

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADE ROUTES PASSING THROUGH SOGDIANA AND EASTERN TURKISTAN

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the historical and cultural regions through which the trade routes of Central Asian settled oases passed, particularly focusing on how Sogdiana's routes connected the East, West, North, and South, integrating the entire region into transcontinental networks. It examines the movement of trade caravans and diplomatic missions originating from Samarkand (Sogdiana) along the Chach, Fergana, and Semirechye (Yettisuv) routes, as well as their integration of representatives from Ustrushana into their ranks.

**Keywords:** Karluk yabghus of Tokharistan, Kat, Mizdahkan, Dargan, Khiva, Urgench, Suboh, Khuzar, Timur Kapugh (Buzghala), Hamukat, Shaljikat, Juvikat, Navikat, Nuzkat.

### Introduction

In the modern era of global information, the system of regional international relations has reached a high level of development. There is an increasing need to study the historical realities associated with the inclusion and active participation of Central Asia, specifically Uzbekistan, in mutual integration processes. This necessity is driven by the importance of examining the region's rich experience in integration, accumulated over centuries, through the lens of the history of transregional and transcontinental transit routes. Throughout various stages of human historical development, these transregional and transcontinental routes have played an incomparable role in political, socio-economic, and cultural processes.

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

To date, substantial scientific works regarding the history of Central Asia have been produced both in global historiography and within our country. These research studies contain serious insights into various aspects of Central Asian history. It is appropriate to categorize them into three groups based on geographical and periodical criteria:

Literature published in foreign countries. Scientific works created during the Russian Empire and the Soviet period. Research published during the years of independence.

Various data related to the history of Central Asia's transregional and transcontinental routes can be found in the works of scholars from different countries. While specific, independent opinions or detailed discussions are not always explicitly highlighted in foreign research regarding the early medieval period of Central Asian history, noteworthy ideas concerning the scope of our research problem have been expressed in scientific works published in France, Russia, Europe, America, Turkey, China, and Central Asian countries



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The region's southward transit trade routes passed through **Bactria–Tokharistan**. During the ancient period, Bactria–Tokharistan was under Kushan influence, playing a vital role in its connections with Sogdiana and neighboring northern principalities.(1) These long-standing relationships continued uninterrupted through the ancient and early medieval periods. However, various political processes further enhanced the strategic importance of the routes passing through Tokharistan. This territory, which transitioned from Hephthalite control to the **Turkic Khaganate** in the second half of the 6th century, was also of great importance to the Sassanids.(2)

From the second quarter of the 8th century, Tokharistan was governed by the **Karluq yabghus**—known as "*jabghu al-kharlukhi*" (referred to as "*Tu-huo-lo she-hu*" in Chinese sources, "*jabghuya at-Tukhari*" in Arabic sources, and "*tyw'r'k MLK*"—the King of Tokhar in Sogdian documents). During this era, Tokharistan became one of the most critical southern possessions of the Turkic Khaganate and was even granted independence in its internal and external policies. Likely due to this autonomy, embassies were dispatched from the principality of **Chaghaniyan** in Tokharistan to Sogdiana. For instance, a reception ceremony took place at the **Afrosiyob palace** in the Sogdian capital, Samarkand, dating back to the second half of the 7th century. According to the wall paintings depicted there, *Bukarzat*, the court *dapirpat* (scribe/secretary), visited the Sogdian *ikhshid* Varkhuman (Avarkhuman) on behalf of the Turkic ruler of Chaghaniyan, *Turontosh*. These ambassadors brought ostriches to Sogdiana as gifts.(3)

According to Xuanzang, the center of Chaghaniyan was **Badrach**, which was approximately half the size of Termez, the capital of Tokharistan [4]. Furthermore, trade caravans originating from Sogdiana reached Termez via the transit route passing through **Suboh, Khuzar, and Timur Kapugh (Buzghala)** [5]. After crossing the Amu Darya, Sogdian merchants traveled through the **Shatial-Chilas pass**, which connected India and Tibet [6]. This direction also constituted a significant segment of the transcontinental routes.

It should also be noted that from an economic perspective, Chaghaniyan lagged slightly behind Sogdiana or Fergana [7]. This may have been due to the scarcity of arable land for farming in the oasis, the population's primary engagement in livestock breeding, and the limited number of villages and towns. Nevertheless, Tokharistan was capable of exporting goods to China; specifically, in 660 AD, red and emerald-colored glassware manufactured in Chaghaniyan was sent to China [8]. During this period, the principality of Tokharistan continued to hold a prominent position in regional and international relations of the early Middle Ages.

Beginning in the 3rd century AD, independent **Khorezm** experienced a period of economic growth. Independent and semi-independent estates of landowners were established, and a new local dynasty led by **Afrig** was founded. Initially, Khorezm was governed from **Tuproqqala** on the right bank of the Amu Darya. Inscriptions discovered at Tuproqqala reveal that every patriarchal family (*BYT'*, or *pδk* in Khorezmian) was registered. This was a political and economic measure used to determine the population size, social status, military potential, and the volume of taxes and other payments due to the state treasury [9].

Economic opportunities laid the foundation for state-scale projects. This also enabled neighborly relations and trade with the nomads to the north. However, since relations with nomadic tribes were not always peaceful, defensive structures—fortresses—were constructed to ensure the



inviolability of the borders. This system of fortresses also served as resting stations for trade caravans, as well as administrative and cultural centers.

On the right bank of the Amu Darya, fortresses such as **Jonboskala, Bazar-kala, Ulug Guldursun, and Oqilakhon (Qozoqli yotgan)** were established. These fortresses were constructed not only for the steppe and desert regions but also for trade with Margiana and Bactria. Along the trade routes, major city-fortresses such as **Savdor, Jigarband, Khazarasp, and Kat** emerged [10]. Landowners grew wealthy due to abundant harvests and thriving internal and external trade. During its time, Khorezm was considered a favorable territory for **Kangju and Kushan** merchants [11]. Therefore, it can be argued that a synthesis of three cultures—local, Kangju, and Kushan—occurred in Khorezm. Furthermore, as the north-western direction of Central Asian transit routes was convenient for the Khorezmian merchant class, they succeeded in establishing economic and cultural ties with the Scythians of the Volga-Don basin, the Sakas of the lower Syr Darya via north-eastern routes, the Dahae and Parthians in present-day Turkmenistan via southern branches, and the Sogdians and Bactrians of the Zarafshan oasis to the east [12].

The north-western branch of the Silk Road passing through Khorezm also became a factor in economic development. Craftsmanship, agriculture, and internal and external trade flourished along these routes. Roadside structures were erected, and specialized service stations were formed. Trade customs duties were introduced, and the issue of caravan route security began to be addressed [13]. The **Afrigid**s ensured the safety of caravans passing through Khorezm and established good relations with nomadic tribes. With tolerance and hospitality, nomads provided travelers in every yurt with food and, if necessary, horses or transport [14]. Nevertheless, specific measures were taken for the security of caravans; wealthy merchants hired armed groups—*chokars*—to ensure their own safety [15].

Markets were bustling in Khorezmian cities such as **Kat, Mizdahkan, Dargan, Khiva, and Urgench**. Khorezmian merchants integrated into international trade, exporting furs, cotton, and hunting falcons to China, while importing porcelain, silk fabrics, jewelry, glassware, coins, and Chinese bronze mirrors [16]. The people of Khorezm conducted extensive trade operations with Iran, Byzantium, India, Volga Bulgaria, and the Khazar Khaganate [17].

Turkic khaganates granted special privileges to the Khorezmian merchant class. In 568–569 AD, an embassy and trade caravans led by the Sogdian Maniakh, sent by the Turkic Yabghu Khagan Istami, reached Byzantium via Khorezm, accompanied by the *Kholits* (Khorezmians) [18]. These routes were familiar to the Khorezmians and were convenient for trading with the Ural and Volga regions, and from there with the Slavs and Khazars. The discovery of coins belonging to the Afrigid ruler Shousharn, dating back to the 8th century, in the city of Mokraya Balka in the Northern Caucasus [19] further demonstrates Khorezm's role in international trade.

Similar to the Sogdians, Khorezmians established trade settlements in certain regions. For instance, nearly 10,000 Khorezmians resided in the Khazar Khaganate [20]. Khorezm remained active in international trade from the Afrigid period until the Arab Caliphate's conquest and thereafter, as its territory was among the most favorable regions for the passage of trade caravans. While connecting various historical and cultural provinces of Central Asia, transcontinental routes also brought the region into the arena of international relations. In these relations, **Semirechye** (Yettisuv), a historical-cultural region densely populated by Turkic tribes [21], held



a distinct place. The ancient Saka and Wusun tribes of Semirechye maintained integral ties with the settled oases of Turan from the 4th–3rd centuries BC until the early Middle Ages. During the Kangju state period, these relations reached a new level. A number of trade factories belonging to the people of Turan, particularly the Sogdians, emerged in Semirechye [22]. This further strengthened the political, economic, and cultural ties between the parties.

Due to its geographical location, livestock breeding and, to a lesser extent, farming predominated in the economy of Semirechye. During the period of the Turkic Khaganate, great opportunities were created for trade relations [23]. The transit routes passing through this territory had a direct positive impact on the formation and development of Semirechye's cities. Along the Silk Road, a network of Sogdian towns (*knd*) emerged in Semirechye, including **Hamukat, Shaljikat, Juvikat, Navikat, and Nuzkat** [24]. Starting from the 5th–6th centuries, the local population of the Chu Valley began to adopt a settled lifestyle under the influence of migrants from Turan's settled oases. Between the 6th and 8th centuries, besides Turks and Sogdians, Syriacs and Persians also lived in the 18 cities and fortresses of the region, primarily engaging in trade [25]. Mahmud al-Kashgari wrote: "The Sogdians in Balasagun are from the Sogdiana between Bukhara and Samarkand, and they have adopted the clothing and customs of the Turks" [26]. These records indicate that an assimilation process between Turkic peoples and Sogdians took place starting from the early Middle Ages [27].

To promote trade, Turkic rulers in Semirechye minted coins with Sogdian inscriptions. The Western Turkic and Turgesh Khaganates (699–766) introduced traditional Turk-Sogdian coins into circulation (bearing the Sogdian inscription *bgy tywrkyš g'g'n pny* – "Money of the Sovereign Turgesh Khagan") [28]. In this regard, the Silk Road provided incomparable services in the relations established between the settled oases of Turan and the populations of the steppe regions. This positively influenced not only trade and commerce but also the development of agriculture, craftsmanship, and urban culture, as well as the transition of nomadic and semi-nomadic populations to a settled lifestyle.

As transit communication routes extended eastward, they merged with the oases of Eastern Turkestan and the regions adjacent to China. Historically, officials of Chinese dynasties were interested not only in Davan (Fergana) but in all of Turan along the Silk Road. Emperors sent their traveler-spies (such as Song Yun, Xuanzang, and Hyecho) along these routes to gather extensive information about these lands [29].

People from Turan, passing through the oases of Eastern Turkestan via trade routes, established colonies there as early as the 3rd century BC. A collection of Sogdian-language documents known as the "**Ancient Letters**" (specifically Letter No. 2), dating to 197 AD, provides information about Sogdian colonies located between the Chinese cities of **Luoyang** (*s'rg* - Saragh), **Chang'an** (*'gwmtn* - Akhumtan), and **Jiuquan** (*cwc'n* - Chuchan) [30]. Regarding this, E.G. Pulleyblank wrote: "They [the Sogdians] settled along the Silk Road and penetrated into the internal provinces of China and among the nomads" [31].

Sogdian trade settlements, which were primarily established for commercial purposes until 350 AD, began to acquire significant political, economic, and cultural importance between 350 and 750 AD [32]. This demonstrates that Western Turkestan (Turan) and Eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang) developed within a unified ethno-cultural space [33]. Furthermore, Chinese envoys visited Samarkand and Maymurgu during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–550), which sent three



diplomatic missions to the Hephthalites between the 420s and 450s (Wang Ensheng and Hei Wang in 425; Tue Yuan and Shao Ming in 437–438; and Zhezhiba in 444–453). While gathering information for Emperor Yang-di (605–617), the envoy **Wei Jie** wrote: "All residents of Samarkand are natural-born merchants; they teach their sons the trade as soon as they turn five. Once a child starts reading, they are set to learn the business. Seeking profit is valued by the majority of the population" [34].

During the period of the Turkic Khaganate, trade directed towards the south, east, and north through settlements in **Gansu** (Kengsuv) was mainly conducted by the people of Turan [35]. Moreover, new settlements continued to emerge. In the Hami region near the city of Qumul, the Khaganate's administration was established under the supervision of Central Asians. Additionally, Chinese authorities made effective use of the services of Central Asian representatives; for example, **Kan Su-mi** from Samarkand was appointed as the governor (*duhufu*) of the Bei-an district in Ordos. In 630 AD, the "Great Commander" **An Tu-han** from Bukhara brought and settled 5,000 Sogdians in Northern China and became the governor of the Weizhou district himself [36]. During this period, the number of migrants from Turan increased; in the second half of the 7th century, a group led by **Kan Yan-tyan** from Samarkand founded three villages near Lake Lop Nor east of the Tarim River. One of them was named *Putao-cheng*—meaning "Vineyard" [37]. Documents found in **Dunhuang** also confirm the growing influence of Sogdians from the 7th century onwards. These records note that in the 7th–8th centuries, there were four Sogdian cities south of Lake Lop Nor [38].

Overall, relations between Central Asia and China significantly intensified during the **Tang Dynasty** (618–907). Between 627 and 647 AD, nine diplomatic missions were sent from Sogdiana to China [39]. These envoys reached the Chinese capital, Chang'an, via established and relatively secure transit routes.

Dozens of towns and villages founded by Central Asian representatives were located in **Luzhou, Lizhou, Hanzhou, Saizhou, and Yizhou**, situated between the Ordos and Shanxi regions where the interests of China and the Turkic Khaganate intersected. The Turan–China trade conducted in these cities positively influenced the economic development and social lives of both parties [40]. At the same time, as historian Hou Renzhi noted, China implemented a policy of "no payment, no trade; with payment, there is trade" [41]. Such matters were often resolved through negotiations between the Turkic Khaganate and China. Out of the one-million population of the Chinese capital **Chang'an (Xi'an)** at that time, nearly 50,000 were Sogdians (Turanian people), and they were referred to as the "*Zhaowu jiu xing hu*"—the "Hu of the Nine Oases" [42].

The security of the **Hexi** (Hexi Corridor) region, which was a favorable location for trade, was strictly maintained [43]. Trade opportunities were enhanced in this area, which remained free from wars. Additionally, one of the major centers, **Dunhuang** (where the Silk Road split into three main branches towards the Mediterranean: the northern via Hami, the central via Turpan, and the southern starting from Dunhuang), was considered a vital artery of the Silk Road [44].

#### **THE "SABLE ROUTE" AND WESTERN TRADE NETWORKS**

In the early 5th century, the Sogdians connected the "**Sable Route**" (*suvsar yo'li*), which linked Semirechye, Southern Siberia, Mongolia, the Onon and Shilka rivers, the Amur River basin, and the shores of Lake Dalai Nor. Through this route, they reached the Primorye region along the Sungari and Ussuri tributaries of the Amur. At the confluence of the Mudanjiang and Sungari



rivers, people from Turan founded the city of **Ugocheng – Besh Mulk** (Beshkent – Panchkent) and engaged in active trade with neighboring tribes [45].

The western branch of the transcontinental routes connected Iran and Asia Minor—specifically the Byzantine Empire in the early Middle Ages—leading to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The First Turkic Khaganate entered into the socio-economic and political competition along the Silk Road, which stretched from the Far East to the Mediterranean, involving Byzantium, Sassanid Iran, and China. These routes reached the Mediterranean from Dunhuang via three main branches:

**Northern Branch:** Hami – Barkol – Issyk-Kul – the Great Steppe – Northern Caucasus – Byzantium – Mediterranean.

**Central Branch:** Turpan – Karasahr – Kucha – Pamir – Ustrushana – Sogdiana – Margiana – Iran – Levant (Sham) – Mediterranean.

**Southern Branch:** Dunhuang – Lake Lop Nor – Taklamakan – Wakhan – Tokharistan – Iran – Levant (Sham) – Mediterranean [46].

In the early Middle Ages, the competition of the Hephthalites and later the Turkic Khaganate with the Sassanids, alongside their alliance with Byzantium, significantly influenced the situation on transcontinental routes. Consequently, it was sometimes necessary to utilize the northern routes. In particular, the clash of economic interests, especially competition in the silk trade, remained persistent. In Byzantine–Turkic relations [47], great contributions were made by Eskil (the elder of the Nushibi tribe), the Sogdian merchant and diplomat **Maniakh**, and the Byzantine envoy **Zemarchus**. The journey of the embassy led by Maniakh to Constantinople in 568 AD via unfamiliar and perilous paths marked the opening of the "**Caucasian Silk Road**" for the Turkic Khaganate, providing access to the Near East and Egypt [48]. Relations between Turan and Byzantium continued until the fall of the Byzantine Empire in the 13th century [49].

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the transcontinental routes branching through Central Asia connected not only Turan but also Eastern Turkestan, China, the Far East, Iran, and Asia Minor. These trade routes provided the essential foundation for political, economic, and social relations during the early Middle Ages.

The interactions between the major powers of the early medieval period—the Sui and Tang dynasties of China, the Hephthalite state, the Turkic Khaganates, the Sassanid Empire of Iran, and the Byzantine Empire—alternated between states of peace and war. In every circumstance, the utilization of transit routes served the mutual interests of all parties. In a true sense, these communication channels were a vital necessity that compelled the various sides to seek and establish peace.

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21. Semirechye (Yettisuv): Historical-cultural region in the southeastern part of present-day Kazakhstan, bounded by Lake Balkhash to the north, the Dzungarian Alatau to the northeast,



- and the Tien Shan mountains to the south. The name originates from the seven rivers: Ili, Karatal, Aksu, Bien, Lepsy, Baskan, and Sarkand.
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