

# Sea Trade between Iran and China in the Persian Gulf based on the Excavations of Sīrāf City

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## Abstract

Sīrāf was an important port in the Late Sassanid era; yet its highest glory and economic prowess occurred in the first Islamic centuries, especially in the tenth century A.D. Among the significant evidences of glory and prosperity of Sīrāf are the discovered coins ranging from Spanish to Indian and even so far as Chinese. These coins were found in archaeological excavations in Sīrāf. Scientific analyses of these archaeological and numismatic find sand the writings of historians on maritime transportation between Iran and China shed light on the widespread relationship between the two nations in the period that covers the late Sassanid era to the end of the tenth century A.D. Due to significance of the a forementioned coins in clarifying Sīrāf's history and Iran-China relations, therefore, the present article aims to investigate maritime trade between Iran and China via Sīrāf based on the archaeological and numismatic evidence.

**Keywords:** Sīrāf, Iran, China, Persian Gulf, Maritime Trade

## 1. Introduction

In the last century, excavations have taken place at several ports on the coast of Persian Gulf. Sīrāf was not the only wealthy port on the Persian Gulf (Basra before the Zanj rebellion was another), but it is of special significance: first, because its wealth was derived almost entirely from the network of trade which supplied Iran with the products of Africa, India and China; secondly, because it has been excavated on generous scale.

Until the excavations began in 1966, we knew nothing about Sīrāf before the ninth century. Excavations done by London University in cooperation with the Iranian Archeological Headquarters led by Dr. David Whitehouse from 1966 to 1973 revealed that it was already a small port in the late Sasanian period, with a fort and other buildings immediately above the beach and a citadel

on high ground overlooking the bay. Afterwards, there have also been some other materials in press about Sīrāf. Excavations revealed such architectural sites as mosque, bazaar, residential areas, etc, and also numerous coins of different eras and origins, proving the glory and prosperity of this ancient port.

Among the discovered coins are the coins from China—clear proof of long-distance trade. Given that Sīrāf was one of the most significant ports in late Sassanid and early Islamic eras, and that many early Islamic Geographers confirmed it to be a trading port, investigation of the coins can define the Iranian trade with China among other contemporary civilizations. The study can contribute to a new vision on Sīrāf trade in the first four Islamic centuries. The present study, therefore, aims to investigate the coins along with the relevant historical texts to come up with an image of Iranian maritime trade with China via Sīrāf.

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## 2. The Geopolitical Situation of Sīrāf

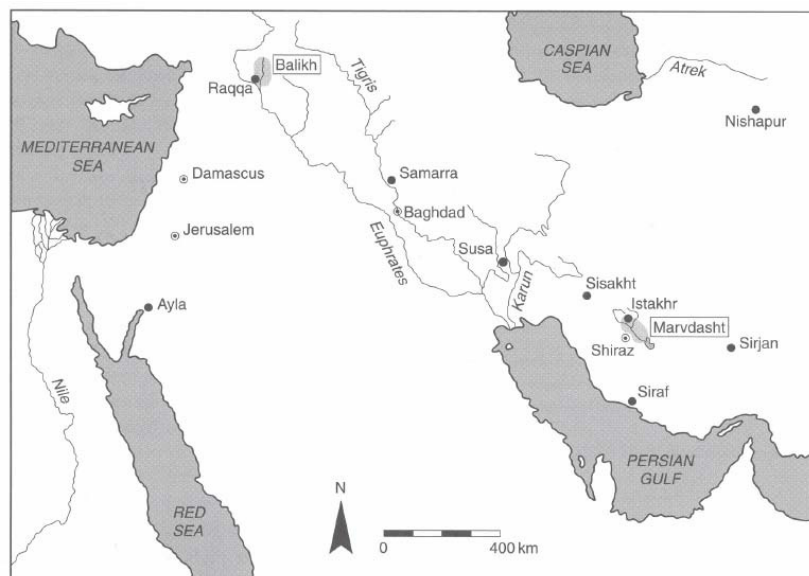
Sīrāf (Persian: سیراف), is an Ancient city, near the small port of Taheri, in the Central District of Kangan County, Bushehr Province, Iran. It is located on the north shore of the Persian Gulf in what is now the Iranian province of Bushehr. Its ruins are approximately 220 km south east of the port of Bushehr and 240 km south of Shiraz (map 1). At this point, the Zagros Mountains, which form the western edge of the Iranian plateau, extend almost to the shore, leaving a coastal strip less than one kilometre wide. The medieval city developed round a shallow bay, sandwiched between the mountains and the sea. The bay affords a sheltered anchorage, and one of the few caravan routes between the Persian Gulf and interior ran from Sīrāf to Shiraz, the regional capital. Otherwise the environment has little to offer; the landscape is rugged and the climate severe, with high temperatures and low rainfall. The modern village of Taheri is a small village inhabited by fishermen, chiefly pearl-fishers, of Arab descent, 200 to 300 in number. It is a small square fort on a little hill at the west end, standing on the shore of the Persian Gulf, at the foot of a range of mountains rising to a height of near 5000 feet, and running parallel to the coast. The ruins of Sīrāf lie to the west of Taheri Port, and extend for perhaps two miles along the shore<sup>25</sup>.

Sīrāf was an ancient Sasanid fortress<sup>5</sup>. Following an earthquake, it was destroyed in 977 A.D.<sup>35</sup>. It is guessed that Captain Kamitoren, a member of the British Naval Force who went to Taheri Port in 1845 A.D. (1253 A.H.), was the first one who compared the old Sīrāf with Taheri, whose findings were later confirmed by Paul Shwats. Although the port is today a less populated and less important area, it used to hold grandeur in the ancient East trade in the late Sasanian period and especially early Islamic centuries (Masoumi, 1374).

### 2.1 Sources

#### A. Persian and Islamic Historical and Geographical Texts

Sīrāf was the chief emporium of the Persian Gulf in the tenth century A.D. (fourth century A.H.), prior to the rise of Kish Island<sup>17</sup>. This region was inhabited and developed long before the establishment of the Islamic city of Sīrāf. Sīrāf was considered as the greatest commercial port in the Persian Gulf and even in the East for about three centuries and was actually an international port and a wealthy commercial center<sup>1,2</sup>. The oldest texts written by the Muslim historians in which Sīrāf is mentioned date back to the first half of mid-ninth century A.D. (third century A.H.), i.e. just at the same time when the city was yet considered as a great port<sup>31</sup>. The first person who mentioned Sīrāf in his book was Sulayman-I tajir, a navigator from Sīrāf who



Map. 1. Sīrāf city on the Persian Gulf

wrote about the position of Sirāf and the importance of commerce in the city in his itinerary (Sirāfi, 2001). Yāqūt Hamawī (1179–1229 A.D.) describes the location of this port in the third climate with the longitude 90° and a half and the latitude 109° and a half. He writes: "...[Sirāf] is a city in the Ardashir Khurrah district, and one of the cities of Fars, which is called Shilav by the merchants. There are some beautiful monuments and buildings in the city, and also a congregational mosque with columns made of teak wood. When the weather is good it takes seven days from Sirāf to Basrah. The distance between Shiraz and Sirāf is 60 leagues [about 180 miles]"<sup>39</sup>.

While describing the wealth of Sirāf people, Yaqūbi states that some of their houses cost more than 100,000 dirham and are built by teak and bricks<sup>38</sup>. Istakhri states in his book *Masalik al-Mamalik*: "and their buildings are made of teak and woods which are imported from India and Zanzibar. There are not any trees around the city and a mountain called *Jam* overlooks it ..."14.

All mentioned above clearly indicate the degree of development and magnificence of the port of Sirāf during the first centuries of Islam.

## 2.2 Archaeological Evidence

One of the first archaeological accounts on Sirāf is composed by Sir Aurel Stein<sup>24</sup> when he visited Iran in 1930s. Later, David Whitehouse, from the British Institute for Persian Studies, conducted seven seasons of joint excavation in Sirāf, in cooperation with Iran Institute of Archaeology (Co-directed by Gholam-Reza Masoumi.) Extensive reports on these investigations have been published in English and Persian<sup>31,32,36</sup>. Sirāf excavations were done in seven seasons between 1966 and 1973 (1351 Solar A.H.). In the seasons, workshops were named alphabetically: Jame' mosque (workshop B), public bathroom or caravanserai (workshop J), palace or penthouse (workshop K), clay furnace (workshop D), bazaar (workshop C), residential area (workshop F), and gate room (workshop L).

Whitehouse aged the buildings at three periods, ranging from the Late Sassanid to the 4th Islamic century<sup>31–33</sup>. Period one: the primitive points where the buildings were made on tamped soil and sand 1 to 1.4 meters thick belonging to a time when Sirāf had not yet been a thriving international port (i.e. before 850 A.D.). Period two: primitive buildings were rebuilt on mortar foundations 20 to 60 centimeters thick. Where necessary, the old walls

were destroyed to the ground and new walls without foundation were built (i.e. no new foundations were built, and the old ones were used). Constructions belonging to the second period are among the biggest buildings of Sirāf, located in workshops A, B, C, and D. In workshop A, there are constructions such as walls ranging in two centuries that hold numerous rooms; notably, 5 rooms were found at the northern end of workshop A, each 2.8 meters wide, being built on narrower period 1 rooms. The buildings were probably built between 850 and 977 A.D. Period three: in the third period, big buildings were destroyed probably by the 977 A.D. (366 A.H.) earthquake; the destruction is more visible in workshop D. All in all, the third period can be dated from late 11th to 14th century A.D. (Masoumi, 1374).

In recent years, in 2005, the International Congress of Sirāf Port was held in Bushehr and the proceeding was published. In 2009, Esmaeil Mohammad Esmaeili conducted further archaeological investigation at Sirāf. British Museum also launched a project on the collection of pottery found at Sirāf<sup>7</sup>. Sirāf has been one of the archaeological sites of national and international interest and different aspects of history and archaeology of Sirāf have been studied and published.

## 2.3 Chinese Coins

During six seasons of excavations carried out between 1966 and early 1973 AD, 949 coins and pieces of coins were discovered, including 4 golden coins, 74 silver coins, 436 bronze coins and 435 leaden coins<sup>18,32</sup>. The number of coins which were not distinguishable even after they were cleansed was high (460 coins or about half of them). The reason they were not distinguishable was partly the inhospitable salty soil and partly erosion. The oldest type of silver coin belonged to the Kings of Persia which was a contemporary dynasty with Parthia in the south west of Iran<sup>32</sup>. The silver coins of that dynasty were discovered by Istakhr and Qasr-e Abu-Nasr excavations at other parts of Fars province<sup>10</sup>.

During the excavations some coins were obtained that belonged to the periods of Sasanids, Umayyads, Abbasids, Buwayhids and Seljuks<sup>32</sup>. They reflected the consecutive stages of constructing, reconstructing and development of this port between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.H., putting out valuable information. In addition to these coins, some other coins were also obtained in excavations which belonged to other points of the world such

as Spain, Arabia, Africa and especially China (Lowick, 1985). Chinese coins allocated a notable percentage of the total discovered coins. Most of these coins were discovered just in a few specific locations. They were discovered in the residential building of the F yard and included a collection of 60 bronze coins and two collections of coins with their minting date fluctuating between the first type of Kaiguan minted in 621 A.D. under the Tang empire (Figure 1).

Another type of coin minted under the Song dynasty in 977 A.D. (Figure 2). Other Chinese coins were obtained individually from a newer building (in F yard), the mosque (B yard), the great building and bathroom (J yard), and the defense wall (P yard)<sup>10</sup>. They were not found in any of the older yards during the excavation, but according to Abu Sa'id Hassan Sirāfi the Chinese bronze coins were imported to Sirāf in the ninth century A.D. (third century A.H.),<sup>10</sup>. The date of the coins is similar to the individual and collection findings from south India, Ceylon and eastern African coasts whose dates are not before 618 A.D. and just the date of some of them are after 1275 A.D.<sup>18</sup>.

## 2.4 Contact between Iranian and Chinese Merchants in Pre Islamic Period

Sasanians considered the Persian Gulf a very important region both politically and commercially. Therefore Ardashir (224–242 A.D.) and then Shabuhr II (309–379 A.D.) constructed many ports in the edges of Persian Gulf's northern coast including Ram Ardashir, Riv Ardashir and Sirāf<sup>6,9</sup>. From the beginning of the Sasanian period, Persian merchants and official missions visited China<sup>20</sup>. We know of a Sasanian official called by the Chinese word sa-pao, who was stationed in Si-nan where the temples of the celestial god of fire was established<sup>16</sup>. By the late Sasanian period, Sasanians controlled the seas and came into conflict with the Romans. They were competing with the Romans and disputing trade concessions as far as Sri Lanka, and it appears there was even a Sasanian colony in Malaysia<sup>15</sup>. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sasanian goods played a major role, and the epithet Po-ssu (Persia)<sup>1a</sup> was even sometimes applied to non-Persian products that came to China from the west<sup>4</sup>. Opinions have differed, however, about whether or to what extent Persian traders came to Chinese ports<sup>27,37</sup>. According to The *Weishu* (魏书), we know about the products of Po-ssu (Persia) imported to China: coral, amber, cornelians, pearls, glass,

<sup>1a</sup> Products brought or made known to China by Persians.

both transparent and opaque, rock-crystal, diamonds, steel, cinnabar, quicksilver, frankincense, turmeric, storax, patchuk, damasks, brocaded muslins, black pepper, long peppers, dates, aconite, gall nuts and galangal. The *Suishu* (隋書), reproduces substantially the above list of Persian products, to which it adds gold, silver, tush, lead, sandalwood, various tissues, sugar and indigo. It seems that most of these products came from India or from countries of south-eastern Asia, only a few being products of Arabia or countries bordering on the Persian Gulf. It seems that in the sixth century A.D. Chinese and Persian merchants used to meet regularly in Ceylon for the exchange of their products<sup>4</sup>.

There is considerable evidence for the settlement of early Muslims, including Persians, in China. In 748 A.D. the Chinese monk Jian Zhen was blown by a typhoon to Zhen-zhou (modern Ai-cheng, Ya-cheng), on the southern coast of Hainan island in the Gulf of Tonkin, where he learned that "Feng Ruo-fang, the chief of Wan-an-zhou [the modern district of Ling-shui], seized two or three Persian merchant ships every year, taking the cargo for himself and making the crew his servants"<sup>26</sup>. This is good evidence that in the T'ang period Persian ships frequently visited the ports of Southern China such as Hanoi and Canton<sup>4</sup>. We know that many Persians were settled in those cities<sup>27,21</sup>. The ports along the southeastern coast of China had a long history of trade with Persia before the coming of Islam. Before the T'ang period, however, it seems that the eastern end of the trade was in the hands of Indonesians and that Ceylon was the point at which Chinese products destined for the west and Persian products destined for China were exchanged<sup>27,37</sup>. It seems that Chinese may have travelled in the sixth century as far as Aden or the head of the Persian Gulf, to Hormuz, Sirāf, Basra or Baghdad, but these were isolated cases of commercial adventure<sup>4</sup>.

## 3. Sea Trade between Iran and China: Questions of Interaction

The importance of Persian Gulf and Sasanians' competition with the Romans for control of the markets and trade routes caused the Sasanians to establish ports in various parts of the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and beyond. At Suhar, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf in the Sea of Oman, as well as at Dama and Jurrafar, there appear to have been Sasanian forts that may have participated in trade<sup>5</sup>. There

was a Persian outpost at Ghanam, in the Strait of Hormuz, which may have overseen shipping<sup>6</sup>. The Sasanians also built other ports in their empire to expand their trade, in such places as Muscat in Oman during the time of Xusro I in 6<sup>th</sup> A.D.<sup>3</sup>. These Ports along with the ports of Fars such as Sirāf acted as entrepôts. This is evident by the remains of imported objects, such as T'ang dynasty export wares<sup>29</sup>, and other items such as Chinese coins and pottery found in Sirāf<sup>28</sup>.

Sirāf dates from the time of Shabuhr II (309–379 A.D.). Excavations led by Dr. David Whitehouse from 1966 to 1973 revealed that in the Sasanian period, Sirāf was a military outpost<sup>31,32,5</sup>. A small Sasanian fortress and settlement was partly uncovered during the excavation and is tentatively dated to Šāpūr II<sup>5,9</sup>. The earliest itinerary between Firuzabad and the coast is the route to Sirāf. This route was in use by the tenth century, when Sirāfi caravans bound for Shiraz travelled via Firuzabad<sup>32</sup>. Although in the Sasanian period, Sirāf appears to have been a military outpost, it was transformed into a trading port in the Islamic period. It was first mentioned in about 850 A.D. as a flourishing port, and Istakhri states that in the tenth century it was a prosperous city rivaled only by Shiraz in the province of Persis<sup>14,5</sup>. Sasanian-Islamic wares were produced in Iraq and exported to Sirāf on a massive scale in the Islamic period<sup>33</sup>.

In this period the commercial facilities in ports Obollah-Najiram and Sirāf were developed. Although the power was transferred from Sasanids to Muslims, the rise of Islam had little impact on the economic structures of the ports in the coast of the Persian Gulf and most of the Iranian merchants of Obollah and Sirāf remained there<sup>19</sup>. At first, the Arabs ignored trading and the Iranians were more active in the ports in the edges of Persian Gulf such as Obollah, Basrah, Mahrouyan, Siniz, Jannabah, Rey-Shahr, Najirom and Sirāf. In the second century A.H., the Muslim society was changed in a way that commerce became one of the most important pillars of the economic life while the society was impressed by welfare, expansion of territory, extension of connecting ground and marine routes, and distribution of wealth.

Hourani, in his book *Arab Seafaring: in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, believes that Ra'eleh and Sirāf were the major trading ports for the sea-going ships then. He mentions the trade between the Persian Gulf and China, and states that the western terminals of the shipping line to China were Basrah, Ra'eleh and Sirāf<sup>8</sup>. It seems that, since there were some problems

in the opening of the Persian Gulf for the ships to reach Obollah and Basrah, Sirāf overtook its rivals in the economic competition. Hourani states explicitly that goods were mainly brought to Sirāf by smaller ships from Basrah and other ports in the Persian Gulf and then were transported to China by large Ships<sup>8</sup>. This commerce was so profitable that made Sirāf a rival for Basrah in its wealth<sup>1</sup>.

Sirāf was connected with the large cities through multiple routes. Import and export goods were exchanged between Sirāf and Iran mainland and other neighboring regions through these routes. These connecting and commercial routes could be divided into two groups. The first group included those routes that reached the central cities of Fars Province and the other group included the routes to other ports and harbors in the Persian Gulf<sup>32</sup>.

Basrah and Obollah were gradually substituted by the port of Sirāf by the ninth century A.D. (the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century A.H.). Archeological evidences such as the mosque and other buildings, pottery kilns and also tools for ship-building confirm the growth and development of Sirāf at that time. Additionally, according to Ibn Khurdadbeh (lived 250–372 A.H.), the Jewish merchants of Sirāf were actively and increasingly engaged in trading in the Mediterranean sea and Indian Ocean<sup>12</sup>. Merchant Sulayman has written that the exporting goods destined for China were transported from Sirāf to Masqat and Kollam<sup>22</sup>. Abu Zeid, (lived approximately in ninth century A.D.), who himself was a merchant from Sirāf, has written that the businessmen of Sirāf used to travel to Jiddah beside the Red Sea and also to the coast of Zanzibar<sup>19</sup>. Hamzah ibn Hasan Isfahani (lived approximately in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and forth centuries A.H.), has also narrated the story of Hassan ibn Omar al-Sirāfi, a merchant from Sirāf who had travelled to the Kanem region in Sudan<sup>13</sup>).

Sirāf was also the largest Iranian port in the Persian Gulf during the tenth century A.D. (the fourth century A.H.), and all the goods imported to it from the overseas were distributed from there. All of the valuable and rare Indian goods were also imported to Sirāf<sup>4</sup>. According to all of the historians of the tenth century A.D. Sirāf was at the climax of its flourish, and captains from that city had commercial relations with Africa, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and China<sup>14</sup>.

It is clear that the profitable trading in this port granted a great profit to those who politically governed that region. Sirāf alone was charged with 10.85 percent of the total taxes of Fars and Kerman provinces and Oman. 13.40 percent of Fars and its agents' taxes were also provided by

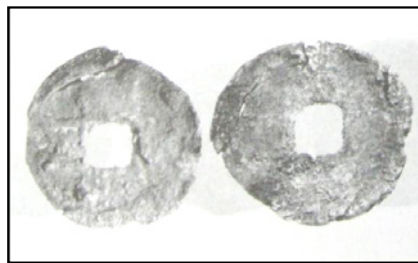
Sirāf and its marine vessels. According to Ibn Balkhi, Sirāf provided a notable amount of the taxes of Fars during the Buwayhids period<sup>11</sup>. Bertold Spuler believes that the revenue of Sirāf customs was 253,000 dinars in 299 A.H. (912 A.D.) and 2,150,000 dinars around 399 A.H. (950 A.D.)<sup>23</sup>. Expansion of trading in the region, especially maritime trading, resulted in the development of products and manufactures of Muslim countries. Exporting goods to distant regions of the world was also accompanied by abundant profits which increased the wealth of people on the one hand and contributed to faster expansion of the treasury on the other<sup>1</sup>.

As mentioned above, the importance of Sirāf and its business is obviously made clear both in the historical texts and through excavations at the ruins of this city. The objects obtained through excavations, including many coins related to different regions, confirm that. Since coin is considered as a very important archeological finding for historical studies, the coins found in Sirāf are very important; they reveal invaluable information about the city in different periods, the degree of commercial expansion, commercial regions as transaction sides, the age of the city, the common monetary units used in Sirāf, and etc.

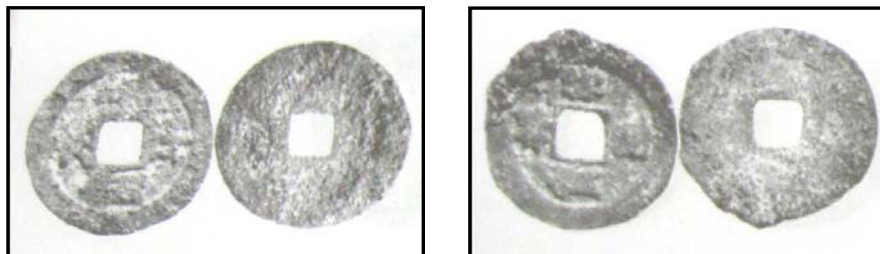
The relative large number of Chinese coins discovered in Sirāf belonged mainly to the Tang and Song dynasties<sup>10</sup>. Tang dynasty began in 618 A.D and was the strongest

Chinese dynasty. It is interesting to note that the distance between the Iranian and Chinese borders was not so much at that time. This dynasty was ended by the deposition of the last emperor of it in 907 A.D. Song dynasty was founded in 976 A.D. Most of the discovered coins in Sirāf belong to Song dynasty<sup>18</sup>. Finding numerous Chinese coins and also some pieces contemporary with them in Sirāf supports the claim that the Chinese coins were common in Sirāf, although coins from other countries did also exist in that city while their number was less than the Chinese ones. The existence of Chinese coins in Sirāf indicates the prosperity of trading in this city and according to Abu Zeid Sirāfi, Chinese coins were used in the transactions in Sirāf<sup>10</sup>.

Due to particular commercial situation of the Persian Gulf and the need for money to facilitate business, the mints in this region should have been the most active ones. The mints in Bushehr, Kish, Oman, Bahrain, Hurmuz, Jaron and Genaveh are some of them in different historical periods<sup>10</sup>. In addition to the domestic coins the foreign coins were also common, since the trading of the navigators from Sirāf was mainly with foreigners, and at that time the internationally credible coins were used more in such regions. They included Chinese coins, large numbers of which found in the excavations in Sirāf (Figure 1 and 2).



**Figure 1.** Sirāf, Coins of Tang Dynasty, 621 A.D.<sup>10</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Sirāf, Coins of Song Dynasty, 977 A.D. and 1018 A.D.<sup>10</sup>.

## 4. Conclusion

Bearing a strategic position as the bridge between East and West, the Persian Gulf has long received attention of the Iranians, convincing the governments to create ports ashore it. Sirāf is among these ports, shot to fame and fortune in the late Sassanid era and reached the acme of success in the tenth century A.D., according to texts and archaeological finds. Sirāf used to be the major trading port of the Persian Gulf in the tenth century A.D. due to especial attention it received from Al-e Booyeh dynasty, insofar as its trade with such far places as China and Zangbar in Eastern Africa has been reiterated in its contemporary texts. The way early Islamic geographers and historians express the city's thriving trade with everywhere, the multitude of its available goods, the way its houses looked, and the richness of its people, all show its splendor in the early Islamic era.

Excavations that have borne remnants of the past support what historians say about the city. Among the ancient pieces that illuminate the extensiveness of trade with such far lands as China are coins. Multitude of the coins with varying geographical origins reveals the extent of trade in the acme of the port's career. Meanwhile, the coins minted in Sirāf show the significance of the city and the need of its citizens for coins to be used in their business. Although Sirāf was never revitalized after the 366 A.H. (977 A.D.) devastating earthquake, the discovered coins that belong to the post-quake period proves the existence of trade in Sirāf, however in a much limited scale compared to the past.

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