fill the role of middleman. The discovery of Chinese silks, Indian ivories, glass from Alexandria in Egypt, and other objects from various places, in the excavation of Begram, Afghanistan, gives archaeological proof of the wealth of the Kushans, based on the volume and richness of international trade. This prosperity apparently changed under the early Sasanians.

In Sasanian Iran merchants were at the bottom of the hierarchy of social classes or castes, together with craftsmen and even peasants. Above them were landowners, the religious establishment and, of course, the court aristocracy. The Sasanians absorbed the "caravan cities" in their centralized state. Hatra was captured and in effect destroyed, as were others of the flourishing network of international trade in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. It must be admitted that the Romans were not behind in their destruction of Palmyra, together with the decline of Petra and the Nabataens. Indeed one may say that the third century saw a decline in trade, which paralleled the rise of orthodoxy in Christianity and Zoroastrianism, and the consolidation of power in the courts of the great powers.

With the reforms of Khusrau Anushirvan, however, more changes took place, including attitudes towards merchants. The prosperity of the Central Asian city states in their trade connections with China, Mongolia, India and Russia, seems to have galvanized the Sasanian state. On the other hand, we know that the Sasanians capitalized on a feature of fiscal policy which had existed since the beginning of their rule, viz. the maintenance of high and consistent purity of silver coinage, except for a brief period in the time of Shapur I son of Ardashir, founder of the dynasty. On the contrary, the Central Asian states debased their coinage, as did the Romans, while the Chinese did not even pretend to a precious metal coinage, using only copper in the modern usage of coinage rather than the intrinsic worth of the metal in coins. Sasanian silver was much in demand everywhere, from the forests of northern Russia to the courts of China. But more important, the Sasanians embarked on a policy of aggressive international trade, competing with the Romans in the Red Sea and in the ports of India, and finally in Central Asia. Large caravans were plying their wares across Central Asia and merchants came to be regarded much higher in the eyes of the populace than

previously. The picture of trade and merchants across Asia began to change which brings us to a third matter.

3) Another question of interest is the nationality and kind of merchants who engaged in long distance trade across Asia. The changes over time briefly can be surveyed, going back to prehistoric times. Before the expansion of the Iranian speaking peoples over the plateau which bears their name, we can only guess at the identity of the aborigines living there. In the western part of the plateau we may suppose that the Elamites extended from their center in Khuzistan all the way to Sistan where they met Dravidians who extended into the sub-continent of India. It is hardly possible to determine whether the Brahuis who today live in Baluchistan, and extend from Sistan to Sind, are remnants of the original population or later migrants from India. But it is likely that Dravidian peoples did live in eastern Iran before, and even after, the expansion of the Indians into the sub-continent and the later movement of the Iranian speakers onto the plateau.

To the north and east we may conjecture lived people, the remnants of whom are found in the Burushaski speaking people of Hunza in northern Pakistan. Why these people? Because like the Basques in the Pyrenees and some Caucasian folk, the inhabitants of Hunza most probably did extend much farther beyond their present seats in the high mountain valleys, into present Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan-Tajikistan.

From the archaeological finds of Indus valley cultural objects in northern Afghanistan, dating from the third millennium B.C. We may infer that trade existed before the coming of the Indo-Europeans, and the latter continued the previous practices with their own merchants. What is interesting, however, is that international trade was directed north-south rather than east-west in this early period. It almost seems as though the high mountains of the Himalaya and Hindukush ranges were less of a barrier to trade than the deserts of central Iran. Actually the Iranians in the western part of the plateau were more concerned with trade with Mesopotamia than with their relatives in the east, who looked to the plains of India for their markets. In any case, the first merchants whom we find in the oasis cities of the southern Tarim Basin-Yarkand, Khotan, Niya, Endere to Dunhuang-were Indians and the language on the earliest documents from that area are in an Indian Prakrit written in the Kharoshti alphabet. This apparently lasted until the fourth century when we find Sogdians dominant

everywhere in the east, not only in Xinjiang but also Mongolia, China, and on the upper Indus, as we know from inscriptions in these areas written in their language.²

Just as the Sogdians dominated trade with the east, so did the Khwarazmians with the northern trade to the Volga River. The name of Muslims in Old Russian chronicles, Busurman, comes from the Khwarazmian language. Many of the silver plates and ewers, both Sasanian and Central Asian, found in north Russia were probably brought there by Khwarazmian merchants. The Finno-Ugrian tribes of north Russia valued the silver objects, which they buried under certain sacred trees which they revered. From the north the merchants returned with furs, honey, amber and beeswax. This trade continued into Islamic times, and the account of Ibn Fadlan's voyage to Bulghar on the Volga is a classic about trade with the north.³

Already at the end of the Sasanian Empire Persian merchants were encroaching on the domain of the Sogdians, but the conquests of the Muslim armies in Central Asia expanded use of the Persian language, which soon replaced Sogdian as the *lingua franca* of the region for trade and communication. Persian with its loss of grammatical features, such as gender and cases of nouns and adjectives, was much easier to learn than Sogdian, or any other language spoken in Central Asia, much like English today. The Indian word for caravan *sart*, remained in Central Asia as a designation for 'merchant', although it originally meant a caravan, while later it seems to have expanded in meaning to a settled person, rather than either a nomad, or simply one locked into a tribal identification. Likewise the Chinese designation of Kashgar as Su-li, may well have been derived from Khotanese where the word meant a 'Sogdian'. The Persian language remained the tongue of culture, polite discourse, and trade until recent times.

4) Finally the role of merchants in the propagation of religions may be examined. Generally speaking, merchants were similar to nomads in their relaxed and unconcerned attitude towards religion, and before the third century of our era there is little evidence of merchants acting as missionaries. Afterwards several matters changed. First, settled states sacralized traditions and made religion part of state policy. This can be observed in both the Roman and Sasanian Empires, but smaller kingdoms also followed the larger and more powerful states. Second, universal religions were codified and orthodoxy established with

² Cf. N. Sims-Williams, "The Sogdian Merchants in China and India," in A. Cadonna, ed., *Gina e Iran* (Florence, 1996), 45-66.

³ Cf. R. Frye, "Byzantine and Sasanian Trade Relations with Northeastern Russia", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26 (Washington, D.C., 1972), 165-9.

missionaries part of the apparatus of the 'world' religions. Finally, merchants travelled afar with large caravans, which missionaries could and did join. Buddhist, Christian, and Manichaeian missionaries are well known, but Jewish and Zoroastrian missionaries also are found, witness the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene in Mesopotamia and later the Khazars in the north Caucasus to Judaism, and the missionary zeal of Kerdir, the Zoroastrian priest of the early Sasanian period. Whereas before this time merchants travelling in Central Asia could have propagated certain personal beliefs to folk they met on their travels, now 'professional' missionaries were needed to explain the involved doctrines of established 'churches', and their activities were more directed and successful. Merchants became the carriers of missionaries in their huge caravans, needed to protect the members on their long journeys.

It is true that our written sources for pre-Islamic Central Asia are overwhelmingly religious and they leave the impression that people spent most of their time in prayer, fasting and other rituals. But trade and commerce remained the most important vehicle for the spread of culture and civilization everywhere. Merchants and their activities too long have been neglected for their vital role in the history of civilization throughout the world. Hopefully archaeology will redress the balance and bring more recognition to those pioneers who braved countless dangers to build relationships in their time perhaps comparable to the internet today.