

Caravans, smugglers and trading fairs: Organizing textile trade on the Syrian frontier

Eivind Heldaas Seland

Introduction

Textiles were extremely valuable in the ancient world, speaking in economic as well as symbolic terms. They were expensive trade goods, sought-after prestige items, and potent status markers, while at the same time being necessities of life. Thus, textiles were traded over long distances, and political authorities were as keen on controlling textile trade as a source of revenue, as merchants were eager to keep transaction costs low. This article discusses the changing organization of textile trade along the Syrian frontier of the Roman Empire, in the period from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE, in light of theoretical approaches from New Institutional Economics. Groups such as merchants, smugglers, political authorities and robbers are approached as actors with bounded rationality, competing for revenue from textile trade within limitations of information, power and institutional restraints. It is argued that over the period in question, there is a gradual shift of power from merchants and nomads, to states and settled population.

Sources

Our main body of data about textile trade in Roman Syria stems from the city of Palmyra, situated on the Syrian Steppe, about halfway between the Euphrates and the coast.

Being a city of the Roman East, Palmyra was very much subject to what MacMullen characterized as ‘the epigraphic habit’,¹ with a surviving record of circa 3200 inscriptions in Palmyrene Aramaic, Greek and occasionally also Latin, covering a time-span of more than three centuries.² Palmyra was fairly unique in the Roman world, however, in the respect that its elites were not only actively involved in the organization and protection of long distance commerce with Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea,³ but that they also took a certain pride in these activities. This is reflected in circa 35 so-called caravan-inscriptions, which were in most cases originally accompanied by statues of the honorand, and prominently displayed in the cityscape, commemorating assistance lent by members of the Palmyrene elite to compatriots engaged in trade, shipping or the operation of caravans.⁴ Textiles such as Chinese silk and silk-yarn as, well as South Asian cotton cloth and yarn, are not mentioned in the inscriptions. Nevertheless their survival in funerary settings and the emphasis on elaborate clothing in Palmyrene sculpture,⁵ show that they were important commodities in Palmyrene trade.

In addition to the material from Palmyra, there are passages in the classical literary sources, relating to trade across the border to the Parthian, later Sasanian rivals of the Roman emperors. Classical authors were generally uninterested in trade, but from time to time commercial matters came to the attention of the high and mighty, and thus found their way into the accounts of the lives and doings of Roman emperors. Together these scraps of information can contribute towards a picture of how trade was organized in a sensitive border area. As with other aspects of ancient economic history,

¹ MacMullen, 1982.

² As'ad, Yon, & Fournet, 2001, pp. 13-15; Hillers & Cussini, 1996; Yon, 2012.

³ Rostovtzeff, 1932; Seland, Forthcoming 2014; Smith, 2013, pp. 75-82; Sommer, 2005, pp. 202-224; Teixidor, 1984; Will, 1957; Yon, 1998; Young, 2001, pp. 138-185.

⁴ Lists in Michel Gawlikowski, 1996, pp. 142-143; Yon, 2002, pp. 263-264.

⁵ Finlayson, 2002, 2004; Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer, & Al-As'ad, 2000; Tanabe, 1986.

however, our source material is fragmented, making it all the more important to situate it within a theoretical framework that can facilitate interpretation as well as comparison with other settings.

Tax collector, mafioso or highwayman: an institutional approach

This inquiry is inspired by the work of Douglass C. North et al. on the socio-economic role of institutions.⁶ North and his colleagues point out that the basic challenge that all societies face is the need to contain the use of violence. This is achieved by the means of institutions and organizations. By institutions, North et al. refer to the formal and informal constraints that regulate social interaction, as well as their means of enforcement.⁷ Examples relevant to textile trade in Roman Syria would include friendship, kinship, patronage, trade, taxation and even warfare. Organizations are “specific groups of individuals pursuing a mix of common and individual goals through partially coordinated behaviour”.⁸ Relevant examples would include the Roman and Arsacid polities, the city-state of Palmyra, nomadic tribes on the Syrian steppe, and also the collectives of Palmyrene merchants acting as sponsors of statues and inscriptions in honour of members of the Palmyrene elite. In the ancient world, most organizations were of political nature, and thus had a capacity for violence. As North et al. observe, such organizations engage in the generation and distribution of rents among their members. This implies that they have to decide how their capacity for violence should be applied in order to give the desired return.⁹ How should political organizations relate to trade?

⁶ North, 1990; North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009.

⁷ North, et al., 2009, p. 15.

⁸ North, et al., 2009, p. 15.

⁹ North, et al., 2009, pp. 19-20.

Trade is acknowledged as a basic human activity and a primary agent of change in most human societies.¹⁰ Nevertheless, major scholarly debates have taken place on the role of trade in classical antiquity, a contentious issue being the significance of trade compared to social, political and violent mechanisms of transferring wealth, such as plunder, robbery, tribute, taxation and gift exchange.¹¹ Arguably, however, from an analytical point of view, the significant aspect is that goods change hands in all these processes. The definition of a merchant is a person who buys and sells goods. A smuggler does exactly the same, but without legal sanction. A tax collector gathers revenue with legal sanction, but backed by the actual or possible use of or force. A mafia boss collects protection money without legal sanction, but with the same overt or covert threat of violence. A robber simply takes what he can by force or intimidation. Seen from the perspective of the merchant, it all comes down to transaction costs. Regardless whether he has to pay taxes for safe and legal passage, protection money in order to avoid seizure of his trade goods, or guards to intimidate aspiring highwaymen and pirates, he has to make sure that he will remain physically unharmed and turn a profit in the end. Political organizations, such as empires, city-states and nomadic tribes that aimed to raise revenue from trade, needed to decide whether their interest was best served by protecting (and taxing) trade, taking active part in it, or preying upon it. From the varied history of the Roman Near East as well as other empirical settings, we know that all the practices described above were actually in use in processes of long-distance exchange. Treating merchants as well as other interested parties as agents with bounded rationality, acting according to what they perceive to be in their best interest,

¹⁰ Oka & Kusimba, 2008.

¹¹ A full summary of the primitivism/modernism, substantivism/formalism debate is outside the scope of the present article. See Bang, 2007; Morris & Manning, 2005 for recent historiographical overviews and attempts at syntheses.

but with limited information and within institutional restraints,¹² and thus frequently also making sub-optimal choices, allows us to approach economic transactions within a common analytical framework. This applies regardless whether these transactions were based on voluntary partnership, as trade should ideally be, or different degrees of coercion.

From the first century BCE to the third century CE: Caravan trade

From the Bronze Age to the early 20th-century, the standard itinerary from the Persian Gulf and Middle Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, was by way of the Euphrates valley across , and then across the plains east of Aleppo,¹³ alternatively along the Tigris and across the plains of Northern Mesopotamia. Both routes follow the river valley until well north of the 200mm isohyet. This is significant, because it means that travellers passed through well-watered regions, with ready access to food, fodder and water. Also, these regions were settled by agricultural populations, firmly under state control. Desert routes were also employed, for instance in cases when time was an important factor, but for reasons of safety and logistics, they seem to have been of secondary importance except for two prolonged periods: The early period of Ottoman rule in this region (16th- to early 18th century), and the period from the first century BCE to the third century CE.¹⁴

In the early Ottoman period, the evidence is quite explicit. The riverine routes were avoided in order to minimize the predation of local authorities acting on their own initiative. Instead caravans were set up in cooperation between merchants based in

¹² Simon, 1997, pp. 291-294.

¹³ Finet, 1969.

¹⁴ Carruthers, 1929; Grant, 1937.

Basra, Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus on one side, and Bedouin tribes in the Syrian Desert on the other, all with the sanction of the Ottoman *bey* (governor) in the city of departure, who auctioned the right to lead caravans to the highest bidder.¹⁵ The situation seems to have been parallel in antiquity. Based on Strabos account of merchants paying the nomadic *skenitai* for crossing the Mesopotamian Desert in order to avoid excessive taxation by petty rulers (*phylarchoi*) along the Euphrates in the late Hellenistic period, Gawlikowski and Millar have proposed a related background for the establishment and operation of a caravan route across the Syrian Desert by way of Palmyra from the first century BCE.¹⁶ In the early period of Roman rule in Syria, travellers along the Euphrates starting in Roman Antioch would have to move through the Roman province of Syria, the Roman client-kingdom of Commagene, the Parthian client-kingdom of Osrohene, the Parthian territory of Mesopotamia kai Parapotamia, Parthian satrapies of middle Mesopotamia and finally the client-kingdom of Mesene. Each of these polities would be eager to secure revenue from passing traders in return for protection. Because of their ability to cooperate with the nomadic tribes of the steppe west of the Euphrates, as well as with Roman and Parthian authorities, the Palmyrenes were able to create an alternative trade route, that could compete with the longer, but under normal political circumstances easier riverine route, offering protection along the whole route from the Persian Gulf ports or Mesopotamia to Roman Syria.¹⁷

Palmyrene merchants were present in Babylon and Seleukia on the Tigris in Middle Mesopotamia by the first quarter of the first century AD and in Spasinou Charax

¹⁵ Carruthers, 1929; Grant, 1937; Seland, 2012.

¹⁶ Strabo, *Geo.* 26.1-2; M. Gawlikowski, 1994: 27; Michel Gawlikowski, 1996: 139; Millar, 1998: 126-127.

¹⁷ Seland, In press 2013.

in Southern Mesopotamia by the third quarter at the latest.¹⁸ The first attested usages of the Aramaic (šyrh) and Greek (*synodia*) terms for “caravan” are from 135 and 140 AD.¹⁹ Caravans as well as collectively acting groups of merchants (tgry'/*emporoi*) then appear regularly in the epigraphic record until a dedication made in the 260s AD to a certain Septimius Worod,²⁰ who was honoured by the council and the people of Palmyra for a number of services, including assistance to the caravans and with recommendations from the head merchants (*archemporoi*).²¹ Following Zenobia's attempt at imperial power on behalf of her son, Vaballathus, Palmyra was conquered by Aurelian in 272 and sacked after a rebellion in the following year. No reference is made to Palmyrene trade after Zenobia's defeat, and although it is not possible to draw secure conclusions *ex silentio*, it seems likely that the commercial activities of the city came to an end.

The Greek word for caravan, used in the epigraphic record from Palmyra, is *synodia*. In a direct sense this means “a journey in company” – a near at hand solution to the challenges of safety connected with long distance travel in the ancient world. Major caravans were probably annual, large scale undertakings, involving thousands of animal and personnel,²² as the maritime trade on the Western Indian Ocean that Palmyrene caravans linked up to, as well as communication between Southern Mesopotamia and Syria, depended on seasonal cycles of navigation, transhumance and climate.²³ By involving the nomadic population in the organization of caravans as animal-drivers, guards, and suppliers of pack-animals, the Palmyrene elite was able to keep transaction costs at a level that enabled the trade to go on for several centuries. For Roman and

¹⁸ PAT 0270, 1351, 136.6, 1584.

¹⁹ PAT 1397, 1412.

²⁰ IGLS 17.67. The year given in the inscription is fragmentary and exact date of the inscription is debated, full commentary and bibliography in Yon, 2012, pp. 83-84.

²¹ IGLS 17.67 excerpt ll. 5-8: ...καὶ ἀνακομίσαν[τα τ]ᾶς συνοδίας ἐξ ἰδίων καὶ μαρτυρηθέντα ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχεμπόρων... / “who brought up the caravans at his own cost and has testimony borne to him by the head merchants”.

²² Teixidor, 1984, p. 16.

²³ Seland, 2011.

Parthian imperial authorities, Palmyrene trading activity will have allowed access to imported goods for taxation and consumption without having to deal directly with the political rival and with minimal investment in control. That imperial interest in the trade was in fact substantial, is attested in an inscription from AD 174, showing that the collector of the special 25% *tetarte* (“quarter”) tax levied on eastern trade, had an agent in Palmyra.²⁴ That Palmyrene trade continued over the better part of three centuries indicate that it found an equilibrium that allowed the different organizations interested in revenue from long-distance trade to balance investment with return. Neither imperial governments, nor merchants, nor nomads, were able to or had sufficient interest in using their capacity for violence in order to change the terms.

Merchants or smugglers?

That different actor nevertheless had different interest in and perception of textile trade along the Syrian is, however, clear. A passage from the *History* of Herodian of Antioch illustrates this. In a supposed letter to the last Arsacid king, Artabanus V (ruled 208-224), the Roman emperor Caracalla (ruled 211-217), suggested an alliance between the two empires:

Since the Parthians produced spices and excellent textiles and the Romans metals and manufactured articles, these products would no longer be scarce and smuggled by merchants; rather, when there was one world under one supreme authority, both peoples would enjoy these goods and share them in common.²⁵

The letter is likely to be a literary construct, never actually written or sent. That, however, does not diminish its value as a normative description of cross-border trade,

²⁴ IGLS 17.1

²⁵ Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 10.4.4., transl. J. Echols, τὰ τε παρ' ἐκείνους φυτόμενα ἀρώματα ἢ θαυμαζόμενα ὑφάσματα καὶ <τὰ> παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις μεταλλευόμενα ἢ διὰ τέχνην ἐπαινούμενα μηκέτι μόλις καὶ σπανίζοντα λανθάνοντά τε δι' ἐμπόρων κομισθήσεσθαι, μιᾶς δὲ γῆς οὔσης καὶ μιᾶς ἐξουσίας κοινήν καὶ ἀκώλυτον ἀμφοτέροις τὴν ἀπόλαυσιν ἔσεσθαι.

as perceived from a ruler perspective. This, it should be kept in mind, was during the heyday of Palmyrene caravan trade. The merchants referred to in the letter must have included Palmyrenes. These merchants are accused of smuggling, or rather of conveying commodities “without being observed” (*lanthanonta*), a procedure, which is clearly perceived as negative. The room of operation left open for the Palmyrene merchants, is explained as an undesirable consequence of the political division between Romans and Parthians. And, one might add, a situation where much of the practical responsibility for the 350 km desert frontier between the Roman military strongholds at the Euphrates (Sura and Resafa) and Bostra, was left to the Palmyrenes.²⁶ To utilize the institutional approach outlined above, imperial authorities had to tolerate that Palmyra held a key role in the textile trade, because direct control with trade would require investment in infrastructure and security that would yield a smaller return than the existing situation.

Designated markets and trading fairs

This state of affairs, of course, changed with the end of Palmyras semi-independent existence following the events of 272-273. The city was garrisoned by Aurelian after the uprising of 273, and from the reign of Diocletian (284-304), the flexible frontier of the Palmyrene period was replaced by the *Strata Diocletiana*, a chain of military stations connected by roads and routes. While the new border organisation was not capable of, and probably never intended to ward off major invasions, it provided territorial control with routes of communication and water-sources, rendering the regular operation of caravans across the Syrian Desert impossible without Roman sanction.

²⁶ There is no doubt that Palmyra was an integrated part of the Roman Empire from an early date (Seyrig, 1941), but it is also clear that the city maintained an autonomus role, visible for instance in the deployment of Palmyrene military forces on the Euphrates (Edwell, 2008, p. 52) and the role played by the city during the wars with the Sasanid empire in the mid third century.

As the treaty of Nisibis, concluded in 299 between the victorious Diocletian and the Sasanian great-king Narses (293-303), shows, such sanction was not given. The treaty, as preserved by the sixth-century Byzantine diplomat and historian Petrus Patricius, specifies that the only place of transactions (εἶναι δὲ τόπον τῶν συναλλαγμάτων) between Romans and Sasanians will be Nisibis in Northern Mesopotamia.²⁷ Although the condition refers to official dealings, any meaningful enforcement of the treaty would also have to include cross-border activities such as textile-trade, given its great potential for government revenue. In this way, merchants no longer had a choice of different routes and different organizations operating in the protection/violence business, but had to conclude their transactions in a location chosen by and monitored by political authorities.

Half a century later, we get another glimpse of the situation. Ammianus Marcellinus, recounting events during the early rule of Constantius II (350-360), describes the city of Batnae, also in upper Mesopotamia, where trade in Indian and Chinese commodities, took place at an annual trading fair:

The town of Batne, founded in Anthemusia in early times by a band of Macedonians, is separated by a short space from the river Euphrates; it is filled with wealthy traders when, at the yearly festival, near the beginning of the month of September, a great crowd of every condition gathers for the fair, to traffic in the wares sent from India and China, and in other articles that are regularly brought there in great abundance by land and sea.²⁸

There is nothing in the description that implies that imported textiles were traded only at Batnae, but clearly Batnae was an important centre of trade, and the restriction of trade to specific periods of time, evidently made transactions easier to monitor and tax

²⁷ Constantinus VII Porphyrogenitus, *De legationibus* 1.3.

²⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 14.3.3, transl. Rolfe, 1956, p. 25, Batnae municipium in Anthemusia conditum Macedonum manu priscorum, ab Euphrate flumine brevi spatio disparatur, refertum mercatoribus opulentis, ubi annua sollemnitate prope Septembris initium mensis, ad nundinas magna promiscuae fortunae convenit multitudo, ad commercanda quae Indi mittunt et Seres, aliaque plurima vehi terra marique consueta.

for authorities. In this way, the Roman government could use its capacity for coercion in order to extract revenue from trade in a much more effective manner than they could have, if trade had taken place along the entire Syrian border. The modern observer might object that total revenues would likely have been larger if trade had been encouraged rather than restricted, but ancient organizations, acting with limited information and within institutional restraints, did what they deemed rational in order to channel revenue their way.

Caravans, smugglers and trading fairs in Roman Syria

The aim of this article was to show how the interplay of political organizations, including, but not limited to states, shaped the organization of textile trade along the Syrian border in the period from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE. Starting with a situation in the late Hellenistic period, where merchants were able to choose among routes and carriers in order to lower transaction costs incurred by taxation, moving on to more than two centuries of successful caravan trade across the Syrian Desert by way of Palmyra, and ending with trade restricted to certain places and periods along a heavily militarized border in the fourth century, there seems to have been a shift of power from merchants and nomads towards rulers and settled societies over time. This shift seems to be a result primarily of political changes rather than commercial fluctuations.

This highlights the need for an analytical framework that can encompass both political and economic aspects of exchange. Adopting perspectives and terminology from New institutional economics allows us to compare robber bands, merchant caravans, city-states, petty kingdoms and world-empires within the same framework. This is useful for several reasons. When dealing with exchange of textiles, we are looking

also at other mechanisms than trade, and we need to understand the political dimension, including institutions such as taxation, tribute, protection and predation. This in turn highlights the importance of and interest in textile trade of political authorities on all levels, thus dispelling the long prevalent notion that ancient societies never had much understanding of or interest in trade or in economic policy. Quite the opposite, they were keenly aware of the potential proceeds offered by trade and the mechanisms regulating them. They just belonged to a world where they were competing with other groups for influence and revenue, and where the institutions shaping interaction between groups and individuals were very different from today.

Abbreviations

IGLS = Yon, Jean-Baptiste. (2012). *Inscriptions Greques et Latines de la Syrie: Palmyre* (Vol. 1). Beyrouth: Institut Français du Proche-Orient.

PAT = Hillers, Delbert R., & Cussini, Eleonora. (1996). *Palmyrene Aramaic texts*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Classical authors and their works have been abbreviated in accordance with Liddell, H.G., Scott, R. and Jones, H.S. (1940). *A Greek English Lexicon* (with a revised supplement of 1996), 9th edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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