

## SERICULTURE CENTER OF THE CAUCASUS – SHEKİ, AZERBAİJAN

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### ABSTRACT

#### Kafkasya'nın İpekçilik Merkezi- Şeki, Azerbaycan

The Great Silk Road laid the foundation a spectacular culture of thousands of years that has influenced the entire world. Even though the story started in 2000 BC, later it brought about formation of a micro universe by adding thousands of lands, cultures, and countries to its own vortex. Silk has been one of the products which were blessed as the goddess of production in China that pioneered the silk industry for 3000 years. One of the busiest main roads of the Great Silk Road was passing through Azerbaijan starting from II BC. The city of Sheki that was in the north-west of the Caucasus had become an international center for silk production by the XVIII century. In this article, the cultural importance of the city of Sheki, Azerbaijan which is the sericulture center of Caucasus on the Silk Road will be discussed.

Key Words: Azerbaijan, Caravanserai, Caucasus, The Great Silk Road, Sericulture, Sheki, Silk.

## Introduction

Since the first pace of its existence, humankind has continued its life by trying different ways of communication. In the earlier stages, it had to continue his life in the shade of a nomadic life by traveling in consideration of environmental factors. Because of preceding fact, the apprehension of communication of humankind embarked upon precisely from the roads. The elapsed time on the roads caused change and had a transformation the faiths, opinions, moral and cultural values of humankind along with them. Silk, which is considered as a light in weight and heavy in value phenomenon, constructed its ancient historical process around the world on the roads. This road, which is considered to be the first intercontinental trade and diplomacy route in the history of humankind, starting from China extending to Europe via Anatolia and the Mediterranean, and to Africa via the Red Sea, has been described as the Silk Road because of silk, which is the most important and valuable commodity traded on this route.

However, in the context of historical and conceptual characterization, we come across the term of Silk Road only in 1877, when the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen gave this name to the caravan route from China to Central Asia and Asia Minor countries. Well into 19th century, this road was named as the route taken such as Samarkand Road, Kashgar Road, Tabriz Road, or related directions such as North Road, South Road, West Road (Özdaşlı, 2015: 579-596). The most important routes of this precious building, which has a tremendous historical and cultural background, started from China to India, Anatolia, passing through Mesopotamia, it extended to Egypt, the African continent, Greece, Rome, and the lands of the United Kingdom.

The Silk Road, which constitutes a network system between East West and North South, has touched the livings of many people in the world due to its wide scope and has brought economic, civil, and political insight. The development of trade routes has creating need to basic needs such as defense and shelter, therefore defense castles, walls, caravanserais, and bridges were built for this purpose (Hemidov, 2009: 14-38). This unique caravan route, which is became manifest in the Uzbek proverb, "There are two great roads in the universe: The Milky Way in the Sky, the Silk Road on the Earth." maintained its importance from the 2nd century BC to the 1800s and had an international character with its strategic structure that includes different nations (İsayev, Özdemir, 2011: 111-112).

Silk is produced from the silk cocoon that the silkworm, also known as *Bombyx mori*, knits for passing the chrysalis stage (İpek Dergisi, 1952: 129). The beginning of silkworm breeding and silk production, which is one of the most valuable sources of wealth in agriculture, we consider as 2.600 BC,

China. This country, which has the closed structure prevented a transfer of knowledge and skills related to silk production to abroad until 419 BC monopolizing the production of this product that was expressed "coming from heaven" and informed the disclosure of its source as a crime punishable by death (Türkiye İkinci İpekböcekçiliği Kongresi, 1974: 10). Azerbaijan sericulture has a very rich and deep-rooted history. The most important reason of this situation is lands of the country are located on the Great Silk Road-that has not lost its economic significance throughout history. For this reason, Azerbaijan was among the countries that met with the art of sericulture in the early period. Azerbaijan's acquaintance with silk and sericulture earlier than many other countries is related to this.

During the research, V and VI centuries came in view as a period that blossomed out production and trade of silkworms in Azerbaijan. In historical sources, the city of Sheki is viewed as the foremost region of sericulture in these periods. Quality of Sheki's silk is likened to European silk (Mammadova, 2013: 37).

## Caucasian Lyon - Sheki

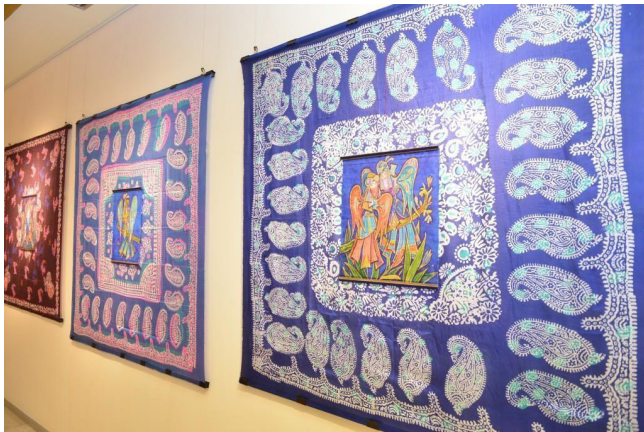
Sheki is a major city that has maintained its importance as a vital trade center along the Silk Roads since the Middle Ages that is considered as a period of rich and diverse cultural development. In the archaeological excavations, it is in sight that there was an interest in sericulture in the Caucasus Albania period. Materials found in archaeological excavations indicate that sericulture in the city of Sheki dates to ancient times. In 1985, discovery of earrings likened to silk worm from precious metal belonging to early times of II BC in the number 7 of kurgan in the land of Kudurlu village of this city is by way of evidence that shed light on the discourses that sericulture has existed in this region since old times (Hasanlı, 2018).

When we look at the findings that make this city unique in the meaning of sericulture, it remarks that the main issue is climate. The homeland of the wild silkworm is known as the Himalayas. It comes to be known that sericulture began by being taken to China from here 2500 years ago (Sokolov, Gilyarov and Pravdin, 1984: 315). It is seen that the existing climate of Sheki exactly coincides with the city of Srinagar in the Himalayas (Alizade and İbrahimov, 2007: 27).

In Sheki, that got famous throughout the world thanks to the silk materials that were sent to different places, was nationalized silk production in 1828 due to the quality of silk cocoon that was produced and was home to the first filament factory that was established in 1829. This factory has also started to produce fabric since 1830 (<http://www.elm.az/news/open/4276> / Date Accessed: 03.03.2021).

In this stage, the silk of Azerbaijan made an indelible impression with its quality in Europe and Russia. One of the most interesting information related to this subject is that during the reign of the II. Nicholas who was the Tsar of the Russian Empire, the silk of Azerbaijan was added to the banknotes of 500 for prevention from being mashed. When we look at Europe in the aforementioned period, it has seen that the companies in Lyon, France, bought silk from Azerbaijan as raw material, and that most of the European countries imported the silk of Azerbaijan. In particular, the company of Saint Etienne in Lyon was one of the regular buyers of Sheki silk. Because of that in the XIX. century, Sheki had a right to being called as Lyon of the Caucasus as a result of its success in the field of sericulture. The silk of Sheki even won a gold medal at the international fair that held in London in 1862 ( Cabbarova, 2018: 8 ). In addition, it was accepted as the highest quality silk fabric preferred by many palaces of that period, including the Ottoman palace. We also come across information related to silk production in the region by the way of discourses of important people such as Âşık Mehmet (1582) and Evliya Çelebi (1647) who visited the region (Azerbaijan Soviet Encyclopedia, 1987:499-500).

Today, the only cultural heritage left from this rarefied sector is the kelagayi sold in small handicraft stores. Only silk thread is used in the production of kelagayi's and it is made in a square shape. The fact that its main center is in Sheki is because the best quality of silk is in these lands. In 2014, UNESCO recognized kelagayi as an intangible cultural heritage.



**Figür 1-** The exhibition titled “Kelagayi: Silk Wings” at the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum.  
Resource: <http://mct.gov.az/az/umumixeberler/11341>

The Caravanserais that are providing a place to stay for merchants and caravans traveling along the Silk Road are one of the most important elements in the architecture of the city of Sheki. The word of caravanserai is formed by combining the words caravan and sara, which means residence in Persian (<http://english.cctv.com/program/cultureexpress/20100127/101397.shtml> / Date Accessed: 14.05.2021).

The Caravanserais were built with a distance of 30 kilometers calculating the distance that a caravan could travel during the day by taking into consideration the conditions of that day ( Rice, 1965: 167 & Can and Gün, 2012: 197 ). There were special facilities for needs such as rest, eating and drinking, treatment, shoe repair, and worship (Yazıcı, 2002: 318). There were guards to protect the safety of the passengers. There were five great caravanserais in Sheki in the XVIII-XIX centuries. Among them, only the Lower and Upper Caravanserai have reached us safely until today without losing any of their magnificence and they were the most important places where the tired merchants of the Silk Road had a rest. From the perspectives of their settlement structures, gigantic dimensions, and commercial suitability, it can be easily stated that they are the largest caravanserais of the entire South Caucasus

([https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Seven\\_magnificent\\_caravanserais\\_of\\_Azerbaijan-1181465](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Seven_magnificent_caravanserais_of_Azerbaijan-1181465) / Date Accessed: 15.05.2021)



**Figür 2 –** Upper Caravanserai



**Figür 3 –** Lower Caravanserai  
Resource: <https://wander-lush.org/caravanserai-sheki-karavansaray-hotel/>

This precious city of sericulture that is blended with history and still carrying the traces of many cultures was announced as the cultural capital of The international organization of Turkic culture ( TÜRKSÖY) in 2016.

## Conclusion

The continuation of this unique story that started on the roads resulted in the genesis of the Great Silk Road, which was formed by the tremendous mixture of languages, religions, and cultures by adding the whole world to its own content. Even though the story started in 2000 BC, it later brought about formation of a micro universe by adding thousands of lands, cultures, and countries to its own vortex. This unique structure, which contains kilometers of land, accompanied the entire life cycle of humankind. Today, we witness that this structure, which has relatively lost its significance has regained importance in the structuring of international trade and international relations. Azerbaijan has been one of the oldest and most important destinations of the Great Silk Road historically. Sheki, Azerbaijan is reputed because of high quality of its silk in its own time. Sheki. which is considered to be equivalent to the city of Lyon in France with its production level and quality has left the handicraft called kelagayi, which

Symbolizes its own sericulture past. Caravanserais of Sheki are the most important architectural examples of the Great Silk Road. These places, which are the stopping and resting points of the caravans, exemplified important architectural example of Sheki.

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