

## Trade and Cultural Interaction through Central Asia, ca. 500-ca. 1500

Central Asia was a gathering place and transit route for merchants from many countries. Our historical sources are too few to document a continuous narrative of Central Asian trade and cultural interaction in the period from ca. 500 A.D. to ca. 1500 A.D. However, we know a great deal about cities and trade for various parts of that millennium. After commenting briefly on geography and routes, we will turn to the activities of Central Asians known as Sogdians, who were responsible for bringing western goods and culture into China. They would be replaced when, with the expansion of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, Muslim merchants became very important across Eurasia. Later, in the thirteenth century, the most striking development is the creation of the Mongol Empire. When the Mongols controlled all of Eurasia, the overland trade routes and cultural exchange flourished as never before. After the Mongols decline set in, although we know that overland trade through Central Asia continued and was often important right down to modern times.

Trade in Central Asia moved over an elaborate network of routes running in all directions. While we often think primarily about the East-West routes connecting Europe with China, important routes ran North-South. For example, India was always very closely connected with Central Asia culturally and economically. One of the impressive facts about Central Asian trade is how persistent the merchants were in overcoming what today would seem to be impossible difficulties of travel. To arrive at the great oasis towns such as Samarkand and Bukhara (both today in Uzbekistan), caravans might have to cross deserts where one could easily be lost forever in a sandstorm or die from lack of water. The routes also traversed high mountains, the passes often higher than 5000 meters.

Merchants of these overland trade routes rarely traveled the whole distance from the place of origin of a product to its ultimate destination. For this reason merchant diasporas—the settled communities of merchants located at various points along the trade routes at some distance from the individuals' homes—played an important role the trade. They would organize caravans, hire agents, buy and sell in the local markets, communicate with a "home office" about financing and purchasing, and perhaps send some of their members along with the goods on at least part of the journey.

One of the most famous such diasporas, active for several centuries across Asia, were the Sogdians, whose homeland lay in the region of what is now southern Uzbekistan and western Tajikistan. Sogdians were active in China from as early as the fourth century, and we know they travelled through the mountain valleys of North Pakistan to trade with South and Southeast Asia. While they never formed powerful states, their cities such as Samarkand and Penjikent flourished right down to the Arab conquests in Central Asia in the early eighth century. Speaking a variety of Persian, the Sogdians obviously were very much influenced by the culture of Sassanian Persia, a state which dominated the Middle East until it too was conquered by the Arabs. Sassanian silver coins were one of the important currencies of the Central Asian trade. Where we find evidence of Sogdian colonies in China, we also find Sassanian coinage.

While Chinese trade with Central Asia had begun much earlier, under the Tang Dynasty (618-906) it flourished as never before. Not only the Central Asian horses, so valued for the army, but various Central Asian luxury items enjoyed great popularity. The goods included spices and minerals - which had a broad range of uses including medicine - precious and semi-precious stones, furs, metalwork, exotic fruits, and, very importantly, people. Musicians and dancers from Central Asia were highly valued, as we know from paintings and statues depicting whole orchestras and figures doing the "Sogdian whirl." In return, China exported silk, ceramics, spices and mineral substances not available in Central Asia. When the Sogdians decorated one of their palaces in Samarkand in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, various embassies were depicted, including a Chinese one. For at least a brief period, the ruler of Sogdiana accepted the political authority of the Tang emperor.

After the disorders of the expansion of Islam the seventh and early eighth centuries, the new Arab empire consolidated its control over territories extending from Central Asia into the Mediterranean world. To a considerable degree the Arabs simply took over existing administrative and commercial institutions that had functioned effectively under the previous Iranian rulers. Despite some religious prohibitions (for example against the charging of interest), the economy of the Middle East flourished under the rule of the Abbasids starting in the middle of the eighth century. The Abbasid capital, Baghdad, and some cities in Central Asia such as Bukhara became centers of

learning and commerce. That commerce might be in the hands of Muslim, Jewish or even Christian merchants. Arab armies met and defeated an army of Tang China at Talas (today's Kyrgyzstan) in the year 751. Increasingly the caravaneers on the inland trade routes were Muslims, who extended their reach to the northwest borders of China. An expanding Muslim quarter, located significantly near the Western Market, was to be found in Chang'an, the T'ang capital. By the eighth century, Chang'an also had a Nestorian Christian community forming the easternmost outpost of a network of Nestorian bishoprics extending from Syria across to Central Asia.

Even though the Abbasid caliphate disintegrated and wars at times interrupted exchange, many Central Asian cities flourished right down to the time of the Mongol invasions. Goods coming from China might pass through Samarkand and then head southwest across the mountains into northeastern Iran. Merchants in Bukhara might look to routes that ran northwest above the Caspian and on to the Black Sea. Evidence of the important trade between Samanid and Bukhara is found in precious metalwork and thousands of Central Asian silver coins which were carried up the Volga River into the northern forests and even on to Sweden. The most important products coming to Central Asia in exchange were furs and slaves.

The considerable urban prosperity of Central Asia came under attack in the thirteenth century. After consolidating his power among the tribes of Mongolia, Chingis Khan (ca. 1167-1227) began to expand, first into northern China and then into Central Asia. Often the Mongol conquests are portrayed as having purely destructive goals, but in fact Chingis Khan was very interested in trade with the rulers of Central Asia. He was provoked into invading there in 1219-1220 when the local officials murdered some of Chingis' Muslim merchant envoys. Cities that provoked or resisted the Khan indeed were devastated. Following Chingis' death 1227, his successors invaded Eastern Europe, finished the conquest of Central Asia, and after the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 established the Mongol Ilkhanid state in the Middle East. Some areas of Iran never did recover from the Mongol invasions, which destroyed the irrigation networks, but Ilkhanid cities in the north and cities in Central Asia such as Bukhara prospered.

Chingis's grandson Khubilai Khan finished conquering China in 1279, but already the empire had begun to crumble. Political disorders notwithstanding, under the Mongols

there was about a century of unparalleled security to travel all the way across Asia. For the first time Europeans go all the way to China, the most famous of them being the Venetian Marco Polo. Marco's merchant father and uncle had spent some time in Bukhara before eventually going to China. Marco accompanied them on a return journey to China spent nearly two decades in the service of the Khan. Other Italians followed and settled in China. The Mongol rulers often conscripted artisans in one region and put them to work elsewhere to produce, among other things, prized embroidered silk fabrics. By now silk production was carried out all across Asia, since each region had its own specialties. The early development of a European silk industry in Italy though still owed much to imports of the relatively inexpensive Chinese raw silk.

The Arab traveller Ibn Battuta, who passed through the territories of the Mongol Golden Horde in the 1330s, visited Urgench, a city just south of the Aral Sea. He described its "fine bazaars and broad streets, a great number of buildings and abundance of commodities," and noted that "it shakes under the weight of its population." He also noted how important the horse trade was between the territories of the Golden Horde and India. Even as late as about 1340, when the Mongol empire (especially its Central Asian part) had fragmented, a Florentine merchant would write about the relative safety of the routes across Asia to China.

The disorders in Central Asia ended with the rise of Timur (Tamerlane) (1336-1405), who made Samarkand his capital in 1370. Although he spent much of his reign on campaign - Iran, northern India, Anatolia, and in the end heading off towards China - he also promoted commerce. The Spanish ambassador Clavijo, who was in Samarkand in the early fifteenth century, described how Tamerlane had ordered a major urban renewal project and conscripted artisans from various places to work in his capital. Goods arrived from all over, among them spices from South Asia, silk from China and furs from Siberia. Tamerlane's successors exchanged embassies with the new Ming rulers of China, and for a time in the early decades of the fifteenth century, the China trade prospered. Some of it still came overland, but a major component was the Chinese goods shipped through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East in the great Ming "treasure fleets". This was a period when lacquerware and large quantities of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain were imported into the Middle East. A royal pavilion in Samarkand was

decorated with porcelain, local potters tried to imitate the Chinese designs, and ceramic tiles which can still be seen on the Muslim tombs of Samarkand were inspired by Chinese lacquerware techniques.

Under Tamerlane's grandson Ulugh Beg (d. 1449), Samarkand became a scientific center, attracting mathematicians and astronomers to work at its great observatory. One of the city's "products" then was science, which would be exported to other countries. Herat, in northwest Afghanistan, became the Timurid capital. A Chinese ambassador to Tamerlane's son Shah Rukh (r. 1405-1447) there described that city's rich array of products. Eventually Herat would eclipse Samarkand as a center of literature and the arts in the second half of the fifteenth century.

Traditional views hold that ca. 1500 marks the end of the historic "Silk Road," the overland trade through Central Asia. That was when Europeans, having sailed around Africa, began to take control of the eastern trade. While Central Asian trade undoubtedly declined, as much as anything the cause may have been the increasing political chaos with a succession of weak and warring states interrupting the caravans. Even so, the patterns of Central Asian trade in all directions were never destroyed, and at various points in succeeding centuries, goods transported through Central Asia continued to be coveted. At least the short distance routes between major cities remained open, and commercial diasporas similar to those of earlier centuries but now often involving Armenians and Indians, prospered in the overland trade.

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