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Shahla Mammadli

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8822-3513>

PhD, senior researcher of the Institute of History named after A.A. Bakikhanov, ANAS, Azerbaijan, shahla.mamedli@gmail.com

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Azerbaijani Cities As Intermediaries in Medieval Eurasian Trade Relations

Abstract

In the Middle Ages, cities in Azerbaijan established trade relations with numerous Asian and European countries. To support trade operations and accommodate foreign merchants, Tabriz, Ardabil, Shamakhi, Baku, Derbent, and other Azerbaijani cities constructed many caravanserais. These caravanserais also served as marketplaces where people bought and sold a variety of goods. The Russian city Astrakhan has played a crucial role in facilitating economic relations between Azerbaijan and various cities in Western Europe, Central Asia, and Southwest Asia. It has emerged as a key hub for Asian trade and warehousing. Merchants used to transport goods purchased from Azerbaijani cities to countries in Asia and Eastern Europe, while also bringing a diverse range of products from those regions to Azerbaijan. Despite the challenges posed by sea and caravan trade routes, which were often plagued by raids and piracy, economic relations between Azerbaijan and Asian countries persisted. Merchants who settled in Azerbaijani cities paid significant taxes to local judges, but in return, they gained the freedom to practice their religion and preserve their religious traditions. The descriptive-comparative analysis was used for this study.

Keywords: international trade, Azerbaijani cities, Asian merchants, European countries, trade in the Middle Ages, trade routes



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Azerbaycan Şehirlerinin Avrasya Ticaret Bağlarındaki Rolü (Xvii-Xviii Yüzyıllar)

Öz

Orta Çağ'da Azerbaycan şehirlerinin birçok Asya ve Avrupa ülkesiyle ticari ilişkileri vardı. Ticaret operasyonlarını ve yabancı tüccarları desteklemek için Tebriz, Erdebil, Şamahı, Bakü, Derbent ve diğer Azerbaycan şehirlerinde çok sayıda kervansaray inşa edildi. Bu kervansaraylar, insanların çeşitli malları alıp sattıkları pazar yerleri olarak da işlev görüyordu. Rusya'nın Astrakhan şehri, Azerbaycan ile Batı Avrupa, Orta ve Güneybatı Asya'daki şehirler arasındaki ekonomik ilişkilerde önemli bir aracı olmuştur. Bu şehir, Asya ticaretinin ve depolarının en önemli merkezi haline geldi. Tüccarlar Azerbaycan şehirlerinden aldıkları malları Asya ve Doğu Avrupa ülkelerine naklettiler ve bu ülkelerden Azerbaycan şehirlerine çeşitli mallar getirdiler. Hem deniz hem de kervan ticaret yollarının zorluklarına rağmen, kervanlara sık sık baskın yapıldığında ve Hazar Denizi'ndeki gemiler bir fırtınayla tahrip edildiğinde veya deniz korsanları tarafından ele geçirildiğinde, Azerbaycan ile Asya ülkeleri arasındaki ekonomik ilişkiler devam etti. Azerbaycan şehirlerine yerleşen tüccarlar yerel hakimlere büyük vergiler ödedi, din özgürlüğüne kavuşmayı başardı ve dini geleneklerini korudu. Bu çalışma için karşılaştırmalı tanımlayıcı bir yöntem kullanılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: uluslararası ticaret, Azerbaycan şehirleri, Asyalı tüccarlar, Avrupa ülkeleri, Orta Çağ ticareti, ticaret yolları

Introduction

Throughout its history, Azerbaijan has been known for its strategically important trade routes. These routes have often been targeted by foreign invaders who sought to control commerce and transportation. Trade has always been a crucial aspect of Azerbaijan's economy, as it allowed the country to establish relationships with other nations in Asia and Europe. The development of trade, commodity-money relationships, and the economy as a whole have significantly influenced the political landscape of the region. The importance of Azerbaijan's cities in facilitating trade relations between different countries remains relevant today, both from a scientific and a political perspective. In summary, the trade relations that Azerbaijan has maintained throughout history have been a key factor in its economic development.

Numerous documents in the archives of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Astrakhan reflect the activities of Asian merchants in Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, and Türkiye during the Middle Ages. These documents provide valuable information about the types and quantities of products that were supplied to the cities of Azerbaijan. Additionally, the two-volume collection of documents titled "Russian-Indian Relations" contains evidence that Asian merchants played a vital role in the commercial life of Azerbaijani cities during the Middle Ages. The diaries of Western European travelers of the Middle Ages, such as J. Chardin (Chardin, h. 1335-1336)

and J.B. Tavernier (Tavernier, h. 1336), who visited Azerbaijani cities, also provide valuable information about the development of trade and the practice of usury.

The records of the 17th-century European traveler Kempfer, who visited Baku in 1683, are of great importance for understanding the socio-economic history of the city. The works of A. A. Sysoyev (Sysoyev, 1925) and S. Ashurbeyli (Ashurbeyli, 1947; Ashurbeyli, 1990) contain valuable information about the commercial life of medieval Azerbaijani cities and their role in transit trade. During his travels to Azerbaijan between 1782 and 1783, J. Foster observed that the merchants, particularly those from Asian countries, played a significant role in the foreign trade of the Shirvan province. Foster noted that these merchants acted as intermediaries in the relationships between various countries. He further observed that these merchants often accompanied caravans that were headed to Iran, and some of them had established trade relations with Astrakhan. The works of Cornelius de Bruijn (1703), John Bell (1716), and I. George (1777) contain information about Asian merchants who arrived in Azerbaijan (Polievktov, 1935). In the modern era, it is crucial to analyze the historical connections in the establishment of international trade partnerships. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to study the Eurasian trade relations of the medieval period in evaluating regionalism and global integration perspectives.

1.Discussions

During the Middle Ages, Azerbaijan established trade relations with many Asian countries through Iran. To support trade operations and foreign merchants, several caravanserais were built in Tabriz, Ardabil, Shamakhi, Baku, Derbent, and other Azerbaijani cities. These caravanserais also functioned as marketplaces where people bought and sold various goods. In the following centuries, Indian merchants began to dominate trade operations with Azerbaijani cities along the Caspian Sea and in the Iranian markets, becoming a leading force in these markets by the mid-17th century (Chulkov, 1758). By the beginning of the 18th century, their trade operations had expanded significantly, and the 1820s-1840s were a period of prosperity for Azerbaijan-Indian trade relations (Mammadli, 2011).

Astrakhan, a city in Russia, played a vital role in facilitating economic relations between Azerbaijan cities and various cities in Western Europe, Central Asia, and South-West Asia (Antonova, 1972). The city became a major center for Asian trade and warehousing. Merchants transported goods purchased in Azerbaijan's cities to countries in Asia and Eastern Europe while bringing back various items from these countries to Azerbaijan. Trade relations, particularly with India, held significant importance for Russia,

with the British and Dutch requesting Russia to open a new path across the White Sea to India several times. The Moscow government realized the potential income these relations could bring to the treasury.

Azerbaijan had a network of internal trade routes that connected its major trade and craft centers. Among them, Shamakhi played a crucial role. It was ideally located to connect the Northern and Southern khanates of Azerbaijan and had roads that linked it to some cities of the Ottoman state, such as Kars and Bayazet, indicating extensive trade. Additionally, there were roads connecting Azerbaijani cities with neighboring countries such as Georgia and Dagestan. In the late medieval era, even though the Portuguese lost their dominance in maritime trade to the English and Dutch, the status of Indian merchants remained unchanged. Historical records confirm that Indian and other Asian merchants held the majority of foreign trade in Sind, Gujarat, Kankan, Malabar, and other regions. The English and Dutch followed the Indian merchants in the maritime trade, coming in second and third respectively. The Portuguese paid a large sum of money to obtain permission for seaborne commerce and continued to engage in trade with Iran, Arabia, Southeast Asia, and other countries (Chicherov, 1965).

The Russian government put its economic interests first when it sought to attract Eastern merchants. By connecting Asian trade with European trade, Russia aimed to gain maximum profit. Indian merchants, along with Iranian, Azerbaijani, and other Asian traders acted as intermediaries.

During the late Medieval era, Russian Customs Officers documented the export of various types of fabrics from India, Iran, and Azerbaijan. They registered up to thirty different products during this time. Historical sources from that period suggest that new varieties of fabrics were introduced to the market and became part of the regular trade operations. During the Middle Ages, Eastern fabric production flourished and 77 types of fabrics were exported as a whole (Astrahanskiy Sbornik, 1896) which indicated the favorable development of Eastern fabric production in the early new era.

Encouraging the development of trade in the eastern part of Russia, the Tsarist government was able to enrich the country's treasury and provide essential goods. Despite considering customs interests, the Russian ruling class did not oppose the expansion of trade by Indian and other Asian merchants in Russian cities. However, Russian merchants were worried about the growing influence of Indian merchants in the commercial life of Russian cities. In the 1739 manuscripts, there were references to the "Astrakhan Indian Company." It

appears that this company brought together several small trading groups. Similar companies may have existed in Azerbaijan. Between 1737 and 1745, Indian traders imported an average of more than 38 thousand rubles annually to Iran and the South Caucasus. (Yuht, 1957). To protect their trade routes and shield themselves from local rulers, merchants formed trade organizations (Bartold, 1963; *Raphael du Mans*, 1890). Trade organizations existed in the Middle East and medieval cities of Azerbaijan. According to Chardin, these organizations were prevalent (Mammadli, 2011). At the beginning of the new era, Russia was at war with Sweden. In 1705, an uprising against the government broke out in Astrakhan, which lasted for two years and severely impacted the city's trade (Mammadli, 2020). Despite the discontinuation of certain trade routes, the Astrakhan trade route that connects Azerbaijan, India, Russia, Iran, and Turkey through the Caspian Sea remained operational. Indian merchants residing in Astrakhan were responsible for bringing Russian goods through the Sea to the ports of Niyazabad, Derbent, and Baku. Moreover, these goods were transported through land routes to Shamakhi, Ardabil, and Tabriz. By passing through Isfahan, Indian merchants reached Bandar Abbas via caravan and continued their journey by sea to the port of Bandar Surat (Mammadli, 2021). Manuscripts from 1639 describe the delivery of Russian goods from Astrakhan to the ports of Niyazabad, Shamakha, and Derbent by Indian merchants (Russko-indiyskiye otnosheniya, 1958). Merchants who arrived in Derbent from Astrakhan on ships, continued their journey to other cities in Azerbaijan. The documents reveal details about monetary transactions made during their journey. It is also reported that the routes taken by the merchants were quite dangerous. One of the documents, dated May 16, 1667, mentions the attack organized by Razin on merchant ships that were sailing from Shamakhi towards the Terek to Astrakhan. The attacked ships were carrying Russian, Iranian, and Indian merchants along with their goods from Shamakhi. The document notes that more than 70 merchants were on board during the attack and Razin managed to take several hostages, including Iranian and Indian merchants (Mammadli, 2020). Azerbaijani merchants who brought goods to Russia often had to bring their families with them when they were forced to stay for long periods (Mammadli, 2011). This fact is supported by the primary sources from the Astrakhan State Regional Archive. The document is titled "The List of Baku and Salyan Merchants from Astrakhan Province Who Have Been Issued a Passport for Trading in the Cities of Northern Russia" (Алиев, 1964). This list includes over 60 merchants who, along with their families, migrated from Baku and Salyan to Astrakhan with the intention of transporting goods to northern cities.

Despite the challenges posed by the sea and caravan trade routes, where caravans were frequently raided and ships in the Caspian Sea were destroyed by storms or captured by sea pirates, Azerbaijan's economic ties with Asian countries persisted. Merchants, who established themselves in Azerbaijani cities, paid substantial taxes to the local judiciary, managed to secure religious freedom, and preserved their religious practices. Despite the economic impact of competition from Russia, Turkiye, and Iran, Azerbaijan's cities benefit from their strategic location and access to lucrative foreign and transit markets.

Azerbaijan was an important link between the East and Europe. Azerbaijan's internal trade routes connected its main trade and craft centers. Shamakhi was one of the important centers (Abdullayev, 1960). Shamakhi was located in a favorable location and connected the Northern and Southern khanates of Azerbaijan. There were several roads that connected the city with some cities (for example, Kars and Beyazet) of the Ottoman Empire. Extensive trade took place along these roads (Bronevskiy, 1823). There were also roads connecting Azerbaijani cities with neighboring Georgia and Dagestan.

Conclusion

Trade has always been a vital aspect of Azerbaijan's economy. Due to its strategic location on the international trade route, as well as its geographical position and wealth, its significance in foreign and transit trade has significantly increased. Azerbaijan holds a crucial place on sea and land routes, forming a key connection between Eastern countries and Europe. During the late Medieval era, Baku was a key exporter of high-quality fabrics to Asian countries. Additionally, Baku played an important role in exporting petrol, salt, and saffron. Petrol was considered a rare commodity in many countries, making it a valuable export. In the early new era, Baku began exporting oil to Iran, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Kurdistan, Georgia, Russia, Dagestan, and India. During the late Middle Ages, Azerbaijan's economy was negatively affected by political and social events, particularly the armed rivalry among Russia, Turkey, and Iran. However, despite the war, the cities of Azerbaijan such as Tabriz, Shamakhi, Ganja, and Baku actively participated in trade due to their favorable geographical location and rich markets.

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