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Central Asia – Transcaucasia – Rome: the significance of the Amu Darya water route via the Caspian Sea to Transcaucasia.

For many centuries, the Silk Road played a vital role in linking the economy and culture of peoples from East and West, through trade routes connecting Mediterranean countries with China and the Far East. The researchers Buriakov and Gritsina focus on the gradual development over many centuries of these routes, which changed and adapted to particular historical events.

Central Asia could be connected with Rome via four main routes: i) the North road to the Black Sea, ii) through the Caucasus to the Black Sea area, iii) through Iran to the Eastern Mediterranean, and iv) by sea from Bactria to India and then by sea to Egypt.

Political and economic factors influenced the development of trade, which depended to a great extent on the relations between states in the region. Rome, as the capital of a great empire, was one of the starting points of the Silk Road. Trading caravans also travelled by land and sea to the East from other Roman cities, as did diplomatic embassies and military legions in pursuit of their traditional enemy, the powerful Parthians (mid-3rd century BC - 226 AD).

The Parthian Empire acted as a barrier, blocking the transmission of Roman goods to the East along the principal path of the Silk Road through Iran. Thus, as mentioned in the history of the Han Dynasty¹, “Daqin, (the Roman ruler) had long searched for an opportunity to open up access to China, but the Parthians did not permit them to pass through their territory, in order to thus remain the only Chinese silk provider for Daqin”.²

¹ Imperial dynasty in China 206 BC – 220 AD

² Bichurin, *Collection of Central Asian people in ancient history*, 1950, p.226-227.

Researchers working in this field believe that the main route of transmission of Roman goods was to the north, through the ancient cities of the northern Black Sea regions, through the Lower Volga region to Central Asia, and then to the east. Another route was by sea, travelling south of Egypt to the ports located on the west coast of India, especially the port of Barygaza, in north-west India.

It is suspected that goods arrived from Egypt, through the Transcaucasian region (then under Roman domination) and past the Caspian Sea, all routes controlled by the tribes of Sarmatia. Indeed, numerous artefacts of Egyptian-Roman origin have been uncovered in the cemeteries of the North Caucasus, dating to the era of the Sarmatian³ tribes. There are some interesting facts in Strabo's "*Geography*" (written in the 1st century AD), including the information that the Aorses people, one of the tribes of Sarmatia, controlled the road along the Caspian Sea. They traded Indian and Babylonian goods obtained via exchanges with the Armenians and the Medes peoples (see *Strabo XI, V, 8*).

Another possible trade route seems to have been a direct path through Central Asia along the Amu Darya river, across the Caspian Sea to the South Caucasus, and then on to Europe. According to Weinberg, the development of this route was dependent on the flood cycle of the Amu Darya, whose waters flowed through the Lake Sarygamysh and the Uzboy River as far as the Caspian Sea. Such conditions gave rise to the water trade route that spanned from Central Asia to the Caspian and the Black seas, and then to the West. The researcher Muraviev has analysed these conditions in his hydrographic study of the Aral-Caspian Sea basin, analysing the low level of the Caspian Basin (which is -58 m below sea level, +/-10 m). His research suggests that the Syr Darya River flowed into the Caspian Sea in the 6th century BC.

A number of studies by Barthold, Kes, Tolstova and Gulyamova all establish that the Uzboy River levels depended on the Amu Darya River, and more specifically, the resulting water level in the Sarygamysh Basin. The overflow of the Sarygamish basin meant that the waters of the Amu Darya filled up the Uzboy watercourse. Therefore, the Uzboy river was not the continuation of the Amu Darya river, but in fact flowed out from Lake Sarygamysh as an independent river.

³ About the 5th century BC to the 4th century AD

The latest geomorphological and geological research suggests that the river basin and the Uzboy watercourse were in use from around the 7/6th centuries BC until the 4/5th centuries AD, and came back into use again from the 12th to the 15th centuries AD. Throughout these periods, the river was used for trade and cultural exchange. The early period, covering as much as twelve centuries, provided long-term stability which in turn created favorable conditions for the emergence and development of water routes along the Silk Roads, connecting Central Asia with Transcaucasia and Europe.

Unfortunately, historical literature pays little attention to the study of the Silk Roads, despite this being an extremely interesting topic of investigation. The most recent research into this question was carried out by Rtveladze⁴, Piankov⁵, Wainberg⁶ and Mavlanov⁷. In 1893, the findings of A. Glukhovsky, expedition leader of the General Staff of the Russian Empire, were published under the title: *“The Amu Darya river waters skipping over its old riverbed to the Caspian Sea and the creation of the Amu Darya Caspian route, from the borders of Afghanistan over the Amu Darya River, the Caspian Sea, the Volga and the Mariinsk Canal System to St. Petersburg and the Baltic Sea”*. This study supports the Russian belief in a waterway between Central Asia and different parts of the European continent.

According to their studies, the earliest data on the link between Transcaucasia and Central Asia comes from the end of the 4th century BC, and is written about by Quintus Curtius Rufus and Arrian. According to Arrian’s work, the Khwarezm ruler, King Pharasman, came to Alexander the Great in 329 BC to propose an alliance. The Khwarezm king presented himself as “the tribal neighbor of the Colchis and Amazons” and offered his services as a guide to the *Pontus Euxinus* (the Black Sea) (Arrian, IV, 15).

This information has thrown doubt onto the geographical remoteness of the Khwarezm (who were based in the Lower Amu Darya River delta) from the Colchis (a Georgian tribe who lived along the lower Rioni River in western Georgia).

In this period, the supremacy of the Khwarezm tribe probably extended to the southwest and west of the Caspian Sea, including the Uzboy riverbed. In the mid-1st

⁴ The Silk Road//Encyclopedic dictionary – Tashkent 1999; Central Asia – Transcaucasia – Rome// The periodic collection: The new approaches to the problems of current importance in Uzbekistan – Tashkent, 1999, 11-23 p.

⁵ Central Asia in the antique geographical tradition. – Moscow, 1997

⁶ The waterway through Amu Darya and the cult centers along this river// Journal of historical, philological and cultural Studies. N 15 – Moscow-Magnitogorsk, 2005

⁷ The ancient ways in Central Asia. – Tashkent, 2008, 216-219 p.

millennium BC, Colchis was one of the most powerful tribes in the Caucasus, and renowned far beyond the region. This explains why King Pharasman seemed keen to inform Alexander the Great that his tribe, the Khwarezm, were neighbours of the Colchians.

At the same time, the Uzboy waterway provided another possible route. The Caspian Sea communicated with Transcaucasia by this way. The researcher Barthold studied the problem of the convergence of the Amu Darya with the Caspian Sea via the Uzboy river. Barthold takes account of Strabo (along with Patroclus and Aristobulus), who believed that the Oxus River (the Amu Darya) was the largest river of Asia, excluding the Indian rivers. According to Strabo, the Oxus River was navigable, and many Indian goods were transported and traded over the Hyrcanian Sea (also known as the Caspian Sea). Subsequently the goods were ferried to Albania or Azerbaijan, through the Cyrus (that is, the Kura River), to the territories of the ancient Georgian kingdoms, Iberia and Colchis, and until they reached the *Euxeinos Pontos* (Black Sea) (*Strabo, XI, VII, 3*). Items and artifacts found in the Khwarezm settlement, Kalalygyr II, in Transcaucasia, confirmed that the northeastern route was in use from the 4th to the 2nd century BC. Subsequently, goods were transported from the *Euxeinos Pontos* to the Roman Empire, which in the 1st century AD ruled almost all of the regions around the Black Sea. In another part of his “Geography”, Strabo gives some facts about the Amu Darya River: “the River Oxus separated Bactria from Sogdiana, and was remarkable for its navigability, being the means by which Indian goods were transported over the mountains and downstream to the Hyrcanian Sea (the Caspian Sea), and then further into the nearby region via the local rivers, until they reached the *Euxeinos Pontos* (the Black Sea)” (*Strabo, II, I, 15*).

Pliny (referring to Varro, 127–116 BC) clarifies this information about the trade route: “during a Pompey campaign, it was discovered that it was possible to arrive in Bactria from India in 7 days, by the river flowing into the Oxus and then on to the Caspian Sea” (*Pliny VI, 52*). Additionally, he informs us that “Indian goods were transported over the Oxus River across the Caspian Sea to the Kura River. Then they had to undergo the five day trip by land to the Phasis river, which flows into the Black sea” (*Pliny, VI, 50*). According to the Chinese author, Shijie, merchants transported these goods by land and water to regions bordering the Gui Shui River (the Amu Darya River), and sold them for low prices.

The Roman historian Solinus has clarified further details about the trade route from India to Central Asia and Transcaucasia: “It is possible to get the Ira River from India over

Bactria to the Dealer River (probably the Kundu Darya River in Afghanistan), where it flows into the Oxus River and then to the Caspian Sea. The Ira River is along the borders of Armenia and Kingdom of Iberia”.

This thus confirms the existence of an ancient trade waterway linking India, Central Asia, Transcaucasia and the regions of the Black Sea under Roman power. The success or decline of this trade route depended on a variety of natural and geographical, political and economic factors.

The historical literature and archaeological data attest as to the extent of the cultural and economic integration of ancient Central Asia with other parts of the world via the water routes of Silk Roads. Archaeological artefacts in Uzbekistan appear to prove the reality of the trade connection at this time. A variety of boats and representations of boats were found in this territory; for example, rock art depicting a single-masted boat from the Bronze Age was discovered in the Nukus area. Another one, showing women in the boat, was found at the site of the ancient settlement Afrasiyab in Samarkand. These boats were structurally identical to the ones of Ancient Egypt, Babylon, Assyria and Mesopotamia. These artefacts and the above analysis of manuscript sources confirm the existence of effective and productive links between Central Asia and other parts of the world. Yet unfortunately, the history of these waterways is often neglected, not only in Uzbekistan but across Central Asia. Nonetheless, the study of the historical connection between Central Asia, Transcaucasia and Europe has not only a scientific value, but is also an important component of our modern understanding of the history of waterways across the regions. As such, we consider that the creation of an international project would be extremely important and must include the participation of historians and archaeologists who have studied these regions of the world.