

PERSIAN TRADE – Ancient Period

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview The Persian Empire lasted from 558 B.C.E. to 651 C.E., passing through several major phases--the Achaemenid Dynasty (558 B.C.E.-330 B.C.E.), the invasion of and conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great (334-330 B.C.E.), the Seleucid Dynasty (323 B.C.E.-83 B.C.E.), the Parthian Dynasty (247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.), and the Sassanid Dynasty (224 C.E.-651 C.E.). During this millennium, in the early part of which the Persians suffered humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks, the Persians accrued one of the largest and most civilized empires of antiquity. From 558 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E. the Persians were blessed with two on the whole outstanding and forward looking monarchs, Cyrus (600 B.C.E.-530 B.C.E.) and Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E.) At the time of his monarchy, Cyrus ruled over the most extensive empire ever seen by mankind. Within the framework of this powerful and influential empire, international trade gained momentum, and contributed to the coming together of formerly separate areas of human settlement, from China to Western Europe.

Transportation: the Royal Road Great Empires--Roman, Chinese--depend on a strong transportation network, along which information can pass that provides the backbone basis for a trading society. No network better illustrates this reliance of trade on information than the 1600 mile long Royal Road which the Persian Emperor Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E.) sponsored into existence, between Sardis and Susa. In the Persian empire this transportation vehicle served as the beating artery of progress and power. Trade between diverse parts of the empire--facilitated by large business agencies and commercial houses-- and en route to export points, was greatly facilitated by this inland route, which Royal messengers on horse could traverse in nine days, and which--as the complexity of the Empire grew-- spawned an industry of caravanserais where travelers could stay as they made their ways from one end of Persia to the other, and where goods could be warehoused. Ongoing networks of roads, like the Chinese Silk Road, joined the Persian Royal Road to help form a land transportation web which stretched from India to Egypt, connecting major seaports which served as access points for goods transfer.

Ocean trade The Persians were proficient sailors, particularly active in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea; points for goods delivery and for forward merchanting to more distant ports such as those in China and India. In large cargo vessels, taking advantage of trade winds in such bodies of water as the Indian Ocean, the Persians were able to deliver and sell with ever increasing efficiency, as their empire grew and its tentacles spread. Among the most valued commodities of the Persian merchant trade were the wide varieties of fruits and vegetables which the inland soil of Persia cultivated, and which have left their names in our present-day vocabulary: *orange, lemon, peach, asparagus, spinach*; not to mention those Persian items of dress, *tiara, shawl, sash*, which were attractive to foreign style setters. In addition to such civilizing items, for which Persia was renowned, there was export of precious metals--abundant in Persia--and stock for new crops--like sesame, imported to Egypt, or rice to Mesopotamia.

Coinage and commerce An accurate system of weights and measures, a homogeneous and plentiful coinage supply, and the development of banking and commercial houses, within Persia, all contributed to the increase of trade within the Persian Empire. The principle at work in the development of economies of scale was active in the development of the Persian Empire which, the more coherent and internally self-informed it was, the more profitable it was able to render its enterprises.

Reading

Cook, J. M., *The Persian Empire*, London, 1983.

Lockard, Craig, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History*, Boston, 2008.

Discussion questions

How were commercial relations between Persia and Greece influenced by the 'Persian Wars,' as the Greeks called them? Did commerce--as usual--trump international hostility?

Ships were the key to Persian trade. Where were these ships made? Who made them? Were the Persian triremes similar to the Greek triremes used in the Persian Wars?

How were the Royal Road--and the many other land networks in Persia--financed? Was it by the famed Persian tax system, or by the 5000 tons of silver on reserve in the King's treasury?