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## Behind the Prosperity of Silk Road

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## Behind the Prosperity of Silk Road

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### INTRODUCTION

From second century B. C. through second century A. D., long-distance trade between oasis towns in Central Asia flourished. Noting that trading included silk produced in China, German geographer von Richthofen named this East Asian route "*Seidenstrasse* (Silk Road)". The name was subsequently extended to cover roads into Syria in West Asia. As investigation of historic relics and unearthed paleographs, and study of other remains, advanced in the area along Silk Road, facts about the trade were gradually unveiled. I have studied why such long-distance trade between East and West flourished in those eras, with particular reference to natural and geographical conditions, changes in climate in relation to water sources of oases. I have also studied production techniques, with special interest in the significance of appearance of scissors as a tool for cutting wool. The prosperity of Silk Road, however, cannot be fully understood only from environmental or technical points of view. There are various types of trading; trade on Silk Road, however, was a long continued enterprise between different peoples, and therefore was possible only with mutual reliance and coexistence. Silk Road trade must be approached as a matter of the mind.

### 1. AGE OF DIVINE POWER

In studying the considerable length of Silk Road, I focused on the Iranian Plateau. Human relations in this area varied with time. In a tomb built in the middle of the Elburz mountains in the first half of first millennium B. C. (early iron age), substantial human immolation (dolichocephalic type) was committed for a lord (brachycephalic type). This indicates that Indo-Europeans interacted with dolichocephalic inhabitants, establishing the relationship of conqueror and conquered. In addition to such large-scale human immolation, also observed was sacrifice of such animals as cows and serows. This custom of human immolation and animal sacrifice was not observed in tombs built later in Parthian period. Moreover, burials during the latter period were only brachycephalic. As indicated by those facts, mutual interaction brought about physical and anthropological uniformity. What was impetus for such transformation?

Zoroastrianism prohibits excessive cow sacrifice, so sacrifice of cows and other animals offered on occasion of human burial must have been gradually abandoned

under Zoroastrian influence. This religion must have prohibited human immolation as well. With propagation of Zoroastrianism as background, the Iranian people, including both conqueror and conquered, were being formed.

Intermediate Achaemenid dynasty, with Zoroastrianism as its religion, did more than rule over the entire Iranian Plateau; the dynasty's power extended to Africa, India and nomadic regions in south Russia during seventh to third century B.C. As shown by reliefs carved on the Apadana platform of Persepolis, missions visited from remote areas to pay tribute to the rulers in the form of special local products. How did Achaemenid empire treat those tributary missions? It is supposed that imperial audience was granted at the Palace of a Hundred Columns, built in the age of Artaxerxes I. As far as these Persepolitan reliefs show, only Persians and Medes were granted imperial audience; no figures remain to show an audience with the emperor for missions from afar. This indicates that depiction of an actual audience could not be expressed in the sublimate form of decoration for the palace. Notable remainders, showing treatment of tributary missions from afar, include reliefs of figures of so-called throne bearers at tombs of Darius I and other kings nearby. In those reliefs, tributary missions are expressed as members of the company of throne bearers; tribute was based on political relation between ruler and ruled. Reliefs indicate that some transportation organization such as the post-horse system existed; however it had not brought about such active trading as occurred around the year zero B. C.

A question arises here as to what ideological background Achaemenid dynasty of Persia possessed in its requesting tribute from remote places, including Africa and India. As exemplified by Bisutun inscription of Darius I, kings of the empire had inscriptions created on occasions of their accession to the throne or construction of their palaces. Inferred from those inscriptions, which indicate that all enterprise and dominion over different peoples were under benevolent influence of god Ahura Mazda, and that kings of the dynasty were supported by divine power. Tribute from other peoples also indicated divine power, leaving little room for possibility of advancement to the stage of free trade.

The idea of protection by such divine power is most clearly expressed in figures and statues divinely granting king's authority.

Unlike subsequent Sasanid dynasty, Achaemenians did not express gods with a human figure. Ahura Mazda, therefore, was depicted as human upper body with bird wings, flying in the sky and holding a ring in its right hand. The ring, symbolizing sun, sunlight or aureole, granted the person who received it eternal protection. Because any actual ring representing authority in the era of Achaemenids has not been discovered, it is not clear how authority was handed down to succeeding kings in those days. Even if there were an actual ceremony of succession, the figure of Ahura Mazda granting a crown of sovereignty to a king was created because people in those days placed emphasis on divine right of kings. However, no Achaemenian figure of a human being presenting his successor with the royal ring has been discovered. That the idea of divine rights of kings was

passed down to Parthian and Sasanid dynasties is proved by various sculptures such as those found carved into cliffs. In the period of Parthia, an Iranian kingdom founded by Arsaces about 250 B. C., different styles of figures were shown granting a ring bestowing divine right upon kings.

## 2. FIGURES GRANTING A RING IN PARTHIAN AND SASANID TIMES

A cliff relief at Bisutun, created in commemoration of a victory won by Parthia's King Mithridates II, shows a winged goddess of victory presenting a crown to the king seated a horse. This figure of winged goddess, showing Greek influence, is clear indication that the idea of divine right of kings continued into Parthian times. Besides such reliefs, archaeologists at Susa in southwest Iran unearthed a stone carving showing Artabanos V of Parthia granting Khwasak, governor of Susa, a ring as symbol of authority. This carving is supposed to show that a king could take the place of gods in granting limited divine right. It also shows that the human presenting the ring had hopes for, and confidence in, a local governor's reliable administration.

Also discovered in Tang-i-Sarvak, in the middle of the Zagros mountains in southwest Iran, was a huge rock bearing several groups of reliefs created during Parthian times. One carving shows a Parthian king lying on a couch, protected on both sides by soldiers armed with shields and spears. At center a figure stands by an altar with right hand upraised. This pledging figure represents the king of a local state submissive to the Parthian king. Other reliefs showing figures on horseback depict the ceremony for appointing rulers of such subservient states. Reliefs also show one person granting a ring to another. Rings shown are sacred items, corresponding to rings worn by figures of Ahura Mazda created during Achaemenid period. In these Parthian reliefs, a person presents the ring, presumably to demonstrate giver's confidence in recipient as well as to bestow god's protection.

Governors appointed by Parthians were not selected from among Arsacid royalty or related bureaucracy, but from among leading local personages. Such symbiotic, or mutually beneficial, relationship between dissimilar peoples may be observed in other historical relics of that era. Recently Iraq government conducted an investigation into Hatra, a city with surrounding double circular walls constructed as a military base against Rome in wasteland west of Mosul. Archaeologists there unveiled remainders of shrines, palaces and houses of the ancient city. Of those remainders, particularly notable are statues of gods and humans, king and soldiers who protected the area. Most figures have Semitic features. (Statues of King Uthal and King Sanatruq, owned by museums in Mosul and Baghdad, also bear Semitic features and wear characteristic Semitic clothing.) Some statues unearthed at Hatra, however, wear Parthian-styled pantaloons, similar to ones from Japan, thus marking the influence of Central Asia. No statue of Parthian king presenting a Hatra ruler with a ring was unearthed at Hatra, it is

true. Yet, the fact that its people played an important military role against Rome demonstrates the relationship of mutual reliance between Parthians and local subjects. It is through such intercourse between dissimilar peoples that eastern Iranian style of clothing is thought to have been introduced to Hatra.

Portrayal of one person presenting another with a ring remains also from Sasanid dynasty of Persia, founded in 226 A. D. This design appears not only in depiction of formal appointment to a position but also of a scene from worldly life, a king's feast. Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, Maryland, owns a silver plate with figures of king and queen seated; in front of the chairs is a large spread of food and, on a lower stage, heads of three wild boars. This is thought to imply richness of game hunted for feasts. Although the scene is of a feast, the king is presenting the queen a ring; in front of the throne, moreover, are three rings, thought to be for granting to guests invited to the banquet. Rings in this scene are something like souvenirs of the feast, tokens in appreciation of participation and symbols of mutual reliance. Together with scenes of Sasanid coronations involving divine right of kings, designs showing rings being handed from person to person are considered to be a mature version of heritage handed down from Parthia.

### 3. CITIES IN PARTHIAN PERIOD

Although interrupted by military expeditions to Egypt, peace was enjoyed generally throughout the Achaemenid era. In those days, exchange among various peoples was promoted as engineers were mobilized from throughout dominions of Mesopotamia for construction of palaces at Persepolis, Susa and Ecbatana (present-day Hamadan). Among such interracial exchanges, intercourse with Greece was perhaps noticeable. Engineers from various fields were invited from Greece and Anatolia. Moreover, under strong Persian control, including hiring of soldiers, immigration from Greece occurred. Such Greek immigration was further spurred by the later eastern expedition of Alexander the Great and subsequent domination by Seleucid Empire.

As a result, many Greek colonial cities were constructed. This eastern expansion by Greece was slowed by force of Arsacid dynasty of Parthia, with its base in northeast Iran. Descended from nomadic tribes and therefore excelling in both light and heavy cavalry, Parthia established rule over the Plateau of Iran and then advanced into Mesopotamia, confronting Rome across the Euphrates. Although many Greek colonial cities were inside its territory, Parthia, continuing Achaemenid tradition, did not destroy them. During the siege of Seleucia, chief city of Seleucid Empire, for instance, Parthia kept its army on the opposite side of the Tigris River and instead of destroying the city, constructed across from it the circular city of Ctesiphon as its new capital. This way of dealing with Greek cities was observed in many other places, for example on the occasion of domination over a key place on the Turkmen plain called Merv, an ancient city in present-day Soviet region of Mary and known as Antiochia Margianna in the time of Seleucids.

During that Seleucid era, an Ionian-style colonial city with square plan had been constructed there and flourished as a trading center. When Parthians later occupied Merv, they built circular protection walls around the square city. Parthia not only made no move to destroy this city, it strove to protect it from destruction and to preserve its function as a prosperous stopping place for caravans. Such policies on occupying cities are substantially different from those earlier followed in West Asia, except Persia.

Chapter nine of the Book of Judges in the Old Testament attests that "Abimelech kept up the attack on the city all the day and captured it; he killed the people in it, pulled the city down and sowed the site with salt." Sennacherib, seventh century B. C. king of Assyria who attacked Babylon, is also reported to have demolished it like a tidal wave. According to his inscription, he destroyed all palace walls, shrines and houses, as well as throwing building bricks into a canal to completely obliterate the city. Such thorough destruction, thought to have been exacerbated by familial and religious conflicts, is far removed from Persia's way of treating other peoples. Given economical advantages of securing an urban trading center, Parthian policies of occupation are further thought to have been aimed at coexistence of different people and religions. The Arsacids, who eventually built Parthia into an empire, were originally nomads, and therefore extended their power by occupying oasis-based cities. The same pattern of power extension was observed among Turkut, Turkish nomadic tribe that extended its influence southward to occupy oasis cities. Agricultural people and nomads thus shared cities for mutual coexistence. In other words, cities came to involve different lifestyles and different peoples, allowing also coexistence of different gods and shrines.

#### 4. ESTABLISHMENT OF "RULES OF GUESTS"

Figures of gods presenting kings with rings as symbols of divine protection were created in times of the earliest dynasties in West Asia. Those figures show the nature of sovereignty supported by divine power. In Parthian period, however, there appeared designs of one person granting another a ring; for example, king presenting local governor. Both types of figures are of granting of rings. They differ, however, in meaning as the former is between god and human being, and the latter is between humans. At the same time as this change occurred, cities began to be composed of different peoples. Those two phenomena seemingly have nothing to do with each other; however, they are each based on mutual reliance between different peoples.

"Race" is used here as any group with the same physical anthropological features, while "people" is a group made distinct not only by physical and anthropological features but other factors like language, lifestyle and customs. It is therefore quite difficult to precisely define a people. One of the defining factors is organization based on blood relations, such as family and tribe. In West Asia,

blood relations served as a strong basis for society. Referring to nomadic societies, Semites of Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia in particular, professor Sugi Isamu has said: "The concept of organization or state system is incomprehensible for desert inhabitants who lead unstable nomadic lives. For nomadic people, only blood relation or blood union has significance." It can safely be said that the history of West Asia has been centered on tribes formed on basis of blood relation. With reference to responsibility to be taken by individual tribe members, Professor Sugi also pointed out the presence of traditions. (Note: Tribe members acted in accordance with those rules or customs, and so were strongly united.) Their activities, however, went beyond tribal framework, since they were joined by members from different tribes; such participation by other tribes prevented tribal society from becoming isolated from outside. Professor Sugi referred to "Rules of Guests" as customs designed to protect other tribe members who entered a tribal community.

To a tribal community, guests are visitors from different tribes—but all visitors are not necessarily guests. Such guests do not live in the community on a daily basis, and therefore could be visitors who relied upon the community. In Achaemenian era, tributary missions visited the capital bringing local specialties. A question arises as to whether or not those missions were treated as guests. In actuality, those mission members were not guests but conquered people, and therefore were treated merely as throne bearers. Then what is the difference between guest and visitor?

When I visited Iran and Syria to investigate historic relics, I was received by local tribes as a guest and, despite some troubles, settled within the tribe and completed excavation work without incident. Paying attention to Rules of Guests introduced by professor Sugi, I have studied their idea of "guest". There are several hints for defining the concept, although detailed conditions for status as guest have not yet been clarified. The idea of guest, however, is supposed to be based on interrelation of reliance. In a society centered on blood relations, it would be impossible without such custom of receiving guests from outside to continue long-distance trading, which surpasses the range of isolated and temporary trading. In this context, Rules of Guests are supposed to have played an essential role in establishing long-distance trading via Silk Road. In approaching questions of differences between guests and visitors through study of archaeological relics, figures granting a sacred ring expressed in Parthian and Sasanid carvings and silverware are considered to represent relationship of mutual reliance between tribes. They also hint of enforcement of Rules of Guests. Those rules are supposed to have covered, in addition to administrative ceremonies, daily life as implied by design of Sasanid silverware. Moreover, rules were presumably enforced not only by presentation of a sacred ring, but in other forms, as exemplified by mosaics unearthed at Palmyra.

Located in the center of the Syrian Desert, Palmyra was once a prosperous caravan city on Silk Road. It was inhabited by Semitic, Greek, Roman and Iranian

people, who built shrines dedicated to gods of various religions. Of those the main one is Bel Shrine, from which positioned westward are a great pillared road, amphitheater, agora and other facilities. As investigation advances, mainly by Syrian government, the ancient prosperity of the city is being unveiled. Among unearthed relics, including Chinese silk cloth that proves trading along Silk Road, are many small unglazed clay tablets. Varied in size (approximately 1 to 3 cm wide) and shape (square, rectangular and round), the clay tablets are marked on both sides with figures of gods and animals. Some tablets bearing inscriptions are believed to relate to feasts at shrines. Social lives of citizens in Palmyra are thought to have been based on individual tribes, each unified and holding feasts at its own shrine to pray for prosperity. These clay tablets, supposedly used as admission tickets for the feasts, do not seem to have been required for gatherings of members of the same tribe. They are believed to have been issued as invitations to identify participants of gatherings also attended by members of other tribes. Participants from other tribes were thus guests and partners with whom to interact and share tribal lives, and could have been visitors from afar. Prosperous caravan trade in Palmyra stemmed from these tribal activities involving guests and shrine feasts; one of such activities is thought to have required these "tickets". Serving as invitation card, token of mutual reliance between different tribes and different peoples, those unearthed tablets imply that Rules of Guests were enforced.

Thus this phenomenon emerged after a period of divine power: Establishment of Rules of Guests for protecting visitors coming from other tribes and establishing mutually dependent relationship. This helped form a basis for prosperous trading along Silk Road during Parthian times.

## Note

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