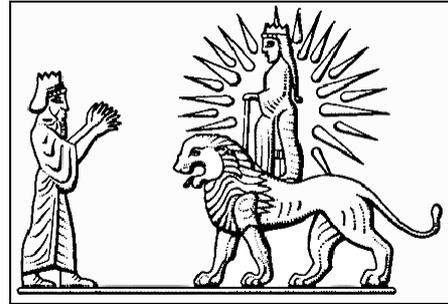


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TRADE AND COINAGE ON THE ANCIENT 'SILK ROUTE'

Richard N. Frye

Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian- ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art.- Lytton Strachey

The early history of Asia has been characterized as a struggle between the steppe (nomads and/or pastoralists) and the sown (settled folk). From the story of Cain and Abel in the Old Testament to the recent turmoil in Afghanistan, this opposition has been a dominant theme of the relation between societies. Granted that different life styles or religions frequently led to strife, invasion or migrations, more important from the earliest of times, I suggest, has been commerce and trade between the two groups. If we look at the written remains from the area between Gansu, in western China, and Mesopotamia, however, they are overwhelmingly religious in nature, as though people everywhere spent most of their days praying and in rituals. One reason for this impression is the restriction of writing to priests, while scribes mainly concentrated their efforts on accounts and records, few of which were preserved. In any case, in trying to reconstruct a secular past we have few sources, and must rely much on the results of archaeology. Always using caution, we may also by analogy rely on later records to illumine the past.

Let me begin with a quotation from an eleventh century 'Mirror for Princes', the Qabus-nameh of Kai Kavus, a ruler in Tabaristan. In advice to his son, and speaking of merchants, he says: "To benefit the inhabitants of the west they import the wealth of the east, and those of the east the wealth of the west, and by so doing become the instrument of the world's civilization. None of this could be brought about except by commerce."(Levi 1952, 156) How far back can we trace this kind of belief?

I propose that we can differentiate between states and societies which regarded merchants highly, and those which undervalued or even denigrated them. By merchants or traders I do not mean shopkeepers, but those who engaged in long distance trade, and that probably existed from pre-historic times. Archaeology can help us in this investigation; for example, the discovery of art objects made of lapis-lazuli in early dynastic tombs of Egypt attests to very early long-distance trade. This is not in dispute, but what is sought in these few pages is the effect of government policy in the form of taxes and controls, and of coinage, on the development of trade and commerce over the vast area covered by the 'Silk Road.' Let us begin with generalities.

It is proposed that long distance trade was primarily in luxury objects, although some other items were always in great demand, such as spices, as a kind of substitute for refrigerators in antiquity. Great rewards had to justify large outlays of capital, not to mention effort and risks by traders. Before the Achaemenid Empire there is little archaeological evidence of organized trade between distant lands, such as Mesopotamia and China. Individuals, or even caravans, may well

have gone on long trips, but we have no records. The mountain massifs of the Tien Shan, Kunlun, Pamirs, and Himalayas deterred extensive, active contacts over them. With the coming of the Greco-Bactrians, however, trade increased and the east Asian and west Asian worlds met. Trade became more complex, with questions of forms of financing commercial enterprises, customs and barriers to trade, modes of transport, the roles of states, of groups of merchants, and of intermediaries in trade, all indicate the complexity of trade in ancient periods.

In China, from early times, merchants were not well regarded, and many were foreigners, from the lands to the north and west. Nomadic rulers, on the other hand, realized that trade was vital for the prosperity of their subjects, and generally merchants were well regarded and well received in their domains. Not that plunder and conquest were absent from their history, but these were exceptions, since the exchange of goods between pastoralists and settled folk meant prosperity for all. Unfortunately history is the record of wars and conquests, much like newspapers today which highlight tragedies.

Parallels between China and the Near East are instructive, since both areas faced threats of invasion by nomads, as well as similar attitudes regarding trade between the steppe and the sown.

When dynasts, originally nomadic or pastoralist by origin, ruled in both areas, international trade seems to have flourished, such as under the Achaemenids and Parthians in the Near East, and the Han, Tang and Yüan (Mongol) dynasties in China. In contrast, the early Sasanians and the Ming rulers of China were more concerned with internal affairs and agriculture than with trade, which resulted in taxes, customs and other barriers for long distance merchants. In spite of much destruction, the Muslim Arabs and the Mongols both saw a flowering of trade in their domains. Can we understand earlier history by projecting backward more recent events?

Coinage came into being as a concomitant of trade, making internal trade, as well as between lands, simpler. But coinage required a strong state and trust between all involved in commerce, as well as with state officials. Sudden changes in history are usually made by 'fanatic' individuals, such as Alexander, Napoleon and Stalin, but long term developments, as the rise and fall of states, at times seem to be the consequences of economic failures. Frankly I am puzzled about the relation between local copper coinage and silver and gold issues. It seems the value of the former was determined by the state, whereas gold and silver was subject to the market, since from time immemorial people distrusted the debasement of those metals in coins of the realm. In the Near East the breaking or even biting of silver and gold coins was intended to determine the purity of the gold or silver in the coins. The reason why Sasanian coins were so widely circulated in the pre-Islamic world of the Near East and Central Asia, was the policy of the government to maintain a high standard of purity in their coinage, a practice not followed by their neighbors.

If it is true, on the whole, that governments set the value of local copper coinage, but the market was influential in determining the value of precious metals, then only coins of the latter would travel. Other factors, however, were

not absent in determining values. The apparent preference for silver over gold by nomadic peoples has remained an enigma for me. Yet the early abundance of Scythian gold objects from kurgans in South Russia is followed by the dominance of silver on the steppes (Frye 1971, 255-62)! Why? Tacitus (Tac.Germ. 5) remarked that the Germans preferred silver to gold, and the same phenomenon is recorded when the Arab Muslim army captured the Sasanian treasury in Ctesiphon. The Romans and Indians valued gold, and India throughout history has maintained a high value for gold over silver. Political events, or the supply of gold or silver, of course, had an influence on prices or coinage, but the different preferences of people for gold or for silver is striking. This kind of irrational or psychological preference cannot be ignored in reconstruction of the past.

Why were some people known as skilled merchants while others were not? In Central Asia the Sogdians and Khwarazmians were the traders par excellence. Their geographic location, and their life in oases, which were not centers of agricultural or craft production, almost ordained them to become middlemen or traders, especially between settled and nomadic peoples. In the Near East, however, similar conditions were less important, but centers of handicraft production also needed middlemen to distribute their wares. It is understandable why the seafaring Greeks occupied the role of traders in the west, while for the east the Armenians were well placed to act as middlemen for products from the lowlands. Over centuries Greeks and Armenians gained a reputation as shrewd traders, while Iranians, as well as people of the 'Fertile Crescent', were more bound to the soil. Jews became money changers and bankers, rather than merchants, but this concentration may have occurred in Islamic times, because of that religion's position on lending and interest. Much needs to be done in recovering the economic history of Asia in early times, and the remarks above are intended merely as a catalyst for young scholars.

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