

## BUZURGMICHR - EMINENT LAND-TAXER

by Tertius Chandler

Buzurgmichr was vizier in the nation until recently called Persia, now officially Iran. Born at Merv, about 560 A.D. he became tutor to the crown prince. Soon he was setting tax policy for the Persian empire, which then included Iraq and well into central Asia.

The land tax before his time, perhaps ever since Cyrus, had been a share of the produce. That seemed fair, especially as those with richest soil paid up to half, while those with poor soil paid only 1/10 of the crop. Buzurgmichr applied another principle: a flat rate per acre plus a fixed amount which could vary according to the soil's richness. But the amount was the same each year the land was sown. The farmer knew in advance what his tax would be, year after year. This made it nearly impossible for tax-collectors to rip him off, and Buzurgmichr set the magi priests to ensuring collectors would not extort by coercion. But the main advantage of the new method was that the farmer could keep as profit all he produced above the fixed tax. He had incentive to produce efficiently.

Did it work? Of course. Land tended to be fully used, except when fields needed to lie fallow a year. With full land-use there tended to be jobs for all. Indeed, begging and idleness were outlawed.

Thus Buzurgmichr was able to avoid resorting to business-crippling taxes such as a sales tax or income tax. He had a poll tax, but it was hardly more than a fee for recording names for the census. (On Buzurgmichr's taxes, see Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia*, p. 462, using Tabari, *Annals*, II, 222-32.)

For this sensible economic policy Buzurgmichr's ruler, shah Chosroes (Khusraw) I was called Anushirwan ("the just"), though his foreign policy consisted of breaking treaties and raiding into Byzantine and Khazar territory, not for conquest but just for plunder and the thrill of killing. It was not the shah but the minister, who brought fairness, productivity, and full employment to Persia.

Ctesiphon, Persia's capital (near modern Bagdad) was reported by a Chinese visitor to have 100,000 households, or 500,000 people, making it probably the world's largest city.

Now, was the fixed tax Buzurgmichr's idea? Gung Yu (123-44 B.C.) in China had stated the principle of taxing farmland rather than farm buildings. Perhaps the above-mentioned Chinese visitor, Ling-hu Te-fen, brought the concept with him and taught Buzurgmichr. If so, the flat land-tax based on area in use and normal productivity may have played a part in China's many centuries of high productivity. Be that as it may, Buzurgmichr deserves great credit for applying it in Persia.

## Early Islam

The story does not end here. Chosroes II, as careless of foreign lives as his grandfather, let one of his generals massacre the 33,000 residents of Jerusalem in 614. But Mohammed had prayed to Jerusalem. So, when his followers soon after his death conquered Persia, they destroyed the capital Ctesiphon and systematically wiped out Persian records.

Yet the Muslims took over Buzurgmichr's system of taxation! And with them, too, it led to full or nearly full employment. It was a major element in the efficient administration that enabled Arab armies to sweep over more of the world than even Alexander had done. Their eventual capital, Bagdad (fairly near old Ctesiphon), became the first city ever to pass a million in population. But the Arab caliphs eventually undermined their prosperity, as they would give whole districts to generals; this undermined the farm-tax base. Bagdad, though not taken in war, declined between 932 and 956 from 1,250,000 to 125,000. No better evidence could be given of the need to retain Buzurgmichr's site-value tax.

Unfortunately, land-value taxing did not spread west to Christian nations.

In all, Buzurgmichr's work lasted about 4 or 5 centuries. He was a Henry Georgist before his time.

-----  
(editor's note: see p. 8 for Tertius Chandler's obituary.)

## TERTIUS CHANDLER DEAD AT AGE 85

Tertius Chandler, Berkeley, CA died on May 17, reports Dr. Fred Foldvary of Berkeley. Chandler is the author of *The Tax We Need* (1980, Gutenberg Press, San Francisco, CA, 64 pages, \$5)

According to an obituary written by Dr. Foldvary and posted at <http://www.progress.org>, Chandler was a historian and many of his writings were about ancient times.

Published in this GroundSwell issue is an article Chandler previously submitted to GroundSwell, "Buzurgmichr-Eminent Land-taxer."

May-June 2000 GroundSwell, page 11