

The Persian Gulf Trade in Late Antiquity*

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The Persians made themselves important in world history with the establishment of the Achaemenid Empire in the sixth century B.C.E. Their rise and center of power was from the province of Fars (Pars/Persis) in the southwestern region of the Iranian plateau. Consequently in the Greek sources, the body of water that bordered this province came to be known as the Persian Gulf. The use of ethnic names for bodies of water certainly presumes either that group's dominance of the landmass or its seafaring activity. For the Persian Gulf, both are true. The Persian Gulf, however, has been less studied in terms of its economic importance and as a unit before the eighth century C.E. than other bodies of water. The reason for this is that most of our evidence, be it textual or archaeological, has come from the period in which the Abbasids made the Persian Gulf an important economic center. This essay attempts to discuss the importance of the Persian Gulf and its economic relationship with the province of Fars and East Asia before the eighth century C.E. There were voyages on the Persian Gulf in antiquity as far back as the Sumerian period. However, I would like to suggest that the amount of trade on the sea suddenly accelerated in Late Antiquity as a direct result of the conflicts between the major centralized empires: Persian and Roman. Furthermore, this acceleration in trade is demonstrated by the enormous output of Sasanian silver coinage. The essay will be divided into four sections: the province of Fars as an economic center, the Persian Gulf economy, Persians in

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East Asia, and the nontextual evidence for trade, which will be divided into two parts, the numismatic evidence and the epigraphical evidence.

THE PROVINCE OF FARS

As the Achaemenid Persians (550–330 B.C.E.) rose to form an empire from the province of Fars, the Sasanian Persians (224–651 C.E.) also rose to power from the same province in the third century C.E. The province of Fars was not only their homeland but also their religious center, as evidenced by their surviving monuments, and was located near the Persian Gulf. The urbanization project by the Parthians and then the Sasanians brought about an influx of population from other parts of the Iranian plateau. Forced migration from the Near East also brought about a rise in population.¹ Later Islamic sources as well as Middle Persian sources attest to the intense interest in the city-building projects of the Persian kings. The *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (*The Provincial Capitals of Ērānšahr*)² is a Middle Persian text naming cities throughout Central Asia, the Iranian Plateau, Mesopotamia, and the Near East, and gives us a good view of this Persian campaign. Many of the *šahrestāns*, which may be translated as “provincial capitals” or major cities, are said to have been built by the Sasanian kings, or rebuilt by them, thus receiving the kings’ names.³ Persian Muslim historians, such as Hamza al-Isfahani, also supply a long list of cities built by the various Sasanian kings that corroborates the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*.⁴

Some of the cities established by the Sasanian kings were along caravan routes that started from Iraq and went through Fars to Kerman and India. Meanwhile ports were also established on the Persian Gulf coast for trade. But before discussing the importance of Fars as a trading center, one must also discuss the important commodities produced in

¹ For a good discussion of this building activity during this period see N. V. Pigulevskaja, *Les villes de l'état iranien aux époques parthe et sassanide* (Paris: 1963).

² J. Markwart and G. Messina, eds., *A Catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of the Ērānšahr* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1931); T. Daryaei, *The Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (Mazda Publishers, 2002).

³ For example, Weh-Ardaxshir, Ardaxshir-Xwarrah, Eran-Xwarrah-Shabuhr, Beshabuhr, Weh-Andiog-Shabuhr.

⁴ The building of these cities has been ascribed to Ardaxshir I: Wahisht-Ardeshir, Ram-Ardeshir, Ram-Mehr-Ardeshir, Bud-Ardashir, Batn-Ardashir, Ansha-Ardashir, Bahman-Ardashir, Ardashir-Xorrah, Meli-Ardashir, Harmshir, Hujastan-Wajar (this would be Wazar, since he mentions that this city was the center of the traders and businessmen), Beh-Ardashir. S. H. Taqizadeh, ed., *Kitab ta'rikh sinī muluk al-ard wa'l-anbiya'* (Berlin: 1921), p. 44.

the province itself. In terms of local products, early Muslim historians and geographers give us a panoramic view of the resources of Fars in the Islamic period, which may serve as examples for the pre-Islamic period. This province was noted mainly for its linen, wool, cotton, and perfume, and especially its brocades and carpets.⁵ These carpets were exported all the way to China where they were called *t'a tēng* according to Sui Annals, and were a much valued product.⁶ At the end of Late Antiquity, Jahrom, Fasa, and Darabgerd were the most important centers of this industry, which is reported as early as the eighth century C.E.⁷ The *Hudud al-'Alam* enumerates the products of Fars and gives the following commodities for the area: salt in Darabgerd,⁸ and fruit and produce from several cities, although their amount is unclear.⁹ More importantly, the Persian Gulf was known for its pearls in such places as Kānāfe.¹⁰ Istakhri in his *Masalik wa Mamalik* states that pearls were in existence on the coast of the Persian Gulf and goes on to state, “and with the exception of the Persian Gulf, there are no other places that have pearls.”¹¹ It is because of these products and the important location of the province that major investment by individuals, joint ventures, or the state took place. A recent study of the Sasanian period demonstrates that agriculture was the main mode of production in Late Antiquity, in which the state invested in the building of canals and other means to improve agricultural productivity.¹² One can assume that the upkeep of roads and communication were other preoccupations of the state.

⁵ Similar lists of products are given by the Muslim authors, with some variation. *Hudud al-'Alam*, p. 130; Istakhri, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, p. 133; Moqaddasi, *Ahsan al-taqasim fi ma'rifat al-Aqalim*; M. J. Goeje, ed., *Descriptio Imperii Moslemici, Pars Tertia*, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum (E. J. Brill, 1906), pp. 629–630.

⁶ B. Laufer, *Sino-Iranica, Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran with Special Reference to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products* (Chicago: 1919), pp. 492–493; W. Watson, “Iran and China,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 3 (I), ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 550.

⁷ S. Parham, “Tarikh-e khoan-e farsh-bafi-e Fars,” (The ancient history of carpet weaving in Fars), *AYANDEH* 7, no. 4 (1981): 262–263.

⁸ *Hudud al-'Alam*, p. 134.

⁹ *Hudud al-'Alam*, p. 135.

¹⁰ *Hudud al-'Alam*, p. 132; Diz ī Pesar Amare is also claimed to have been where divers lived, although it is not known for what reason they dove and whether or not it was for pearls; *ibid.*, p. 131.

¹¹ Istakhri, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, p. 34. Of course this is untrue, but the statement may mean that the pearls of Fars were valued over other pearls; for a complete list of products of Fars see Schwarz, *Iran im Mittelalter*, Teil II.

¹² F. Rahimii-Laridjani, *Die Entwicklung der Bewässerungslandwirtschaft im Iran bis in sasanidisch-frühislamischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Beiträge zur Iranistik 13, 1988).

In terms of trade and its routes for the province of Fars, the political realities and relations with neighboring peoples and empires accented its trade situation. The bulk of the merchandise in the east-west trade was carried via several routes.¹³ These routes were important pipelines for trade and when one was blocked, one may assume that there was either a reduction in the volume of trade or probably an increase in importance of the other routes. Besides the Red Sea maritime route, in the east the main routes included the Silk Road, which was the famous road that went from China to the Mediterranean region; the caravan route that came from the desert to Iraq and by the shores of the Persian Gulf to the east; and the sea route, where commodities were carried east from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea, to India, to Eastern Africa, and then to East Asia.

In the third and fourth centuries C.E., with the establishment of the Sasanian and the Eastern Roman empires, the Silk Road trade was secure and bustling.¹⁴ The Silk Road, which had been important and busy since the Parthian period, became limited due the Perso-Roman wars, namely those in 502–506 C.E., 527–561 C.E., and 602–629 C.E.¹⁵ Finally, it has been noted that it is difficult to gauge the intensity of the Silk Road trade before the Islamic period.¹⁶ For these reasons, namely the political situation, trade appears to have been more brisk on the coast and the Persian Gulf, thus Fars was an important center in long-distance trade.

Sources inform us that caravans left Fars for India and stopped in such places in eastern Fars as Abadeh, Bardanakan, and Jahak, making their way to Kerman and beyond.¹⁷ Sources also mention that many traders and businessmen lived in the province of Fars along the Persian Gulf,¹⁸ as well as on the coast of Kerman, all the way to Debal in Sind, as far as the coast of India and China.¹⁹ Trade with Rome declined

¹³ A. Mustufi, *Raha-ye sasanī* (Sasanian Roads) (Tehran: Geographical Publication of the University of Tehran, no. 1, n.d.). For the roads in Fars and Kerman, see C. Brunner, "Geographical and Administrative Divisions: Settlements and Economy," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, no. 2, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp. 750–754.

¹⁴ J. H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters, Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchange in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 33.

¹⁵ A. H. M. Jones, "Asian Trade in Antiquity," in *Islam and the Trade of Asia*, ed. D. S. Richards (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 9.

¹⁶ J. Kröger, "Sasanian Iran and India: Questions of Interaction," in *South Asian Archaeology*, ed. H. Härtel (Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, 1979), p. 446.

¹⁷ *Hudud al-'Alam*, p. 135.

¹⁸ *Hudud al-'Alam*, pp. 130, 131, 132, 135.

¹⁹ *Masalik wa Mamalik*, p. 37; E. H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand, A Study in Tang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) pp. 12–13.

in the late Sasanian period in Mesopotamia because the Sasanians deliberately increased export tariffs on the Persian side.²⁰ The war over Armenia also reduced the amount of trade in the north, further reducing the Silk Road trade. Beginning in the sixth century, the Romans forbade the sale of copper and iron to the Persians,²¹ and the Sasanians inflated the price of silk during the reign of Justinian. These measures forced the Romans to search for new avenues for trade. These new avenues would no longer be through Mesopotamia, but via the sea routes from Clysma (Suez) to the Axumite kingdom (Eritrea) to Yemen and Hadhramaut.²² The trade wars on the sea will be discussed below, but it should be mentioned that Justinian had decided to no longer buy silk from the Persians and instead resorted to trade with Christian monks in India who had learned the art of making silk.²³ This tactic, however, eventually failed and the Persians kept the monopoly over the silk trade a while longer.

It is under these circumstances that Arabia became an important trading center in the late Sasanian period, since trade in Mesopotamia was prevented from going farther west. Thus the desert route²⁴ was a way to stimulate trade in Arabia in this period, not only from western Arabia by the Romans, but also from eastern Arabia by the Persians. It is not certain how conducive this Arabian route was to a large volume of trade in Late Antiquity, but it was certainly a factor in the increased trade for such cities as Mecca. We must turn to the third and the most important route for trade, that is, the maritime trade.

THE PERSIAN GULF ECONOMY

The failure of the traditional routes elevated the significance of Fars and the Persian Gulf ports and cities. The ports were also linked to the inland cities, where imported commodities from the east were brought or kept to be sold to other merchants. The Sasanian hold on the Persian Gulf was apparent from the beginning: from the start of the

²⁰ Jones, "Asian Trade in Antiquity," p. 8.

²¹ V. Lukonin, "Administrative Institutions During the Parthian and the Sasanian Period," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, no. 2, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 744.

²² Jones, "Asian Trade in Antiquity," p. 9.

²³ *Procopii Caesariensis Historiarum Temporis Sui Tetras Altera, De Bello Gothico*, Lib. IV, ca XVII, 212, translated from the Greek into Latin by Claudius Maltretus (Venice, 1729), in R. C. Cave and H. H. Coulson, *A Sources Book for Medieval Economic History* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1965), pp. 244–145.

²⁴ Jones, "Asian Trade in Antiquity," p. 9.

dynasty in the third century c.e. ports and forts were established on the Persian and Arab side of the Persian Gulf.²⁵ The reason for these ports and forts, however, is not clear, since it is implausible that a Sasanian navy would have been stationed in these places because with the exception of a few accounts, there is no mention of a Sasanian navy.²⁶ The Middle Persian text, *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr Pāpagān* (*The Book of the Deeds of Ardaxshir the Son of Pāpagān*) describes the building of one of these ports, which still survives during the reign of Ardaxšīr I (224–240 A.D.): “when he (Ardaxshir) saw the sea with his eyes, he gave homage to the Gods and named that rosta, Box-Ardaxshir” (i.e., Bushihr).²⁷

The archaeological evidence suggests that the port of Bushihr was linked to Kazerun and Sheraz by a road used for the export of commodities to other regions, and its closeness to the center of Fars (i.e., Sheraz) must have made it an important port.²⁸ The other important port was Siraf, which was linked by road to Firuzabad and to Sheraz.²⁹ The Sasanian site of Siraf dates from the time of Shabuhr II.³⁰ In Siraf we find the remains of a Sasanian fort under an Islamic city. The existence of Sasanian coins³¹ and pottery fragments attest to the existence of a Sasanian site.³² There were also chamber tombs, typical of Zoroastrian

²⁵ A. Williamson, “Persian Gulf Commerce in the Sassanian Period and the First Two Centuries of Islam,” *Bastan Chenasi wa Honar-e Iran 9–10* (1972): 97–109; M. Kervran, “Forteresses, entrepôts et commerce: une histoire à suivre depuis les rois sassanides jusqu’ aux princes d’ormuz,” in *Itinéraires d’orient, hommages à Claude Cahen*, eds. R. Curiel and R. Gyselen, *Res Orientales* 6 (1994), pp. 325–350.

²⁶ I. Rā’in, *Darya nawardi-ye iranian* (*The Seamanship of Iranians*), vol. 1, 1350. (Tehran) pp. 251–255.

²⁷ B. Farahwashi, ed., *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pāpagān* (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1354), p. 46; for general remarks on the importance of ports in the Sasanian period see M. Kervran, “Forteresses, entrepôts et commerce: une histoire à suivre depuis les rois sassanides jusqu’ aux princes d’ormuz,” in *Itinéraires d’orient, hommages à Claude Cahen*, eds. R. Curiel et R. Gyselen, *Res Orientales* 6 (1994), pp. 325–350. See also I. Ra’in, *Darya nawardi-ye iranian*, pp. 251–255; On the importance of the Persian Gulf for Ardaxšīr I see, V. F. Piacentini, “Ardashīr I Pāpakān and the Wars against the Arabs: Working Hypothesis on the Sasanian Hold of the Gulf,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 15 (1985): 57–78.

²⁸ R. Boucharlat and J. F. Salles, “The History and Archaeology of the Gulf from the 5th Century B.C. to the 7th Century A.D.: A Review of the Evidence,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arab Studies* (1981): 66; the authors identify Rew-Ardaxshir with Bushihr, p. 69. Bushihr was a diocesan center for a Christian archbishop created in Fars in 415/420 A.D. under Shabuhr II, pp. 69–70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁰ D. Huff, “Archeology IV. Sasanian,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (1989), p. 303.

³¹ N. M. Lowick, *The Coins and Monumental Inscriptions*, *The British Institute of Persian Studies*, Siraf 15 (1985): 11–16.

³² V. F. Piacentini, *Merchants-Merchandise and Military Power in the Persian Gulf (sūriyān/Shahriyāj-Siraf)* (Rome: Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1992), p. 117.

astodān,³³ found in the hillsides behind Siraf.³⁴ In the Sasanian period, Siraf appears to have been a military outpost, while in the Islamic period it was transformed into a trading port. It was first mentioned in about 850 A.D. as a flourishing port, and Istakhri states that in the tenth century it was a prosperous city rivaled only by Sheraz in the province of Persis. By the thirteenth century the city was in ruins.³⁵ The city plan shows it was laid out with drainage and sewage pipes. It is claimed that this early Islamic type of town still shows Sasanian stylistic influence. The city also shows its importance in trade. There were thousands of fragments of Chinese porcelain, together with coins from Spain, Russia, and Syria, and the earliest legible, dated Islamic coins. Glass, lapis lazuli, and much Sasanian-Islamic ware were also found.³⁶ Coins were found on the site that attest to its occupation in the late seventh century.³⁷ In fact, Baldehuri refers to the capture of the Sasanian castle of Siraf during the Muslim conquest.³⁸ Although it is not clear whether Siraf was a port already at the end of the Sasanian period, it appears that even if we assume it was only a military outpost, it may have functioned as a place where sea traffic was monitored and was used as a spot for securing the Persian Gulf.

Istakhri states that the houses in Siraf were built with a wood called Saj, brought from India and Zanzibar,³⁹ which again points to the city's trade relations. In fact, the inhabitants of Siraf were known for their maritime travel, and it is stated that the people of Siraf made their living through trade via the sea. In order to make this point Istakhri relates the following story:

³³ *Astodān*: a receptacle for the bones; see L. Trümpelmann, "Sasanian Graves and Burial Customs," *Arabie orientale, mésopotamie et Iran méridional de l'âge du fer au début de la période islamique* (Paris: Histoire du golfe, Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984), p. 317; L. Trümpelmann, *Zwischen Persepolis und Firuzabad, Gräber, Paläste und Felsreliefs im alten Persien* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp Von Zabern, 1992), pp. 19–20. The cemetery at Sirāf also contained chambers, measuring 2 meters across by 1.5 meters high, which contained bones; D. Whitehouse, "Excavations at Sirāf: Fifth Interim Report," *IRAN* 10 (1972): 65.

³⁴ D. Whitehouse and A. Williamson, "Sasanian Maritime Trade," *IRAN* 11 (1973): 35.

³⁵ Sylvia A. Matheson, *Persia: An Archaeological Guide*. (London: Faber, 1976), p. 247.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

³⁷ D. Whitehouse, "Excavations at Sirāf: Fourth Interim Report," *IRAN* 9 (1971): 3. There is a Sasanian copper coin in Siraf; D. Whitehouse, "Excavations at Sirāf: Sixth Interim Report," *IRAN* 12 (1974): 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁹ *Masalik wa Mamalik*, p. 113.

And I have heard that a man from Siraf went for trade to the sea and stayed in the boat for forty years and did not come to land. And when he came to the coast, he did not desire to leave the sea. He sent his workers to conduct trade and make profit and come back to him. And when the ship was in ruins, he moved to another one.⁴⁰

Thus the occupation of this site by the Arab Muslim conquerors may have been due to the economic advantages and the control of trade in the Persian Gulf. Farther to the east there were other cities or ports that had a role in trade. These included the site of Hormuz at the Strait of Hormuz, which was connected to the northeast via Julfar to Sirjan;⁴¹ the port of Guzeran or Kujaran Ardeshir, located near Bandar ĩ Lengeh, which again had a role in trade and met the needs of the city of Darab in Fars;⁴² and the island of Kharg, which appears to have been a late Sasanian settlement 37 miles northwest of Bushihr.⁴³

These ports made Fars important in terms of being a trade center not only for commodities brought to its ports and taken to the inland cities, it was also a stopping place for the cargo going from Iraq to Asia, Africa, and back.⁴⁴ The amount of trade from the ports to the inland area are unclear and the terrain makes volume relatively low. However, not only was controlling the trade in the Persian Gulf important, but these sites were also places the Sasanians aspired to control.

PERSIANS IN EAST ASIA

By the late Sasanian period, we know that the Persians controlled the seas and came into conflict with the Romans. The question here is whether the state was actively involved in the control of the waterways or simply that the Persian merchants dominated the trade without heavy state intervention. The Sasanians were competing with the Romans and disputing trade concessions as far as Sri Lanka, and it appears there was even a Sasanian colony in Malaysia, but again they

⁴⁰ *Masalik wa Mamalik*, p. 121.

⁴¹ Boucharlat and Salles, "The History and Archaeology of the Gulf," p. 66.

⁴² B. de Cardi, "A Sasanian Outpost in Northern Oman," *Antiquity* 46, no. 184 (Dec. 1972): 306.

⁴³ Boucharlat and Salles, "The History and Archaeology of the Gulf," p. 71.

⁴⁴ For the existence of the Sasanian-Islamic ware produced in Iraq and found in Eastern Africa, see "Kilwa: A Preliminary Report," *Azania, the Journal of the British Institute of History and Archaeology in East Africa* 1 (1966): 7.

do not appear to be military colonies.⁴⁵ Persian horses were shipped to Ceylon,⁴⁶ and a colony was established on that island where ships came from Persia.⁴⁷ The Sasanians also built other ports to expand their trade, in such places as Muscat in Oman during the time of Xusro I.⁴⁸ The importance of Muscat for Persian traders continued into the Islamic period, for ships sailing from India to Aden stopped at this port.⁴⁹ By controlling the Arabian Sea, Persian merchants put an end to the Roman merchant involvement directly, so the latter empire had to seek the aid of the Christian Ethiopians who were expelled by the Yemenis with the backing of the Sasanians.⁵⁰ The fact that the ports of Fars acted as entrepôts is evident by the remains of imported objects, such as T'ang dynasty export wares, and other items such as coins of Theodosius I minted at Alexandria (376–394 c.e.) and those of Constantius II from the mint of Constantinople (641–668 c.e.).⁵¹

Already in the fourth century c.e., Ammianus Marcellinus tells us that:

*cuius per oras omnes oppidorum est densitas
et vicorum, naviumaque crebri discursus*

all along the coast (of the Persian Gulf) is a throng of
cities and villages, and many ships sail to and fro.⁵²

This rare view of the Persian Gulf in the fourth century c.e. attests to the vitality of the sea trade at the time. By the late Sasanian period (sixth and seventh centuries c.e.) it is clear from Arab sources that many of the people who lived along the coast of the Persian Gulf were Persians and that the Arabs lived in the mountains and the desert.⁵³ Maritime trade became more important because of the political situa-

⁴⁵ D. Whitehouse, "Maritime Trade in the Arabian Sea: The 9th and 10th Centuries A.D.," in *South Asian Archaeology*, vol. 2, ed. M. Taddei (1977), p. 868.

⁴⁶ J. Kröger, "Sasanian Iran and India," p. 447.

⁴⁷ *Kosma aigyptiou monachou Christianika topographi, The Christian Topography of Cosmas, An Egyptian Monk* (New York: The Hakluyt Society, Burt Franklin), p. 365.

⁴⁸ H. M. al-Naboodah, "The Commercial Activity of Bahrain and Oman in the Early Middle Ages," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 22 (1992): 81.

⁴⁹ B. Spuler, "Trade in the Eastern Islamic Countries in the Early Centuries," in *Islam and the Trade in Asia* (1970), p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

⁵¹ D. Whitehouse, "Chinese Stoneware from Sirāf: The Earliest Finds," *South Asian Archaeology* (1971): 241–243.

⁵² Ammianus Marcellinus, 23, 6, 11.

⁵³ R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs, from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 28.

tion, and hence Fars's ports became increasingly central. From these ports, Persian traders went as far as China. From the beginning of the Sasanian period, Persian merchants and official missions visited China.⁵⁴ We know of a Sasanian official called by the Chinese word *sa-pao*, who was stationed in Si-nan where the temples of the celestial god of fire was established.⁵⁵ The Romans, in search of silk, reluctantly took to the sea. This competition for control of the markets and trade routes is attested in several sources. Once the inland trade became scarce, the Romans had to resort to the sea, from Aden to Malabar or Ceylon, or from Suez to 'Aqaba with Yemen and China.⁵⁶

Of course the Persian merchants did not idly sit by; rather they rose to the challenge. They established ports in various parts of the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and beyond. One must ask from where these initiatives could have begun? The answer would most probably be from the province of Fars, the center of the Sasanian power. At Suhar, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf in the Sea of Oman, as well as at Dama and Jurrafar, there appear to have been Sasanian forts that may have participated in trade.⁵⁷ There was a Persian outpost at Ghanam, in the Strait of Hormuz, which may have overseen shipping.⁵⁸ The same scenario appears for Banbhore in Sind, at Kilwa, where few Sasanian-Islamic wares were found.⁵⁹ These Sasanian-Islamic wares were produced in Iraq and exported to Siraf on a massive scale in the Islamic period.⁶⁰ In the Umm al-Ma region there is evidence of Sasanian contact, where green-glazed pots from Iraq were found.⁶¹ There is also

⁵⁴ E. H. Schafer, "Iranian Merchants in T'ang Dynasty Tales," *University of California Publications in Semitic Philology* 11 (1951): 408.

⁵⁵ Laufer, *Sino-Iranica*, p. 529.

⁵⁶ Jones, "Asian Trade in Antiquity," p. 4.

⁵⁷ J. C. Wilkinson, "Suhār in the Early Islamic Period: The Written Evidence," *South Asian Archaeology* 2 (1973): 888.

⁵⁸ B. de Cardi, "A Sasanian Outpost in Northern Oman," *Antiquity* 46, no. 184 (Dec. 1972): 308. Besides this evidence, A. A. Ezzah believes that the Sasanians had little presence in Oman other than commercial interests, but later goes on to state that the Arabs in the region wanted to free themselves from the yoke of the Persians. How much the Sasanians were involved in Oman is difficult to say until more archaeological evidence becomes manifest; see *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 9 (1979): 56, 61. There was probably more interaction than is known; see D. T. Potts, "A Sasanian Lead Horse from North Eastern Arabia," *Iranica Antiqua* 28 (1993): 197.

⁵⁹ D. Whitehouse, "Maritime Trade in the Arabian Sea: The 9th and 10th Centuries A.D.," in *South Asian Archaeology* (Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, 977), pp. 874–879.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 881.

⁶¹ B. de Cardi, "The British Archaeological Expedition to Qatar 1973–1974," *Antiquity* 48, no. 191 (Sept. 1974): 199.

evidence of Sasanian material at Salihyah near Khawran in Ras al-Khaimah.⁶² To control the shipping close to these outposts, Persis could have acted as the logistical center.

With these measures it is no wonder the Romans were not able to do much via the sea trade. This is evident from a statement by Procopius regarding long-distance trade. As mentioned before, Justinian wanted to compete with the Sasanians by becoming allies with the Ethiopians. It was the case that the Romans had to buy silk from the Sasanians, and by allying themselves with the Ethiopians, who would buy the product for them, they hoped to avoid continuing this practice. Procopius states that it was “impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbors where the Indian ships first put in, (since they inhabit the adjoining country) and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes.”⁶³

THE NONTEXTUAL EVIDENCE FOR TRADE

So far we have discussed the archaeological and the textual evidence with regard to trade. We shall now look at the material culture to see what it can tell us in regard to trade and the economic situation in Late Antiquity in Fars, the Persian Gulf, with East Asia.

The Numismatic Evidence

Gold and silver mines appear to have been scarce in Fars. This is paradoxical, since the province had a tremendous and steady output of *drahms* (silver coin) from its main centers in the late Sasanian period. The sheer amount of *drahms* minted in Fars in the late Sasanian period makes the province important as a financial center. There were five major mints⁶⁴: Ardashir-Khurra (ART), Beshabuhr (BYŠ), Darabgird (DA), Istakhr (ST), and in the late Sasanian period Veh-az-Amid-Kavad (WYHC).⁶⁵ With all these active mints, the *Hudūd al-‘Alam*

⁶² B. de Cardi, “Archaeological Survey in N. Trucial States,” *East and West*, IsMEO 21, no. 3–4 (Sept.–Dec. 1971): 260, 268.

⁶³ Procopius, I, xx 12.

⁶⁴ For the identification of the following mints see R. Gyselen, “Ateliers monétaires et cachets sasanides,” *Studia Iranica*, Tome 8, fasc. 2 (1979): 210.

⁶⁵ The location of this mint is controversial and has been attributed to several mints. Mitchner has identified that mint as NIHC for Ctesiphon in the province of Asūrestan, “Mint Organization in the Sassanian Empire,” *The Numismatic Circular* 86, no. 9 (1978):

mentions only a mine at Istakhr⁶⁶ and another in eastern Fars at Na'in.⁶⁷ Istakhri mentions that Fars had little silver.⁶⁸ Neither *Masalik wa Mamalik* nor the *Fars-name* of Ibn Balxī mention any significant silver mines in Fars. Although it is usually thought that the reason for such a great output of coinage in Fars was due to the military campaigns of Xusro I and later Xusro II, could it be that the volume of trade was partially responsible for this amount of coinage output? Although this point cannot be proven for a fact, it can be emphasized that the trade in the Persian Gulf may have contributed to this increased amount of coinage in the Late Sasanian period.

Coins found at trading ports where the Sasanians had an interest is another way in which we can see the evidence for trade. Of course if the places where coins were found are ports or close to the sea, it may be assumed that the coinage was coming via the maritime trade, and most probably from the province of Fars. As mentioned, the mere fact that during the late Sasanian period Fars had a steady output of coinage in large amounts raises the question of the province's economic importance. Sasanian coins belonging to the rulers of the late Sasanian period can be found in such territories: in T'ien Tz, Yü, Ch'angan county, the small number of coins found belonged to those of Xusro II and Buran; in Yaoshien, Shensi, Sasanian coins belonging to Peroz, Kawad I, and Xusro I were found. In India, in Rupar in the Amble District, Sasanian coins were found from later Sasanian rulers; these were found in Inner Mongolia in Huhhot county as well. In Oman, at Sinaw Sasanian coins were also found.⁶⁹

473. Gyselen has identified it as Veh-az-Amid-Kavad or Arrajan known in the Islamic period, *ibid.*, p. 210; her reading is based on a seal with three cities mentioned: Istakhr, Beshabühr, and Veh-az-Amid-Kavad, thus located in Fars, *ibid.* *La géographie administrative de l'empire Sassanide*, Res Orientales (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), for the discussion see p. 62, for the seal see p. 112; Mochiri has read it as VSP for Visp-Shad-Xosrow in Media, *Études de numismatique iranienne sous les Sassanides et Arabe-Sassanides*, vol. 2 (Tehran, revised edition, Leiden: 1982), p. 454; Mordtmann and Sellwood have proposed New-shabühr in Xwarasan, Sellwood, *An Introduction to Sasanian Coins*, Spinnk & Son Ltd. (London: 1985), p. 49. Mitchner's suggestion is simply untenable. Malek doubts that Veh-az-Amid-Kavad (Arrajan) was such an important town in Sasanian times to have such a large output of coins, Malek, "Sasanian Numismatics," *The Numismatic Chronicle* 153 (1993): 90. I have been able to see affinities on the Arab-Sasanian coins to this mint with the other mints of Fars identified by Michael Bates, which make it certain that Gyselen's suggestion is correct. Thus New-shabühr seems to be less plausible; see also S. Tyler-Smith "Sasanian Mint Abbreviations," *The Numismatic Chronicle* 143 (1983): 244-245.

⁶⁶ *Hudud al-'Alam*, p. 131.

⁶⁷ *Hudud al-'Alam*, p. 136.

⁶⁸ *Masalik wa Mamalik*, p. 135.

⁶⁹ Malek, "Sasanian Numismatics," pp. 243-244.

Two pieces of information, however, are relevant for the importance of the Sasanians and the province of Fars for trade. The first is a new find of Sasanian type coinage in Sind, which may be copies of Peroz.⁷⁰ This may tell us that Sasanian coins were well known due to trade and that when it came to minting, these coins were copied or they were circulated by the Hephthalites. Sasanian coins found on the coast and ports of southern China also attest to trade with Fars. We know that Chinese merchandise reached the Sasanian empire as early as the fourth century.⁷¹ While some Sasanian coinage is found in northeastern China at Ulugh Art, Subashi, Bogdachin, Astana, Qodjo, and Yarkhoto, which is the result of trade through the Silk Road, the majority of sites are located in eastern China with some in southeastern China.⁷² It is quite feasible that the sites in eastern China are an extension of the Silk Road, but their proximity to the coast should not be forgotten either. At least three sites near the sea in southeast China make it probable that ships from the Persian Gulf brought these coins. These are the sites of Kukong, Yngdak, and Suikai, which had connections with trade in the Persian Gulf.⁷³ Many of the coins belong to the late fifth and mostly late sixth and early seventh centuries,⁷⁴ which again attest to the importance of the Persian Gulf in the Late Sasanian period.

The dates of the coins demonstrate that they were deposited in the Ch'i period (497–501 C.E.) at Kukong and Yngdak, which is a coastal province.⁷⁵ It would be instructive to look at the mint signatures of the coins found in this coastal region to see if there are any significant quantity of mint signatures of Fars. At Suikai four coins have been found that carry the mints of Kerman, Istakhr, Darabgird, and Ray(?).⁷⁶ Although the number is insignificant, we can state that they are mainly from the province of Fars and the coastal region of the Persian Gulf. Some other coins with Kawad I's name were found in the maritime province of Guangdong; their mint signatures are from Fars and

⁷⁰ B. Senior, "Some New Coins from Sind," *Oriental Numismatic Society* 149 (Summer 1996): 6.

⁷¹ D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 101.

⁷² F. Thierry, "Sur les monnaies sassanides trouvées en chine," in *Circulation des monnaies, des marchandises et des biens*, Res Orientales, vol. 5, ed. R. Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette, 1993); see map on p. 90.

⁷³ H. Nai, "A Survey of Sassanian Silver Coins Found in China," *K'ao Ku 'Hsüeh Pao* 1 (1974): 93, 107.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁷⁵ H. Nai, *Studies in Chinese Archaeology* (Peking: The Institution of Archaeological Academia Sinica, 1961), p. 171.

⁷⁶ Thierry, "Sur les monnaies sassanides," p. 95, where he transcribes the mint of DA as KA, and LY as RY.

adjoining regions and they appear to have come via the sea route.⁷⁷ There may also be evidence of Sasanian presence in southern China, since it is claimed that a temple similar to that of the Zoroastrians has been found in the Ch'angan region in southern China.⁷⁸ This is corroborated by Chinese textual evidence that states that the maritime trade came from Persia—that is, the Persian Gulf—and most probably Fars.

The Epigraphical Evidence

Epigraphical materials are another important source of information that occurs on Sasanian silver bowls and other objects, but more importantly on seals and sealings, which give insight into the nature of the late Sasanian administrative institutions.⁷⁹ In fact, they are the most important primary sources for reconstructing the Sasanian bureaucracy, administrative organization and divisions, and even the number of priests.⁸⁰ They also provide information on the scope and degree of economic activity, who was in charge of these activities, and where they took place.⁸¹

It is interesting in itself that many of the bullae and seal finds derive from the province of Fars, and their placement around the empire with the name of one of the cities or districts of Fars should persuade us of the economic importance of this province. By using the four sites where storehouses of bullae were found, namely those at Taxt ī Suleyman, Qasr ī Abu Nasr, Aq Tepe, and Dvin, we can draw certain conclusions about Sasanian economic history and the importance of Fars. In Aq-Tepe, sealings with the name of Kerman and Ardaxshir-Xwarrah in Fars have been found, which should persuade us that Fars had economic

⁷⁷ J. E. Cribb, "Far East," in *A Survey of Numismatic Research 1978–1984*, vol. 2, eds. M. Price, E. Besly, D. Macdowall, M. Jones, and A. Oddy (London: 1986), p. 814.

⁷⁸ R. C. Houston, "A Note on Two Coin Hoards Reported in Kao Ku," *The American Numismatic Society, Museum Notes* 20 (1975): 158–159; the statement that the temple is close to that of the Zoroastrians is the suggestion of the author of the cited article.

⁷⁹ Robert Göbl, *Der Sāsānidische Siegelkanon* (Braunschweig, 1973).

⁸⁰ R. N. Frye "Sassanian Clay Sealings in the Baghdad Museum," *Sumer* 26 (1970/1972): 240; "Methodology in Iranian History," in *Neue Methodologie in der Iranistik* eds. R. N. Frye and Otto Harrassowitz (Wiesbaden, 1974), p. 68; R. Gyselen, *La géographie administrative de l'empire sassanide, les témoignages sigilloraphiques* (Paris: Centre national pour la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 1989).

⁸¹ Ph. Gignoux, "Sceaux chrétiens d'époque sassanide," *Iranica Antiqua* 15 (1980): 299–314. For a complete bibliography see Ph. Gignoux and R. Gyselen, *Sceaux sassanides de diverses collections privées* (Leuven: Éditions Peeters, 1982); *Bulles et sceaux sassanides de diverses collections*, *Studia Iranica-Cahier* 4 (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 1987); also, for a complete list of administrative seals for the province of Fars, see R. Gyselen, *La géographie*.

relations with the far reaches of the empire, and that only Fars can claim this position because of the numerous seals and bullae with names belonging to its cities. At Dvin, sealings from Ardaxshir-Xwarrah have been found. This fact tells us that commodities were brought from Fars, with Fars either acting as a port or being where the merchandise began its route.⁸² I agree with Frye and Lukonin that the bullae were used to seal packages destined for caravan or maritime trade, which is supported by later historical evidence.⁸³ A disproportionate number of these finds have the names of the cities of Fars, which should demonstrate the economic importance and vigor of Fars in the Late Antique period. The bullae also attest to the involvement of the Sasanians in trade in the East, as bullae have been found in Mantai in Sri Lanka.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

The importance of Fars may be said to have been threefold. First, the products of the province themselves, such as rugs and pearls, were important for export, and were sent as far as China and other distant areas. Second, the location of Fars made it an important place of transit for land and sea trade, although the terrain would have made this route less desirable than that of Mesopotamia. Because of the wars with the Roman Empire, the Silk Road, which appears to not have been so busy, began to have even less traffic and as a result the sea trade made Fars important. Third, the steady production and sheer amount of coins minted in Fars may be due to the fact that they were used for trade. Coins were minted not only to support the Sasanian war machine, which is usually given as a cause, but by the sixth century c.e. the large trade in the Persian Gulf or in Fars made it necessary to mint coins in the province. This is why Fars appears to have had the largest output of coins in the late sixth and the seventh centuries c.e., as opposed to the northern areas. Coins from the mint of Fars have been found as far as the ports of southern China and India, which again attests to the amount of trade and the importance of its route. The reason the mints were not located on the coast or the by the ports was probably that inland mints were more secure.

⁸² V. G. Lukonin, "Administrative Institutions," pp. 742–743.

⁸³ R. N. Frye, "Sasanian Seal Inscriptions," *Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte und deren Nachleben, Festschrift für Franz Altheim zum 6. 10. 1968*, eds. R. Stiehl und H.E. Stier (Berlin: Zweiter Band, Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1970), pp. 79, 84; *ibid.*, p. 743.

⁸⁴ R. N. Frye, "Commerce III. In the Parthian and Sasanian Periods," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 6, fasc. 1, ed. E. Yarshater, (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1997), p. 62.

In Sasanian Persia in the sixth and seventh centuries, long-distance trade appears to have accelerated and the competition with Rome forced the Persians and the Romans to seek new markets. While some trade with the West continued, even though there were major wars between the two empires, the Sasanians expanded their trade to the East. The trade with the East was either via land routes from Xwarasan to Central Asia through the Silk Road and then to India, or via the sea routes. It is the second route that is the focus of this study, since all evidence indicates that the acceleration in trade with the East was undertaken through the maritime trade. The importance of the Persian Gulf and its surrounding territory became paramount; we can see this in Sasanian attempts to control and establish ports around the Persian Gulf region and beyond. Thus their strong presence in the Late Antique period in these areas was not a mere accident but was brought about by competition and control of the market.

This control, however, should not be thought to have been a campaign of the Sasanian state, supported by its military. As mentioned, in fact there is little evidence of a Sasanian military presence in the Persian Gulf or beyond. While some scholars have opted for the idea that the state controlled the trade, there is not much evidence in this regard. This British Empire analogy that the navy opened markets is a fallacy. Further, one has to ask what a fort or port could have done at the various points on a coast with the absence of gunpowder technology. One answer would be to assume that while the state was in favor of such expeditions and the opening of the markets, it was the merchants who took it upon themselves to find and control new markets. In the Sasanian period, not only was production mainly in the hands of private individuals, but the economy seems to have been the domain of the same people and not the state.⁸⁵ While the Sasanian state may have patrolled the roads and waterways for security, there is simply no evidence that a Sasanian navy was present in the Persian Gulf or was active in the opening markets in the East. Until there are such finds, we must think of the Sasanian control of trade as the domain of the private sector, where merchants—not the military—dominated the economy. The economic history of the Persian Gulf is yet to be written, but this study hopes to have contributed to the discussion that it was already an important economic center in antiquity.

⁸⁵ R. Gyselen, "Economy III.–IV. In the Sasanian Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 8, fasc. 1, ed. E. Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1997), p. 1.