

Trade and commerce of Kushan age

Both internal and external trade and commerce flourished in the Kushan period. The development of trade and the strengthening of economic ties resulted, above all, from the consolidation of the supremacy of the Kushan Empire, the expansion of agriculture and the growth of handicraft production. As is clear from the mass of archaeological material from various ancient sites of the period, trade between the Central Asian provinces increased greatly. Items of trade included products of handicrafts and agriculture, and both consumer goods and luxury articles. Consumer goods such as cereals, fruit, textiles, pottery, timber, etc. probably formed items of regular and extensive trade within the country, which demanded the minting of local coinages in different regions – Chorasmia, Margiana, Samarkand, Bukhara and Chach – serving as a medium of exchange in retail transactions.

The agricultural regions of Central Asia were at this time conducting a particularly vigorous trade with livestock-breeders of the nomadic steppe zone. They were linked by a trade route that ran along the Syr Darya. This caravan route, which linked the northern regions of Ferghana and ancient Chach with the regions of the lower and middle Syr Darya and the Aral Sea area, served as a kind of two-way transmission line for the agricultural areas. Cereals, fruits, handicraft products and weapons were transported along this route to the nomads of the north; in exchange, furs and skins, meat and milk products, livestock and raw materials for weaving were accepted in the south by the sedentary peoples. It is not surprising, therefore, that this period witnessed the growth of major cities in the Syr Darya basin, ruins of which have been found at Akhsikent, Kanka and Shahrukhiya, Otrar and Dzhetî-Asar. Foreign trade also expanded considerably in this period. The main trans-Asian trade routes passing through Central Asia linked the Mediterranean countries with India and the Far East. Substantial overland trade was conducted with India. The most convenient route from India passed through the cities of Taxila and Peshawar, and along the Kabul river valley into Bactria. From there merchants travelled by boat down the Amu Darya, over the Caspian Sea and across Transcaucasia to the Black Sea. They also made their way to southern Siberia. The Silk Route from China to the Mediterranean countries had a branch linking Bactria to Barygaza (Broach), which had established regular maritime links with the countries of Western Asia. This branch acquired greater importance when contact between Bactria and the West was suspended because of international politics. In about

127 b.c. Chang Ch'ien discovered in Bactria some bamboo articles and textile goods which had come from Szu-chuan via India.

The main exports from India were spices (pepper, ginger, saffron, betel), perfumes and medicines (sandalwood oil, spikenard, musk, cinnamon, aloe, bdellium), lacquers and dyes (indigo, cinnabar), silk, rice, sugar, vegetable oils (sesame, coconut oils), cotton, precious woods (teak, sandalwood, ebony), pearls, precious and semi-precious stones (diamonds, sapphires, rubies, jasper etc.) ivory, exotic animals and slaves.

At the same time India imported precious metals (gold, silver) and non-ferrous metals (copper, tin, lead, antimony), horses, purple dye, coral, wine, slaves and artistic pottery and glassware. According to a report by Pliny the Elder (XII, 8) dating from the second half of the first century a.d., the value of imports into India, East Turkestan and Arabia totalled 100 million sesterces. Some of these imports undoubtedly came from the Central Asian provinces of the Kushan Empire. Moreover, there is evidence of Bactrian merchants travelling to the confines of the Roman Empire, particularly to Alexandria in Egypt, one of the leading commercial centres, and of Roman merchants visiting Central Asia, where a fairly large number of Roman objects and swords have been found, testifying to the existence of trade links between the Roman Empire and Central Asia.