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‘Industrial espionage’ of Justinian I (527-565)

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Abstract: *Economic espionage especially with regard to luxury goods has been known since Antiquity. A key event in economic history of late Antiquity is smuggling of the silk worms, described by the Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea in his eighth book of the Wars.*

Key words: the Silk Road; Byzantium; China; Iran; Khosrow; Justinian; Procopius; espionage

Introduction

Economic espionage especially with regard to luxury goods has been known since Antiquity. A key event in economic history of late Antiquity is smuggling of the silk worms, described by the Byzantine historian Procopius. With this successful mission Byzantine Empire managed to break two monopolies: the Chinese one for silk production and the Iranian one for the import and re-export of silk from the Far East.

From the very moment of his enthronement in Constantinople Justinian (527-565) drove to avoid Iranian brokerage in trade.¹ He realized clearly that the income from this trade were one of the important elements of the budget of the *Shāhanshāhs*. Economic weakening of Iran was important for the emperor because of the wars Byzantium waged with its Eastern neighbor from the early 6th century.²

Trade routes in Mesopotamia

The Silk Road was a system of the trade routes which from the 2nd century AD joined Far east with Europe.³ Its detailed description was presented in *Mansiones Parthicae* written by Isidore of Charax.

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¹ Prokopius informs about increase of raw silk (Proc. *Anecd.* XXV 13-22). On top of that the wars on the Byzantine-Iranian border resulted with irregular supply of the raw silk (FELTHAM, 2009).

² MAKSYMIUK, 2015: 62-67.

³ BOULNOIS, 1963; RASCHKE, 1978; YOUNG, 2001; DARYAEE, 2003; YING-SHIH, 2008; HANSEN, 2012; REZAKHANI, 2010.

During the Parthian period (247 BC-224 AD) the land route from Northern India, Central Asia and China ran through Marv, Hecatomphylos, Ecbatana, Seleucia and Zeugma. The second route ran alongside Euphrates through Spasinou Charax, Vologesia and Hit.⁴ Until 106 AD a route controlled by the Nabateans with their capital in Petra remained independent,⁵ however after the Romans incorporated the Nabatea to their state and created on its territory the province Arabia Felix,⁶ the role of Palmyra in international trade increased.⁷ In 214 AD Rome took control over the trade routes running through Northern Mesopotamia and removed the local dynasty from the power in Hatra.⁸ The main centers of the trade in the first half of the 3rd century were Hatra, Dura Europos and Palmyra, all associated to the Roman Empire.

In 224 AD new dynasty, the Sasanians, took over the power in Iran. The first military actions taken by Ardashir I (224-242) even before initiating struggle for the throne, were directed towards the Persian Gulf.⁹ Probably they were directed to control the maritime routes running through the Gulf and gaining control over the trade with Far East.¹⁰ Perhaps the further plan included capturing of entire Arabia. The steps taken by Ardashir contradicted Roman trade interest as the Empire controlled 'nabatean' and 'palmyrene' routes.

When instigating the war in the West Ardashir directed his armies against Hatra, Probably one of the reasons of sending the troops there was the rivalry between Hatra and Hira. Hatra was captured after a siege lasting two years in 240 AD.¹¹

The successor of Ardashir, his son Shapur I (242-272) took firm control over the port of Spasinou Charax,¹² which forces Palmyra to seek new trade routes. During the second campaign of Shapur I in Syria (253-256) Iranian armies demolished Dura Europos.¹³ Palmyra benefited on the destruction of Hatra and Dura Europos and monopolized the trade in Syria. 'Palmyrene Empire' was destroyed only by the intervention of Aurelian (270-275) who captured and laid the city to waste.¹⁴ It seems that in the late third century the trade routes moved from Euphrates to Tigris.¹⁵

⁴ RASCHKE, 1978: 630; DREXHAGE, 1982: 17.

⁵ NEGEV, 1977; TAYLOR, 2002: 59-78.

⁶ de MAIGRET, 2002.

⁷ DRIJVERS, 1977.

⁸ SOMMER, 2003.

⁹ PIACENTINI, 1985; KENNET, 2007; DARYAEE, 2010; ULRICH, 2011.

¹⁰ BIVAR, 1970; WILLIAMSON, 1973; WHITEHOSE & WILLIAMSON, 1973; POTTS, 2008; HOJABRI-NOBARI & MOUSAVI KOUHPAR & VAHDATINASAB & KHOSROWZADEH, 2011.

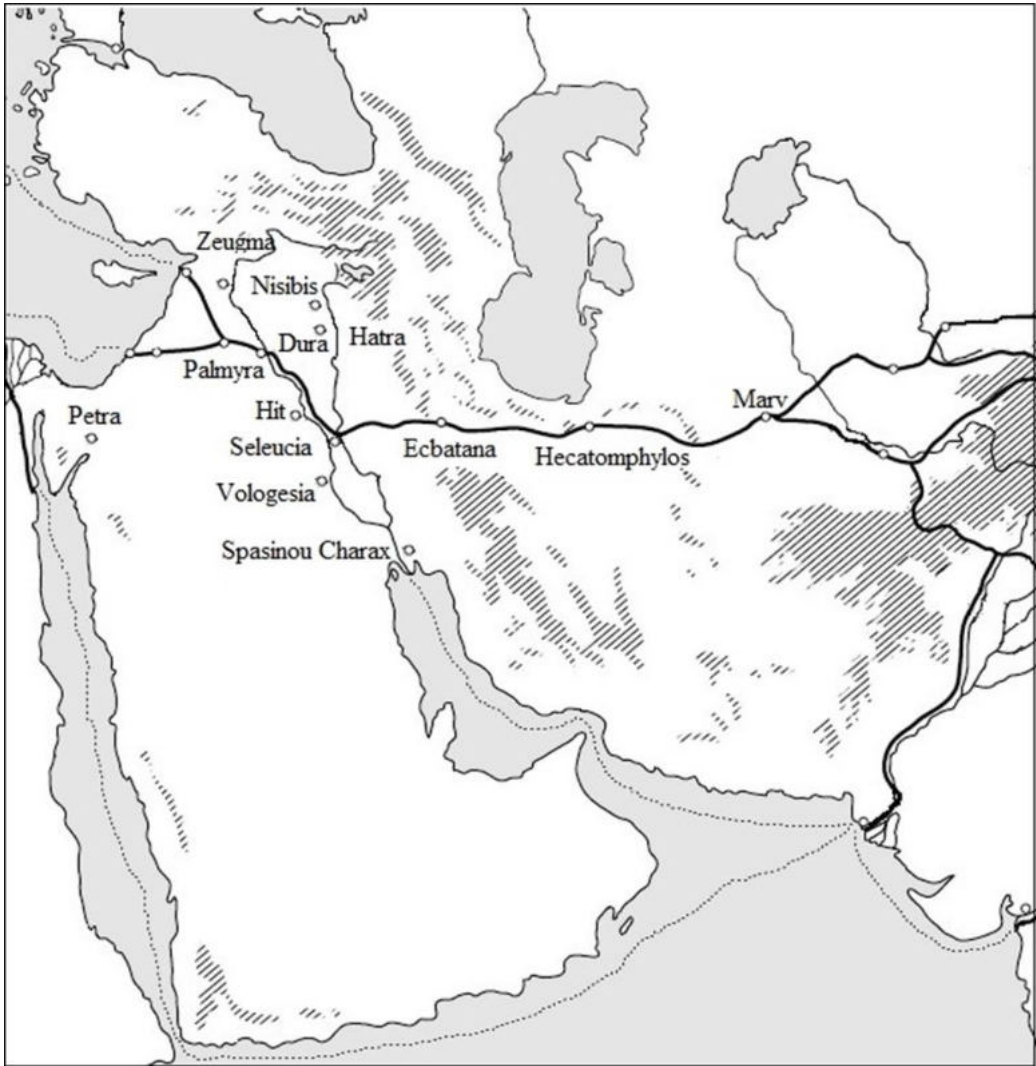
¹¹ WIESEHÖFER, 1982: 446; MAKSYMIUK, 2017)

¹² HILL, 2009.

¹³ McDONALD, 1986; MOSIG-WALBURG, 2009: 43-44.

¹⁴ HARTMANN, 2001.

¹⁵ MILLAR, 1996: 483-484.



Trade routes on the Near East (autor K. Maksymiuk)

Rivalry and legal regulations

The kings of Iran realized crucial role played by the trade routes. The attempts of securing financial interests can be observed already when the Arsacids received the embassy of Chinese Han dynasty emperor Wu Ti (141-87 BC) in 115-105 BC.¹⁶ Attempts to monopolize the trade are confirmed by the information from the *Book of Later Han Dynasty (Hou Han Shu)*, referring the years 25-220 AD), stating that the Parthians thwarted direct trade connections of Rome and China.¹⁷

¹⁶ DEBEVOISE, 1939: 43.

¹⁷ *Hou Han schu* 118, 8; HIRTH, 1975: 42.

However frequent military conflicts between Iran and Rome made the trade difficult, there were no observable attempts to regulate mutual economic relations in the diplomatic way. From the second half of the third century regular diplomatic contacts between the Roman emperors and the Iranian kings were already established.¹⁸ Among the preserved conclusions of the treaties some clauses regarding economic matters were present.

In the peace treaty of 298 AD¹⁹ between emperor Diocletian (284-305) and defeated king Narseh (293-302) the decision was made regarding the city of Nisibis which became the key to later Romano-Iranian economic relations. It was agreed that the city was the only place of goods exchange between Iran and Roman Empire. What is important, this clause was the only point objected by Iranian envoy Apharban.²⁰ Diocletian placed in this way Rome in privileged position in front of its partner as the city was under Roman control.²¹ Within the years to come Nisibis became the main city of Northern Mesopotamia.²²

After the disaster of the Eastern campaign of Julian the Apostate (361-363), Jovian (363-364) was elected the emperor and he was forced to sign in 363 AD the peace treaty with Shapur II (309-379).²³ One of the conditions of the treaty was transferring of Nisibis to Iran however the inhabitants were must to leave the city.²⁴ This decision limited the privileged position of Rome acquired by Diocletian. The Romans attempted to avoid Iranian trade agency by activation of their actions in Caucasian region.²⁵ First of all by setting the relations with Armenia and Iberia which resulted with moving the main area of Romano-Iranian conflict to the North.²⁶

On the basis of the act *de commerciis et mercatoribus*, dated 408/409 AD,²⁷ may be deduced that was a trade agreement between Iran and Rome. The text of the act lists the towns which were the right to become the places of commercial transactions. The list includes Nisibis, Artashat (in the Iranian influence zone) and Callinicum (under Roman control). Text specifies the punishments for the attempts of smuggling and stipulates that the diplomats were freed from the customs duties.

The stalemate survived until 5th century when the route running though the Red Sea focused the attention of both powers. The control over it was challenged by Aksum supported by the Romans and the kingdom of Himyar backed by the Sasanians.²⁸

¹⁸ MAKSYMIUK, 2018a.

¹⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV 7. 9; Petr. Patr. 13-14; MOSIG-WALBURG, 2009: 91-121.

²⁰ WINTER, 1987: 47-58.

²¹ BLOCKEY, 1984.

²² *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* 22.

²³ Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV 7.

²⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV 7. 10; Malalas XIII 27; Yeshu' Stylite IX; MAKSYMIUK, 2016.

²⁵ WISSEMAN 1984: 166-173.

²⁶ MAKSYMIUK, 2018b.

²⁷ C.J. IV. 63. 4.

²⁸ Proc. Bell. I. 20. 9-12; SHAHÎD, 1964; MUNRO-HAY, 1982; CALLU, 1992; YULE, 2007.

The testimony of Procopius

The events resulting with the introduction of the breeding of the silk worms in Byzantium was presented by Procopius of Caesarea²⁹ in his eighth book of the *Wars* (the *Gothic Wars*)³⁰:

Ὑπὸ τοῦτον τὸν χρόνον τῶν τινὲς μοναχῶν ἐξ Ἰνδῶν ἦκοντες, γνόντες τε ὡς Ἰουστινιανῷ βασιλεῖ διὰ σπουδῆς εἴη μηκέτι πρὸς Περσῶν τὴν μετάξαν ὠνεῖσθαι Ῥωμαίους, ἐς βασιλέα γενόμενοι οὕτω δὴ τὰ ἀμφὶ τῆς μετάξης διοικήσεσθαι ὠμολόγουν, ὡς μηκέτι Ῥωμαῖοι ἐκ Περσῶν τῶν σφίσι πολεμίων ἢ ἄλλου τοῦ ἔθνους τὸ ἐμπόλημα τοῦτο ποιήσονται: [2] χρόνου γὰρ κατατρίψαι μῆκος ἐν χώρᾳ ὑπὲρ Ἰνδῶν ἔθνη τὰ πολλὰ οὔση, ἥπερ Σηρίνδα ὀνομάζεται, ταύτη τε ἐς τὸ ἀκριβὲς ἐκμεμαθηκέναι ὅποια ποτὲ μηχανῆ γίνεσθαι τὴν μετάξαν ἐν γῆ τῆς Ῥωμαίων δυνατὰ εἴη. [3] ἐνδελεχέστατα δὲ διερευνωμένῳ τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ ἀναπυθνομένῳ εἰ ὁ λόγος ἀληθῆς εἴη ἔφασκον οἱ μοναχοὶ σκώληκας τινὰς τῆς μετάξης δημιουργοὺς εἶναι, τῆς φύσεως αὐτοῖς διδασκάλου τε οὔσης καὶ διηνεκῶς ἀναγκαζούσης ἐργάζεσθαι. [4] ἀλλὰ τοὺς μὲν σκώληκας ἐνθάδε ζῶντας διακομίζειν ἀμήχανα εἶναι, τὸν δὲ αὐτῶν γόνον εὐπορόν τε καὶ ῥάδιον ὄλως. εἶναι δὲ τῶν σκωλήκων τῶνδε τὸν γόνον ᾧ ἐκάστου ἀνάριθμα. [5] ταῦτα δὲ τὰ ᾧ χρόνῳ πολλῷ τῆς γονῆς ὕστερον κόπρῳ καλύψαντες ἄνθρωποι ταύτη τε διαρκῆ θερμῆσαντες χρόνον ζῶα ποιοῦσι. [6] ταῦτα εἰπόντας ὁ βασιλεὺς μεγάλῳις τοὺς ἄνδρας ἀγαθοῖς δωρήσασθαι ὁμολογήσας τῷ ἔργῳ πείθει ἐπιρρῶσαι τὸν λόγον. [7] οἱ δὲ γενόμενοι ἐν Σηρίνδῃ αἰθῆς τὰ τε ᾧ μετήνεγκαν ἐς Βυζάντιον, ἐς σκώληκας τε αὐτὰ τρῶπῳ ᾧπερ ἐρρήθη μεταπεφυκέναι διαπραξάμενοι τρέφουσι τε συκαμίνου φύλλοις, καὶ [p. 230] ἀπ' αὐτοῦ γίνεσθαι μετάξαν τὸ λοιπὸν κατεστήσαντο ἐν Ῥωμαίων τῆς γῆς. [8] τότε μὲν οὖν τὰ τε κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον πράγματα Ῥωμαίοις τε καὶ Πέρσαις καὶ τὰ ἀμφὶ μετάξης ταύτη πη ἔσχε.

The precise date of introduction of the silk worms to Byzantium is not indicated. According to Procopius the meeting was held in 552 AD.³¹ Considering the time needed for the travel in both ways (the distance between Constantinople and modern Xi'an is 6800 km, the travel time is about 230 days) one must assume that the mission was completed in 553 AD the earliest.³²

²⁹ The shorter version of these events can be found at Theophanes of Byzantium: "Ὅτι τὴν τῶν σκωλήκων γένεσιν ἀνὴρ Πέρσης βασιλεύοντος Ἰουστινιανοῦ ἐν Βυζαντίῳ ὑπέδειξεν οὐπω πρότερον ἐγνωσμένην Ῥωμαίοις. Οὗτος δὲ ἐκ Σηρῶν ὀρηθεὶς ὁ Πέρσης τὸ σπέρμα τῶν σκωλήκων ἐν νάρθηκι λαβὼν μέχρι Βυζαντίου διεσώσατο, καὶ τοῦ ἔαρος ἀρξαμένου ἐπὶ τὴν τροφὴν τῶν συκαμίνων φύλλων ἐπαφῆκε τὰ σπέρματα· τὰ δὲ τραφέντα τοῖς φύλλοις ἐπεροφύησέ τε καὶ τᾶλλα εἰργάσατο (Photius *Bibl. cod.* 64).

³⁰ Proc. *Bell.* VIII 17. 1-8.

³¹ STEIN, 1949: 772.

³² EVANS, 1996: 235; TATE, 1999.

Although the word Serinda (Σηρίνδα) used in the text was employed in the sources in reference to China as a country of „the people of the silk”³³ (‘silk’, gr. σηρικός, lat. *sericum*), it must be borne in mind that the two most common denominations of China were Serica (North-Eastern region of Asia) and Sina (South-Eastern region).³⁴ Besides, the fragment of Theophanes of Byzantium preserved as an excerpt in Fotius mentions the negotiations of Justin II (565-578) with the Turks,³⁵ suggesting that the Turks held control over the trade with Seres³⁶. It is doubtless that the merchants from Sogdiana, not China,³⁷ expected Turkish *qaghan* to help them in selling raw silk to Iran which is testified in Menander Protector’s description of the diplomatic mission on the court of Khosrow I (531-579) led by Maniakh.³⁸ It can be assumed that the silk worms were brought not from China but from Sogdiana.³⁹

Conclusion

It is obvious that the development of silk worms breed and manufacture of the textile in Byzantium (initially in Berytus, Broussa, and later in Morea on Peloponesus) requested more than couple of years. The empire was still interested in importing of the silk from Far East. In the peace treaty made between Justinian and Khosrow I in 562 AD the trade clauses were introduced.⁴⁰ The privileged role of Callinicum and Nisibis was sustained and the former privileges or Armenian Artashtat was transferred to Dvin.⁴¹ According to Menander the reason of introducing diplomatic relations with the Turks in 568 AD was intention to avoid Iranian trade intermediary.⁴²

Summarizing above consideration it must be observed that the single event of mid sixth century AD changed the economic history. It allowed creation of competitive center of silk manufacture which resulted in breaking of the Far Eastern monopoly.

³³ ‘αὐτὴ δὲ ἐστὶν ἡ μέταξα ἐξ ἧς εἰώθησι τὴν ἐσθῆτα ἐργάζεσθαι ἦν πάλαι μὲν Ἑλληνες Μηδικὴν ἐκάλουν, τανῶν δὲ σηρικὴν ὀνομάζουσιν’ (Proc. Bell. I. 20. 9); MALINOWSKI, 2012; *contra* HAMILTON (1995: 25-33), he derives the word not from Latin *ser*, meaning ‘silk’, but from Chinese dynastic Qin.

³⁴ LANMAN, 1985: 197.

³⁵ MAKSYMCIUK, 2020: 359-360.

³⁶ Ὡς τὴν τε γένεσιν καὶ τὴν ἐργασίαν ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἰουστίνος ὕστερον τοῖς Τούρκοις ὑποδείξας ἐθάμβησεν. Οἱ γὰρ Τούρκοι τότε τὰ τε Σηρῶν ἐμπόρια καὶ τοὺς λιμένας κατείχον. Ταῦτα δὲ πρὶν μὲν Πέρσαι κατείχον (Photius *Bibl. cod.* 64).

³⁷ de la VAISSIÈRE, 2005: 227-234.

³⁸ Menander frg. 10.

³⁹ PIGULEVSKAJA, 1969: 158-159; KAGEYAMA, 2003.

⁴⁰ SHAHĪD, 1995: 268-272.

⁴¹ Proc. Bell. II 25. 1-3; MANANDIAN, 1965: 81-82; PIGULEVSKAJA, 1969: 153.

⁴² Menander frg. 18.

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