

AZERBAIJAN'S

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE AS A TRANSIT ROUTE FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

IMPORTANCIA ESTRATÉGICA DE AZERBAIYÁN COMO RUTA DE TRÁNSITO DESDE LA ANTIGÜEDAD HAS- TA LA EDAD MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Azerbaijan, one of the oldest centers of human civilization, has maintained international relations with Western and Eastern countries, as well as with the countries of Southwest Asia. Its strategic geographical location has always attracted the attention of other nations. Situated on transit routes since ancient times, Azerbaijan has held significant importance. Since ancient times the country was able to attract merchants from other regions with its high-quality products, and thus its influence on the development of international trade was substantial. Both the records of European travelers who visited Azerbaijan and the trade product samples discovered during archaeological excavations demonstrate the convenience and appeal of its lands. The establishment of economic relations between the Turkic peoples of the Great Silk Road and the peoples of China, the Caucasus, Russia, India, as well as the Arab world, had a positive impact on the development of trade routes. As an important part of the Turkic world, Azerbaijan's location on these transit routes created favorable conditions for its economic development. From the past to the present, even in modern times, despite the emergence of alternative transit routes in international relations, these traditional corridors have retained their significance. Therefore, the objective of this work is to make a historical analysis of the relevance of Azerbaijan as a transit route in trade, from ancient and medieval times.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Great Silk Road, Transit routes, Cities, Merchants.

RESUMEN

Azerbaiyán, uno de los centros más antiguos de la civilización humana, mantiene relaciones internacionales con los países occidentales y orientales, así como con los países del sureste de Asia. Su posición geográfica estratégica siempre ha atraído la atención de otras naciones. Situado en rutas de tránsito desde la antigüedad, Azerbaiyán ha tenido una importancia significativa. Desde la antigüedad, el país pudo atraer a comerciantes de otras regiones con sus productos de alta calidad, por lo que su influencia en el desarrollo del comercio internacional fue sustancial. Tanto los registros de viajeros europeos que visitaron Azerbaiyán como las muestras de productos comerciales descubiertas durante las excavaciones arqueológicas demuestran la conveniencia y el atractivo de sus tierras. El establecimiento de relaciones económicas entre los pueblos turcos de la Gran Ruta de la Seda y los pueblos de China, el Cáucaso, Rusia, India y el mundo árabe tuvo un impacto positivo en el desarrollo de las rutas comerciales. Como parte importante del mundo turco, la ubicación de Azerbaiyán en estas rutas de tránsito creó condiciones favorables para su desarrollo económico. Desde el pasado hasta el presente, incluso en los tiempos modernos, a pesar de la aparición de rutas de tránsito alternativas en las relaciones internacionales, estos corredores tradicionales han conservado su importancia. Por tanto, el objetivo de este trabajo es realizar un análisis histórico de la relevancia de Azerbaiyán como ruta de tránsito en el comercio, desde la época antigua y medieval.

Palabras clave: Azerbaiyán, Gran Ruta de la Seda, Rutas de tránsito, Ciudades, Comerciantes.

INTRODUCTION

Trade is, without a doubt, one of the fundamental activities in the history of humanity. From its earliest origins, when our ancestors exchanged goods and services to satisfy basic needs, to the complexity of today's exchange networks, trade has been a driving force for the evolution of societies. The origins of trade date back to prehistoric times, when human groups were organized into nomadic communities. In this context, self-sufficiency was a constant challenge, since the resources available in a particular environment were not always sufficient to cover all vital needs (Ling et al., 2022). Faced with this limitation, the practice of barter arose but the evolution from this system to the use of coins marked a decisive milestone in the history of trade. Coins made of metals allowed the value of goods to be standardized, which simplified the transactions and opened the door to more complex and far-reaching exchanges (Svizzero & Tisdell, 2019). The consolidation of monetary systems facilitated the expansion of trade, as it provided a medium of exchange that was recognized and accepted across regions, reducing the barriers and risks associated with trade (Caller & Guerra, 2012).

From an economic perspective, the importance of trade is well-founded in its role as a facilitator of specialization and innovation because by allowing individuals to focus on producing what they do efficiently (comparative advantage) (Krieger & Trottnner, 2024; Melitz & Redding, 2021), increasing global productivity with the implications it brought about to quality of life and development. Nevertheless, trade was not just about the simple transaction of products since as a consequence of this process ideas, technologies, beliefs as well as cultural movements spread in a faster way, which forged links that transcended borders and eras. That way, trade became also a driver of cultural and economic development (Kristiansen et al., 2018). One of the most notorious examples is The Silk Road, which connected Asia to Europe, and not only transported silk and porcelain, but also made possible to spread religions and technologies, fostering unprecedented cultural exchange (Lin, 2019; Wang et al., 2022).

By the 2nd century BC, China had already become a major economic and political power. In order to develop its economy and gain new markets, it sent an expedition to Central Asia in 138-126 BC. After this expedition, trade relations were established with various states (Budagov, 2006, p. 5). From the 2nd century BC, the movement of trade caravans westward from China led to the emergence and development of foreign trade relations, and Chinese goods,

especially silk, played an important role in this commerce. Since silk was the main product exported from China, this great trade route began to be called the "Silk Road." There was a constant struggle for control of the "Great Silk Road" between the Chinese, Hun, Kushan, Sasanian, Byzantine, and Roman states, and in the 6th century, the Great Turkic Khaganate also joined this competition (A alarli, 2003).

The Great Silk Road had two major branches. The first branch passed through Lanzhou and reached Dunhuang, while the second branch extended to Kazakhstan from the northern shores of Lake Lobnor. The Silk Road passing through Kazakhstan traversed the north of the Caspian Sea and stretched along the western coast towards Derbent-Shamakhi-Ganja-Batumi-Istanbul. Another route passing through Ganja followed the direction of Goycha-Nakhchivan-Tabriz and Nakhchivan-Istanbul. The Silk Road gave a significant impetus to the development of trade and silk production in Azerbaijan, as well as to the development of transit routes in the region. These trade routes demonstrate that Azerbaijan played a crucial role in the development of the Great Silk Road (Budagov, 2006, pp. 6-7).

Azerbaijan's strategic location along the trade route allowed it to serve as a nexus between different worlds, Asia and Europe. During the peak of the Silk Road, Azerbaijan became a crucial enclave for the distribution of goods and knowledge. The caravans that traversed the region contributed not only to economic prosperity but also to cultural enrichment of the region, as they carried stories, beliefs, and techniques that, over time, became integrated into the local identity. This process of cultural interaction helped shape a society that, while deeply rooted in its traditions, was also open to external influences and innovation (Hakim, 2016; Salazar, 2017; Zeynaloglu, 2020). Considering the above, the objective of this work is to make a historical analysis of the relevance of Azerbaijan as a transit route in trade, from ancient and medieval times.

DEVELOPMENT

Azerbaijan has held an important place since the early days of the "Great Silk Road". This great transit route, starting from China and India, passed through Central Asia and reached Azerbaijan via the southern Caspian Sea, where it split into two branches: the first direction along the Kura River to Iberia and Colchis, and the second in the northern direction along the western coast of the Caspian Sea, passing through Derbent and reaching the Greek city colonies in the northern part of the Black Sea. Azerbaijan's strategic and favorable position in the development of the "Great Silk Road" was recognized from ancient times. The trade routes connecting Eastern and Western countries

that passed through Azerbaijan consistently fostered the development of political and economic relations.

Over time, significant changes occurred in the political and economic spheres along the "Great Silk Road". The discovery of a direct sea route from Europe to India in 1498 led to major shifts in transit routes. This maritime route weakened the land route connecting the West with the Far East, while the expansion of European relations with America reduced the previous significance of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. These changes substantially increased the importance of the Volga-Caspian waterway in East-West trade relations while diminishing the prominence of the "Great Silk Road". As a result, Azerbaijan's position as a Caspian state became increasingly significant for transit trade.

The Safavid state, which was of Turkish origin and the largest feudal state in Azerbaijan, recognized this shift and began focusing more on the Volga-Caspian route and the ocean route to Europe via Hormuz to develop trade relations with European countries. The cities of Baku, Barda, Ganja, Sheki, Ardabil, Tabriz, and Nakhchivan, located on Azerbaijan's section of the Great Silk Road, played a major role in political and economic development (Amrahov, 2011, p. 36). In the 3rd millennium BC, Azerbaijan maintained close relations with the peoples of Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, the eastern Mediterranean, and southeastern Europe. Nakhchivan particularly maintained constant contact with the regions around Urmia and Asia Minor. During this period, the Kur-Araz culture of the Bronze Age began to spread throughout Near Asia.

Since the 2nd century BC, one of the most important transit routes of the Silk Road passed through Azerbaijan. This vital route originated in China and India, crossed Central Asia to reach the Caspian Sea, continued through Azerbaijan's territory, and then split into two branches. The first branch led along the Kura River to upper Iberia and Colchis, while the second turned north, passing through Derbent and the foothills of the Caucasus along the western Caspian coast to reach the Greek city-colonies in the northern Black Sea region.

During the Arsacid dynasty (2nd century BC), Azerbaijan maintained extensive silk trade relations with the Far East and China. Furthermore, the early Hellenistic period saw the establishment of direct relations with countries in the eastern Mediterranean, Central Asia, and northwestern India. The Hellenistic period brought significant developments to Azerbaijan's international standing. The presence of ancient slave states such as Albania and Atropatena, the emergence of numerous cities, the development of commodity-money relations, and the passage

of transit-trade routes through this territory strengthened the country's international relations. This expansion of trade connections led to the importation of Indian mother-of-pearl shells and other products from India.

The Sassanids, who assumed power in Iran in the 3rd century, attempted to maintain control of the "Great Silk Road" just as their Parthian predecessors had done. During the Arab period in Azerbaijan, cities situated along the Silk Road - including Sheki, Barda, Derbent, Chola, and Beylagan - gained international prominence, with Beylagan achieving particular distinction. Azerbaijan's favorable geographical location proved instrumental in both the establishment and development of the Silk Road (Amrahov, 2011, pp. 37-38).

During the Middle Ages, numerous Azerbaijani cities including Shamakhi, Guba, Baku, Ganja, Nakhchivan, Tabriz, and Nukha grew into significant trade centers with flourishing commercial relations. These cities served as crucial marketplaces where merchants from both Europe and Asia traded and exchanged goods. This development highlighted Azerbaijan's vital role in facilitating trade relations between Europe and Asia, with its trade centers playing a pivotal role in maintaining European-Asian commercial connections (A alarli, 2003).

In the 10th century, cities across Azerbaijan including Barda, Baku, Ganja, Beylagan, Shamakhi, Shamkir, Nakhchivan, Ardabil, Maragha, and Tabriz emerged as major trade centers. These cities specialized in producing goods highly valued in international markets, such as thin glassware, glazed ceramics, silk fabrics, and gold and silver products. Baku, Shamakhi, and Derbent, situated on international trade routes, played crucial roles in regulating the Caliphate's trade relations with Eastern and Western countries. During this period, Nakhchivan and Barda rose to prominence as the largest trade and craft centers in the Middle East.

Merchants from Russia, Iran, Byzantium, India, China, and Syria frequented the cities of Derbent, Shamakhi, and Baku. They brought copper, wax, fur, weapons, expensive silk, porcelain, and precious stones, exchanging these goods for oil, salt, fish, livestock (particularly mules and horses), and dyes transported by caravan. The discovery of coins from the cities of Arran in northern Russia, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the Baltic countries provides evidence of extensive trade relations and Azerbaijan's significance as a transit route (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, pp. 70-71).

Russian merchants established trade connections with countries along the southern and western shores of the Caspian Sea. Their trade route followed the Tanais

(Danube) River to the Volga River, crossing to the Khazar capital of Hamlij. After paying customs duties, they sailed to the Caspian coast, primarily trading in furs and swords. Azerbaijani merchants congregated in Trebizond for trade with Byzantium, while caravans from Trebizond and Asia Minor traveled through the Araz plain to Azerbaijan and Iran. These caravans then proceeded through Mughan along the main road, following the right bank of the Kura to reach Tbilisi, the Black Sea, and Byzantium (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, pp. 72–73).

In the 11th-12th centuries, the international trade route passed near the Absheron Peninsula. The southern main trade route connecting Azerbaijan with China operated through two paths: one through Central Asia, Iran, and Azerbaijan's southern provinces, and another along the Caspian coast via the Derbent Passage. The caravan route from China and India to the Caspian Sea through Central Asia significantly contributed to trade development. Merchants transported goods to the Black Sea via the Caspian Sea, Kura, and Riona rivers before sending them to Byzantium. The main trade route from Absheron to Baku connected to the caravan route via the Caspian Sea and Kura river. A second route ran northwest from Baku to the west, passing through Gobustan to Shamakhi. A third route branched northwest from the second route in the northern part of the peninsula, connecting to the main Derbent trade route (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, pp. 110–111).

In Assyrian manuscripts from the reign of Adadnerari III (910-783), the Caspian Sea was described as “the great sea from which the sun rises.” Greco-Roman historians and geographers documented the significance of the Caspian Sea route, which connected nomadic settlements and ancient agricultural regions from Southeastern Europe to Asia Minor along the western Caspian coast (Onullahi, 1982). In the 15th and 16th centuries, the growing importance of the Volga-Caspian route strengthened Baku's position as a port city. Along with Baku, the cities of Derbent, Niyazabad, and Lankaran emerged as significant Azerbaijani ports (Ağalarlı, 2003). The Catalan atlas of 1375 reflects Baku's importance as a trading and port city, with Catalans referring to the Caspian Sea as both the Baku Sea and the Sarra Sea. The Cape Pearl mentioned near Baku refers to present-day Pirallahi Island (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, p. 115).

During the 13th-14th centuries, Azerbaijan expanded its trade relations with the Far East and other regions. Venetian and Genoese merchants transported goods via the Caspian Sea, exchanging them for a distinctive silk known as gelli. The increasing significance of the Volga-Caspian trade route sparked competition between England and Russia for control over this vital commercial

pathway. Three major raw silk centers flourished along the southern coast of the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea: Gilan (capital: Rasht), Shirvan (capital: Shamakhi), and Arash (capital: Ganja). These cities served as crucial trading centers for finished goods. The Caspian trade route held particular importance for England, which sought to protect its substantial trade income and viewed the route as essential for maintaining its textile industry. Following deteriorating relations with Spain and France, Britain increasingly relied on the Volga-Caspian trade route to secure raw materials (Ağalarlı, 2003).

Azerbaijan's role in developing transit routes along the Caspian Sea to Central Asia merits special attention. This significance stems from Azerbaijan's advantageous geographical location, abundant resources, and strategic position as a transit country. Historical evidence shows that caravan routes connecting Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Volga region with the South Caucasus, Iran, Asia Minor, and India traversed Azerbaijan through the Derbent Pass. These transit routes facilitated regular trade relations with the West during various periods: under the Caliphate (7th-9th centuries) and later under the Hulagu, Garagoyun, and Aggoyun states (13th-15th centuries). Key Azerbaijani cities including Barda, Beylagan, Nakhchivan, Shamakhi, Sheki, Gabala, Tabriz, Ardabil, and Ganja played vital roles in the operations of the “Great Silk Road”.

Sea trade gradually developed alongside land trade routes, eventually becoming more advantageous. Several factors contributed to this shift: the risk of caravan plundering, safer maritime transportation, and lower costs over shorter distances. A compelling example of this efficiency can be found in the route from Astrakhan to Tiflis: the land route required a month and a half and cost 4-5 manats per pound of goods, while the sea route to Baku followed by land transport to Tiflis took only 25 days total and cost half as much. This economic advantage naturally led to the expansion and development of Caspian shipping and trade.

The “Great Silk Road” connected diverse peoples through its various routes. Although periodic attacks sometimes destroyed ancient pathways, new cities, administrative centers, and routes emerged in response. Importantly, the old routes retained some significance and continued to function intermittently [6,63]. During the Caliphate period, Azerbaijan integrated into international trade networks, establishing and strengthening economic, cultural, and political ties with other states. Arab merchants had been utilizing sea routes since the 7th century.

By the early 13th century, the Mongol Empire had expanded from China to Western Europe, incorporating all

Central Asian nomadic peoples. While the Mongols' destructive and prolonged wars had devastated the economies of conquered territories, the trade routes between the Near and Far East proved resilient. These routes resumed operations and generated profits for Mongol noyons engaged in commerce.

The Jalairi and Timurid states also significantly influenced trade development. Amir Temur particularly recognized trade as the state's primary source of income and actively promoted it. He dispatched merchants to various countries including China, India, Egypt, and European nations, instructing them to acquire rare products. Notably, Amir Temur instituted a policy of replacing lost merchant capital to encourage trade. His attention to commerce resulted in comprehensive and high-level trade development. However, as K. Paydash notes, the eventual dissolution of the Timurid empire led to weakening trade relations along the routes stretching from East to West through Central Asia and Azerbaijan (Najafli, 2012, p. 429).

Amir Temur's conquest strategy focused on controlling the "Great Silk Road" connecting Eurasia by seizing Iran, Near Asia, and the South Caucasus. To consolidate power over the Southern trade route, he deliberately destroyed major trading cities including Urgench, Saray Barka, Astrakhan, and Azov to block the Northern route through the Black and Caspian Seas. In his effort to develop Turkestan's economy, he rebuilt Samarkand (Amrahov, 2011, p. 340). Historical sources indicate that Amir Temur relocated approximately 10,000 Albanians from the Caucasus (Shirvan province) to Afghanistan and the Indian borders. These Albanians were involved in raiding trade caravans departing from India, which carried rare jewelry, weapons, ceramic products, and porcelain dishes to and from India and China.

Azerbaijan and India share deep historical economic, religious, and cultural connections, as evidenced by archaeological findings. The materials discovered by Jacques de Morgan in Talysh in 1890 provide concrete evidence of these Indo-Azerbaijani relations (Amrahov, 2011, p. 42). Ancient authors (4th century BC - 1st century AD) documented a land-water route connecting Caucasian Albania to India via the Black Sea and the upper reaches of the Rioni (Fasis) River. Both Strabo and Pliny the Elder noted these connections, with Strabo specifically mentioning in the 1st century BC that Indian goods were transported to the North Caucasus by camel. During the Middle Ages, major transit trade routes included Ecbatana in India and Central Asia, Atropatena, the Araz valley, the Meotid - Colchis highway, and the southern Black Sea ports. Trade goods included rice, cotton cloth, precious stones, pearls, aromatic items, ivory, ebony, and painted objects. Iranian

and Azerbaijani cities served as crucial intermediaries in West-India international trade.

During Arab rule, Barda emerged as a major Middle Eastern trade and craft center, maintaining this status until the early 10th century. Derbent, Baku, and Shamakhi served as key points on the international trade route connecting the Caliphate's northern and eastern regions. These cities attracted merchants from India and other eastern countries who exchanged their goods for local products including oil, salt, fish, cattle, saffron, and marena. From the second half of the 15th century, the Caspian Sea, particularly Baku as a port city, gained increased significance in international trade, as documented by Venetian traveler Donato da Leze. Archaeological evidence of ancient trade connections includes silk fabric remains discovered in a 1st century AD pit grave in Shamakhi and a 5th century AD catacomb grave in Mingachevir. While silk production in Azerbaijan began in the 7th century, these earlier silk remains likely originated from China, indicating long-established trade relations between the regions.

Chinese goods were brought from Central Asia to the Caspian Sea by caravan route, and from there, via the Kura and Rioni rivers, to Fasis-Potii on the Black Sea coast. Porcelain dishes occupied a major place among Chinese goods entering Azerbaijan. Such porcelain dishes were discovered in the cities of Gabala, ancient Ganja, Baku, and other locations (Amrahov, 2011, p. 43). The famous 14th-century traveler Ibn Battuta noted that beautiful Aksaray carpets were brought to China from Asia Minor and Iran. It is likely that carpets were also exported to China from Azerbaijan, which shows that trade relations were not one-sided.

Economic and cultural relations between Azerbaijan and China were more regular in the 13th-15th centuries. Al-Umari reports that during the rule of the Mongol state of the Hulaguds in the 13th century, there was a caravan route from Baku to Derbent, through the territory of the Golden Horde to China. In the second half of the 13th century, Tabriz became one of the important centers in trade with the Far East. In 1285, a delegation headed by a nobleman named Pulad, as mentioned by Rashid-ed-Din, arrived in China and stayed at the Hulagud palace, where Pulad became an advisor to Argun. Later, during the reign of Kazan Khan, he was appointed the head of the Maragha division. Finally, he was entrusted with the leadership of the Shirvan borders (Amrahov, 2011, p. 44).

At the end of the 13th century, the city of Tabriz became the convergence point for trade routes from the North (via Derbent), the Far East, Central Asia, India, and Iran. Tabriz at that time was important both as a trade center and a

major cultural hub. By the beginning of the 14th century, "Daruşşafa" was established in Tabriz, where training, treatment, scientific departments, and an observatory were located. Teachers from India, China, Egypt, Syria, and Azerbaijan worked there as well. Up to 6-7 thousand students from various countries of the East came there to study. The role of the "Great Silk Road" in the development of education at that time and the concentration of great thinkers of the East in this location was irreplaceable (Amrahov, 2011, p. 41).

Marco Polo's notes about the city of Tabriz confirm this assessment. He wrote:

The majority of the population of Tabriz is engaged in crafts and trade. The commercial position of the city is so good that many merchants from all over - India, Baghdad, Mosul, Hormuz - come here to trade. Precious stones and excellent pearls can be obtained in Tabriz. Merchants who trade with foreigners quickly become rich there. (Onullahi, 1982, p. 51).

The ruler of the Mongol Elkhanid state, which existed in Azerbaijan for a time, Kazan Khan improved the city of Tabriz due to its favorable location. He built a caravanserai, a market, and a bathhouse near each gate to develop trade relations. Merchants who came to Tabriz with caravans stayed in these caravanserais, and the tamghachi inspected the goods they brought and collected the prescribed amount of tamgha tax. Then, the merchants had to go to the bathhouse near the gate and wash themselves before they were allowed to enter the city. This requirement was implemented because the large number of merchants coming from different countries posed a risk of disease spread. Furthermore, there were so many merchants entering Tabriz from Asia Minor and Europe via Sham-Kazan that a thousand tamghachi were appointed to collect the tamgha tax (Onullahi, 1982, p. 52).

The development of trade in Tabriz was due to its location on the main trade caravan route (Shahrah). At the beginning of the 14th century, the Sivas - Erzincan - Erzurum caravan routes were connected to the Tabriz trade route. Trabzon - Erzurum - Ayas was also connected to the Tabriz caravan route. This route went through the city of Artaz to Khoy, and from there to Tabriz. There were two routes from Khoy to Tabriz: the first route was Marand - Sofian - Tabriz, and the second route went through Tasuj to the eastern shore of Lake Urmia towards Tabriz. At the beginning of the 14th century, Tabriz was connected to other cities and foreign countries from all four sides by trade caravan routes. Tabriz served as a gateway to international world trade (Onullahi, 1982, p. 53).

The Southern and Eastern routes originated from Tabriz. The Sultaniyeh - Zanjan - Tabriz route connected Azerbaijan with the countries of Asia Minor and Europe. The caravan route between Azerbaijan and Central Asia also passed through Tabriz, and the route extended to the Amu Darya (Ceyhun River). During the Elkhanid period, the rulers and their viziers were considered great merchants. Internal and external trade was in their hands. Additionally, many caravanserais were built along the trade routes. The Karabakh - Ahar - Tabriz trade caravan route was 55 farsakhs (approximately 330 km). Five rabats (stopping places for caravans) were built on this farsakh. The length of the Sultaniye - Tabriz trade caravan route was 46 farsakhs (approximately 276 km) (Onullahi, 1982, p. 54).

In the 15th century, many international caravan routes passed through the territories of the Garagoyunlu and Agagoyunlu states. These trade routes were of great importance in providing European countries with various types of oriental goods, especially silk, spices, and other products. Since Tabriz was located on these international caravan routes, it played a crucial role in regulating European-Asian trade (Amrahov, 2011, p. 59). Precious stones, glassware, perfume, and other goods were brought to China by camel caravans. Many envoys from Europe came to the Mongol-Turkish khans, who controlled a large part of the Silk Road. Extensive knowledge was gathered and maps were prepared about the countries, cities, and peoples located along these routes, including Shamakhi, Tabriz, the Caspian Sea, and other locations.

The private road connecting the Silk Road with the territories of Azerbaijan ran from Ecbatana to Tabriz, and from the Caspian coast to Arash, Shirvan, and Barda. A branch of the Silk Road heading north led to Derbent and the Volga, while another branch led west from Barda towards Tbilisi and Batumi. An important direction of the Silk Road, starting from the Barda and Arash districts, extended along the Araz to Nakhchivan and Julfa, and from there to Tabriz and then to the West. Large silk warehouses were established in Julfa, and raw silk was brought there from all over Azerbaijan. Through the Silk Roads and its favorable natural conditions, Azerbaijan maintained its position as a major silk producer and trading center of the world for many years.

Located at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road, the city of Tabriz was considered a city that regulated Asia-Europe trade at that time. Trade caravans passing through Tabriz connected the country with the trade centers of that time such as Trabzon, Bursa, Aleppo, Beirut, and Damascus. In these cities, merchants from Asia and Europe and their goods were present, and Western merchants showed

interest in and purchased Eastern goods, especially spices, rare dyes, precious stones, raw silk, and silk fabrics imported from India. Additionally, Western merchants showed great interest in Azerbaijani and Iranian silk. Italian merchants, especially Venetians, bought raw silk primarily because Venice, which supplied the palaces of Western Europe with silk fabrics, was rapidly developing its own manufactures. Raw silk brought from Azerbaijan and other Eastern countries via the caravan routes played a key role in their supply (Hasanov & Hajizadeh, 2010).

The city of Tabriz was important as a center that played a coordinating role in European-Asian trade. The Tabriz market sold mahud and glass products imported from Italy through the trade centers of the Near East, raw and woven silk from Sheki, Shirvan, Georgia, Gilan and Yazd, rare dyes and spices imported from India, Ceylon and Malacca, various gemstones, and various types of handicrafts imported from Cairo, Alexandria and Istanbul, which demonstrated the city's importance. Furthermore, Tabriz became a major point for exporting Eastern goods to foreign countries, with raw silk occupying a major place among the exported goods. The growth of commercial importance of Tabriz and other Azerbaijani cities was due particularly to the revival of caravan routes passing through the territories of the Garagoyunlu and Aggoyunlu states. Thus, the geographical factor - the country's favorable location for international trade relations - had a great influence on the progress of both individual Azerbaijani cities and the economic development of Azerbaijan as a whole (Najafli, 2012, pp. 429–431).

As Kh. Inalcik noted, the city of Tabriz was the most developed and important trade center of the world before the Ag Qoyunluds. Tabriz had become the largest trade center of Asian trade, overshadowing Baghdad and other centers of world trade in the Middle East. The trade route from Tabriz passed through the cities of Erzincan-Sivas and reached Konya, or Ayas in the Gulf of Iskenderun, which had become the main export port of Asian products during the Elkhaniid period. Caravan routes from Konya passed through Denizli and reached the port of Ephesus or Antalya. Western merchants obtained their silk and spice products from these ports. Italian merchants who came to Tabriz exchanged their woolen fabrics for Azerbaijani silk or Indian spices brought via Hormuz and Baghdad (Najafli, 2012, p. 436).

According to K. Paydash, the Aghqoyunlu rulers attached great importance to international trade and therefore tried to take control of the passage routes that were crucial for trade development. In this context, the city of Trabzon was very important for the Aghqoyunlu, as it was their main exit point to the Black Sea. The Aghqoyunlu merchants

paid special attention to Venetian, Genoese, and other European merchants who came there to buy silk and other oriental products. The Aghqoyunlu merchants received substantial income from the Trabzon trade and maintained contact with trade centers in the Crimea (Najafli, 2012, p. 437).

In the 15th century, vital international caravan routes connecting Asia and Europe passed through the territory of the Qara-Qoyunlu and Agh-Qoyunlu states of Azerbaijan. The city of Tabriz was of great importance in providing European countries with various Eastern products, especially silk, spices, gems, and other goods, as it was located at the junction of all these international caravan routes (Najafli, 2012, p. 439).

Azerbaijan established extensive trade relations with the Western world through the Garagoyunlu and Aggoyunlu states. Several factors significantly impacted their trade relations: the passage of international trade routes through their territory connecting Central Asia, China, India, and the Persian Gulf with the Black Sea and Mediterranean basins; connections to the countries of the Near and Middle East through the Derbent Passage; and links to Russia through the Volga-Caspian waterway. Furthermore, these states' control over famous craft and trade centers of Azerbaijan, especially in the South Caucasus and Iran, along with raw material resources, helped them establish trade relations with Western states. Notably, Azerbaijani raw silk played a crucial role in the relations between the Garagoyunlu and Aggoyunlu states and European countries. These trade relations between the Azerbaijani states and European countries represented the continuation of long-standing interactions between Eastern and Western civilizations.

Although many trade and craft centers of Azerbaijan weakened due to military operations at the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century, political stability was established in the country during the 30s-80s of the 15th century. During the reign of the Garagoyunlu ruler Jahanshah, and under the Aggoyunlu rulers Uzun Hasan and Sultan Yaqub, trade relations flourished again and economic life reached a high level. The reforms implemented by Uzun Hasan during his reign had a positive impact on urban development. The growth of cities was linked to increased demand in both domestic and foreign markets. The development of commodity-money relations in Europe and Asia facilitated the growth of transit trade relations between the two continents, with Azerbaijani cities playing a significant role in this integration process (Najafli, 2012, p. 440).

One of the ancient cities through which transit routes passed was the city of Nakhchivan. Since there were no large bodies of water around it, trade relations were established through land routes. Convenience had to be ensured to establish both political and economic relations. From that time onward, caravanserais, ribats, mansions, and hunting lodges began to be built. These structures were protected to ensure the safety of trade caravans, and to maintain the importance of trade routes, bridges were built over rivers, hunting lodges were constructed along roads, and water wells were dug. Among these structures, caravanserais were of particular importance in terms of rest, security, and the exchange of goods between merchants (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, p. 104).

The Greek historian Herodotus, in his work "History," noted that there were beautiful guesthouses at distances of 30-40 km along the roads (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, p. 122). Sources indicate that the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas had 999 caravanserais built (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, p. 125). In addition to Nakhchivan, there were caravanserais in the Azerbaijani cities of Tabriz, Ganja, Ardabil, Shamakhi, Zanjan, and Ordubad. The Arab historian Ibn Havgal reported on the existence of caravanserais in Azerbaijan and Arran (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, p. 195). Bridges were built to facilitate trade routes. One such bridge was the Khudaferin Bridge, which connected the northern and southern banks of the Araz River (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, p. 119). Another bridge, the Onbiraşirimli Bridge, dates back to the ancient period. After the Arabs arrived in Azerbaijan, this bridge was destroyed, and later, Fazl I, the ruler of the Shaddadid state (one of Azerbaijan's small feudal states), built the Onbiraşirimli Bridge. The bridge was constructed of baked bricks and river stones with pointed arches. The "Haji Naghi" and "Aza" bridges were also built in this area (Ashhurbeyli, 2006, p. 120).

Particularly in the Middle Ages, ferries were used to cross rivers. This type of water transport was used to transport heavy loads and animals from one bank to the other. The presence of caravanserais, ferries, and bridges with their distinct names proves that Azerbaijan's territory was one of the important transit points and trade centers. The European traveler Tavernier provides the most detailed information about caravanserais. He notes that caravanserais were the hotels of Eastern countries and were very different from European hotels. He states that they consisted of one-story, four-cornered buildings, and two-story caravanserais were rare.

The French traveler Chardin also provided detailed and interesting information about the caravanserais in the Safavid state. He stated that the caravanserais belonged either to the shah or to various individuals. Chardin wrote:

"Caravanserais consist of large buildings intended for the accommodation of travelers and those who come and go" (Suleymanov, 2021, p. 126). Chardin notes about city caravanserais that they were of two types:

Some of them belong to travelers and pilgrims, which the public uses without payment. The other part consists of very beautiful and comfortable buildings that have many different cells with strong and good doors. However, since most of these apartments are occupied by merchants and traders, it is necessary to spend 1-2 water per day to live in these places during these seasons. (Suleymanov, 2021).

Chardin provides extensive information about the Qazvin caravanserais, which were considered the general hotels of the city. He notes that there were no magnificent and beautiful buildings there. The Shah caravanserai consisted of 250 cells. There were 127 large water pools in its courtyard, along with large and tall trees. It had two gates, where valuable goods were sold and shops were located in two rows (Suleymanov, 2021).

As S.M. Onullahi has shown, caravanserais were an indicator of trade development. Most of the caravanserais were built by the shahs, and such caravanserais were considered enterprises belonging to the khass (royal dynasty). Caravanserais were mainly located near the markets and entrance gates of the cities. The European traveler Tavernier writes:

Merchants can choose one of two routes to Isfahan. They can select either route based on their inclinations, needs, and necessity. Those who want to take the straight Qum-Kashan route should leave Lake Urmia, which is at the crossroads of the two routes, on the left. Those who want to take the Ardabil-Qazvin route, which leads to a good city, should leave Lake Urmia on the right. The distance from Ardabil to Tabriz is no more than 12 liv. (Suleymanov, 2021, p. 128).

Among the caravanserais that existed in Azerbaijan in the 15th–16th centuries were Indian caravanserais. E. Kempfer, who visited Baku in 1683, reports that he met Indian merchants belonging to the Multani tribes and provides information about their caravanserais. He states that these caravanserais were located near the coast. These caravanserais, which are of particular importance as 15th-century buildings, were called "Moltani." This name was connected with the Indian city of Multani, and these structures have been preserved to this day. The building has one floor and six separate rooms with arches. There is a basement in the lower part of the caravanserai. The arched, deeply placed entrance is decorated with a simple frame. The small window slits on the facade walls

resemble holes in a fortress wall. Their area reaches 100 square meters. These caravanserais have been restored in recent years. During the restoration, it was determined that the building was originally two stories. The lower floors were used as warehouses, rooms, and stables for servants (Mammadli, 2011, p. 23).

Indian merchant ships entered the Persian Gulf (Kangar) in the coastal sea waters, sailed along the Euphrates River from the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab River, and approached Asia Minor. From Basra and Baghdad, a land caravan route ran along the Euphrates through Asia Minor to the port cities of the Mediterranean basin. In ancient times, Indian goods traveled along this route to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and from there to Europe. There was also a caravan route from the Kangar Gulf to the inner cities of the Safavid state of Azerbaijan. This route was part of the Silk Road connecting China with Europe through the Middle East, and it connected the Moscow state with the Safavid state of Azerbaijan via the Volga-Caspian road. The caravan routes connecting Europe and Asia particularly intersected in the lands belonging to the Safavids (Mammadova, 2016). Indian merchants with caravanserais in Baku were closely involved in the international silk trade. In the 16th century, about 100,000 tons of raw silk were exported from Shirvan via Baku (Mammadli, 2011, p. 24).

CONCLUSIONS

Trade has been a driving force throughout human history; from humble beginnings in prehistory to the complexity of today's global networks, this activity has proven to be a reflection of the human capacity to innovate, adapt and build interconnected societies. In this sense, it is necessary to point out that more than the exchange of goods and services, historically the impact of trade was perhaps greater due to the diffusion of ideas and technologies, which drove the economic and cultural development of regions. In this way, trade in all its forms continues to be one of the defining elements of our collective existence and in an increasingly globalized world, understanding the evolution and impact of trade not only helps us to value our past, but also to outline strategies for a future in which collaboration be the basis for sustainable and harmonious development.

Azerbaijan is the vivid proof of how geography, history, and culture combined in a commercial field to give unique opportunities. Whereas throughout history some geographical areas lost their importance over time, Azerbaijan not only kept its position as one of the biggest transit points but its cities flourished as important trade centers. The country's favorable geographical position along the route

of the "Great Silk Road" allowed it to become and important trade center from ancient times, promoting exchanges between Asia and Europe. This contributed in a huge extend to the development of international trade. Even today, Azerbaijan has continued to take advantage of its strategic location to develop its economy and the country continues to invest in infrastructure as well as diversify its economy, reducing its dependence on oil and promoting sectors such as agriculture, tourism and technology.

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