

# Trade And Commerce In Central Asia During Mediaeval Period

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To Alexander's campaigns we owe our earliest geographical notion of Turkistan (Central Asia) and nearly all we know about Central Asia between Second century B.C. and the seventh century A.D. has been extracted from Chinese sources.<sup>1</sup> Socio-political affairs apart, in the field of trade and commerce Central Asia occupied the key position in the East-west trade in those distant days.<sup>2</sup> In fact prior to the discovery of the East-west Sea route, Central Asia had been the meeting place of commerce and civilization of China, India, Middle East and Europe; and all the trade routes connecting them lay across this territory.<sup>3</sup> *Trade Route* 'Silk route' the oldest and the longest trade route known to man was named so because it was mostly used by caravans which brought silk from China to Persia and to the Lavantine market, was firmly established by first century B.C.<sup>4</sup> From perking the rout passed over a long belt-of oasis both north and south of the desert which provided the necessary halt with wells and carvan saris.<sup>5</sup> Both the routs converged, the southern one through "Khotan", on Kashgar in Sinkiang (Eastern Turkistan). One important channel linked to this trade artry at Kashgar junction came from Gujrat to Kashmir all along the vast plains of northern India and then through Ladakh and across Pamirs via Yarkand to Kashgar. From Kashgar the main 'Silk route' proceeded to Mawara-un-nahar (Western Turkistan) over the inaccessible and inhospitable Tien-Shan through several passes, one of the most important ones being

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through Farghana valley. Passing further through the valleys of Syr-Darya, the Zarfashan, the Amu Darya, the Murghab the road continued to Khorasan and Iran.<sup>6</sup> At Samarkand this great rout divided one branch of it leading south across the pass of Hindu Kush to Kabul and the basin of Indus. An almost parallel road led to upper Amu Darya and from there either to Balkh and Kabul and West to Herat.

**Trade and Bazaar:** Both the Greeks and Chinese found agriculture and urban life fairly well developed in Mawara-Un-Nahar. The Chinese borrowed from Farghana the cultivation of the wine and Lucerne. Owing to the proximity of the Nomads, horse breeding flourished in Farghana, and the Chinese even organised military expeditions for the sake of one particular breed of its horses. In their turn, the inhabitants of Farghana learnt from the Chinese the art of making Silver and Gold Vessels and Iron Weapons. These crafts were still flourishing in Farghana during the first century of Islam.<sup>7</sup> While as the 'Silk rout' served as a principle Channel for the export of Chinese silk; Greeco-Roman glass and cut crystal were imported into china by the same rout under western influence, the glass industry developed in central Asia, parallel to the development of the Metal Industry under the influence of the east. In the seventh century Turkistan was much as it had been in the fourth century B.C and its culture could not have stood comparison with that of Sasanian Iran, were as in the 10<sup>th</sup> century it differed little from the other countries of ancient Civilization. Particularly interesting are the facts pointing to the considerable growth of the Towns and to the Progress of trade and industry.<sup>8</sup> From the Chinese Prisoners, captured in the Battle of 751, the inhabitants of Samarkand learned the art of manufacturing rag-paper. This new writing material gradually spread from Samarkand to the West and replaced papyrus and parchment, both in the Muslim and the Christian Worlds. "In extent and population Samarkand was always the first city of Transoxania (Mawara-Un-Nahar) even in the age when under the Samanids, Bukhara was the capital of the Kingdom. This importance is explained chiefly by its geographical position at the junction of the main trade routs from India (via Balkh ), from Persia ( via Merv ) and from the Turkish

Dominions.<sup>9</sup> Trading with the Nomads was profitable to the civilized population who received from them the products of their breeding, in particular meat and horses. Still greater was the demand of Nomads for the products of their civilized neighbours, such as wheat and especially articles of clothing wherever trade existed between the Nomads and Sedentary Population on the Borders of China of the Muslim world and of Russia-the Nomads drove their herds to the frontier towns without waiting for the traders to come on to their steeps. Besides the necessary commodities another attraction for the Nomads were the reed beds along the banks of the large rivers which made convenient grounds for winter camping. The coming of the Nomads for the trade of these winter quarters easily turned into plundering raids.<sup>10</sup> Peter Brent remarks that "Samarkand during Timurid time stood as a city loud with trade bright with mosaic, cool with fountains and gardens, Sonorous with poetry and music. Having destroyed its rivals, he diverted to it almost all the trade of the eastern world. From Nongorod and Nakin, from Delhi, Hamburg, Alexandria and Venice, Merchandise and Merchants threaded their laborious way to where in this city of endless lanes and squares, of shaded arcades and sudden flamboyant minarets, the energy of Tamurlang had decreed the existence of World's central market".<sup>11</sup> Timur appreciated that trade could help him achieve glory and make it worthwhile. By blocking the routes from the Black Sea to China he diverted trade to make Samarkand the great junction from Caravans playing between Europe, India and China. Merchants were fully protected against marauding or cheating and attracted by favourable terms.<sup>12</sup> Timur went so far as to write to all fellow Sovereigns in Europe and Asia, urging them to send merchants because trade makes for prosperity nor did he neglect the related conditions of agriculture and industry. "Cultivation was helped by irrigation works, sericulture was developed further and orders were given for planting cotton, flax and hemp. Textile workers were brought to Samarkand from Syria or Iran as were many other craftsmen, Armourers from Turkey goldsmiths from Georgia, glass blowers from Syria and even porters from China".<sup>13</sup> Under Shah Rukh and Ulugh Begh, the Timurid State entertained peaceful trade relations with the more distant eastern countries. The

plan of a campaign against China was abandoned immediately after Timur's death. One of the main items of Chinese export was China the production of which had attained a high perfection in the fifteenth century.<sup>14</sup> One of the particular specialties of Samarqand trade perhaps found in few other places that time in the world, as pointed out by Babar, was that different trades were not mixed up together in it but each had its own Bazaar with a good sort of plan.<sup>15</sup> Shuyler comments that the central Asiatic definition or idea of a city has been that it must have a grand mosque or 'Jamma' Mosque that can hold all the inhabitants at Friday prayers and possess all of the 32 guilds or trades (Kasba) that are thought to comprise the whole world of commerce.<sup>16</sup> All these traders were to be seen in full working in the Bazaar's of Mawara-Un-Nahar during Timurid period. Each street was devoted to a single trade; here were the silk shops, there the Jewellers, here the brass workers, while occasionally a large gateway with a court beyond marked the place of a "Carvan Serai" for the accommodation of foreign merchants who came for a short time for trade and the storage of goods. Here was a small Kitchen with "Kabobs" and Patties, cooking over the dim fire, there the stand of baker.<sup>17</sup> Each shop was merely a small square room with perhaps a still smaller one behind it, quite open to the street, as the boards which composed the front of the shop were all taken down in the day time. The merchant sat cross-legged or on heels on a rug or bit of matting, while his wares either occupy the rest of the floor, or were placed on shelves behind him. Most of the shops were so small that there was rarely place for a friend or too inside with him. The customers either stood in the street, or sat on their horses or took their positions on the threshold of the shop.<sup>18</sup> In different streets of the bazaar one would see Jewellers, Blacksmiths, and Barbers, "Athar Khana" dealers and other shopkeepers dealing with grains, flour are pottery busy with their traffic. The Jewellers had in trade stock usually a few silver rings and ear-rings, belt clasps and amulets to be worn on shoulders or in the hair, sometimes necklaces or Bracelets set with pieces of coloured stone. In addition to few precious stones, one could see great quantities of turquoise used for decorating Bridals, the horns of saddles or sabres and when thickly set would look much like Shagreen

leather. Manufactures of native pots and utensils, usually of graceful shapes and often very delicate workmanship would use simple instruments like simple foundry or furnace fed by bellows worked by hand, and different types of chisels etc. for purpose of washing they would make a large basin surmounted by a platter, pierced with delicate arabesques to receive the water poured over the hands. Knife being so important to the life of every person, this trade occupied a large number of persons both for the manufacture and the sale. The handles were usually made of bones, horns often richly ornamented and nearly every knife had a case, generally of horse leather dyed and fastened to a piece of leather with ornamented tassel which was hung on the belt. The greater part of the knives, razors and sword blades were usually made of steel. The potters sold different kind of glazed and unglazed ware and during summer could work on the clay at any spot as the tools and these belongings of trade were few and simple. The best class of native ware was an imitation of Chinese mark called "Chini" (Chinese). The shoemakers made 'galoshes' soft boots, riding boots studded with nails and small sharp heels. There were also shops dealing with bunches of dried herbs and other similar drugs or 'Ather Khana' dealing with all those cosmetics used by women, and mostly consisted of different common articles that could be obtained from any garden. A barber in the act of shaving at his shop used no soap but would wet the scalp and with admirable skill take off the hair with an iron razor stuck in the handle like a penholder. The barber was a surgeon as well, and would let ones blood or operate on one as best as he could but he had the connection with the apothecary's shop over the way.



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