

# Sasanian's Role in the Trading Network of the Silk Roads: An Insight into the Coins Found along the Silk Roads

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**Abstract:** *Sasanian Empire once played an indispensable part in term of facilitating the trading networks in Iran in terms of investing in infrastructures and issuing high quality silver coins. These actions greatly impacted the trading activities not only within the Iranian border but also had economic influence over the Silk Roads countries. Though during the later period of the Sasanian Empire, the country's power and control over the central Asia declined, they still remained an important role due to their early investment in coinage.*

**Keywords:** *Sasanian, coins, Silk Roads, trading networks*

## 1. Introduction

Sasanian Empire, the ancient Iranian dynasty once stretched across Asia, Europe, and Africa during its heyday, was often considered a major contributor to the establishment of the trading networks of Silk Roads. Situated in the middle of China and Roman, the major trading members of the Silk Roads, Sasanian Empire well utilized the geographical advantage to not only get economic benefits, but also to promote its own culture, which is evident from the coins excavated all along the Silk Roads. But now more evidences point out that the trading networks may not be as important as we thought to Sasanian Empire and they may not devote as much as we thought to maintain the stability of the trading routes. Therefore, it is worth exploring Sasanian's role in the trading networks of the Silk Roads and evaluating their contribution to the establishment and maintaining of these trading routes. In this work, evidences of coins will provide a new perspective to view the Sasanian Empire's role played in the trading activities in the Silk Road regions.

## 2. Sasanian Empire's early expansion

After the conflicts between the Roman Empire for two centuries, Parthian gradually ran out of its resources and the country became chaotic. At this moment, Ardashir, the ruler of Kingdom of Persia, overthrew the weak Parthian king, establishing the Sasanian Empire in AD 224.

Instead of creating a loosely held confederation as Parthian did, Sasanian Empire aimed to build a more united country.[1] Immediately after the new empire was established, Sasanian took over the western part of Kushan Empire, a country extended from Tajikistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan and into the Ganges valley in northern India. During the rule of Shapur I (r. 241–272), one of the most able kings in Sasanian history, the central government was greatly enhanced, the coinage was reformed, and Zoroastrianism was made the national religion. The series of reformations made the empire became more and more powerful and paved the way to the continuous expansion of Sasanian Empire. By AD 260, Sasanians took over the majority of the southern shore of the Persian Gulf and Omen Gulf.[1] In this way, the empire was able to control a large part of overland trading routes across central Asia and further ensure the control over the oversea trading routes connecting India and Iran, making Sasanian Empire a vital participant in the trading networks of the Silk Roads.

## 3. Sasanian's investment in trade and coinage

Mainly because of its geographical advantage, Sasanians were the beneficiary of the trade between China and Rome, since they extracted a huge volume of extra income by acting as the middleman of the



the central Asia when nomadic groups came. Sasanian's feeble control over the inner Asia led to the instability of this region. Conflict among the Hephthalite, Jou-jan, and Kao-chü tribal groups probably made the trading route passing through Samarkand and Gansu Corridor a less favored method to get into China. Coins along this route act as a defining evidence. The presence of only two coins of Pêz, which were abundantly found in this region since Pêz paid a huge amount of money to Hephthalite as a tribute, on this route clearly indicates that it played a minor or even no role in the Silk Roads trading during 5th century to 6th century. Moreover, the presence of larger numbers of Pêz's coins have been found at Hsi-ning in Ch'ing-hai and Khotan, which lied on two separate branches of a southern route and were usually related to Indian trade.[3] The rise of a trading routes related to India may have boosted the ocean trading activities, which could be a favor to the Roman Empire since they could now trade directly without the intervention of Sasanians, who had been trying hard to support their own business over Roman ones. Certainly, during the period of 5<sup>th</sup> century to 6<sup>th</sup> century, Sasanian failed to maintain their control over the central Asia, making them a much smaller role in the trading networks of the Silk Roads.

### 5. The relationship between Sasanians and Sogdians

Early in the first century BCE, merchants from Sogdia and Bactria started to establish the trading networks linking cities in north-west China and ports in India. Also, they began to dominate the transcontinental trading routes since the fourth century CE.[2] Interestingly, the development of Sogdian trading routes coincided with the rise of Hunnic and Turkish groups in the central Asia and the decline of Sasanian influence over the region. Investigating the relationship between Sasanians and Sogdians can be helpful to understand Sasanian's role during this time period.

At the very beginning, Sasanians and Sogdians were both partners and competitors. Sogdian merchants established various trading routes connecting China to central Asia while Sasanians managed to establish the trading routes connecting central Asia to Europe. Inevitably, there was overlap between their commercial activities, which usually made their relationship competitive. Though most evidences indicate Sogdians were mainly actively between Samarkand and Chang'an, there was also evidence indicating their presence in the Iranian court in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, trying to open up a market of Chinese silk in Persia, which was rejected by the Sasanian king in an attempt to protect the Persian silk monopoly.[1]

Though Sogdian merchants may be more actively participating in the trading activities in the Silk Roads, the Sasanian had greater power in terms of economic influence, which was evident from Sogdian coins. Sogdian coins at first were heavily influenced by Greeks, but later they struck "Bukhar Khuda" coin series in the oasis of Bukhara based on a Sassanid prototype, the coins of Vahrâm V (420–438) struck at the mint of Merv. Also, when Pêz paid a huge amount of money to Hephthalite as a tribute, the influence became even greater. The existence of "Bukhar Khuda" indicated that the Sasanian penetration was not solely because of the abundance of Sasanian coins in this region, but also attests to the existence of a deeper influence, of an economic rather than a military nature.[4]

Sogdian also tried to mint their own coins series, which were usually in a small quantity and played a very minor role in their commercial activities and are unknown to China. The circulation of their coins was largely limited within their own communities. On the other hand, Sasanian coins were circulated over a vast area as a result of Sogdian commercial activities, which was attested by written documents.[4] All these evidences indicated that Sasanian though may played a smaller role in establishing trading routes and transporting goods along the Silk Roads, they were still very influential largely due to the high acceptance of Sasanian coins in these regions, making Iranian court "a beneficiary of political-economic developments occurring far beyond the frontiers of both its empire and its knowledge." [2] This may indicate a superior position of Sasanian Empire over Sogdians, who were mainly in charge of the most basic part of trading—transferring goods. While Sasanians controlled the universal trading medium, making the relationship between them and Sogdians more like an employer-employee one.

### 6. The evaluation of Sasanian's role in the trading networks of the Silk Road

Sasanian Empire acted as a great contributor to the establishment of a stable prosperous trading routes during the first two centuries since the beginning of the empire. They realized the huge benefits they could receive from trading activities. They can not only collect a huge amount of tax revenue being in the middle of the Silk Roads connecting China and Roman Empire, but they could also act as a center of raw material processing by exporting their goods. These factors led to their early military expansion to central Asia and Persia Gulf and pushed them to initiated massive scale infrastructure programs to

facilitate the commercial activities in these regions. Moreover, the high quality of Sasanian silver coins dwarfed their competitors, making them a universal accepted currency along the Silk Roads countries. These coins would have profound influence over the Silk Road trading activities, bring Sasanians continuous benefits, and become the major contribution of Sasanian Empire to the Silk Roads commercial development.

From this perspective, Sasanians indeed played a huge role in this time period during 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Sasanian's control over the trading routes declined as nomadic groups came into the central Asia region during 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century, creating huge instabilities. Though Sasanian Empire strived to reclaim this region, they failed eventually and lost their control over one of the major overland trading routes. Also, the coin evidence indicated that higher risk of using the overland trading routes pushed the further development of India trading routes and may boost oceanic trading activities, which was harmful to Iranian court since the Roman Empire, their competitor, could greatly benefit from sea trade by circumventing Sasanian Empire. These factors made Sasanian Empire a lesser role in the Silk Roads trading during 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Though they played a less important role in maintaining the trading routes and transferring goods, they still had profound economic influence over the vast regions. From the Sogdian case, it was likely that Sasanians played a superior role in the trading system due to the high popularity of Sasanian coins, which were circulated all along the Silk Roads. Even when Sasanian Empire collapsed, these coins still remained in circulation for centuries.

## 7. Conclusion

Being in the middle of the trading networks of Silk Roads, Sasanian Empire contributed a lot to the development of the Silk Roads in terms of constructing infrastructure programs and issuing high quality coins. All these actions greatly facilitate the exchange of goods along the Silk Roads. The coin evidences give a more clear picture of Sasanian's impact and have a more direct relation with the rise and down of the trading activities over the silk road regions. Though during the later part of the dynasty, as the country's power declined and failed to maintain the stability and prosperity of the trading activities, their continuous impact on the coin design indicated that they still remained a profound economic influence to the countries along the Silk Roads. Though in recent years, many coins was uncovered and provided evidences important to the study of silk road trading, more work is still necessary to investigate the whole picture of the trading networks in the Silk Roads region. Hopefully, with more coin evidence excavated in the future, we will have a deeper understanding of the essence of Silk Road trading activities.

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