

# Trade and Exchange: The Sasanian World to Islam

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Commercial history needs to be seen both in terms of dynamic changes and the place of commerce in the economy. The latter is also related to whether the economy is expanding, contracting or stable. In the case of Western Asia, there is a common perception that the Late Antique economy was stable or retracting and that the economy in the early Islamic period was expanding. The change is seen to be from a mainly agrarian, self-sufficient economy with some local trade and long-distance commerce in luxuries subject to government control or regulation during Late Antiquity, to a more urban, commercial and unregulated economy supported by commercialized production in the Islamic period.<sup>1</sup>

Behind this of course, lie the issues of production for consumption vs. production for exchange and of choice vs. control in economic activity. On one side, this view also begs the question of continuity from Late Antique commercial circumstances and methods to those of early Islamic times. On the other, it raises the issue of teleology; early Islamic conditions are seen in terms of development toward the commercialized economy that is clearly visible by the ninth century C.E. In considering, the seventh and eighth centuries connections to the past need to be balanced against evidence for an earlier development of a commercialized economy, while the evidence for government expropriation through taxation and requisitions and redistribution needs to be weighed against evidence for supply by merchants and market exchange.

A central question for both periods is how to define exchange networks. Is relative distance sufficient, i.e. the distinction between local and long-distance trade? How far is long-distance? If long-distance trade is defined in terms of the furthest distance commodities were taken, what do we do about exchange *en route*? Lastly, it is important to consider the mechanisms of trade and exchange, i.e. the nature of contracts, the use of cash, payment instruments, *etc.*, and attitudes toward exchange, what might be called merchant culture.

Before proceeding further, there are at least three caveats. The first has to do with assumptions about the universal operation of classical liberal economic theories.<sup>2</sup> Kervran, for instance, speaks of a free enterprise attitude consonant with the spirit of Islam in ‘Abbāsī commerce.<sup>3</sup> We

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<sup>1</sup> For a typical formulation see M. Tampoe, (1989: 97).

<sup>2</sup> Benaboud (1987: 4) warns of a deforming danger in applying classical economics to medieval history.

<sup>3</sup> Kervran (1994: 341) Heck (2006) went so far as to argue that the early Islamic economy was the *source* of modern capitalism.



need to be careful about the application of such concepts both in the case of Late Antiquity with regard to the supposed effects of government regulation and in early Islamic times with regard to the apparently less regulated commerce. Sawyer cautions that:

The distinctions between long-distance and local trade, or gift-exchange and barter are hardly adequate to describe the complex transactions that occur in societies with different values and priorities from ours, in which competitive acquisitiveness is not necessarily a virtue.<sup>4</sup>

According to Constable:

... it would be misleading to apply the modern concept of 'market economy' – with its complicated mechanisms and controls – to medieval commerce. The model of a market self-regulated by supply and demand ... can only imperfectly apply to the medieval world, nor do we have the capability to test the extent of its applicability.<sup>5</sup>

The second is the assumption, without corroboration, that the distribution of goods has only occurred through commerce.<sup>6</sup> This applies both to references in textual sources and to material evidence. With regard to the latter, Sawyer remarks on the "natural temptation to treat any evidence of the movement of goods from one place to another as a sign of trade, especially when the objects were of high value."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Constable argued that the value of luxury goods makes it more likely that they traveled through noncommercial means such as theft, gift, or tribute and that less valuable commodities such as ceramics, foodstuffs, and ordinary textiles are better indicators of commerce.<sup>8</sup> It is well to bear in mind the possibility of noncommercial (re)distribution of goods via government taxation and requisitions, tribute, plunder, ransom, payments to soldiers and officials, exiles, pilgrims, gifts, and charity.<sup>9</sup> According to Constable, it is only safe to conclude that commerce has occurred when there is supporting evidence in the form of explicit references to commercial exchange, the existence of trade routes, or the presence of merchants.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sawyer (1971: 141)

<sup>5</sup> Constable (1994: 134).

<sup>6</sup> For the view that during Late Antiquity exchange could occur through noncommercial means, see Whittaker (1983: 165).

<sup>7</sup> Sawyer (1971: 140). Whitehouse (1973:243) uses two coins found at Sīrāf, one of Theodosius I (376-94) struck at Alexandria and one of Constans II (641-68) struck at Constantinople between 651 and 659, as evidence of the long history of that place as an entrepôt.

<sup>8</sup> Constable. 1994: 143).

<sup>9</sup> See Sawyer (1971: 140). For a discussion of gifts vs. tribute see Cutler (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Constable (1994: 143).

The third is that the volume of commerce and the velocity of exchange are simply impossible to quantify in any but the most general way given the nature of our information for Late Antiquity or early Islamic times.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to speak of commerce without resorting to quantifying language, but what do we mean by “flourishing” trade? Constable developed some rather sensible guidelines for a qualitative approach to commercial history that includes paying attention to the network of trade routes, different kinds of merchants, types of goods and their relative desirability, and how they traveled.<sup>12</sup>

With these qualifications in mind, what can we say about commerce and other forms of exchange in the Sasanian and Arabian regions at the end of Late Antiquity? The Sasanian state has tended to be seen as the center of a vast commercial network controlling land and sea routes that connected central and eastern Asia, southeast and south Asia, the coasts of east Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula with the Mediterranean. But the view of Fiorani-Piacentini that:

... the struggle between the two empires can also be seen as a rivalry for control of the trade routes between east and west, a struggle for conquest on the part of the Sasanians, and of defense on the part of the Romans, of the monopoly of all trade between Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean basin.<sup>13</sup>

probably goes too far. The main concerns of both sides appear to have been the acquisition of certain commodities, such as silk, for which the demand seems to have exceeded the supply, the taxation of goods at ports of entry and toll stations, and security (merchants might be spies).<sup>14</sup> It is unlikely that officials on either side saw matters in terms of a balance of trade. However, it is possible that the Sasanian occupation of Yaman in *ca.* 575 contributed to a reduction in the Indian trade through the Red Sea to Alexandria.

It might be tempting to see aggressive Sasanian campaigns against the Byzantines in terms of achieving a breakthrough to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to have access to western markets. This is belied by Sasanian behavior. In economic terms, Sasanian warfare against the Byzantines can only be called predatory. Not only was everything moveable of value looted, but captive populations were transported and relocated to Sasanian territory.<sup>15</sup> In 540, Khusraw I (531-79) invaded Syria, took Antioch, burned the city and deported the survivors, and seized or extorted huge amounts of gold and silver there and from other cities on his return. The captives

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<sup>11</sup> Kervran 1994: 11) uses the discovery so far of two Chinese sherds at Şuḥār from the fourth to the sixth century compared to thirty Chinese sherds found there from the late eighth to the end of the eleventh century to estimate a fifteen-fold increase in traffic with China from the Sasanian to the ʿAbbāsī period. If it means anything at all, this difference is more likely to reflect the increase in the export of Chinese pottery than an increase in traffic itself. See the discussion below.

<sup>12</sup> Constable (1994: xxii, 144).

<sup>13</sup> Fiorani-Piacentini (1985: 60).

<sup>14</sup> See de la Vaissière (2005: 230).

<sup>15</sup> On both points with references see Morony (1987; 2004)

from Antioch were resettled in the new city of Weh Antiok Khusraw near Ctesiphon on the Tigris, which was put under the charge of a chief of artisans as a manufacturing center. In 543, Khusraw I invaded Syria again, going up the west bank of the Euphrates as far as Commagene. Finding nothing left to plunder or extort, he deported farmers from Callinicum (Raqqa) on his return. In 573, the Persians sacked Apamea. During the great war between the two powers in the early seventh century the Sasanians aimed at the conquest of the entire Byzantine state. Syria, Egypt, and much of Anatolia were occupied, and when Jerusalem fell in 614, 35,000 captives, mostly artisans, are said to have been deported to Sasanian territory. Although some prisoners were freed after 617, in 625 the churches of Edessa were looted of their treasures to help finance the war, and Miophysites were deported from Edessa to Sīstān. The peace negotiations with the Byzantines in 628 provided for the freeing of prisoners of war and the return of deportees. The Byzantines rarely had the opportunity to loot Sasanian territory, but from 624 to 627 Heraclius ravaged Azerbaijan and plundered the royal treasures at Dastagerd in ʿIrāq. Of course, Sasanian territories were subjected to more extensive looting during the Muslim conquests, and western Iran is said to have been plundered by Daylamīs during the caliphate of ʿAlī (656-61).<sup>16</sup>

In general, Sasanian predatory warfare in the sixth and early seventh centuries are likely to have contributed to economic retraction in the regions that were directly affected. In particular, the deportation of members of the productive labor force is likely to have made recovery more difficult in Byzantine territory and at the same time to have contributed to economic development in Sasanian territory. Two further points can be made here. The first is that, to the extent that the Sasanians were interested in Syrian products, they took them by force or deported Byzantine labor to produce what they wanted, rather than depending on commerce. The Byzantines resorted to import substitution when they could. By 658 silk was being produced in Syria,<sup>17</sup> and by the fifth or sixth century Coptic weavers were imitating the patterns of Sasanian silk in woolen textiles. The second is that, although Byzantine deportees do not appear to have been enslaved by the Sasanians, prisoners of war taken by the Muslims during the campaigns of conquest were enslaved and employed in a variety of ways, and the slave trade that developed along the frontiers of the Islamic empire from central Asia to western North Africa and provided (mainly domestic) labor was a commercialized, and perhaps more individual, form of deportation.

Another important form of exchange between the two states was the subsidy the Byzantines paid to the Sasanians in gold in return for peace. This amounted to 11,000 pounds of gold in 532, 2,000 pounds of gold in 545 for a five-year truce, and 2,600 pounds of gold to renew the truce for another five years in 551. The fifty-year peace treaty in 561 provided for the payment of 30,000 gold *nomismata* each year to the Sasanians. This lasted until 571, when the Byzantines withheld their payment at the outbreak of the Armenian revolt. It is difficult to say what the economic consequences of these payments might have been. There do not seem to

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<sup>16</sup> Brock (1981-82: 146).

<sup>17</sup> Simon (1989: 33)

have been annual payments before 561, and these were not resumed after 571.<sup>18</sup> Although Khusraw I struck some gold coins and medallions, there was little gold in circulation in Sasanian territory. Byzantine gold may have accumulated in the royal treasury. Presumably, these payments, along with plunder, contributed to the depletion of gold in Byzantine territory, as commerce with the east is also said to have done. The use of subsidies in diplomacy is attested for early Islamic times as well, the most famous example being when the caliph, ʿAbd al-Malik (685-705), paid the Byzantines an annual subsidy in gold in return for their neutrality during the second Muslim civil war.

It is remarkable how little material evidence remains to testify to this flow of wealth from Byzantine to Sasanian territory. But the few, scattered Byzantine coins found there (from as far away as Carthage)<sup>19</sup> are at least as likely to have come from plunder as from commerce. In any case the existence of a political frontier was no deterrent to these forms of exchange.<sup>20</sup> (One could argue that it is precisely along a political frontier that plundering is likely to occur, and that Muslim summer raids into Anatolia replicated Sasanian behavior.) Nor was the Byzantine-Sasanian frontier a deterrent to overland commerce. The existence of a route from Egypt to ʿIrāq in the sixth century is revealed by a trail of Alexandrian coins that goes through Gerasa.<sup>21</sup> Travel was not necessarily for trade, and this could be evidence for pilgrims as well as for merchants, since Christian pilgrims from ʿIrāq went to Jerusalem and to the desert monasteries in Egypt. But pilgrims could also be merchants. There were merchants from Takrīt<sup>22</sup> in Egypt in the mid-sixth century, where one of them, called Mārūthā, bought a monastery (St. Mary Mother of God) in the Thebaid for 12,000 gold coins. It was called the Monastery of the Syrians, but the first Abbot (Bar ʿIdai) was also from Takrīt.<sup>23</sup>

There is good evidence for commercial activity along the Persian Gulf – Mesopotamia route in the Sasanian period. We hear of an annual trade fair at Batnae, close to the Euphrates in Syria, near the beginning of September during the fourth century. The place was full of wealthy merchants, and a multitude of all kinds of people gathered there to trade in wares sent from India and China and in other commodities that were brought there regularly by land and sea.<sup>24</sup> These goods had most likely arrived via the Persian Gulf – Mesopotamia route. This route was still operating in the sixth century, when pearls from the Gulf region were exported to Byzantine

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<sup>18</sup> Blockley (1985a: 70-71, 73). Justin II refused to pay the Persian subsidy in 572. See Haldon (1990: 34). Thirty thousand *nomismata* at the rate of 72 *nomismata* per Roman pound would equal approximately 417 pounds of gold. In the fifth century, Byzantine gold payments to the Sasanians had been a contribution to the defense of the Caucasus passes by the Sasanians.

<sup>19</sup> Prawdżic-Golembeski and Metcalf (1963: 90-92).

<sup>20</sup> Morony (1993: 700). According to Gawlikowski (1987: 14), “the river Euphrates was not a barrier between the Roman Empire and Parthia. It was a road running through lands which shared to a considerable extent the same civilization.”

<sup>21</sup> Prawdżic-Golembeski and Metcalf (1963: 83, 87).

<sup>22</sup> Takrīt emerged as a Miophysite center in ʿIrāq in the sixth century.

<sup>23</sup> Fiey (1963: 315-316).

<sup>24</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus (1950), English trans. By Rolfe.

territory. The presence of pearls on Byzantine objects and their representation in mosaics is mute testimony to this trade. We also hear of a rich Persian merchant of Revardashīr who sent his son, the future Mar Job, to the land of the Romans with a consignment of pearls. The son got as far as Nisibis, where he lodged in a monastery east of the city, converted to Christianity, and was diverted to a monastic life.<sup>25</sup> There is no record of what happened to his pearls.

A further clue to the organization of trade across the Mesopotamian frontier and within Sasanian territory is provided by John of Ephesus' account of two brothers, Elijah and Theodore, from Amid, written in 567. As youths, they had worked for merchants, with whom they traveled to Persian territory buying and selling. After working for two or three years at five or six *denarii* per year, their wage was raised to ten *denarii* per year. Then "after some years during which they had been willing to travel" it was raised to twenty *denarii* per year and finally to thirty *denarii* per year on the condition they served those merchants exclusively, who "committed to their hands all that was in their houses." After working for twenty years at thirty *denarii* per year, they went into business for themselves, and some time afterward finally returned to Amid. Apparently, they had been trading in Persian territory the entire time, but we are not told where they went or in what goods they dealt.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps they were like the trader with many classes of merchandise, so that, although his trade fail in one, he can spend money on another, that an opportunity may be found for profit to come in ...<sup>27</sup>

Another clue to commerce in Sasanian territory is given by Procopius, who describes how numerous merchants from all over Persia and some from Byzantine territory would come to Dubios (Dvin) in Persarmenia and trade for goods from India and from Iberia in the Transcaucasus.<sup>28</sup> Persian merchants also crossed the Gulf to attend annual markets at Hajar and al-Mushaqqar (most likely in December) where sales were conducted by gestures and muttering, lest anyone swear falsely during the bargaining.<sup>29</sup> According to Daryaee, private enterprise was responsible for late Sasanian commercial expansion.<sup>30</sup> Commerce might be financed by credit; a merchant would settle his debt after selling the consignment.<sup>31</sup> Several merchants might form a commercial co-partnership (*hambāyīh*), an *ad hoc* free association in which the investors' property and profits belonged to all of them equally. The income belonged to the partnership and had to be divided among the partners equally and not in proportion to their original shares.<sup>32</sup> Governments were more interested in controlling and regulating trade in their own territories than in promoting it.<sup>33</sup> There is only one example of what might be called "protectionism" on the part of the Sasanians in the sixth century when Khusraw I denied

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<sup>25</sup> Chabot (1896: 27, 248).

<sup>26</sup> Brooks (1924: 576-79, 585).

<sup>27</sup> Brooks (1924: 593).

<sup>28</sup> Procopius (1914: 480-481).

<sup>29</sup> Morony (2001-2: 29).

<sup>30</sup> Daryaee (1999; 2003: 16).

<sup>31</sup> Peegulevskaya (1956: 66). in the context of oil in containers delivered by sea.

<sup>32</sup> Peegulevskaya (1956: 67-72); Choksy (1988: 203); Daryaee (2010: 403).

<sup>33</sup> For the Sasanian case see Daryaee (2010: 403). On the Roman side, Seland (2014: 88) points out that limiting trade to particular time periods made it easier to tax and observes that total revenues might have been larger if trade had been encouraged instead of restricted.

Sogdian merchants permission to sell their raw silk in Persia in *ca.* 568.<sup>34</sup> According to Vaissière, the Sasanians controlled frontier commerce by issuing permits to trade in the large frontier towns; there were Sogdians at Merv in the fifth and sixth centuries where they would have traded with Persian merchants; and there were Persian merchants in Sogdiana.<sup>35</sup> There does appear to have been a connection between diplomacy and commerce however. Ambassadors carried trade goods with them, and we are told that Sasanian embassies to the Wei developed trade with China in the mid-fifth century.<sup>36</sup> Justinian had (*Codex IV 63/4*) ordered that:

Neither traders subject to our empire nor those to the Persian king must trade in places other than agreed upon at the time of the treaty with the peoples in question, so that they shall not be able to spy out – which would not be proper – the secrets of a foreign state. In the future none of our subjects shall dare to travel further than Nisibin, Callinicum or Artaxata with the aim to buy and sell and shall not think that he will be able to exchange merchandise elsewhere than the above-mentioned cities.<sup>37</sup>

According to the treaty of 561, Roman and Persian merchants were to conduct their business through the specified customs posts, and Saracen and other barbarian merchants of either state were to go through Nisibis and Dara. Both Roman and Persian ambassadors were allowed to exchange the trade goods they brought with them.<sup>38</sup>

How effective this was another matter, and we are not told how far merchants from Sasanian territory could penetrate Byzantine territory, if at all.<sup>39</sup> But a tariff of 10% is said to have been collected on Roman and Persian merchandise at the three cities. This probably encouraged smuggling and the diversion of trade through Arabia. We are told that no tithes were collected at the market of ash-Shihr on the south Arabian coast because it was not in the territory of a kingdom.<sup>40</sup> Apart from the fact that a frontier continued to exist between eastern Anatolia and Armenia after the early Muslim conquests, there is little evidence of increased trade between ʿIrāq and Syria in early Islamic times.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the Muslims themselves set up a toll barrier

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<sup>34</sup> Vaissière. (2005: 228-9).

<sup>35</sup> 182-3, 231.

<sup>36</sup> Rose (2010: 417).

<sup>37</sup> *Codex Iustianus* (1970); Simon (1989: 129).

<sup>38</sup> Blockley (1985b: 70-73). Most of the activity of the two brothers from Amid would have been before 561.

<sup>39</sup> For merchants from Takrīt in Egypt, see above. There are said to have been Persian merchants at Baalbak at the time of the Muslim conquest, but it is unknown how long they had been there or what they were doing. See Al-Balādhurī (1866: 145).

<sup>40</sup> Ibn Ḥabīb (1966: 206).

<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the Umayyad-period marketplace at Palmyra indicates a revival of trade across the Syrian desert. Walmsley (1992: 261). argues that the presence of nine *dirhams* from Wāsit, and one each from Kirmān, Aparshar (Nīshapūr), and Marv in the central market of the 747 earthquake level at Pella is evidence for expanding commercial contacts in the early eighth century.





across the Euphrates in the early eighth century.<sup>42</sup> The Mesopotamian-Persian Gulf route extended into the western Indian Ocean, which Sasanian merchant shipping dominated if not monopolized by the sixth century.<sup>43</sup> Kervran argues that this commerce was protected by a series of Sasanian forts at Ratto Kot on the island of Mushaq in the Indus delta to control and protect access to Banbhore (Daybul<sup>44</sup>), at Ṣuḥār in ʿUmān, on the island of al-Ghanam off Ra’s Musandam controlling the Strait of Hurmūz, and at Sīrāf in the Gulf.<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to see how forts alone could have done so before cannon or without naval patrols. The forts might have been naval bases or safe havens for merchants, but, except for the expedition to Yaman in the 670’s, there is no evidence of a Sasanian navy in the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, or anywhere else.<sup>46</sup> The main destination of commercial traffic was Ubulla at the head of the Gulf in ʿIrāq, said to have been guarded by five hundred horsemen, which is described as the port for Bahrayn, ʿUmān, India, and for ships from as far away as China at the time of the Muslim conquest in the 630’s.<sup>47</sup> From there goods went by river craft to the Sasanian capital at al-Madā’in on the Tigris, and possibly to al-Ḥīra on the Euphrates.<sup>48</sup> The archaeological evidence for sea-borne trade between the Gulf and India is supported by a literary reference to merchants going to India by sea in the life of Rabban Bar-Sahdē (in this case they were captured by pirates).<sup>49</sup>

Although Po-ssu (Persians) are mentioned in Chinese records from the fourth century onwards, Sri Lanka (Taprobane) was the main entrepôt for trade between the western and eastern Indian Ocean during Late Antiquity. Persian and Ethiopian merchants sailed to Sri Lanka, where they acquired silk, aloes, cloves, and sandalwood brought on Indian ships from China and elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> We do not seem to know what the Persians and Ethiopians exchanged for these commodities other than probably cash and possibly Persian horses.<sup>51</sup> The nature of long distance east-west trade in Asia was affected by events in China, where the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 C.E. ended government sponsored export commerce along the northern overland route to western Asia. The division of China between north and south seems to have encouraged the development of trade from south China via the sea route to the West.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the silk trade can be taken as paradigmatic of longest distance commerce during Late

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<sup>42</sup> Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-Kharāj* (1352:136).

<sup>43</sup> Tampoe (1989: 2); Whitehouse (1985: 339; 1996); Wilkinson (1977: 888).

<sup>44</sup> Bahrām V had acquired Daybul in the fifth century as the dowry of an Indian princess he married. See Whitehouse and Williamson (1973: 43). It is unknown how long Daybul remained in Sasanian possession, but it was under an Indian ruler who engaged in piracy when the Muslims took it in 711.

<sup>45</sup> Kervran (1994: 330-33, 335-36). The port of Shahbār on the coast of Makrān was also important for Sasanian shipping. See Rahimi-Laridjani (1988: 323).

<sup>46</sup> Daryaee (2010: 406; 2003: 16).

<sup>47</sup> Al-Balādhurī (1866: 341); Ṭabarī (1879: 2021, 2384).

<sup>48</sup> According to Ibn Rustah (1891: 95), ocean-going ships formerly sailed up the Tigris estuary as far as al-Madā’in, and Al-Alusi (1342/1923-4: 175) has sea-going ships sailing to al-Ḥīra. It is unlikely that seafaring ships could have sailed much further than Ubulla after the lower Tigris changed its course and created huge swamps in lower ʿIrāq in the early sixth century.

<sup>49</sup> Chabot (1896: 45, 262).

<sup>50</sup> Fiey (1968: 44).

<sup>51</sup> Daryaee (2003: 9).

<sup>52</sup> Loewe (1971: 177); Simon (1989: 130).





Antiquity.<sup>53</sup> Two factors affected the export of silk from China. One was extreme insecurity between 290 and 435, when China was divided among warring states. The destruction of mulberry trees during these wars reduced silk production, which did not reach the Han level in quantity until the second quarter of the fifth century. The second was that the Shu region, where the best quality of silk was produced, was separated politically from the north and depended on the southern dynasties, so silk was exported from southern China via the sea route to the West.<sup>54</sup> It would seem that it was mainly raw silk (*metaxa*) that was shipped west, that Sasanian and Axumite merchants acquired it in India and Sri Lanka, and that it was carried up the Persian Gulf to ʿIrāq, across Arabia to Syria, and up the Red Sea to Egypt. Persian merchants usually bought up all the silk brought to Indian ports, making it impossible for the Ethiopians to buy it directly from the Indians in 529. The Ethiopians then resold it to the Byzantines.<sup>55</sup> Raw silk was dyed and woven into cloth in Syria and Egypt.<sup>56</sup> “Much” silk has been found in excavations in Egypt,<sup>57</sup> and it was exported from there. In about 600, during the patriarchate of John the Almoner, a fleet of thirteen ships belonging to the Church, one of them loaded with silk, was caught in a storm in the Adriatic and had to jettison their cargoes.<sup>58</sup> Presumably they were going north (possibly to Ravenna) rather than south. It remains to be explained why Byzantine coins are no longer found in India during the sixth century.<sup>59</sup>

By contrast, there is no direct evidence of the transport of silk across the Iranian plateau under the Sasanians. In the first place, less silk was available in northern China until the northern Wei (386-534) began to develop silk production again, but Wei silk could not compare in quality with the silk from Shu.<sup>60</sup> No Sasanian coins earlier than those of Yazdagerd II (438-57) have been found in China proper; 369 out of 416 later Sasanian coins (80%) found there are from the reign of Pērōz (459-84), and most Sasanian coins are found in later contexts belonging to the Sui (557-618) and T’ang periods (after 618).<sup>61</sup> The preponderance of coins of Pērōz is best explained by the location of the Hephthalites athwart the overland route in the fifth and early sixth centuries, the payment of Hephthalite troops by the Sasanians, the ransom of Kavād, tribute, and the money sent by Pērōz to buy grain from the Hephthalites during the famine. The Hephthalites themselves had diplomatic relations with the Wei in the early sixth century and served as

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<sup>53</sup> According to Vaissière (2005: 85), silk can “serve as a standard for evaluating the respective flows of long-distance commerce by both sea and land”. But, for a critique of the existence of an overland, trans-Asiatic “Silk Road” see Rezakhani (2010).

<sup>54</sup> Thierry (1993 : 109-111).

<sup>55</sup> Procopius (1914: 193).

<sup>56</sup> Johnson and West (1949: 146). Loewe (1971: 178) argues that there is no evidence for the production of raw silk in Byzantine territory despite Procopius’ story about two monks who smuggled silk-worm eggs to Constantinople. Zuckerman (2013: 339, 350) is equally skeptical of the traditional account about the monks. He dates the first arrival of the Indian monks in Byzantine territory to ca. 532 and the maturation of the silk-farming experiment to ca. 547. He argues that Byzantium was self-sufficient in the production of raw silk by the late 540s and more openly so in the early 550s.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson and West (1949: 146).

<sup>58</sup> Johnson and West (1949: 70); Hollerich (1982: 197-198).

<sup>59</sup> Loewe (1971: 176); Peters (1988).

<sup>60</sup> Thierry (1993: 111).

<sup>61</sup> Thierry (1993: 99-100).

economic intermediaries between Iran and China,<sup>62</sup> but it was their Sogdian subjects who disseminated Sasanian silver coins that were the usual means of payment throughout Central Asia and the Gansu corridor.<sup>63</sup> Copies of Pērōz coins also found their way to Sind via the Hephthalites.<sup>64</sup> This is not to say that there was no direct economic exchange between Iran and China in late Sasanian times. Some thirteen Sasanian embassies went to Chinese courts from 455 to 639. Such delegations usually took gifts in what Thierry calls diplomatic commerce. Western goods desired by the Chinese included those with medicinal properties, precious metals, jade, pearls, coral, agate, glass, Persian brocades, and especially Sasanian silver, there being little silver occurring naturally in China. Sogdian and Sasanian silver objects found their way to China.<sup>65</sup>

Although the circulation of western silver coins is attested in Chinese administrative documents and authorized by law in the region of Hexi (Liang prefecture) this is the only region where no Sasanian coins have been found before the T'ang period.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, most Sasanian coins found in the territory of the present People's Republic (1012 out of 1430) have come from the westernmost region of Xiyu, annexed by the T'ang between 640 and 657. The T'ang period hoard of Ulugh Art alone accounts for 947 coins, 567 of which are of Khusraw II (591-628) and 281 are Arab-Sasanian (type of Khusraw II). One of the latter was struck at Istakhr in year 44 (664 C.E.). Other late Sasanian coins come from the tombs of Astana, that are dated between 604 and 710.<sup>67</sup>

The most obvious explanation for the above is that the seventh century and the early eighth century was the second great historical period for the overland movement of silk west of China because the T'ang used silk to finance the westward expansion of their empire by paying their soldiers in silk. The T'ang conquest of the Tarim basin from 640 opened the region up for administrative silk. The T'ang shipped huge quantities of administrative silk to the Tarim basin (over five million pieces of cloth per year) until the 760's when Chinese control over the region collapsed.<sup>68</sup> The soldiers, of course, had to exchange the silk that was paid to them as salaries for other things they needed. Sogdian merchants were able to trade everything of value in Inner Asia (including Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian silver coins) for T'ang silk.<sup>69</sup>

From the end of the fourth century to the early eighth century, Sogdian merchants were main commercial intermediaries between China and Central Asia.<sup>70</sup> Their presence in China is attested by T'ang period ceramic figurines of western barbarians with their laden camels.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>62</sup> Thierry (1993: 115-119).

<sup>63</sup> Vaissière (2005: 111-112, 173).

<sup>64</sup> Daryaee (1999: 142).

<sup>65</sup> Thierry (1993: 125-128, 130-131); Vaissière (2005: 175).

<sup>66</sup> Thierry (1993: 98-99). A hoard of 76 *drachms* of Pērōz were found in a T'ang period context at Xining.

<sup>67</sup> Thierry (1993: 96-8, 104).

<sup>68</sup> Vaissière (2005: 176-178).

<sup>69</sup> Vaissière (2005 :174-5, 177).

<sup>70</sup> Thierry (1993 : 98, 122); Vaissière (2005 : 70, 87).

<sup>71</sup> A collection of such figurines may be viewed at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. See also Vaissière (2005: 189).

Sogdian merchants of Paykand were off trading with China when their town was conquered by the Muslims in the early eighth century.<sup>72</sup> Did Sogdians also trade with Iran to the west? We have already seen that they were prevented from importing raw silk into Sasanian territory by Khusraw I. But there may have been Sogdians at Marv in the late Sasanian period, and they were clearly at Marv in the eighth century, after the Muslim conquest,<sup>73</sup> where they could have engaged in commerce with Persian merchants. It is not difficult to imagine the Sogdians reselling their T'ang silk to Persians at Marv for cash to buy more T'ang silk. How else would post-conquest Arab-Sasanian coins have reached western China? How far would that have reached into Iran? The historic route from Central Asia went across northern Iran, through Marv, Nīshapūr, and Rayy (the famous Khurasān road), and then southwest through Hamadān to ʿIrāq. The origins of Sasanian coins found in China do little to confirm this route; most of them do not come from mint sites clustered along it. Marv, Aparshahr (Nīshapūr), and Rayy are represented, but so are Zaranj (in Sīstān), Bīshapūr, Istakhr, Darabjird, and Ardashīr Khurra (in Fārs), Veh Ardashīr (in ʿIrāq), and Armenia. While eight mints are attested for the coins of Khusraw I, fifteen are attested for Khusraw II from all over Iran.<sup>74</sup> Does this mean that exchange with the Sogdians was increasingly diffused over the Iranian plateau from the sixth to the seventh century? From the other side of Iran, out of 148 Sasanian coins found in ʿIrāq from the reign of Khusraw I, 17 are from Nihavand, 4 from Hamadān, 10 from Rayy, 2 from Aparshahr, 11 from Abivard, and 12 from Marv, but 8 are from Sīstān and 9 from Zaranj, with other coins coming from Kirmān, Ram-Hormuz, Ardashīr Khurra, Darabjird, Istakhr, Aīram, and Armenia.<sup>75</sup> These are as likely to reflect taxation as trade. Otherwise, there is very little evidence of any kind of long-distance or interregional exchange on the Iranian plateau during Late Antiquity.

More might be done with the circulation of coins from their places of origin, but that would not necessarily be evidence for commerce alone. However, something can be done with seals and seal impressions (bullae) originating in Fārs that have been found elsewhere in Iran and are very likely to be evidence of internal commerce because they were probably attached to bales of commodities. The presence of sealings from the port of Ardaxšīr-xwarrah in Fārs found at Dvin in Armenia point to a south-north trade axis through western Iran.<sup>76</sup> Finally, although there is evidence for indirect exchange with China through Central Asia, there is precious little evidence that this included silk. Silk *may* have been produced in northern Iran before the end of Sasanian rule.

There is better evidence for long-distance and interregional exchange on the Arabian Peninsula at the end of Late Antiquity when a great part of the peninsula had become included in the Sasanian economic sphere by the late sixth century. The Sasanians were as interested in exploiting Arabian resources and developing production as they were in commerce. They developed irrigated agriculture and copper mining in ʿUmān and silver mining and textile and leather industries in Yaman and may have drawn Arab over-land merchants into their own

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<sup>72</sup> Frye (1954: 44-45).

<sup>73</sup> Vaissière (2005: 232, 282-283).

<sup>74</sup> Thierry (1993: 89-96).

<sup>75</sup> Nakshabandi and Rashid (1955).

<sup>76</sup> Daryaee (2010: 403; 2003: 14-15).



trading network.<sup>77</sup>

Commerce in the Arabian Peninsula during Late Antiquity tends to be understood and argued about in terms of long distance trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. A good deal of effort has gone into explaining the rise of Makka as a commercial center. Only a few, crucial issues will be addressed here. One is whether or not the Peninsula should be viewed as an economic unit with an integrated trade network. Population tended to be concentrated around the rim of the Peninsula. That meant that Bahrayn and ʿUmān were part of the Gulf trading sphere along with Fārs; Yaman (ruled by Ethiopians for half of the sixth century) was part of the Abyssinian trade zone in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden but was in the Sasanian economic sphere by the end of the sixth century; the Hijāz belonged to a trade network along the upper Red Sea with connections to Egypt and Syria; and the inhabitants of northern Arabia were more closely tied economically to Byzantine Syria or to Sasanian ʿIrāq. By the sixth century the Peninsula was crisscrossed by caravan routes connecting all of these regions. According to Ibn al-Kalbī, merchants made an annual circuit, beginning in the fall, of seasonal markets held in the Peninsula from Dumāt al-Jandal to Mushaqqar, Ṣuḥār, Dabā, ash-Shiḥr, Aden, Ṣanʿāʿ, and Ḥaḍramawt and ʿŪkāz (the latter two held simultaneously).<sup>78</sup> One of the oldest and historically most important routes went from South Arabia through the Hijāz to Syria,<sup>79</sup> and other routes connected this one to eastern Arabia and ʿIrāq. There was little change after the Muslim conquests; basically, the same routes continued to be used by pilgrims as well as merchants.<sup>80</sup>

The main goods in the sixth century were Arabian products: incense, cloth, oil, and leather transported from Yaman to Syria.<sup>81</sup> The fairs of pre-Islamic Arabia appear to have functioned mainly for local exchange and were only part of an interregional trading system to the extent that merchants made an annual circuit among them. Arguably, it was the Makkan merchants who centralized the organization of this commerce in the Hijāz, importing grain from the Yamāma and dates and raisins from Tāʿif,<sup>82</sup> and arranging safe passage agreements with Bedouin tribes in return for marketing their products for them.<sup>83</sup> Whatever had happened in antiquity, this was a recent development. The rise of Makka as a commercial center only occurred in the last decades of the sixth century<sup>84</sup> and in the part of the peninsula that was the least affected by the Sasanians.

Two commercial innovations are attributed to the Makkans in the sixth century.<sup>85</sup> One was to pool their resources in joint ventures that minimized the risk and enabled poorer merchants to

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<sup>77</sup> Morony (2001: 25, 37).

<sup>78</sup> Al-Marzūqī (1332/1914: 161-165).

<sup>79</sup> Simon (1989: 39).

<sup>80</sup> Al-Rashid (1978: 33); Naṣīf (1408/1988: xiii).

<sup>81</sup> Ibrahim (1990: 22); Simon (1989: 48, 143).

<sup>82</sup> Simon (1989: 94).

<sup>83</sup> Ibrahim (1990: 42-3).

<sup>84</sup> Simon (1989: 24, 65-70, 76).

<sup>85</sup> They are both ascribed to Hāshim, Muḥammad's grandfather, which would put them in the early decades of the sixth century.

invest.<sup>86</sup> The other changed the responsibility for goods. Normally, during Late Antiquity, the agent of a merchant bore any losses to the goods in transit. According to the Arabian *qirāḍ* contract, the investor was to bear any losses and the profits were to be divided between the agent and the investor according to prearranged proportions.<sup>87</sup> Both of these are likely to have contributed to Makkan commercial success, and the latter was spread by Muslims wherever they went, eclipsing the older forms of contract. The *qirāḍ* made it possible to employ people without capital of their own as commercial agents, and in the seventh century slaves and *mawālī* were employed in this way.

Although it is reasonable to suppose that Arabian commercial practices spread outside Arabia as a result of the Islamic conquests,<sup>88</sup> one might question whether those conquests created a unified economic bloc or a single large commercial network. It is generally assumed that the early Islamic empire coincided with or even created a single zone of exchange (the Islamic Market) throughout its entire territory.<sup>89</sup> It is useful to remember that the early Islamic Empire continued to expand for about a century, until the second decade of the eighth century. Did a Muslim-controlled trading network expand with it,<sup>90</sup> or did it only emerge after expansion stopped? Cahen argued against the idea that economic regions should be defined by political or religious boundaries, pointing out that Muslim political unity was soon compromised (beginning with the Berber revolt in 740), and that systems of money, weights and measures varied from region to region.<sup>91</sup> One could add that by the eighth century Muslim merchants were trading beyond the frontiers of the Islamic Empire. It would be better to define economic regions in economic terms of local and regional exchange networks. But then the problem is how to do so, when our attention is usually drawn to those merchants and commodities that traveled the furthest. One might think in terms of overlapping zones of exchange or of different distribution zones for different commodities, such as that of the Jerash pottery in northern Jordan in the seventh and eighth centuries. Tampoe identifies an early Islamic pattern of at least one entrepôt in each sailing or trading zone in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.<sup>92</sup> Local trading networks, such as that in the Persian Gulf and the former Abyssinian sphere could also be seen to be overlaid or subsumed in a wider Islamic trading system.<sup>93</sup> According to Vaissière, the Persian network and the heart of the Sogdian network were incorporated into the same political space of the Islamic Empire.<sup>94</sup> We hear of a Sogdian merchant from Bukhara who left Bukhara to trade with China and then settled in Baṣra where he converted to Islam before 661.<sup>95</sup> Whitehouse states that in the ninth and tenth centuries several interlocking systems were replaced by a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibrahim (1990: 41).

<sup>87</sup> Morony (2001: 710).

<sup>88</sup> Rāḡib (1992: 26).

<sup>89</sup> Ibrahim (1990: 120); Lombard (1975: 10); Tampoe (1989: 97). It is reported that when the Muslims took Baalbak the treaty stipulated that merchants there could travel to any region under Muslim control (Al-Balādhurī 1866: 145).

<sup>90</sup> For the view that it did so see Ibrahim (1990: 112); and Rāḡib (1991: 5).

<sup>91</sup> Cahen (1980: 10-11).

<sup>92</sup> Tampoe (1989: 105).

<sup>93</sup> Munro-Hay (1982: 119).

<sup>94</sup> Vaissière (2005: 184).

<sup>95</sup> Vaissière (2005: 280).

single trade network throughout the Arabian Sea.<sup>96</sup> But trade routes and distribution patterns are only symptoms; the real issue is the commercialization of the economy.

One tends to think of commercialization in terms of increased production for exchange through entrepreneurial middlemen who distribute more goods and more different kinds of goods than before, accompanied by greater specialization in production that requires more exchange. The development of early Islamic commerce is usually tied to increased urbanization, the founding of new cities and the growth of new and older cities that provided concentrated, mass consumer demand for all kinds of products.<sup>97</sup> Of course this begs the questions of whether demographic growth occurred, if so, why it occurred, and how much there was. If fertility rates remain the same an increase in population is normally caused by a decline in mortality brought about by improved living conditions, diet, and health. The latter might also increase fertility rates as well. From this point of view, it could be argued that the early Muslim population, having privileged access to resources and extra women, experienced a differential demographic growth over successive generations compared to the non-Muslim population. But this should be balanced against the demographic effects of recurring outbreaks of bubonic plague that affected Muslims along with everyone else in the seventh and early eighth centuries, such as the Plague of ʿAmwās that decimated the Muslim army in Syria in 639<sup>98</sup> or the Plague of the Maidens at Baṣra, Kūfa, Wāsiṭ, and Syria in 706 that decimated an entire generation of child-bearing young women.<sup>99</sup>

It is still a chicken and egg question whether urban growth was caused by commerce or *vice versa*.<sup>100</sup> The expansion of agriculture, commerce, and urban populations was more likely to be parallel and interactive. But the problem with all of this is that the evidence for larger cities comes from the ʿAbbāsī period (the area of ʿAbbāsī Iṣfahān was twice that of the Sasanian city) and tends to be generalized from the case of Baghdād, which does not help us for the seventh and early eighth centuries. With the sole exception of seventh-century Madīna,<sup>101</sup> early Islamic cities do not seem to have been significantly larger than their Late Antique counterparts. Indeed, Bolʿshakov has argued that there was no change in the size of urban populations or the number of towns in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt from the seventh to the thirteenth century.<sup>102</sup>

Urbanization is also said to have encouraged commerce because cities were administrative centers and the locations of ruling dynasties and their courts that consumed imported luxuries. This does not work very well for the seventh century either, because the early Islamic administrative economy was redistributive. Taxes in cash and kind were kept in government storehouses in the early *amṣār* and distributed to soldiers and officials as stipends and rations. There is also documentary evidence of the requisition of goods by the government in Egypt and the northern Negev from the seventh century. Perhaps the most significant reorientation of

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<sup>96</sup> Whitehouse (1979: 865).

<sup>97</sup> Ibrahim (1990: 104, 119-20); Tampoe (1989: 97); Whitehouse (1979: 346).

<sup>98</sup> Conrad (1981: 69, 87); Ṭabarī (1879: 2511-2525).

<sup>99</sup> Conrad (1981: 55).

<sup>100</sup> Ibrahim (1990: 8) argues that merchants encouraged urbanization because it served their interests.

<sup>101</sup> Arazi (1984: 177-235).

<sup>102</sup> Bolʿshakov (1984). See Subtelny (1990: 45-6).



commodity distribution in the seventh century was the change in the export of grain from Egypt to Madīna instead of to Constantinople under ʿUmar I to relieve the famine in the Hijāz. This was done by the government, although speculators managed to commercialize the distribution of the grain at Madīna. Much is also made of the strategic location of cities along or at the junction of trade routes or at seaports. But, except for Qayrawān and possibly Ramla, all early Islamic urban foundations were located near previously existing towns or cities. Since the routes passing through these places already existed, location alone would not explain an expansion of commerce in early Islamic times. Some cities, such as Baṣra, Sīrāf, and Ṣuḥār did develop as entrepôts drawing their hinterlands into an economic nexus with the long-distance trade that went through them.<sup>103</sup> According to Tampoe commerce began to recover in the Persian Gulf region from about 700 C.E., and earliest Islamic trade was “grafted onto” the previously existing Byzantine-Sasanian commercial networks.<sup>104</sup> But even before that the merchant, Abraham of Kashkar (fl. Ca. 635-657/8), was engaged in the sea trade to India.<sup>105</sup>

Other factors contributed to the development of commerce in early Islamic times. Merchants followed Muslim armies, bought the booty from Muslim soldiers, and some made fortunes thereby. By all accounts the Muslim Ḥajj stimulated long distance trade. Large amounts of cash were in circulation and cash transfers and purchasing power were increased by credit instruments. Commerce and merchants had a more positive, religiously sanctioned reputation among Muslims than in former Byzantine territories.<sup>106</sup> Muslim merchants had preferential tariff status in the export trade. The rise of an Ibādī commercial diaspora from the early eighth century in the Persian Gulf region and in North Africa was accompanied by a legal system that favored the interests of merchants.<sup>107</sup>

It would seem that the post-conquest revival or expansion of trade from the Persian Gulf to South Asia and China had begun by the early eighth century. Sīrāf and Ṣuḥār developed as commercial ports. During the early eighth century John of Daylam sent two monks from Arrajān to “the great sea”, who returned from Serendib (Sri Lanka) with 70,000 pieces of silver, presumably the profit of some commercial enterprise if not collected from the Christians there.<sup>108</sup> Many fragments of Indian pottery and one fragment of Chinese Dusun ware were found in Umayyad levels at Ṣuḥār,<sup>109</sup> and by the second half of the eighth century Chinese stoneware jars (Dusun ware) began to arrive at Sīrāf.<sup>110</sup> Daybul fell to the Muslims in 711 and became an important commercial center for Muslim merchants.

It is somewhat controversial whether Persian merchants continued to sail to China (on Indian and South Asian ships) during the seventh century. Kervran suggests that the change in

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<sup>103</sup> Whitehouse (1979: 884); Wilkinson (1977 :890, 894).

<sup>104</sup> Tampoe (1989: 101).

<sup>105</sup> Fiey (1966: 136-137; 1968: 165).

<sup>106</sup> Hollerich (1982: 200-1); Ibrahim (1990: 99-100).

<sup>107</sup> Wilkinson (1977 :900).

<sup>108</sup> Brock (1981-1982: 173).

<sup>109</sup> Kervran (1994: 339).

<sup>110</sup> Whitehouse (1973: 244-250; 1985: 346).



dynasties is likely to have interrupted trade nearly completely, although she hesitates to say this for the Persian Gulf region,<sup>111</sup> while Lewicki claims that Persian ships frequented Canton from the seventh to the beginning of the eighth century.<sup>112</sup> We hear of a Chinese passenger who sailed from Canton to Srivijaya in south-east Sumatra with a Persian shipmaster in 671, of an Indian who went from Sri Lanka to Srivijaya with a fleet of 36 Persian ships in 717, and of Persian sailing from Sri Lanka to Ceylon to get different kinds of silk in 727.<sup>113</sup> In 748, there was a large village inhabited by Persians on the island of Hainan.<sup>114</sup> It is usually held that direct sailing (on the same ship) from the Persian Gulf region to China was a ninth-century development,<sup>115</sup> but one wonders what difference that would have made. Perhaps goods were less expensive if they did not have to be transshipped *en route*.

Be that as it may, two new developments are associated with the Chinese trade by the eighth century. One is that, alongside the Po-ssu, Ta-shih (Arab, but later used in China for “Muslim”) merchants appear at Canton before 758.<sup>116</sup> One of them was the ʿUmānī, Ibādī merchant, Abū ʿUbayda as-Saghīr, who made the round trip to China in the early eighth century.<sup>117</sup> The second is that Chinese ceramic vessels (and perhaps their contents) replaced silk as the main commodity exported to the West, partly because silk was now being produced in western Asia and partly because the Chinese developed a ceramic industry to exchange its products for western goods they wanted.<sup>118</sup> ʿIrāqī ceramics were also exported through the Gulf to western India, the Red Sea and East Africa,<sup>119</sup> but the evidence for such traffic before the ninth century is slim indeed. It consists of scattered pieces of blue-green glazed “Sasanian-Islamic” pottery, a couple of dirhams from Wasit (708) and Rayy (712) found at Athār on the Red Sea coast,<sup>120</sup> reports of Indian pirates on Socotra,<sup>121</sup> and the report that, in 711, the Indian Ruler of Sind was encouraging piracy at Daybul against ships taking Muslim men and women from Sri Lanka to Makka and ʿIrāq.<sup>122</sup> The earliest levels at Manda and Kilwa on the East African coast also have “Sasanian-Islamic” pottery (with more glass than pottery at Kilwa), and Tampoe dates trade with the Lamu archipelago from about 750 C.E.<sup>123</sup> It was also about the middle of the eighth

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<sup>111</sup> Kervran (1994: 333, 339).

<sup>112</sup> Lewicki (1935: 174-175).

<sup>113</sup> Colless (1969-1970: 22-23). See also Whitehouse and Williamson (1973: 46).

<sup>114</sup> Colless (1969-1970: 35).

<sup>115</sup> Tampoe (1989: 119).

<sup>116</sup> Colless (1969-1970: 35); Di Meglio (1970: 108-9); Lewicki (1935 : 175-176); Tampoe (1989: 100, 119). Ta-shih came from Tadjik, the Middle Persian term for Arab.

<sup>117</sup> Lewicki (1935: 180); Whitehouse (1985: 341). Wilkinson (1977: 894-5) argues that the position of an-Nazar ibn Maymūn, who was active as a financier among the ʿUmānī merchants in the China trade in the later eighth century, implies the existence of several merchants and a specialist financial organization.

<sup>118</sup> Hudson (1970: 16). For the diffusion of Chinese stoneware in the western Indian Ocean see Whitehouse, (1973: 250-52). Lewicki (1935: 180) suggests that aloe wood was also imported from China to ʿUmān in the early eighth century. According to Colless (1969-1970: 24) the Chinese exported pickled eggs, soy bean sauce, and dried fish in the large, green-glazed stoneware jars found at Sirāf.

<sup>119</sup> Whitehouse (1979: 877, 881; 1985: 342, 344).

<sup>120</sup> Zarins and Zahrani (1405/1984: 89).

<sup>121</sup> Ubaydli (1989: 46).

<sup>122</sup> Ansari (1965: 188). See also Ghosh (2008: 370).

<sup>123</sup> Chittick (1966: 7); Tampoe (1989: 111); Whitehouse (1979: 881).

century that a trans-Saharan slave trade was developed in North Africa by Ibādī merchants who had come from Baṣra and Kūfa.<sup>124</sup>

Piracy, banditry, and theft can also be considered to be forms of economic exchange. The first two are also evidence that there was commercial traffic worth attacking and that trade could be dangerous. One of the rare descriptions of the marketplace at Damascus tells how, after the failure of the revolt of Zayd ibn ʿAlī at Kūfa in 737, a Kūfan called Abū l-Muʿarrīs became a robber and went to Damascus with a gang of Kūfan robbers. There they would set fires in the marketplace at night, and, when the people raised the alarm and were busy putting out the fires, they would go somewhere else in the marketplace, break the locks, take what they could and flee.<sup>125</sup> Commercial exchange was institutionalized in marketplaces. The Arabian tradition of seasonal fairs where merchants exchanged goods and Bedouin sold animals, bought food, and bought and sold slaves lasted until about the middle of the eighth century.<sup>126</sup> Bedouin sometimes also camped alongside roads to trade with passing caravans or to beg from them. There were also weekly markets for rural produce and permanent marketplaces with street vendors and shops occupied by artisan-retailers. Bedouin came into Baṣra to sell their animals and to buy provisions.<sup>127</sup> Al-Farazdaq's father sent him, as a Bedouin youth, to Baṣra with his caravan and merchandise to sell it and buy items for him and to buy clothing for his family. When al-Farazdaq arrived in Baṣra, he sold the merchandise and took the money.<sup>128</sup> We also hear of a Samaritan called Abna from the village of Ḥesfin, who took the linen he wove to Tiberias to sell.<sup>129</sup> Urban markets tended to be subdivided according to specialization in commodities and services, and the building of marketplaces was an attractive form of investment (even by officials), because of the income from the rental on the shops.<sup>130</sup> In the *amṣār*, marketplaces sprang up around the government storehouses. Islamic tradition emphasizes the inspection of markets by government officials to ensure honest weights and measures and fair commercial practices. Standardized glass weights and vessel stamps appear in Egypt from the early eighth century, and the market inspector began to be called *muḥtasib* in ʿIrāq about the same time.<sup>131</sup>

Because the early Islamic Empire was created and governed by people with a merchant background, the relationship between commerce and politics was highly personal. Muslim officials, and their relatives and protégés, used their political power and access to the treasury for private commercial ventures.<sup>132</sup> Merchants advanced cash for military campaigns, supplied Muslim armies, and bought the booty.<sup>133</sup> First generation Muslim members of the Arab elite at

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<sup>124</sup> Savage (1992: 362-363).

<sup>125</sup> Dīnawarī (1912: 345).

<sup>126</sup> Azraqī (1964: 131). For markets in pre-Islamic Arabia see Simon (1989: 83, 84, 155, 161, 226).

<sup>127</sup> Al-ʿAlī (1953: 227).

<sup>128</sup> Ṭabarī (1879: 95).

<sup>129</sup> Brock (1973: 302).

<sup>130</sup> This was nothing new. The Patriarch Athanasius owned 400 shops in Edessa in the early sixth century and built the church of the Theotokos with the revenues. See Duval (1892: 19, 78).

<sup>131</sup> Al-ʿAlī (1953: 240).

<sup>132</sup> Ibrahim (1990: 102-3, 127-8, 217).

<sup>133</sup> Al-ʿAlī (1953: 236-237); Jūda (1989: 112).

Madīna employed slaves in commerce, who worked for their own profit or that of their Muslim masters. Az-Zubayr ibn al-Awwām is said to have possessed 1,000 slaves who engaged in commerce; al-ʿAbbās had twenty slaves, each with a capital of 10,000 dirhams. Slaves with limited legal rights could enter into any contract they wished, trade with their own capital or enter into partnership, and could trade in their master’s country or travel to another.<sup>134</sup>

Former captives who became *mawālī* also engaged in commerce for themselves or their Arab patrons, sometimes taking advantage of their connection to an official or member of the ruling dynasty. Jūda identifies some forty *mawālī* who engaged in some form of commerce, including the slave trade, during the first Islamic century, many of them in the Hijāz and ʿIrāq. They dominated the marketplaces in ʿIrāq, and some became quite wealthy. Notable among them was a *mawlā* of the Banū ʿUdhra in Damascus, who engaged in commerce to Azerbayjān and the other *amṣār* ; Yūnus ibn Kurd ibn Shahriyār, a *mawlā* of ʿAmr ibn az-Zubayr, who traded between Madīna and Syria in the time of Yazīd II; Abū Kathīr, a *mawlā* of Aslam, originally a captive from Fārs, who lived in Madīna and engaged in trade with Egypt, where he was excused from paying the tithe on his goods because of his close connection to the governor, ʿAbd al-Azīz ibn Marwān; and Ashras, a *mawlā* of the Banū Asad, who was a merchant for the governor of ʿIrāq, Yūsuf ibn ʿUmar.<sup>135</sup>

Apart from what this tells us about Syrian and Egyptian commerce in the seventh and early eighth centuries, it deserves to be compared to Late Antique patterns of commercial agency. Elijah and Theodore were paid an annual wage but eventually went into business for themselves, as did many *mawālī*. More importantly, the services of Late Antique *negotiatores* were attached to institutions, primarily the state and the Church, in what Whittaker calls “tied trade”. Merchants were also dependents or clients of the rich. The same person could operate as an employed agent and as an entrepreneur.<sup>136</sup> The institutional dimension seems to be gone from the early Islamic situation, which appears to be more completely personal, although during Late Antiquity the relationship between merchant-agents and representatives of the state and Church may have functioned at a personal level.

Personal relationships were important for early Islamic commerce and were often based on some common identity, usually place of origin and/or religion. Trading networks developed with far flung merchant colonies, the identity of which tells us something about the geographical origin of commercial development.<sup>137</sup> Curtin points out that the phenomenon of a trade diaspora, which had been known in antiquity, reappeared in the Mediterranean region from the fifth to the eighth century among merchants collectively called Syri.<sup>138</sup> One should add the Sogdians in Central Asia and western China and the Persians in the Indian Ocean, both from the

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<sup>134</sup> Al-ʿAlī (1953: 237, 243).

<sup>135</sup> Jūda (1989: 110-12, 115, 117).

<sup>136</sup> Whittaker (1983: 164, 166, 168, 172-3).

<sup>137</sup> Tampoe, (1989: 125) suggests that merchant colonies also indicate the geographical range of nodal centers of trade.

<sup>138</sup> Curtin (1984: 103-104).



fourth century, as similar trade diasporas.<sup>139</sup> We can thus see this as a broader phenomenon occurring during the last two centuries of Late Antiquity, although a diaspora might not necessarily constitute a network, and Vaissière warns that:

No document from the great years of Sogdian commerce formally proves that we are dealing with networks rather than the trading activities of individual merchants, even if this seems immensely probable due to the distances involved.<sup>140</sup>

From the sixth century onward, we can add Christian Persians of the Church of the East, and by the seventh century the merchants from the port of Dārīn, on the Arabian side of the Gulf, who exported musk imported from India to the cities of eastern Arabia, to Baṣra, where they invested in trade, and even to the Hijāz, where 400 merchants from Dārīn were engaged in the perfume business at Madīna during the *ḥajj* in 63/682-3.<sup>141</sup> A seventh-century letter reveals the existence of a group of import-export merchants who traveled between Egypt and Ifriqiyya.<sup>142</sup> By the eighth century, an Ibādī merchant diaspora had spread from Baṣra to ʿUmān and North Africa. This suggests that it was mainly from ʿIrāq and the Gulf region that this phenomenon spread in early Islamic times. This pattern continued with Sīrāfī merchant colonies, the Persian Karaites from Tustar, and Rādhānite Jewish merchants, probably from a district north of Baghdad, in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>143</sup>

Partnerships were also more convenient with fellow-countrymen and fellow-believers. In early Islamic commerce, resources were pooled in joint ventures, usually for a single transaction, as in the case of the Ibādī merchant, Abū ʿUbayda as-Saghīr, who asked a group of merchants at Ṣuḥār if he could join them in buying aloes in the early eighth century. When they agreed, he contributed twenty *dīnārs* to the purchase.<sup>144</sup> Commercial agency tended to be reconceptualized from hire to partnership in Islamic legal literature from the eighth century onward, with the *qirāḍ* partaking of both aspects,<sup>145</sup> possibly as a transitional form, but also possibly as a reversion to Sasanian traditions of partnership, at least in Iran. Choksy makes a direct comparison between the Sasanian *hambāyih* (co-partnership) and the Ḥanafī and Mālīkī *mufāwāḍa* (unlimited investment partnership) in which a commercial purchase by one partner belonged to all the partners equally as did the proceeds from the sale of joint property.<sup>146</sup> Commercial payment instruments, used to finance trade, may have developed out of Muslim government requisition forms. The *ṣakk* was a claim check or voucher issued originally by the government for the receipt of goods or cash. The earliest reference is to ʿUmar I issuing *ṣukūk* to

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<sup>139</sup> Vaissière (2005: 63, 166).

<sup>140</sup> Vaissière (2005: 335).

<sup>141</sup> Al-ʿAlī (1953: 231); Al-Balādhurī (1938: 43); Yāqūt (1866: 432).

<sup>142</sup> Rāḡīb (1992: 26).

<sup>143</sup> For the Rādhānites see Gil (1974: 299-328).

<sup>144</sup> Lewicki (1935: 179).

<sup>145</sup> Pryor (1977: 32).

<sup>146</sup> Choksy (1988: 203).

the people of Madīna for grain rations when wheat was shipped from Egypt to relieve the famine, that local merchants bought and sold at a profit before the shipment arrived.<sup>147</sup> During the seventh and eighth centuries, *ṣukūk* were issued as treasury drafts to individuals for specified amounts of cash, stipends, and provisions. When Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab purchased provisions for the government in the early eighth century, he issued a *ṣakk* for the sale according to the price, that presumably could be redeemed from the treasury by the vendor(s). The *ṣakk* began to be used privately as a promissory note very early. In the mid-seventh century Saʿīd ibn al-ʿĀṣ registered debts of 90,000 *dīnārs* owed to him in *ṣukūk*, and Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn wrote a *ṣakk* of 10,000 *dirhams* for an exchange of property.<sup>148</sup>

There is also early evidence for the use of the letter of credit in commerce between Egypt and Ifrīqiyya. On a parchment document of the late seventh century written in Arabic, a merchant in Ifrīqiyya asks his correspondent in Egypt to send him clothing and to entrust a third party with a letter of credit (*ṣahīfa*) for fifty *dīnārs* to be paid in Ifrīqiyya. By the eighth century the Persian term, *suftaja*, was used for such a letter of credit, and this term occurs frequently in Egyptian papyri.<sup>149</sup> Such payment instruments were safer and more convenient than carrying large amounts of cash, and thus arguably contributed to commercial expansion. Credit increased purchasing power and contributed to inflation, but none of this resulted from a dearth of cash.

The early Islamic economy was highly monetized. Property was evaluated in monetary terms, and huge amounts of cash were in circulation, especially silver coins from the late Sasanian period. Late Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian *dirhams* remained in circulation until the second quarter of the ninth century.<sup>150</sup> There is no textual evidence for barter, but massive textual evidence for the use of cash in all kinds of transactions.<sup>151</sup> Small change (copper in Syria and Egypt, lead in the Gulf region<sup>152</sup>) was struck locally, and there were more mints in Syria, ʿIrāq, and Iran during the seventh century than there were after the coinage reform of ʿAbd al-Malik. Hoards can be used to establish minimum distances coins traveled, but we should remember that these are coins that went out of circulation the moment they were buried, if not before.<sup>153</sup>

It seems appropriate to conclude this review of commercial issues with a word about ethics. Ideals of fair dealing tend to highlight the sharp practices that may have been fairly common. At any rate, two examples of commercial ethics, one from the sixth century and one from the early

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<sup>147</sup> Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (1922: 166).

<sup>148</sup> Zubaydī (1970: 174, 175-6, 185).

<sup>149</sup> Rāḡib (1992: 1-8). If Rāḡib is right in dating this document to the seventh century, this would undermine Lieber’s thesis that derives the *suftaja* from administrative practices in T’ang China See Lieber (1968: 234-235). This is about the same time that Ibn Az-Zubayr is said to have taken *dirhams* (*waraq*) from merchants at Makka and wrote for them to Baṣra and Kūfa, where they collected the sums, as did Ibn al-ʿAbbās between Makka and Kūfa. See as-Sarakhsī (1398/1978: xiv, 37).

<sup>150</sup> Lowick (1983: 202).

<sup>151</sup> Coptic papyrus sale contracts from late eighth century Egypt refer to the price for real estate being exchanged “hand to hand”. See Varenbergh (1949).

<sup>152</sup> For Sasanian lead coins found at Sīrāf see Lowick (1985: 11-16). For the Islamic period see Whitehouse (1970: 5; 1972, 70-71); Whitehouse and Williamson (1973: 35); and Tampoe (1989: 152).

<sup>153</sup> Lowick (1983: 210).

eighth century, suggest continuity in the tension between commercial behavior and ideals. It is probably significant that both examples are found in pious biographical literature, where they serve to heighten the reputations of the protagonists. The first example involves the two brothers from Amid, Elijah and Theodore, who traded in Sasanian territory. They are said to have abstained from the evil practices of merchants, from oaths, lying, extortion, and diverse weights and measures, fraud, and bargaining. They told everything to their customers fairly and honestly.<sup>154</sup> This deserves to be compared to what we are told about the Ibāḍī merchant/<sup>ʿ</sup>*ālim* Abū ʿUbayda as-Saghīr, who invested in the purchase of aloes with a group of merchants at Ṣuḥār. When they disparaged the aloes to their owner in order to reduce the price, Abū ʿUbayda thought they were sincere. But when the partners then went elsewhere and praised the quality of the aloes they had purchased to their customers in order to raise the price, Abū ʿUbayda exclaimed: “Glory to God! You disparaged the faultless aloes before their owner,” demanded and got his money back.<sup>155</sup>

There are many other issues that deserve consideration, such as commercial taxes, contract formularies, money changing, *etc.* But, based on the themes outlined above, one can suggest a broad pattern of change from government regulation to government facilitation of commerce from the sixth to the eighth century. One can also identify the main forms of economic exchange as including looting, robbery, ransom, charity, and diplomatic gifts and subsidies, along with buying and selling. It could be argued that the commercialization of the economy was the most important change during the early Islamic period, and that this had less to do with the development of trade routes and urban development than with the commercialization of agriculture, commercial partnerships, the development of credit instruments, the large amounts of cash in circulation, an increase in market exchange, specialization in production and exchange, the role of merchants in Muslim government, and the development of trading networks based on personal relationships and some common identity. Ultimately, however, questions of production loom behind those of exchange.

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<sup>154</sup> Brooks (1924: 576-578).

<sup>155</sup> Lewicki (1935: 179-80).

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