

INFLUENCE

OF COMMERCIAL ROUTES ON TRADE AND CULTURE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

INFLUENCIA DE LAS RUTAS COMERCIALES EN EL COMERCIO Y LA CULTURA: UNA PERSPECTIVA HISTÓRICA

Elbrus Saleh oglu Isayev

E-mail: elbrusisayev799@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1622-8602>

Nakhchivan State University. Azerbaijan.

Suggested citation (APA, seventh ed.)

Elbrus, S. (2025). Influence of commercial routes on trade and culture: a historical perspective. *Universidad y Sociedad*, 17(6). e5618.

ABSTRACT

The Great Silk Road served as a critical nexus for economic and cultural exchange between Eastern and Western civilizations, yet the interconnected role of trade, architecture, and literature in shaping regional cultural development remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining how trade networks functioned as mechanisms of cultural transmission in medieval Azerbaijan. Using historical-comparative method, it is analyzed medieval chronicles, travel accounts, architectural monuments, and literary sources to trace patterns of intercultural exchange along caravan routes. It was found that trade facilitated the dissemination of literary works, such as Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa*, which influenced subsequent authors across the Islamic world, while architectural analysis demonstrates that the Nakhchivan school, particularly the innovations of Ajami Nakhchivani, impacted construction styles in neighboring regions through cultural contacts established via trade routes. Material infrastructure—including caravanserais, bridges like Khudafarin, and urban planning systems—functioned not merely as commercial facilities but as conduits for artistic, intellectual, and technological exchange. These findings underscore that Azerbaijan operated simultaneously as a recipient and transmitter of cultural influences, illustrating how economic networks catalyzed the formation of civilizational identity and historical globalization.

Keywords: Great Silk Road, Cultural exchange, Medieval Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan architecture, Literary transmission, Caravanserais.

RESUMEN

La Gran Ruta de la Seda constituyó un nexo crucial para el intercambio económico y cultural entre las civilizaciones oriental y occidental; sin embargo, el papel interconectado del comercio, la arquitectura y la literatura en la configuración del desarrollo cultural regional sigue siendo un campo poco explorado. Este estudio aborda esta laguna examinando cómo las redes comerciales funcionaron como mecanismos de transmisión cultural en el Azerbaiyán medieval. Mediante un método histórico-comparativo, se analizan crónicas medievales, relatos de viajes, monumentos arquitectónicos y fuentes literarias para rastrear patrones de intercambio intercultural a lo largo de las rutas de caravanas. Se constató que el comercio facilitó la difusión de obras literarias, como el *Khamsa* de Nizami Ganjavi, que influyó en autores posteriores de todo el mundo islámico, mientras que el análisis arquitectónico demuestra que la escuela de Najicheván, en particular las innovaciones de Ajami Najicheván, impactaron los estilos constructivos de las regiones vecinas a través de los contactos culturales establecidos mediante las rutas comerciales. La infraestructura material “incluidos los caravasares, puentes como el de Khudafarin y los sistemas de planificación urbana” no solo funcionaba como infraestructura comercial, sino también como conducto para el intercambio artístico, intelectual y tecnológico. Estos hallazgos subrayan que Azerbaiyán funcionó simultáneamente como receptor y transmisor de influencias

culturales, ilustrando cómo las redes económicas catalizaron la formación de la identidad civilizatoria y la globalización histórica.

Palabras clave: Gran Ruta de la Seda, Intercambio cultural, Azerbaiyán medieval, Arquitectura de Najicheván, Transmisión literaria, Caravasares.

INTRODUCTION

The cultural and economic significance of the Great Silk Road has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention (Torr, 2021; Yucekaya & Ozcimbit, 2023). Researchers have emphasized that trade routes served not only as channels of commercial exchange but also as mechanisms for the dissemination of cultural values, religious ideas, and artistic traditions (Heydarov, 1999; Khalilov, 2004). This perspective is reinforced by studies in cultural history, which posit that the intercultural interactions fostered by the Silk Road shaped intellectual developments in both Eastern and Western societies (Oldenburg, 2002).

Within Azerbaijani historiography, this interconnectedness is vividly illustrated through its architectural legacy. Scholars such as Salamzade and Mammadzade (1985) and Qiyasi (1985, 1991) have documented the profound influence of Ajami Nakhchivani and the Nakhchivan school of architecture on the broader canon of Islamic art. Their research demonstrate that the diffusion of distinct architectural styles was inseparable from the economic and cultural exchanges along trade networks. Similarly, the works of Aliyev (1960) and Onullahi (1982) have shown that medieval Azerbaijani cities became important centers of commercial and cultural life due to their location on the Silk Road.

The flow of ideas was not confined to architecture. Literary interactions facilitated by caravan trade, formed another critical dimension of this exchange (Guha, 2025; Jie, 2022). The research of Alizadeh (2002), for instance, explored the transmission of Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* and its reinterpretations by later authors such as Abdurrahman Jami, illustrating the role of book trade in intercultural communication. Comparative studies have stressed the reciprocal nature of these influences, noting that Azerbaijan was both a transmitter and a recipient of literary and intellectual traditions (Nizamulmulk, 1989; Shiraliyev, 2003). At the same time, archaeological and architectural studies provide evidence of the infrastructural role of caravanserais, bridges, and urban planning in facilitating long-distance trade (Miller, 2002). These monuments are considered as key indicators of the cultural dynamics of

the Silk Road, reflecting the synthesis of local and foreign elements in medieval Azerbaijani society.

However, despite the extensive body of research, there remains a need for a comprehensive historical-comparative analysis that simultaneously integrates trade, architecture, and literature in the context of Azerbaijani cultural development. Previous studies often treated these domains in isolation, whereas this research seeks to demonstrate their interconnectedness within the framework of intercultural exchange along the Silk Road. We consider that analyzing how trade and culture are linked allows us to better understand the historical progress of societies, exchange between different cultures, and the construction of civilizational identities. Thus, in this article it is investigated the role of trade relations, particularly those established along the Great Silk Road, in the development and dissemination of cultural values, architectural traditions, literary heritage, and social practices across Eastern and Western regions (Heydarov, 1999; Khalilov, 2004).

This research addresses the growing academic focus on cultural globalization and historical cross-cultural communication. Given today's integration dynamics, examining how trade routes facilitated cultural interaction in the past provides valuable insights into the origins of inter-societal influence. The study's originality lies in exploring the cultural role of commercial networks through Azerbaijan's example, which acted as a strategic bridge between European and Asian civilizations. Using historical records, travel writings, and architectural analysis, the work emphasizes the contribution of medieval Azerbaijani urban centers, caravanserais, and scholars to East-West exchanges. The central objective is demonstrating that trade routes generated not only economic prosperity but also functioned as significant channels for cultural transmission, thereby molding societal identities, values, and historical consciousness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A historical-comparative method guides this investigation into how trade along the Great Silk Road shaped culture. This technique involves comparing historical developments and institutions across multiple time frames and regions to identify both shared characteristics and unique differences in cultural growth. This approach is based on the systematic examination of archival materials, medieval written sources, and travel accounts by both Eastern and Western authors (Alizadeh, 2002; Hawqal, 1908). Furthermore, the comparative aspect allows for the identification of cultural parallels and mutual influences among societies connected by trade routes, with a particular

focus on the territories of Azerbaijan (Heydarov, 1999; Rahmani, 1981).

Data were collected using documentary and archival research methods. Primary sources include medieval Arabic, Persian, and Turkic chronicles, as well as geographic and diplomatic descriptions by travelers such as Ibn Hawqal. Secondary sources comprise scholarly research by Azerbaijani historians and architects (e.g., Salamzadeh, Mammadzadeh, Qiyasi), which provide theoretical and factual support for interpreting the data. Together, these materials form the empirical foundation for reconstructing the multidimensional role of trade in shaping the cultural landscape of medieval Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 1960; Khalilov, 2004).

The data collection process was conducted through a systematic examination of written historical sources, a comparative review of secondary scholarship, and field-based architectural observation (Mammadzadeh, 1978; Onullahi, 1982). The obtained data were then analysed through the assessment of architectural monuments—caravanserais, bridges, and urban structures—located along the ancient trade paths (Miller, 2002; Qiyasi, 1991). The research examines architectural styles and building methods to track how they disseminated through trade networks. Additionally, the study draws upon literary works, including those by Nizami Ganjavi and Abdurrahman Jami, as proof of cultural transmission facilitated by the circulation of books and the movement of ideas along merchant routes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trade routes, and particularly the Great Silk Road, played a decisive role in the cultural, literary, and architectural development of medieval Azerbaijan. The analysis of historical sources and architectural monuments reveals how economic exchange functioned as a medium of cultural transfer, fostering the spread of ideas, artistic styles, and social practices. The results will be presented in three interrelated dimensions: the role of trade relations in the development of cultural ties, the influence of medieval Azerbaijani architecture on other Eastern regions, and the contribution of material and cultural monuments to the growth of international trade relations.

The role of trade relations in the development of cultural relations

The Great Silk Road, which has played an important role in the economic and political life of the countries it passed through for a long time, is of immense importance due to its irreplaceable influence on the development of culture in those regions. This road served as a route for

trade, culture, and sometimes war. It was used to spread literature, science, education, culture—especially urban culture—and religions. Travel notes and works by travelers, scientists, diplomats, missionaries, and government officials who journeyed from the West to the East and vice versa along this road contain valuable information for studying cultural history.

It should be noted that, unlike in the modern era, East-West relations during the Middle Ages developed more on economic and cultural grounds; today, relations are often political in nature (Khalilov, 2004). In earlier periods, such as during the time of Alexander the Great, Hellenistic culture combined Eastern and Western elements. Similarly, in the periods after the spread of Islam, a large part of the roads in the Arabian Peninsula, which until then had been used only as trade routes, were transformed into the “Hajj Road.” The joining of pilgrims to the caravans created conditions for trade relations to be transformed into economic-cultural relations. After the Crusades, contacts between the East and the West increased further. Eastern words and tales were rapidly mixed with Western languages (Oldenburg, 2002). Therefore, the main essence of the Great Silk Road was the cultural transmission from the East to the West. At that time, with the exception of the cultures of Ancient Rome and Greece, a cultural awakening had just begun in Europe. The caravans, which started from the Far East—from Korea—passed through China, Mongolia, Central Asia, and Azerbaijan to the shores of the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and into the interior of Europe.

At the same time, the Great Silk Road played a significant role in expanding literary relations by facilitating the transfer of silk and paper manuscripts and literary samples from one country to another. The works written by Azerbaijani thinkers in the 8th–11th centuries—first in Arabic and later in Persian and Turkish, the primary poetic languages of the Middle East—were widely disseminated throughout Central Asia, the Arab world, Iran, India, and Europe. It is a result of this book trade and exchange that the great Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* gained great fame in Eastern countries. Undoubtedly, Nizami's works were carried to numerous near and far countries by the caravans traveling along the Great Silk Road and spread there. Similarly, these caravans brought the scientific and literary achievements of other countries to Azerbaijan.

Had it not been for the works on various scientific fields brought from Eastern countries, Nizami Ganjavi would likely not have been well acquainted with the natural conditions of Europe and Asia, nor would he have been able to deeply understand the racial diversity of peoples. Consequently, Alexander the Great could not have been

depicted in the Iskandername amidst subtropical, desert, field, and forest landscapes (Shiraliyev, 2003). It is no coincidence that after the 12th century, all Eastern authors who addressed the subject of Alexander called themselves successors of Nizami's legacy and took pride in being disciples of the great master. In general, the influence of the great master is evident in the works of most Eastern poets who lived after him.

One of the outstanding representatives of the Nizami poetic school was Abdurrahman Jami, a classic of Persian-Tajik literature. A fan of the artistic and philosophical genius of the great Ganja thinker, Jami wrote works in response to Nizami's *Khamsa*: *Tohfatul-ahrar* for Makhzanul-asrar (Treasure of Secrets), Yusif and Zuleikha for Khosrov and Shirin, a poem for Leyli and Majnun of the same name, and *Kharednameye Iskandari* for Iskandername (Alizadeh, 2002). These concise comparisons demonstrate the influence of Nizami's artistic and philosophical genius and highlight the development of Azerbaijani literary relations. Thus, for this period, the primary means of establishing such literary relations between countries were the trade caravans traveling on international roads.

The importance of trade routes in the influence of the medieval architectural style on the architecture of other Eastern countries

The observation of the medieval architectural style in the architecture of other Eastern countries and the residence of prominent artists, scientists, and architects in caravanserais at various times had a great impact on the development of mutual cultural relations. The influence of the heritage of Nakhchivani, the founder of the Nakhchivan school of medieval Azerbaijani architecture, Ajami Abubakr oglu, on the architecture of the Near and Middle East was certainly not accidental; it appeared as a result of the cultural relations of these countries with Azerbaijan, including Nakhchivan. As a result of these relations, under the influence of Ajami's genius, magnificent examples of architecture were built in a number of countries of the Near and Middle East and were included in the world cultural treasure. It is no coincidence that when talking about the sphere of influence of the Nakhchivan school of architecture, academician A. Salamzadeh and K. Mammadzadeh note that a direct connection with Nakhchivan tombs is evident in a series of tombs erected by the prominent Turkish architect Sinan in Istanbul in the 16th century.

When discussing the influence of Nakhchivan monuments on Sinan, scientists have concluded that architect Sinan came to Azerbaijan as an architect of janissary troops during Sultan Suleyman Qanuni's marches to Azerbaijan (1535-1536), and at that time he became acquainted with

Nakhchivan monuments (Salamzade & Mammadzade, 1985). Nakhchivan school monuments of Azerbaijani architecture. Baku: Elm). It is known that during his marches to Azerbaijan, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent did not move through mountains, valleys, swamps, and other impassable roads, but rather on convenient trade routes operating at that time, occupying the cities on those roads. Architect Sinan also came to Nakhchivan by the same route and saw the rich products of Ajami Nakhchivani's creativity. Despite the strong influence of the Turkmenistan monument, the structure of the Kazan Khan tomb was more similar to the Azerbaijani tower-shaped tombs. The vault and tower-shaped structure made it similar to the Maragha and Nakhchivan tombs of the 11th-12th centuries (Qiyasi, 1991).

Architects, weavers, craftsmen, and other artisans who lived and created in the territory of Azerbaijan gained fame among neighboring and distant countries with their craftsmanship. Built in the 1370s in the old city of Organj, Turkmenistan, the building of Mrs. Turebek is a magnificent medieval monument with a refined style. Some researchers, based on the similarity of style, assume that Azerbaijani craftsmen were directly involved in the decoration of Mrs. Turebek's mansion. According to the correspondent member of ANAS, J. Qiyasi, the beautiful marble decoration of this rare Khwarazm monument was undoubtedly created in the environment of close cultural relations with Azerbaijan, because this decoration technique first appeared in Azerbaijan (Qiyasi, 1991, p. 44).

This culture, of course, was created by the people living in the area, that is, the ancient ancestors of today's Azerbaijanis. However, it is impossible to think of this culture in isolation from the culture of its close neighbors, for example, Georgia, the peoples of the North Caucasus, as well as the peoples of distant India, Iran, and Central Asia, who lived in continuous contact with caravan routes. Just as Azerbaijan was influenced by these countries and peoples, it also exerted its influence on them (Gubatoglu, 2002). One of the main factors of the influence of the Great Silk Road is the urban development culture that was developing day by day. It is evident that the creation of cities was directly related to the development of crafts and trade. If we look at the medieval cities with famous bazaars, fairs, and caravanserais, we will see that these cities were able to develop and become famous precisely because they were an important station on the international caravan route. The medieval cities of Nakhchivan also belong to this type of cities.

As is known, the most important lines of the Silk Road stretching from East to West passed through the territory of Azerbaijan. These roads are not an addition to

international trade routes, but a part of them. Since ancient times, the country's location in a favorable position for the implementation of international economic and cultural relations has influenced the progress of Azerbaijani cities and the implementation of trade relations of Azerbaijan as a whole.

Material and cultural monuments serving the development of international trade relations

Many monuments were built in all parts of Azerbaijan, located at the junction of important trade routes connecting Europe and Asia, to develop domestic and international trade. Thus, in order to overcome the difficulties faced by the trade caravans, bridges were built over the rivers, water wells were dug on the roads to meet the water needs of the caravan members, and guard posts were created for the safety of the caravans. One of the most important measures implemented in order to develop trade was the establishment of caravanserais in residential areas, within a day's distance of trade routes (Miller, 2002). Caravanserais were buildings created for the rest and recreation of tired caravans after a long journey. Here the animals belonging to the camped caravans were fed and rested, and the people of the caravan rested as well. Also, trade and exchange of goods with merchants from other places were carried out in the caravanserais. The caravan had to travel long and difficult roads, and it was more dangerous to move at night. Thus, they began to build special "palaces"—caravanserais—far away from cities and villages, in the deserts and steppes along the caravan routes.

Caravanserais have an ancient history, being buildings as old as the culture and trade of Eastern countries. The Greek historian Herodotus, describing the roads in his work "History," mentions beautiful guest houses at distances of about 30-40 kilometers (Valikhanli, 1993). It is clear from the historical sources that the importance of caravanse-rais in the early periods was different from that in later periods. For example, during the Roman era, caravanserais mainly served the safe and comfortable travel of Roman officials, so these monuments belonged only to the upper classes. These caravanserais were spacious and beautiful buildings with rooms richly carpeted and equipped with every necessary item. During the Byzantine Empire, the distance between caravanserais on major roads was 50 kilometers. They were so comfortable and beautiful that even kings and rulers could comfortably stay in those caravanserais. Up to 400 horses were kept in each caravanse-rai, which served to replace the tired horses of the messengers who brought news to the emperor, the messengers who carried out his orders, and the officials. Caravanserais are found not only in the Mediterranean and Eastern countries, but also in the Mongolian homeland,

which learned the construction of these buildings from the Chinese, and in other places. Historical sources show that the largest and most beautiful caravanserais were built by the Seljuk rulers. The Seljuk rulers even received and protected Iranian scientists and artists who fled from the Mongols in these buildings.

Throughout the medieval period, rest stations for travelers (caravanserais) and merchants were constructed along Azerbaijan's principal trade routes. Sources indicate that Shah Abbas built 999 caravanserais in these areas (Miller, 2002). It is worth noting that the legend still alive among the local population in Nakhchivan mentions the construction of 999 caravanserais in the territory of the Safavid state during the reign of Shah Abbas I. Also, giving this number in the form of 999 instead of 1000 is associated with the more glorious sounding of that number. As in other parts of Azerbaijan, some of these caravanserais have survived to this day in the Nakhchivan region.

Merchants from different countries and cities stayed in caravanserais, which were mainly places where wholesale trade was conducted. Caravanserais were usually located near market squares. Merchants of different countries had their caravanserais in particularly important trade centers. Almost all of the travelers who visited the Safavid state in the 17th century emphasize that the caravanserais in these states were the most convenient for trade and the most beautiful buildings in the East. Caravanserais were considered the safest places for merchant goods in cities (Heydarov, 1999, pp. 24–25).

In contrast to ancient times, starting from the Middle Ages, caravanserais served more merchants and travelers. After realizing the state importance of trade, not only were conditions created for merchants, but also guards were organized for their safety. After the spread of Islam and the formation of large pilgrimage caravans to the holy lands of Islam, caravanserais were built as religious institutions not only by rulers, but also by wealthy merchants. In the religious caravanserais, every traveler could stay freely without paying any money. Caravanserais were equipped with baths, bazaars, cells, and other buildings, forming a large complex. To meet the religious needs of Muslim travelers, mosques and places of worship were built in caravanserais (Heydarov, 1999, pp. 125–140).

Caravanserais, which have a history of about 4 thousand years and were a place for caravans to stop, were hotel-type buildings. These large-scale buildings formed a large complex. In that complex, there were rooms for the people of the caravan to rest and spend the night, canteens for feeding, stables for keeping riding and pack animals, and mangers for feeding. It included warehouses for storing

goods, shops for trading, and places of worship. Also, there were shops of various artisans, including tailors, cobblers, merchants, and spike craftsmen, to meet certain needs of travelers. To protect the goods and animals placed in the caravanserai, armed guards stood around it at night. These groups of guards protecting the caravans from raids by bandits were called caravanserais (Onullahi, 1982, p. 56)

Caravanserais had a number of rules that guests had to follow. The goods of the merchants who came to any city were first checked by the tax collector and taxed according to the rules. As traders traveled through a number of places, they could bring infectious diseases with them. Therefore, before entering the city, they had to go to the bathroom near the gate, wash, and change their clothes. Only then could they enter the city. On the one hand, these measures facilitated taxation of caravans entering the city, and on the other hand, they prevented the spread of various infectious diseases in the city (Bunyadov, 1998, p. 68). Those who stayed in the caravanserai paid a daily or monthly rent, depending on the duration.

Caravans were led by caravan leaders (*malik-at-tujjar*). They were chosen by the merchants and managed all the affairs of the caravan during its existence. Caravan leaders were familiar with trade routes, managed to eliminate unpleasant situations, resolved conflicts between caravan participants, and arranged payment of various expenses. Special servants-sergeants reported on the movement of the caravan, for which they received a certain fee. Caravanserais played the role of an important trade center - fairs - for conducting wholesale trade. Here, merchants could rent a warehouse, shop, or cell for a short or long term. During the Middle Ages, caravanserais also served as centers for negotiations between merchants, where important trade deals were reached, and where contracts and agreements were concluded.

Some of the travelers in Azerbaijan, as well as in Nakhchivan, wrote their opinions about the famous caravanserai in the area. Most of the travelers indicate that the caravanserais were built within a day's distance from each other. Thus, every caravan that set off at sunrise had to reach the next caravanserai by sunset, before dark. Caravanserais were often patronized by local magistrates, who themselves built caravanserais and rented them out and made a large profit from them. Some caravanserais were dedicated to mosques and pirs (shrine). The income received from this type of caravanserais went entirely to the clergy. Sometimes, in cities with good trade and developed trade and craft centers, merchants who came regularly from one or another country-built caravanserai with their own funds. These caravanserais were named after

the places where those merchants came from (Aliyev, 1960).

Sources testify that during the Middle Ages in a number of cities of Azerbaijan, including Tabriz, Nakhchivan, Ganja, Ardabil, Shamakhi, Zanjan, Ordubad, and others, large caravanserais were built. For example, the Arab historian Ibn Havgal, who lived in the 10th century, testifies that there were many caravanserais along the trade routes in Azerbaijan and Arran (Hawqal, 1908). These caravanse-rais, divided into two parts (hall type and inner courtyard) in terms of architectural structure, were divided into two groups according to their location:

1. City caravanserais
2. Caravanserais located at the junction of trade routes

City caravanserais themselves were divided into two groups: guest houses where merchants and other travelers stayed temporarily; and the second type was caravanse-rais where wholesale operations were carried out within the city. In large cities, these two types of caravanserais were combined, and merchants had the opportunity to live together with their warehouses and cells. Medieval sources confirm that large trade operations in caravanse-rais were conducted under the leadership of caravanse-rais, and the work done was recorded in a special "king's book." At that time, the caravanserai was responsible for the normal and correct conduct of the trade, the quality of the goods, the accuracy of the weight and number, and if the goods were given on credit, the payment of the agreed price. Also, the caravan dealer officially guaranteed that the buyer would pay the debt on time. In return for all this, he received 2 percent of the agreement reached (Rahmani, 1981).

Caravanserais were mostly built with two floors. The first floors usually served as warehouses, and merchants' goods were stored there. A stable for keeping animals was also located on the first floor. The second floors were intended only for the overnight stay of merchants, travelers, and guests in general. In order to solve the water problem in the caravanserai, baths were used in some cases, and wells and cisterns were used in most cases. A cistern is an ordinary stone reservoir with above-ground and below-ground parts built to store drinking water. Wells were dug obliquely, and water was taken out by means of stairs. Cisterns were usually placed in rugged areas with drought or difficulties in digging wells. Typologically, cisterns were divided into two parts:

1. Cisterns built to collect underground rock water.
2. Cisterns which collect atmospheric water.

Cisterns were usually made of stone and consisted of two parts—underground and above-ground. They were built primarily for conducting and developing foreign, transit, and internal trade. At the same time, caravan routes, caravanserais, and cisterns replaced maps, compasses, and topographic markers for medieval merchants who tried to go to distant lands or an unfamiliar country and sell their goods on a more favorable market.

The territory of Azerbaijan is rich in world-important ancient and medieval monuments belonging to the Great Silk Road. Some of these architectural monuments that have come down to our time are valuable sources that allow us to study the development characteristics of the construction culture of the people, as well as the culture of our people. Architectural monuments provide valuable and colorful material about the society that created them, the purpose and organization of construction, the materials used in it, and finally, the artistic design of the monument (Mammadzadeh, 1978, p. 3). The natural-geographical position of Azerbaijan and the destructive wars and natural disasters conducted by historically powerful states in this area have unfortunately led to the destruction or even disappearance of some of our monuments. We obtain information about the existence, grandeur, and structure of these monuments—monuments built in Azerbaijan during the ancient and medieval ages—through written sources. Rich and interesting facts about magnificent architectural examples built in different regions of Azerbaijan have been reflected in those sources. From this point of view, the information provided by medieval Arab historians and geographers, as well as travelers who visited our country in later times, is particularly interesting.

The material and cultural monuments that have survived in the area are the most honest sources of information about the level of development of our culture, especially our architecture, during the ancient and medieval ages. These monuments are mainly religious (mosques, khannagahs, shrines, etc.), memorial tombs (mausoleums, etc.), and civil (caravanserais, bridges, etc.) monuments. J. Qiyasi shows that since the 11th-13th centuries, there has been special progress in the construction of civil architectural monuments along with religious and memorial monuments. The Seljuk sultans and atabays made special efforts in terms of raising the prestige of Islam and erecting religious buildings. At the same time, the Seljuks separated religious and secular forces, which had a strong impact on socio-economic progress, the development of science and art in the Muslim world, and also created conditions for the flowering of civil architecture (Qiyasi, 1985).

It should be noted that during the Middle Ages, the attention given to civil buildings and landscaping rose to the

level of state policy. Khaja Nizamulmulk, the grand vizier of the Seljuk Empire, presented a construction and improvement program to the rulers of the time. He writes:

The king should be engaged in the improvement of the world, build dams, build bridges over big rivers, improve villages and castles, build new castles, build new cities, build tall buildings, beautiful mansions, and on big streets (on caravan routes) should order the creation of caravanserais. In these works, his name will remain forever, he will always be blessed. (Nizamulmulk, 1989).

The stabilization of the local independent state in Azerbaijan in the twelfth century created favorable conditions for the development of culture, along with other fields, and city planning and architecture in Azerbaijan reached their most powerful period. In this period, along with other architectural examples, the bridges built over the rivers crossed by the Great Silk Road in order to facilitate the movement of the caravans have a special place. Bridges, which amazed medieval historians and travelers and a large part of which have survived to this day, have a special place in the architectural history of Azerbaijan. It should be noted that bridges are monuments with high construction techniques. Since the location and construction of bridges were also related to the political, social, economic, and geographical requirements of the time, their construction was an important issue.

The location of Azerbaijan in a geographically favorable area, at the intersection of the trade routes passing through Asia and Europe, or rather, its location in a region that connects with Iran, India, one of the oldest countries in the world, and in general with Eastern and Western countries, has been able to bring this country to the position of a world trade center (Mammadzadeh, 1978, p. 74). For this reason, magnificent bridges were built to reduce the natural barriers that made domestic and foreign trade relations difficult, and to ensure the smooth passage of caravans on intercontinental trade routes passing through the territory of Azerbaijan. One of the most magnificent and important examples of such bridges is the famous Khudafarin bridges. Khudafarin was one of the most convenient passages in the Araz riverbed. Thus, there are large rocky areas in the widening riverbed. The bridges of Khudafarin, which connect the northern and southern coasts of Araz, are high-level engineering facilities. Khudafarin consists of two bridges. Both bridges are outstanding architectural works and, at the same time, examples of the high engineering ability of medieval Azerbaijani builders.

The eleven-span bridge is located about 800 meters from the fifteen-span bridge, far to the west. As for the history of this bridge, it can be said that the historical

conditions for the construction of the bridge here may be related to the creation of the Achaemenid Empire or the ancient period. However, apparently, when the Arabs arrived in Azerbaijan, the eleven-span bridge was destroyed. Instead of its restoration, a bridge with ten spans was built, more favorable and directly connected to the road coming from the south (Salamzade & Mammadzade, 1985, p. 22). Historical sources indicate that this bridge was built by Shaddadi ruler Fazl I. In addition to wars and military affairs, Fazl dealt with the country's economic issues, especially trade relations.

The construction of such a bridge over the Araz river was really of great historical importance. There are different opinions in the sources about the importance of building this bridge. It should be noted that at the beginning of the 11th century, there was a conflict between the Ravvadis and the Shaddadis, two of the feudal states of Azerbaijan, which was typical of the period of feudalism. There is no doubt that Fazl's move from Araz to the south could not have failed to worry the Ravvadis. Therefore, Fazl had to take certain measures. It was necessary to build such a bridge over Araz to establish regular communication with the southern side of Araz. In general, there were bridges over the Araz in several places on the territory of Azerbaijan. It is likely that the bridge built by Fazl is Khudafarin's bridge (Sharifli, 1978).

Since the supports of the bridge arches are raised on natural foundations—rocks—the spans are of different sizes and freely arranged. The arches of the eleven-span bridge, built of baked bricks and river stone, are pointed. The total length of the bridge is about 200 meters, the width is 4.50 meters, the greatest height above the river level is 12 meters, the largest arch span is 8.70 meters, and the smallest arch span is 5.80 meters (Qiyasi, 1991). Thus, the ruins of the eleven-span bridge probably stood during the construction of the fifteen-span bridge. Research has shown that the restoration of the eleven-span bridge was needed only during the Elkhani state, in the 13th century. It is about 130 meters long, 6 meters wide, and 12 meters high above the river level. The 3 central arches of the bridge have survived, while the coastal arches were destroyed in the 1930s. Since then, a new name for the bridge has emerged—"Sinikh korpu (Broken Bridge)."

The remains of the eleven-span bridge, which is 750 meters west of the fifteen-span bridge, are covered with large stone slabs built from top to bottom. At this time, the passage of Khudafarin became a large geographical point in the territory of Azerbaijan, where not only trade caravans but also people moved (Salamzade & Mammadzade, 1985, p. 23). It should also be noted that Khudafarin, being an important point on the Silk Road, borders Ahar

from the north, Kalibar district from the south to the east, and Verzigan from the west. The bridges of Khudafarin are outstanding architectural works and examples of the high engineering abilities of medieval Azerbaijani builders. Although these bridges have arrived in a destroyed state, it can be seen from the remaining parts that they were built very magnificently and were of great importance.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted in this research demonstrates that trade routes, particularly the Great Silk Road, played a pivotal role in shaping Azerbaijan's cultural, literary, and architectural development. Trade caravans facilitated the movement of goods, ideas, and manuscripts, enabling the circulation of works such as Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* and influencing subsequent authors like Abdurrahman Jami (Alizadeh, 2002; Shiraliyev, 2003). Architectural evidence shows that the Nakhchivan school, led by Ajami Nakhchivani, impacted neighboring regions, with caravanserais, bridges, and urban centers serving as physical and cultural conduits for knowledge and artistic exchange (Qiyasi, 1991; Salamzade & Mammadzade, 1985). Monuments like the Khudafarin bridges illustrate the integration of functionality, engineering, and aesthetic values, reflecting the interdependence of economic activity and cultural production (Miller, 2002). These findings underscore that trade was not merely an economic phenomenon but also a catalyst for intercultural communication and historical globalization. Azerbaijan's strategic position enabled it to act both as a recipient and transmitter of cultural influences, highlighting the multidimensional impact of commercial networks on regional and trans-regional cultural development.

In general, the study of trade relations in the context of the Great Silk Road reveals the profound cultural significance of economic interaction across regions. Far beyond mere commercial exchange, the Silk Road functioned as a powerful mechanism for the transmission of knowledge, ideas, artistic styles, and social practices. The case of Azerbaijan—situated at the crossroads of East and West—demonstrates how trade facilitated not only material prosperity but also intellectual and cultural flourishing during the medieval period. Architectural monuments, literary works, and historical records examined in this research underscore the multidimensional role of trade in shaping the identity and legacy of Azerbaijani civilization. The contribution of Azerbaijani thinkers, craftsmen, and architects to broader cultural developments across the Islamic world and beyond highlights the integrative function of caravan routes in historical processes of globalization.

Ultimately, this research confirms that the cultural heritage of Azerbaijan cannot be fully understood without considering its place within international trade networks. We also would like to emphasize in the need for further interdisciplinary study of trade as a formative factor in the evolution of societies, especially in regions like the Caucasus, where cultural intersections were historically dense and enduring.

REFERENCES

- Aliyev, F. (1960). *Northern Azerbaijan cities in the second half of the 18th century*. Azernashr Publishing House.
- Alizadeh, M. (2002). The image of Alexander in Nizami's Iskandernama and Jami's Kherednamei-Iskanderi. In *Azerbaijan–Middle East literary relations: Thematic collection of scientific works* (pp. 4–27). ASU Publishing House.
- Bunyadov, Z. (1998). *History of Azerbaijan* (Vol. 2). Elm Publishing House.
- Gubatoglu, N. (2002). *History of culture*. Nasir Publishing House.
- Guha, S. B. (2025). The Silk Road. *Strategic Analysis*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2025.2569594>
- Hawqal, I. (1908). Customs and Traditions (Masaluk va Mamaluk) (N. A. Karainova, Trans.). In *SMOMPK* (Vol. 38).
- Heydarov, M. (1999). *Trade and trade relations of Azerbaijan in the late Middle Ages*. Elm Publishing House.
- Jie, Y. (2022). The Great Silk Road and Historical Plots in Tang Dynasty Poetry. *Voprosy Istorii*, 9(1), 210–218. <https://doi.org/10.31166/VoprosyIstorii202209Statyi24>
- Khalilov, A. (2004). *East and West: Towards the universal ideal*. Azerbaijan University Publishing House.
- Mammadzadeh, K. (1978). *Construction art in Azerbaijan*. Elm Publishing House.
- Miller, C. (2002). Nearest Eastern caravanserais (A. Ozturk & Sh. Uzluk, Trans.). *Ipek Yolu Magazine*, 2, 99, 122–166.
- Nizamulmulk. (1989). *Siyasetname [Policy]*. Elm Publishing House.
- Oldenburg, S. (2002). The relationship between the West and the East is ancient (D. A. Valiyev, Trans.). *Ipek Yolu Magazine*, 2, 33–35.
- Onullahi, S. (1982). *History of the city of Tabriz in the XIII–XVII centuries*. Elm Publishing House.
- Qiyasi, J. (1985). *Near and far lands (About the international relations of medieval Azerbaijani architecture)*. Ishiq Publishing House.
- Qiyasi, J. (1991). *Architectural monuments of Nizami period*. Ishiq Publishing House.
- Rahmani, A. (1981). *Azerbaijan at the end of the XVI and in the XVII century*. Elm Publishing House.
- Salamzade, A., & Mammadzade, K. (1985). *Nakhchivan School monuments of Azerbaijani architecture*. Elm Publishing House.
- Sharifli, M. (1978). *Feudal states of Azerbaijan in the second half of the 9th century and the 11th century*. Elm Publishing House.
- Shiraliyev, V. (2003). *Azerbaijan–Turkish world, Asia–Europe relations*. Sabah Publishing House.
- Torr, G. (2021). *The Silk Roads: A History of the Great Trading Routes Between East and West*. Arcturus Publishing. <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-silk-roads-geordie-torr/1127971326>
- Valikhanli, N. (1993). *Arab caliphate and Azerbaijan*. Azernashr Publishing House.
- Yucekaya, H., & Ozcimbit, O. (2023). The Unclear Role of Turkic Communities in the Adventure of Silk. *Tarih Incelemeleri Dergisi*, 38(1), 327–345. <https://doi.org/10.18513/egetid.1333311>