Sasanian Exchange an Archaeological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: One of the most influential factor that made the Sasanian Empire win renown as a conqueror and mighty empire and enabled them to linger on for four centuries, was their magnificent economic capability. Objective: The present case study was set out to delve into different variables affecting the Sasanian’s advancement of the economic exchanges with other nations. Those variables are as follows: their sufficient knowledge about the environment, mining, agricultural lands, the implementation of engineering techniques in the construction of irrigation channels, their severe orientation towards specialization in various areas, their attentiveness to the manufacture of high quality goods, and their luxurious court designed by the royal officials so as to provide extensive advertisement for the Sasanian sovereigns. Results: The results of the analysis of various studies, reports, and the objects pertaining to the Sasanian era indicated that Sasanian kings deemed commerce as an instrument for initiating relationships with other nations in order to extend their territorial borders as much as possible; consequently, not only did the government achieve the economic profitability, but also in the mold of Iranian Imperialism, they managed to fulfill their primary goal, i.e., the expansion of their borders. Conclusion: This study explored the production centers, exchange transmission networks, and the role of the religious and private institutions in strengthening the economic structure of the government.

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INTRODUCTION

The chief purpose of economic transactions with other nations in the Sasanian government was to seize control of new properties and extend their borders; however, the government gained loads of profitability and created enormous wealth; despite all these facts, the primary goal was to extend borders and to prevail a growing trend in Iran in the East and West. Hence, commerce was considered to be a key to attain this objective. To provide appropriate circumstances for the goods exchanges, a set of methods were required to be implemented. Sasanian dynasty, having great insight into the management, first made an endeavor to enrich the religious and private institutions (including feudal lords, royal families, and merchants), since these institutions turned out to be the major elements for accelerating the realization of the government’s purposes. The kingdom also focused on the accumulation of the scientific knowledge such as information about the agricultural lands, about the proper exploitation of them in terms of plantation, and about the extraction of metals from mines; In addition, via engineering techniques, Iran’s water shortage was solved, and digging aqueducts and building canals considerably contributed to the irrigation of farm lands. On the other hand, some expert industrialists, using the method of division of labor and having the orientation towards specialization, engaged in craft jobs and the manufacture of high quality goods in urban and rural areas. The government’s other measures were the construction of cities, harbors, and new commercial bases. In effect, Sasanian government, by being luxury oriented and augmenting their affluence, which has been corroborated based on the archaeological evidence, portrayed a decent image of Iran with an advanced civilization for the world of those times, and introduced itself as a kingdom with strong political management skills in a way that it was able to be the embodiment of the subsequent dynasties.

Economic policies and procedures employed by the Sasanian government:
1- Using the strategy of donation exchange (gift contribution).

In fact, offering the gift before being requested can be considered as an appropriate approach and will be responded in diverse ways as a sign of respect and acknowledgment; if this cycle endures, this approach plays a significant role and is regarded as an effective means of communication between people ([1]). This system of
exchanging gifts has prevailed all over the world since ancient times. In some countries, special types of goods, which are called dignity-making goods by archaeologists, are utilized for a certain type of trading [2]; in relatively autonomous countries, the gift contribution is mainly exploited for the enhancement of the social relationships between individuals and groups, which instigated some behaviors and some circumstances that initiate some obligations between the groups trading [3]. According to the archaeological evidence, in the parties Sasanian kings gave a cup or a piece of silverware to each guest as a gift, and apparently that is why these objects were sparsely discovered over a wide range of areas [4]. Since Shapur II, bestowing silver dishes as gifts was considered as an instrument for royal propaganda; according to Moses Kalankatsuisky, Shapur II gave away silver bowls and cups to the rulers of other nations [5].

2- Economy based on the redistribution (recirculation):

In economic systems in which goods were deemed as a base for funding, taxes were food and consumable items being paid by peasants [6]. During Sasanian era, taxes were amassed via various ways by commanders; two important courts, namely Tribute Court and Costs Court, were founded in the Sasanian period; the income and the army expenditures belonged to Tribute Court and Costs Court respectively [7]. Another type of taxes was toll tax which was called Bahk (or ransom) and accumulated from people based on the amount of their investment in goods [8]. Land Tax was stored in government warehouses so as to be expended on the military divisions if required [9]. The chiefs of irrigation channels were propelled to pay taxes [10]. Another type of tax, called Regulation, incorporated gifts obtained from New Year and Mehragan festivals, and were received by the government on a yearly basis [11]. Sasanian government made use of taxes via redistribution. The division of labor and orientation towards specialization were two other economic policies of this empire; of course, it was handled not in the modern form we have seen nowadays, but they utilized some artisans, such as farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers, bakers, millers, oil distillers who worked in large estates [12]. A number of occupations such as gilding and making silver artifacts grew into highly specialized jobs; great attention devoted to the urban construction in Ardashir and Shapur I era boomed new industries and occupations. In Khuzestan, the textile industry stood out as being more significant than the other ones [13]. Linen and cotton knitwear and carpets were exported from Iran; they were woven by dependent artisans in castle factories belonging to large feudal lords and by self-employed artisans in cities (such as Ctesiphon, Gondi Shapur, Hamedan, Estakhr, Nishapur, and Rayy) [14]. The knowledge of sea and its navigation, as well as shipbuilding industry turned out to be other efficient elements instigating growth in commerce. The Persian Gulf has been considered to function as a bridge connecting Iran to other territories including Africa, India, and the Far East. Some of Sasanian’s successes are attributed to their acquaintance with and domination of the Persian Gulf region and their sagacity in how to communicate with the neighboring territories [15]. Shipping and sea navigation in the Persian Gulf caught Iranians’ attention due to two prominent reasons: first to establish national security, implement power, and reign over the territories on the other side of the Persian Gulf, and second to transport goods from the north coast to the south coast as well as to transfer goods across Indian ocean and the Gulf of Oman towards the West, i.e., the northern areas of the Arabian Peninsula and the coasts of Mediterranean Sea [16]. The crucial factor enhancing the Sasanian’s renown for its navy, being regarded as the sole force in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean from 4th to 6th century (AD), was certainly the high quality of the ships [17]. The growth of the maritime trade, more than anything else, was attributable to the direct intervention of the government. In the 3rd century (AD), they managed to expand cities belonging to Khuzestan and the Persian Gulf specially harbors in the Persian Gulf, and in the 6th century (AD), they could seize the control of Indian fairs and could impinge their activities upon Aden and Ceylon. The remains of the Sasanian city have been discovered in three sites of Siraf. One of them is a fortress consisting of semi-circular towers and a string of rooms; most probably it was one of the garrisons. Countless Sasanian coins were unearthed in Siraf, which corroborates this fact that Siraf was a naval base [18]. At this harbor, in addition to the remaining relics of the eras of Ardashir and Shapur II, the ruins of temples, Astvdan, the rocky tombs of Zoroastrians are also other convincing archaeological evidences which indicate the importance of the harbor of Sirafin generating and improving communication via land routes of Persian and the Persian Gulf in this area [19]. Another Sasanian castle was dug up in Suhar located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman; probably it had commercial functions; Dama and Urrfar also verified that in Ghanam, placed in the Strait of Hormuz, there was an Iranian scout who monitored the ships entering the Persian Gulf.In Kilwa, Banhbore had the same responsibility in the east coast of Africa. In these regions, the Sasanian cups were dug up. In Ummal-ma and Salhiya situated near Khawanr and in Ras-alkhaimh, some evidences were also found, which confirmed the presence of Sasanianin those areas [20]. Harbors exerted a great influence on the trading; one of them was Boshehr Harbor where the goods were exported [21]. Qeshm also was of paramount importance in Sasanian era; the construction of Qeshm castle, utilizing as a site for overseeing the East region, was accomplished in this epoch [22]. Abskun Harbor on the Caspian Sea was launched by Gobad I, which brought about a brisk commerce with Russia. Various silver bowls were found in Perm and Kama regions are indicative of Iranian transactions with Russia in Sasanian era [13]. Ablah Harbor setting up in Sassanians period was considered as the main exit of the Persian Gulf [23] and in Artaxerxes I era,
woods, sands, the East African ivories, pearls, fabrics, dates, and the purple color were traded; accordingly, this harbor primarily developed into a major trading port of Sasanian dynasty [24]. In the late Sasanian era, Bahrain, Oman, and Yemen were conquered for strategic and economic purposes and ultimately for the exploitation of resources and the advancement of commercial productions. Sasanian made use of the copper mines in Oman and were settled in its fertile areas as well [20]. Yemen conquests were deemed as the most outstanding success of the Sasanian Empire in the Indian Ocean. It appears that the Persian ruler had been settled there in order to impinge on the coast of Africa, and the age-old trade between Iran, India and Egypt gave rise to this settlement in Yemen [25]. On the other hand, Iran exploited the silver mines in Yemen and brought the Yemen’s commerce under their control [20].

3. The enhancement of the irrigation system and production methods (crop and animal husbandries):

In the study of economic policies, three central factors are feasible to be implemented in different countries in spite of the diversity of communities; one of them is the accessibility to resources, i.e., overseeing the way lands, water, and raw materials are utilized, the second one is productivity, i.e., the transformation of natural resources into a usable forms, and the last one is transactions, i.e., the distribution of goods and services among various members of the society [26]. In the Sasanian era, numerous dams and embankment dams were constructed on the Karun River, and the Tigris and Euphrates. Via those dams, the lands surrounded this river were irrigated which led to the growth in agriculture [16]. Owing to the fact that the Sasanian had a centralized government, they expended a vast amount of funds on the development of agriculture [27]. One of the most eminent activities accomplished by the Sasanian government in Khuzestan plain (from 226 to 637 AD) was its extensive installations of irrigation systems which covered almost all the arable fields; It was considered to be a profound unique step which had not been observed before. These installations aimed at the augmentation of agricultural productivity; as a result, they primarily gave rise to the boost in government revenue and secondarily to the growth in the productivity of farming systems and the improvement on efficiency in work. In the past, the irrigation networks of Dezful, Shoshtar, and Ahvaz branched, hence they supplied enough water for irrigation in the winter [28]; therefore, the low land alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia and of southwestern Iran in Sasanian dynasty were at the zenith of its economic prosperity.

4. The quality of the artifacts:

In some sites, including Gilan, Mazandaran, and Khuzestan, Sasanian planted mulberry trees and bred silkworm [26] and due to the fact that they had the monopoly on trading silk, they embarked on fabricating looms and expanded the production of assorted types of silk and silky fabrics in Susa, Shoshtar, Gondi Shapur [30]. The investigation of the clothes having the embossed designs belonging to this era demonstrated the delicacy and the unique quality of those fabrics [31]. The duplication of some fabric samples, having Taghe Bostan designs and now being held in Monster Cathedral in “Prussia” and in the Vatican Palace’s library called “Wolfenbüttel” in Rome, provided evidence to the high utility of those fabrics [32]. The production of silk and wool and its export to other countries in the East and West has been deemed as the most principal commercial deeds. According to Sindonius, Bishop of Clermon, Iranian textile fabrics were traded with the West in the fifth century (AD) [33]. Most of the Sasanian silk fabrics are held outside of Iran. The pieces of cloth, now stored in the collections of Lyon and Louvre Textile Museum, were made in the Sasanians’ royal factories in the 6th and early 7th centuries (AD) [34]. Those fabrics were dispatched to the king palaces, temples, and churches, and people, not only in Iran but also in Europe and Goal, were zealous to purchase them (now called France). Approximately 60 pieces of exquisite fabrics remaining from Sasanian era are held in some major museums in the world, including Hermitage, Berlin, Victoria, and Albert [35]. Bemikse and Poumbadytasi situated on the bank of the Middle Euphrates and Nehar-Abba were also introduced as the other textile centers in this era [36]. Two threadbare rugs, obtained from excavations in Egypt, now being kept in the Hermitage Museum and having the Cruciform designs, appeared to be the hand-woven rugs belonging to the Sassanid era. They provided corroboration for the production of rugs in that era [37]. In comparison with other things produced in Sasanian era, pottery was restricted; a number of them, most of which were a duplication of the silverware, were found in Mesopotamia and Susa. Several cases of wine and oil in the form of Pitus, being held in museums and private collections, substantiated the growth in the quality of the vats fabrication for the purpose of better food storage [37]. Some pieces of pottery produced around 3th to 5th centuries (AD) were also unearthed in Kosh area located in 70 km away from the coast of Ras-al-khaimah in the United Arabic Emirate, i.e., the southern part of the Hormozgan Strait. Ajustari jars used to carry or transport food; they were similar to the Mediterranean Amforasand were widely distributed through Mesopotamia. The interior parts of these jars were wrapped with pitch so as to conserve and convey water. It is not entirely obvious whether the jars were traded or the material inside them [38]. It sounds as if the Sasandns had a close relationship with the Bulgarians given that Sasanian ceramic plates, made to be hanged on the wall, were dug up in Bulgaria and Constantinoople. Furthermore, Sasanian had sufficient skills at manufacturing glass objects and were acquainted with the techniques of free blowing and mold blowing [39]. They exploited the cutting machine for the manufacture of glass vessels in
order to enhance the quality of the production [17]. The epitome of cups is the Soleimon cup which is kept in the National Library of Paris. This Cup was made of crystal decorated with precious gems; on the cup, there is a portrait of Khosro sitting on his throne with a sword in his hands [40]. Deluxe glassware was largely ornamented with lathes; some samples of these glasses were uncovered in China, Japan, and Korea [36]. The chief centers of glass manufacture were the north of Mesopotamia and northwest portion of Iran. The German discoveries in Ctesiphon in 1928-29 (AD) and Kish as well as Italian discoveries in 1974-75 (AD) are clear indications that the majority of glass manufacturing centers were situated in Mesopotamia [13]. Another type of prominent artifacts in this era are enamels whose technology has encroached on southern Russia, the land of the Scythians, the Far East, and Byzantium. The Cross of Kristen Museum was constructed in duplication of enamel industry belonging to the Sassanid era [37].

Given that they had sufficient knowledge about the exploitation and extraction of metals from mines, they dug gold out of Zarshuran Tekab Mines [41]; moreover, they extracted silver from Nakhial Mines located in northern Anarak in the middle of the great Lut Desert, Tabark Mountain in Rey, Damavand Mountain, Persian Mountain (near Jiroft), Ghor Mountain (near Bamian), SimMountain (between Sarkhas and Herat) [42]; thus they focused on the production of silver objects [36]. Mazandaran, Gilan, and Khorasan became the manufacturing centers of metal objects [37]. Many of the objects produced in these centers are conserved in the museums outside of Iran (Chegini, 1968 8: 17-19). Sasanian silverware were sparsely discovered in a range of southern Mesopotamia to Altai plains in the southern part of Siberia, Caucasus, and the slopes of the Urals Mountains; they were dispatched to overseas for sale or donation [42]; Chinese artists were highly impressed by the quality of these dishes [43]. Almost 90 pieces of metal dishes were extracted in the Russian territory and now are held in the Hermitage Museum [4]. The metal objects belonging to this era were excavated from some areas such as northern India (Rawalpindi) and Poland and now are maintained in the British Museum [37]. The discovery of Sasanian metal objects in some countries including China, Russia, India, and Central Asia represents corroboration for the commercial and artistic relationships between the Sasanian government and other countries [41]. As regards their remarkable knowledge about these objects, European jewelers replicated the images engraved on golden and silver plates of this period; besides, the painters in the Central Asian were strongly inspired by this art [44]. The aforementioned objects won renown beyond the borders of Sasanian dynasty due to their unique way of fabrication and the outstanding quality of them and were transacted as trading goods.

5. The trend towards luxury in the Sasanian government:

In truth, the orientation towards luxury aimed at illuminating the power and superiority of the Sasanian over other nations. The prosperity of the Sasanian court came into the attention of the rulers in China, Rome, Constantinople [18]; the kings’ treasures including crowns, robes of brocade adorned with Alvin gems, and silk brocade carpets enchanted the Arabic people as well [45]. They exhibited embossed designs and artistic crafts, which sometimes were looked on as sacred objects, so as to depict and boast about their magnificent authority [46]. The real intention of the upward trend towards luxury was to grab the attention of foreigners to the Sasanian court.

6. The role of minting in economic circulation in the Sasanian government:

The growth of the monetary system exerts a full range of influence on the development of various countries. Money has facilitated the production of assorted goods and services. Any kinds of pecuniary economy substantially bring about a brisk market for manufactured goods and maximize the effective demands for goods and services ([47]. Throughout the Sasanian period, the main coins were called Drakhm which had been uniquely minted since Shapur II. Just like golden coins, silver coins were in circulation in different and independent shapes in the Sasanianera; this way was prevailing at least till Ghobad I. Then, since his era, strict discipline regarding the quality and quantity of the coins (namely, the order and sum of them) was imposed [48].

It seems that silver coins were minted much more than the golden and bronze coins in Sasanian era; one of the major states for minting was Persian State which was stood out among other states in this era and whose five mints (Bishabor, Darabgerd, Ardeshir Khore, Estakhr, and Beh located in Omid Yakva) have been unearthed so far [49]. Minting, as one of the most significant financial indicators in the Sassanid era, played a profound role in strengthening the chief foundation of its economy and stimulated the achievement of the economic progress for the centralized Sasanian dynasty.

7. The role of government, and religious and private institutions (merchants and royal families) in the development of economic trade:

Despite the fact that the government played a major role in administrating the country affairs, providing security of roads and borders, and constructing ditches [50], it was known as a governmentality which involved in the construction of new cities, including the commercial cities. Running cities such as Marvrodand Nusybin (being the commercial centers) were part of the government’s responsibility [51]. Managing the financial
system, supervising the mints, and supporting the military forces were among the duties of the government entity. The government owes its strength to the leading elite of royal families and the clergy community [52]. In Sasanian era, in fact, numerous reasons initiated the orientation towards religion and the close proximity of the government and the religion; one reason, among other things, was that religion instigated a political alliance. Due to political purposes, Ardeshir and Shapur both were seeking for one single religion in order to unite various heterogeneous and dissimilar communities within their jurisdiction [53]; in truth, the religion that argued more in favor of the government had greater opportunity to be selected and draw more attention of the king on the throne [40]. Clergymen were given considerable authority to an extent that they had the right to judge, to register the dates of births and weddings, to purge people, and to sacrifice to the Gods, etc. Their other authority was to take the ownership of possessions and affluence they gained via religious tithe, income, and charity [11]. They had so much influence on the society that they could even intervene in the private lives of the Kings [54].

In addition, they even had the power to oversee the affairs of different organizations, entities, and even couriers and martial issues; even private institutions had a great power. The augmentation of their power prolonged until the middle of the fifth century (AD). The root of their immense political and martial power can be found in their being backed by the central pillar of economy and in their possessing large lands. Without a doubt, the Sasanian kings were in desperate need of them and owed a big proportion of their general power in terms of politics and martial affairs to their support [55]. They gained so much power that the embossed designs of them were engraved in an informal or personal manner; its evident example is the carvings on the cresset pitcher [56]. Merchants were considered to belong to other private entities and based on Matican’s lawbook, named HazarDatistan, it is inferred that the trade in Sasanian era were to a large extent under the control of unions and companies or the merchants’ families who were expert on the rules governing the product exchanges [20]. At the end of the Sasanian era, merchants gained a very important role in the government. It seems that, unlike other dynasties, Sasanian government were much more familiar with the economic power; this is evident in the high purity of silver coins, which were maintained throughout the whole era. Chinese in Tang Dynasty were also aware of the importance of this point; apparently the discovery of coins belonging to Sasanian era in China demonstrated the prominence of Iranian economic credibility, while even one Sogdian or Haftaly coin was not excavated from China [36]. Iranian cities were the centers of commerce in Sasanian epoch, and markets lay at the heart of these cities; a variety of goods and artifacts were carried to those cities from all over the country [57]. According to the Syriac texts in the Sasanian period, tradesmen and merchants were organized, were managed, and acted under their bosses’ authority and were assigned as personal superiors under the title of “chief of craftsmen” (Qarubed). The other title is Wazarbad which is mentioned once in inscription of Shapur in Kaba of Zoroaster; it seems that this title was utilized as a label for the chief of the merchants (or chief of total trade) [20], accordingly in late Sasanian era, companies and merchants were seemingly more in a position of responsibility for trading than the dynasty [58]. In fact, private employers exerted more influence on the growth of economy in the late Sassanid era [31]. Consequently, the nobles and priests, as two influential institutions cooperating with the government, played a significant role in the advancement of economic exchange networks; however, throughout the history of Sasanian era, their power was always faced vicissitudes. It appears that the Sasanian kings aimed at nationalist and imperialist movements [59]; that is why their empire impinged on the whole regions of Transoxiana of Iran and some parts of South and Central Asia before Islam [60]. Seemingly the Sasanian kings’ thirst for the expansion of their possessions led to the imposition of power on other nations; so, the best way to quench this thirst for border extension was via commerce and economic transactions.

**Conclusion:**

Founding a transregional empire while expanding their possessions in the Sasanian era was one of the most earnest objectives of the government. It sounds that the establishment of Iranian nationalism propelled the Sasanian kings to exploit a variety of ways, such as using military forces and politics, seeking peace, and ultimately trading economic goods, to achieve their purposes. Although the economic advance were of paramount importancethroughout the whole era of the Sasanian government, at the end of the era much more attention were devotedo it. In this regard, the Sasanian employed policies which brought about outstanding successes. The most prominent factors involving the formation of commerce and economic trades on a transregional scale in the Sassanid government, was to have sufficient knowledge of ecosystems and their geographical conditions, to be acquainted with arable lands and the technology of irrigation via channels, to dig aqueducts, to strengthen the farmers physically, and to have access to the effective plantation of mulberries and the breeding of caterpillars, all of which led to the establishment of the textile industry in centers such as Khuzestan, Susa, and Shushtr; consequently, gaining a monopoly on the trade made them get closer to their political goals. The ability to identify and exploit the metal mines inspired Sasanians to manufacture metal goods (such as gold, silver, and bronze). Experienced and dexterous artisans were engaged in producing high-quality goods made from these metals. As a result, customers from southern Mesopotamia to the plains of Altai in southern Siberia, Afghanistan, Armenia, India, China, Japan, and even Europe were enchanted by these products. So as to fortify the economic foundation, Sasanian embarked on constructing cities, trade routes, and
defensive bases, on minting standard coins, on reinforcing its naval bases, and on establishing commercial harbors in the Persian Gulf. Evidently in order to achieve its goals and to function better in this regard, the government could not manage to succeed on its own, consequently, private and religious institutions (nobles and merchants) came to its assistance. The modification, amendments, abolition, and integration (i.e., unity) of these institutions provided substantial benefits to the Sasanian government. In fact, the government took advantage of these entities to consolidate its position. In the late Sasanian epoch, these institutions played such a vital role in the exchange economy that the religious institutions had the authority to manage and supervise economic and commercial transactions. Nonetheless, the potential for the institutions’ union with each other constantly posed a major threat to the hierarchy of Sasanian community; hence, sometimes the king was compelled to suppress them. Despite all these, the government structure would indubitably have been damaged without their support. In the end, in the late Sasanian era, all transactions were under the authority of unions, companies, and aristocratic families, while the government took the responsibilities of taxing and of providing national security. The purpose of receiving the tolls and taxes from diverse unions was not to accumulate a fortune; they utilized the redistribution method in which the money gained from taxes expended on war expenditures, urban and road construction, and the basic necessities of the country. In fact, goods transactions were used as a pretext to present Sasanian to the world in those days; and so as to substantiate their superiority and draw the politicians’ attention to themselves; they embarked on manufacturing unique products. Regarding their sagacity and knowledge in this area, they could manage to initiate macroeconomic trades. Therefore, via this strategy, not only could they fulfill their primary purpose, i.e., the expansions of their properties and the borders to its full extent, but also they achieve loads of profitability. It appears that through transactions, or its today’s so-called name Merkantalisti, the Sasanian dynasty proved to win renown as a great empire in those days.

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