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Arabs, Khazars and the Battle for Transcontinental Trade Routes (7th-13th centuries)

The rise of the Arab caliphate and the formation of the Khazar state in the area north of the Caucasus were two major foreign political events which largely shaped Georgian history in the 7th-10th centuries. These two events also influenced the configuration of trade routes across the continent.

The disappearance of the Sasanian state in the 640s-650s created a political vacuum in the Middle East, swiftly filled by the expanding Arabs. Their campaigns had a great impact on the economic activity of the region.

In late antiquity Sasanian Iran played an important role between Rome/Byzantium as well as Central Asia, India, and China. Yet neither Rome/Byzantium nor Sasanian Iran fully controlled the major trade routes, the so-called “silk roads” and one of the reasons for their military clashes and territorial expansion was the struggle to control the trade routes in the Near East. As a rule, the initial and final sections of each trade route were under the control of different political powers.

The Arab rule, on the contrary, created a single economic space from the Maghrib (North-West Africa) to Central Asia. Many scholars believe that imagining such economically and geographically diverse territories as a single Arab economic space is an exaggeration. Indeed, connecting such a vast area in the 7th-8th centuries which spanned multiple continents must have been extremely difficult. However, we can still point to certain trade and economic unity across the Arab caliphate. Traveling throughout the Arab state for commercial purposes was much easier for both Arab and foreign merchants. This is supported by a great deal of written sources preserved by Arab travelers and traders during their travels to various provinces of the Arab Caliphate and much beyond.

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Transcontinental Trade Routes (7th-13th centuries)**

In the Umayyad period the territory from North Africa to China's borders was subject to one political power. For the first time since the Achaemenid era, a single political power gained long-term direct control of the trade routes connecting Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean, as well as the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Peninsula¹.

In other words, the Arabs (in this case, the Umayyads) controlled the trade routes at both ends of which until the 7th century there were traditionally two competing geopolitical powers, one Mediterranean and the other the Asian one². During the Umayyad period, these roads connected the most developed economic space at that time - the countries around the Mediterranean Sea - with the most populous regions - the western part of China³, India, Central Asia and the islands of Southeast Asia.

As the mainland trade routes through the Near East mostly had its starting and ending points connected to the sea, for the Arabs the need for a strong navy grew proportionally. During the Sasanian period, there were sea trade routes from the Persian Gulf to India and then to Southeast Asia. The Arabs continued to actively use this route while also establishing a military and naval force⁴. They needed this to control the Mediterranean Sea, or at least to ensure the security of their trade activities by neutralizing the Byzantine naval power. For example, in 655, the Arabs defeated the Byzantines in the battle of Dhat al-Sawari off the coast of Lycia. This is significant because the Arab fleet came was from Alexandria, and it is also known that when the Byzantines evacuated Egypt in 641, they withdrew all their ships. As a result, the Arabs had to build a new fleet in about 14 years, which enabled them to mount military and economic competition to the Byzantines in the Mediterranean Sea.⁵

¹ A. K. Bennisen. *The Great Caliphs*. Yale University Press. 2009, pp. 141-150.

² G. F. Hourani. *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*. New York. 1975, pp. 51-61.

³ Maritime traffic between the Near East and China began to decline sharply in the 9th century when the Abbasid state began to decline and the Tang dynasty in China waned and eventually ended in 907. É. de la Vaissière. "Trans-Asian Trade or the Silk Road Deconstructed". *The Cambridge History of Capitalism. The Rise of Capitalism: From Ancient Origins to 1848*. Vol. 1. Cambridge. 2012, pp. 101-124.

⁴ However, during the long period of Arab rule, the sailors traveling from the Near East to the Far East were still Zoroastrian Persians, referred to in Chinese sources as "Posse", and Arabic-speaking Muslims as "Tashih". It is also worth noting that a large portion of the terms related to seafaring in Arabic came from Persian, demonstrating the Persians' dominance in maritime activities. See G. F. Hourani. *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, pp. 61-78; H. Hasan. *A History of Persian Navigation*. London. 1928, pp. 95-122.

⁵ G. F. Hourani. *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, pp. 53-61.

Warfare in the Mediterranean and its eastern shores led to a decline in trade relations during the Umayyad era, and an increase in traffic across South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. This model persisted through the first decades of the Abbasid rule (beginning in 750), though a sharp economic rise began by the end of the 8th century⁶. Relations with Byzantium, particularly with the Khazars, were stabilized (detailed discussion will follow below), which contributed to the development of commercial relations. A massive influx of gold from the West Africa to the Near East began, and the demand for slaves from the Slavic lands and other north Eurasian territories fueled Arab economic expansion into territories much beyond the Near East. The population mobility in single vast Arab space far exceeded the conditions on the European continent at that time. Higher level of population movement in the Middle East contributed, to some extent, to social mobility and, thus, at least initially, to economic development.

Let us, however, return to the 7th century. Following the fall of Sasanian Iran and the conquest of large swathes of the Byzantine Empire, the South Caucasus, the areas around the Caspian Sea, and parts of Central Asia became the northern periphery for the Arabs. In this way, the caliphate became neighbors with the nomadic tribes living in the Eurasian steppes, who facilitated active economic contact with the peoples living further away in northern Eurasia and in the north and north-east of Europe. With these geopolitical changes, the Arabs perceived the South Caucasus and Central Asia not only as a military outpost, as was primarily the case during the Byzantine-Sasanian era, but also as a connecting space with the Eurasian steppes, a border with the nomadic world.

As a result of Arab dominance the character of the “silk roads” underwent significant changes⁷. Central Asia’s importance as an interconnecting point between China and India, and China and the Near East, declined in the 8th-10th centuries⁸. The battle in Talas in 751 between the Chinese and the Arab forces ended in victory for the latter, contributing to China’s exclusion from Central Asian political and economic processes⁹.

The exclusion of Central Asia was also well reflected in the geographic

⁶ E. Ashtor. *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages*. London. 1976, pp. 71-114.

⁷ E. Rtveladze. *Historical past of Uzbekistan (in Georgian)*. Tbilisi. 2009, pp.145-147.

⁸ É. de la Vaissière. “Trans-Asian Trade or the Silk Road Deconstructed”, pp. 101-124.

⁹ E. Rtveladze. *Historical past of Uzbekistan*, p.144.

scope of activities of the well-known Sogdian merchants. Even after the rise of the Arabs, they continued their economic activities in the Eurasian steppes, the Khazar state, etc. However, the geopolitical cataclysms across and around Central Asia significantly reduced the Sogdians' role as mediators¹⁰.

Furthermore, another significant area negatively impacted by the Arab campaigns was the Armenian cities known for active regional trade in the Sasanian-Byzantine era. The economic level of Armenian cities declined during the 7th-8th centuries. It was precisely during this period that key trade routes began to shift from Armenian cities to the Aran-Shirvan area (the Mtkvari-Araxes basin)¹¹.

At the time of the existence of a unified Arab state in the Near East (7th-10th centuries), there was a powerful Khazar state in the steppes of Eurasia, located in the North Caucasus and north of the Caspian Sea. Khazars were not only engaged in pastoral nomadism. Reports by Arab historians as well as the existing archaeological data reveal that agriculture was also quite widespread among the Khazars¹².

In the 7th-10th centuries, the geographic position of the Khazar state placed it at the crossroads of two strategically important trade routes in Eurasia: the first leading from the Khazar state to the south through the Caucasus to the Near East. The second road went from Central Asia (Khwarezm) to the Volga River. The Khazar state thus served as a sort of transit space. Indeed, merchants traveling from East or Central Asia to the Khazars usually discovered active trade taking place in the upper reaches of the Volga River, to the north of the Black Sea, or in what is nowadays eastern and northeastern Europe.

The Rus and other traders from these regions (see below for detailed

¹⁰ É. de la Vaissière. "Trans-Asian Trade or the Silk Road Deconstructed, pp. 101-124. However, this does not imply that the Sogdians abandoned their activities. It is thought that in the 7th-8th centuries they were actively involved in trade passing through the Khazar territory. See É. de la Vaissière. « Les marchands d'Asie centrale dans l'empire khazar ». M. Kazansky, A. Necessian, C. Zuckerman édés., **Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient**. Paris. 2000, pp. 367-376. Various archeological data attest to the activity of Sogdian traders in such distant areas as India and the shores of the Indian Ocean. F. Grenet. « Les marchands sogdiens dans les mers du Sud à l'époque préislamique ». Cahiers d'Asie centrale. 1/2. 1996, pp. 65-76. The activity of Khazarian traders in the Eurasian steppes is discussed by T. Noonan. "The Economy of the Khazar Khaganate". *The World of the Khazars*. Leiden. 2007, pp. 229-233.

¹¹ Я. А. Манандян. О торговле и городах Армении в связи с мировой торговлей древних времён. (V в. до н. э.-XV в. н. э.). Ереван. 1954, стр. 189-199.

¹² The nomadic lifestyle of the Khazars differed from the nomadism common in Central Asia and China-Mongolia during the same or earlier period. As it was said, the Khazars were actively engaged in agriculture.

discussion), whom the Arab travelers call the “people of Saqaliba”¹³ were frequent visitors to the lower and middle reaches of the Volga. There was also frequent trade traffic on the Caspian Sea. This explains the huge number of coins dating from the 9th-10th centuries that were in circulation in the southern, eastern, and eastern-western territories of modern Russia¹⁴.

As previously stated, the Arab expansion in the South Caucasus and Central Asia brought them closer to the Eurasian steppes. In effect, similar to the Byzantine and Sasanian rulers before, the Arabs had to defend corridors from the steppes to the Near East. In the 5th-6th centuries, the masters of the Eurasian steppes were the Huns and the Turks, while during the Arab period it were the Khazars.

The significance of the South Caucasus for the Arabs was largely conditioned by this basic geography. Passages over the Caucasus mountains and across the Derbend (a corridor along the western shore of the Caspian) were the traditional routes through which it was possible to penetrate from the Eurasian steppes into the South Caucasus and deeper into the Near East.

This strategic circumstance led to intense competition between the Khazars and the Arabs over which power will control key passages and roads. In 641, the Arabs reached Derbend¹⁵, and in 642, the Khazar capital, Al-Bayda, was occupied¹⁶. This information is likely not accurate since, apart from Tabari, it is not confirmed in any other contemporary or later sources. Indeed, al-Bayda was geographically quite distant from the Arab-controlled territory.

Intermittent clashes between the two powers continued until 652, while large-scale hostilities erupted in 681/682 and did not end until the Abbasids took power in 750¹⁷. Along with the Arab expansionism in the Middle East and the South Caucasus, the Khazars, in turn, subjugated the people living in economically and militarily important territories. In 670, they conquered the

¹³ The term “Saqaliba” most likely emanates from the ancient Greek word “sklavoi” and then must have been related to the Latin word “sclavus”. Most likely, the Arabs did not consider the Rus to be “Saqaliba” among the peoples but considered them as a separate group. See T. M. Kalinina. “Al-Khazar and As-Saqaliba: Contacts. Conflicts?”. *The World of the Khazars*. Leiden. 2007, pp. 195-206.

¹⁴ T. Noonan. “The Economy of the Khazar Khaganate”, pp. 233-243.

¹⁵ D. J. Wasserstein. “Khazars and the World of Islam”. *The World of the Khazars*. Leiden. 2007. p. 373-377. According to V. Minorsky, the Arabs reached Daruband in 641. V. Minorsky. *A History of Sharvan and Darband in the 10th-11th centuries*. Cambridge. 1958, p. 18.

¹⁶ D. M. Dunlop. *The History of the Jewish Khazars*. New York. 1954, pp. 41-58.

¹⁷ In 713 Maslam b. Abd al-Malik captured Derbend. See D. J. Wasserstein. “Khazars and the World of Islam”. *The World of the Khazars*, pp. 373-381.

Bulgars living in the basin of the Kuban River, and, at the end of the 7th century – the middle of the Volga River¹⁸.

In 681/682-750, for almost 70 years, the South Caucasus experienced a series of invasions by Arab and Khazar armies. The Khazar campaigns in Albania in 681-682 and 685 are particularly noteworthy. Later, during the Arab invasion of 713, Derbend was most likely seized. In 717, for a short time, the Khazars conquered the territory of modern Azerbaijan. Apparently, the Khazars also reached Armenian lands in 723. In 724 the Arabs attacked the Khazars through the Darial pass¹⁹, and in 730, the Khazars entered the South Caucasus through the Darial pass under the command of Barjik. In 732, Marwan Ibn Muhammad marched against the Khazars with an army of 40,000, aiming to subjugate the Alans²⁰ in north of the Caucasus, who were pressured by the two forces. Active hostilities stopped only in the middle of the 8th century²¹.

As this brief description of Arab-Khazar hostilities demonstrates, the South Caucasus was a de facto border between the two major powers. It is also clear that the dominance over Derbend and the Darial pass was a priority for both powers, as these roads allowed passage from the South Caucasus to the North and vice versa.

This largely explains why the Arab-Khazar wars hampered operation of trade routes from the south to the north. This should have had an impact on Kartli and to a certain extent Lazika too, which in addition to serving as a military springboard for the two competing powers, were effectively cut off from the region's trade network. Indeed, active trade relations did not develop between the Near East and the Khazars until 750 when the Arab-Khazar wars ended and the Abbasid dynasty replaced the Umayyads.

¹⁸ R. K. Kovalev. "Commerce and Caravan Routes Along the Northern Silk Road (Sixth-Ninth Centuries)". ARCHIVUM EURASIAE MEDII AEVI. Edited by Th. T. Allsen, P. B. Golden, R. K. Kovalev, A. P. Martinez. Vol. 14. 2005, pp.77-78.

¹⁹ M. Lortkipanidze. "The character of Arab ownership in Georgia" (in Georgian). Materials for the history of Georgia and the Caucasus. Tbilisi. 1963, p. 74-75.

²⁰ The Alans are an interesting example for the study of the nomadic lifestyle of the peoples living in the steppes of Eurasia. Like the Khazars, the Alans were semi-nomadic, semi-agricultural. The Alans also had their own king in the 6th century (named Sarozius) and according to archaeological data, they built several fortified settlements that controlled strategic passages and roads. More importantly, the areas around these fortified settlements were actively used for agriculture. See I. A. Arzhentseva. "The Alans Neighbours of the Khazars in the Caucasus". The World of the Khazars. pp. 59-73.

²¹ А. Н. Новосельцев. «Страны Закавказья и Хазария в VIII-первой половине IX вв.». Georgia and the East (in Georgian). Tbilisi. 1984, стр. 186-194.

The Abbasid Era: Trade with the Khazars and the Establishment of Major Trade Routes

From late 8th century on, close economic ties were established between the Islamic world and the Khazars. Trade contacts must also have been caused by the transfer of the capital by the Abbasids from Damascus to Baghdad, which was relatively closer to the South Caucasus and the Khazars. The 9th century dirhams entered the southern part of what is nowadays Russia and Eastern Europe precisely from the mints of Baghdad and other cities in Iraq²². This, in turn, suggests that the South Caucasus, and especially its eastern part, was at the center of economic activity between the Arabs and the Khazars from the end of the 8th century to the beginning of the 9th century, turning into a sort of transit zone.

The Khazar state stretching from the north of the Caspian Sea to the north of the Black Sea controlled key trade routes in the region. The Khazars' territorial expansion, as well as the region's specific landscape – steppes – enabled the Khazars to control the main river arteries entering the Black and Caspian seas – the Volga, Don, and Kuban.

These rivers flow from the north and north-west to the Black and Caspian seas, and the Khazars exerted a great deal of influence on most of modern south-western Russia because they controlled the junctions of these rivers with the seas. In other words, traders of the Rus and other ethnic groups coming from the north via the Volga, Don, and Kuban rivers to reach the Black and Caspian seas had to pass through the territory held by the Khazars, where the latter levied commercial taxes²³. As a result, the main reason for the conflict between the Rus and the Khazars was to gain control of the rivers and trade routes that ran through them.

Slaves, in which the Arab world was widely interested, were exported in

²² T. Noonan. "The Economy of the Khazar Khaganate", pp. 233-243.

²³ Istakhri. in Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North. Translated with an Introduction by P. Lunde and C. Stone. London. 2012, p. 181. According to the 13th century historian Yakut Ibn-Fadan, there are records of the collection of taxes by the Khazars. Yakut. "Mujam al-Buldani", p. 48. Ibn Fadlān. Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North, p. 82.

great numbers from the Khazar state. Fur from the taiga and tundra areas was another product coveted by the peoples in the Near East²⁴.

International trade routes did not end with the territory of the Khazars but passed through the territories further into the north and west. For example, it is worth noting the trade conducted by the Rus with the Khazars²⁵. The Rus were actively involved in importing goods from modern Eastern European territories²⁶. Furthermore, the 9th-century Arab historian Ibn-Khordadbeh notes that trade linked the Rus lands to Western Europe. The author claims that there were two trade routes from Spain and France to the Middle East: one through the North Africa and the other through the Slavic and Khazar lands to Central Asia²⁷.

Political events in the South Caucasus during the 7th-8th centuries revealed that the main trade routes between the steppes and the Islamic world did not pass directly through Lazika and Kartli or what came to be known as Georgia. The nearest major trade route that passed near Kartli was the road leading to Derbend along the western coast of the Caspian Sea, which was developed only at the end of the 8th century. At the time Lazika and Kartli were more of an economic periphery as neither Georgian nor foreign sources from the 7th-8th centuries provide details about the existence of important trade routes passing through Georgia.

At the same time, the absence of major trade highways through Georgia did not preclude the existence of small, secondary routes. In this regard, archeology provides us with interesting information about the existence of possible trade routes in the region.

The settlement of “Imenkovo” was discovered in the middle of the Volga. It consisted of many fortified buildings that were probably intended ensuring safe passage for caravans. The buildings were mostly constructed on elevated ground and were reasonably well protected by ditches and walls. It is interesting that the mentioned buildings and structures are dated by the 6th-7th centuries,

²⁴ Yakut. "Mujam al-Buldani". p. 49. Ibn Fadlān. in Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North, p. 78. Contrary to T. Noonan's work mentioned above, in our opinion, the Khazar state produced less than it imported from other countries. The Khazars played a transit role rather than producers or traders. See Istakhri. in Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North, pp. 181-182.

²⁵ Ibn Rusta. in Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North, p. 155.

²⁶ А. В. Назаренко. Древняя Русь на международных путях. М. 2001, pp. 71-112.

²⁷ Ibn Khurradadhbih. Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North, pp. 141-142. Ibn al-Faqih. Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North, pp. 142-143.

which may well indicate the existence of the caravan routes from Central Asia to the Caspian-Black Sea area well before the rise of the Khazars.

The discovery of camel bones is another artifact that indicates to the existence of trade routes in the 6th-7th centuries. After that camel bones from Central Asia to the Caspian-Black Sea region are only found in graves from the 10th century. Silk was another product found in great numbers²⁸.

To the south of the Volga River, between the Terek and Sulak Rivers, the fortified site of Andreiaulsk dated by 6th-8th centuries, was discovered, which many scholars believe to be the city of Babandari on the road south to Derbend. The fortified site is strategically important because it also led to Khasaiut in the west, where many Sogdian, Chinese, and Byzantine silks were discovered. The road then went south through the Caucasus Range to Georgia's Black Sea coast²⁹.

The road from the upper reaches of the Kuban River to the settlement of Arkhiz (modern Karachay-Cherkessia) was another trade route that passed close to the Georgian territory. On this route, Sogdian and Chinese silk dating back to the 9th century was discovered. The road from Arkhiz led to Moshchevaya Balka, where multiple silks and other items from Central Asia and China were found. The road from Moshchevaya Balka to the Black Sea coast crossed the Caucasus range. Moreover, the bones of a mule discovered on the caravan route from Arkhiz attest to the active use of this road³⁰. The use of the mule should not be surprising because the trade routes described above passed through the complex geographical landscape of the Caucasus, and the mule was a very convenient means of transportation in the given period.

As we have seen, to the north of Georgia, between the Black and Caspian seas, fortified places and roads existed even before the rise of the Khazars. However, precisely after the latter established a powerful state to the north and west of the Caspian Sea, caravan roads and fortified places for travelers were further expanded.

An important direction of the Khazar trade was the northern part of the Don River bed. This is supported by the discovery of numerous camel and mule bones. Bones have also been discovered in Sarkel, a strategic Khazar fortress on the Don River. The presence of two caravansarais totaling 5558 square meters

²⁸ R. K. Kovalev. "Commerce and Caravan Routes Along the Northern Silk Road (Sixth-Ninth Centuries)", pp. 77-80.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

proves the existence of widespread trade activity in the area surrounding this fort. These caravansarais along with the Sarkel fortress³¹ together constituted the major crossing point of trade routes in the region. From there roads led to the Crimean Peninsula, eastward to Derbend, and, most likely, to the Black Sea coast of Georgia. The functioning of these roads must have been quite active, despite the discovery of only a few artifacts related to international trade at Sarkel (a piece of paper from Samarkand and an ivory chess piece of Sogdian origin. Both details date to the 7th-9th centuries)³².

The Don River was linked to the Donets River basin, and thus to the Rus-occupied territory. The Rus with furs, swords, and other products traveled by ship through the Don and Donets river basins to the territory of the Khazars, and in some cases, even to the south of the Caspian Sea.

From the Caspian Sea, Islamic coins reached first the lower Volga River, then the lower Don River, the Donets River, the Oka River and the Gulf of Finland via the western coast of the Caspian Sea³³. This road was most likely functioning at the beginning of the 9th century, and many fortified sites were built along it, which were separated from each other by 21.3-30.4 km – a day's travel distance. Therefore, this extensive trade network linked the Caspian side with the territories to the north of Georgia, as well as the eastern European market.

We have already mentioned Ibn-Khordadbeh's account of merchants known as "Radania" reaching the Khazar state from Central Europe via modern Ukraine and Russia³⁴. These accounts are supported by another Arab historian, Ibn al-Faqih, who claims that merchants called "Radania" traded various items from China and the Eurasian steppes³⁵. Furthermore, camel and mule bones were found in the Danube region, highlighting possible trade contacts between

³¹ The construction of Sarkel took place in 840-841 with the help of the Byzantines. From the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, it can be seen how well the Byzantines understood the strategic location of this fortress. Константин Багрянородный. Об управлении империей. М. 1991, 42. 22-31. С. Zuckerman. "Two Notes on the Early History of the thema of Cherson". Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies. 21. 1997, p. 214.

³² A hoard of Sasanian coins and Islamic dirhams was found nearby.

³³ A large number of silk and dirhams were recovered from the many tombs found in the area of the Don River and Northern Donets.

³⁴ Ибн-Хордадбех. Книга путей и стран. Перевод с арабского, комментарии, исследование, указатели и карты Н. Велихановой. Баку. 1986, pp. 123-124.

³⁵ Ibn al-Faqih. in Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North, p.143-144.

the Khazars and northern Byzantium³⁶ and a wide range of Khazar trading activities³⁷.

All this indicates that eastern Europe of the 9th–10th centuries, including the western part of what is nowadays Russia, was closely connected with the Eurasian steppes, the Caspian Sea, China, and Iran-Mesopotamia. Moreover, it can be also assumed that the “Radania” merchants were also active near Georgia’s borders. Most researchers consider these merchants to be Jews³⁸. If we accept this opinion, then, for example, the origin of one of the items found in Moshchevaya Balka – a glass lamp with four Hebrew inscriptions (“Israel”) – becomes clear. The item was probably made in the territory of Syria-Palestine and reached the the North Caucasus via one of the trade route described above³⁹.

The Donets-Don trade route partially lost its function around the 900s when the Pechenegs rose in prominence and managed to occupy important caravan routes along the northern Black Sea coast⁴⁰. Along with the emergence of the Pechenegs, notable changes occurred in the Middle East. Until mid-11th century, a huge number of Islamic coins entering eastern Europe and what is nowadays western territories of Russia originated from Baghdad and other Mesopotamian mints. From 963/964, the situation changed dramatically, and massive issuing of dirhams began in northern Iran. From this period on, most of the Islamic coins found in eastern Europe and the western part of modern Russia came from Central Asia, more specifically the Samanid state⁴¹. This shift

³⁶ R. K. Kovalev. “Commerce and Caravan Routes Along the Northern Silk Road (Sixth-Ninth Centuries)”, pp. 81-92.

³⁷ There is an assumption that in the middle of the 9th century it was the Khazars who founded the city of Kyiv as a trading point.

³⁸ “Radania” merchants were actively involved in slave trade. Their influence gradually decreased in the 10th century when the trade expansion of the Christian Europe begins in the Mediterranean world.

³⁹ It is also significant that in the years 600-900, silk became more available in Europe, in particular in the Mediterranean countries. Since Venetian merchants still do not appear as major merchants and importers of valuable products from the Far East in this period, we can assume that one of the main routes by which silk reached Europe was the trade route of the Eurasian steppes mentioned above. Moreover, the silk found in Europe in the 600-900s is similar to the silk found in the north of Georgia, which is another argument for the existence of active trade contacts through the Eurasian steppes.

⁴⁰ Константин Багрянородный. Об управлении империей, 2. 2-9.

⁴¹ For the distribution of Samanid coins, see R. K. Kovalev. “Circulation of Samanid Dirhams in Viking-Age Northern and Eastern Europe (based on the mints of Samarqand and Al-Shash).”, pp. 2-20; M. Jankowiak. Dirhams for slaves. Investigating the Slavic slave trade in the tenth century. Medieval Seminar at All Souls, 27 Feb 2012. pp. 1-13.

was significant because the direction of Islamic money penetration into territories to the north of Georgia and eastern Europe changed from the western coast of the Caspian Sea to Central Asia. Active use of the route began through the southern Ural region and the Volga basin inhabited by the Bulgars⁴², and the circulating money originated from nine active mints in northern Iran. The number of coins issued in the second half of the 10th century found in the territory of modern Russia and eastern Europe was particularly large highlighting the popularity of the new trade route⁴³.

It should be noted that during the same time period the Rus defeated the Khazar state and the Volga Bulgars took control of the new trade route⁴⁴. This led to an intensified struggle between the Rus and the Volga Bulgars in 985–1000 for the control of the region's trade routes.

These events coincided with a sharp decline in the quality of Islamic coins minted in northern Iranian mints at the beginning of the 11th century. If earlier Samanid coins contained 90% silver, by the 11th century, the level of silver was only 20-40%. Subsequently the use of these coins in trading activities decreased dramatically⁴⁵.

Eurasian trade corridors: Bulgars and the Rus

Bulgars established their state on the Volga/Kama River after being forced to migrate in the northeast direction from the Kuban River Basin in the 7th century. It is worth noting that the area occupied by the Bulgars along the Volga/Kama River was the place where large-scale production of furs is confirmed.

In the following centuries, when the powerful Khazar state was established to the north of the Caspian Sea, and the Bulgars were subordinated

⁴² Р. К. Ковалев «О роле Русов и волжских Булгар в импорте североиранских дирхемов в Европу во второй половине X-начале XI в.». 2015, стр. 1-32.

⁴³ For a general overview see R. K. Kovalev. "When and what regions of the Islamic World exported Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian silver coins to Early Viking-Age Northern Lands?". *Myntstudier. Festskrift till Kenneth Jonsson*. Edited by T. Talvio. M. Wijk. 2015, pp. 68-83.

⁴⁴ Р. К. Ковалев «О роле Русов и волжских Булгар в импорте североиранских дирхемов в Европу во второй половине X-начале XI в.». 2015, стр. 1-32.

⁴⁵ Р. К. Ковалев «О роле Русов и волжских Булгар в импорте североиранских дирхемов в Европу во второй половине X-начале XI в.». 2015, стр.1-32. The so-called "Silver Crisis" also affected Georgia. See T. Dundua, G. Dundua. *Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics*. (in Georgian). Part III. Tbilisi. 2015, p. 52.

to them, they nevertheless retained a semblance of autonomy. It was manifested in establishing active political contacts with neighbors and in various religious matters (Bulgars were followers of Islam)⁴⁶.

It seems that in the 5th-7th centuries the confluence of the Volga-Kama rivers turned into a vibrant economic center. A large number of Sasanian coins of the same period found in the mentioned area attest to this possibility.

When hostilities between the Umayyads and the Khazars ceased in the 8th century, the Bulgars' economic importance began to rise⁴⁷. The city of Bulgari was the economic center, attracting merchants from Khazar khaganate, Central Asia, Derbend, Bardav, Ray, and other parts of the Near East.

Silver money brought by foreign traders was primarily exchanged for furs, honey, and slaves⁴⁸. It is worth noting that none of the listed products or slaves could be obtained directly from Bulgars. Rather the latter appear to have maintained close economic ties with the people living further north. For example, people named Burtas as well as Udmurtians supplied the Bulgars with furs and honey, indicating that active trade routes ran deep across the northern Eurasia.

In addition to the aforementioned peoples, the Rus, who rose in prominence in the 9th century, played an important role. They were likewise interested in the fur trade as indicated by many Arabic sources. The Rus appear to have had their own sources of quality hides and furs, and they, like the Bulgars and Khazars, were interested in attracting inflows of high quality Arabic silver coins⁴⁹.

However, due to their geographical location, the Rus and Bulgars were still dependent on the Khazars⁵⁰, who held the roads from Central Asia to the Caspian and Black seas, as well as the routes from the north of Eurasia to the Caspian basin. Accordingly, the Bulgars, Rus, and other peoples, in order for to receive highly valuable Arab silver, often visited the Khazar capital, Atil. Products from Atil went to Central Asia, the Black Sea coast, and the Near East. Another notable route ran from Atil along the western coast of the Caspian Sea

⁴⁶ J. Martin. *Treasure of the Land of Darkness. The fur trade and its significance for medieval Russia.* Cambridge. 1986, pp. 5-14.

⁴⁷ Р. К. Ковалев «О роле Русов и волжских Булгар в импорте североиранских дирхемов в Европу во второй половине X-начале XI в.». 2015, стр. 1-32.

⁴⁸ J. Martin. *Treasure of the Land of Darkness*, pp. 5-14.

⁴⁹ J. Martin. *Treasure of the Land of Darkness*, pp. 35-43.

⁵⁰ O. Tskitishvili had a different opinion. See Zakaria Al-QazwinI's reports about Georgia and the Caucasus. Translation and comments by O. Tskitishvili (in Georgian). Tbilisi. 1975, pp. 63-64.

to Derbend and further south, to the territory of modern Iran-Azerbaijan.

Due to their strategic location, the Khazars were actively re-exporting the products of the Rus and Bulgars. This gave the Khazars large economic income, as foreign goods entering their territory were taxed.

Behind these active transcontinental trade relations a military competition for the control of the trade routes was unfolding between the Rus, Bulgars, and Khazars. The Khazars were on the defensive, while the Rus were quickly expanding and by the 960s destroyed the Khazar Khaganate. In 985, the Rus chieftain Vladimir campaigned against the Bulgars and in 1006, the Rus and the Bulgars reached an agreement under which the latter were allowed to trade freely in the Rus-held cities⁵¹.

The growth of the Rus power in the Volga region, as well as the replacement of the Samanids by the Karakhanids in Central Asia, had a significant impact on trade routes from the north of the Caspian Sea to Central Asia. Despite significant difficulties, the Bulgars managed to maintain a kind of monopoly on furs and hides right until the Mongol invasions in the early 13th century⁵². In exchange for furs, the Bulgars attracted ceramics from Iran and the rest of the Near East. For example, archeological data prove that iron knives were exported to the Bulgar territory from Zanjan, Tabriz, Isfahan and other Iranian cities.

Now let us focus on the Rus, who held a special place among the northern peoples closely involved in trade with the Middle East. Kyiv was an important trade point for the Rus as they controlled all river traffic (and thus economic activity) leading to the Black Sea by controlling the city, which was located to south of all main estuaries of the Dnieper River⁵³.

From Kyiv the Rus reached the Black Sea, then Crimea, where they paid a 10% tax to the Byzantines in Kherson⁵⁴. Then the road led to Samkarsha

⁵¹ J. Martin. *Treasure of the Land of Darkness*, pp. 14-27.

⁵² However, in the middle of the 12th century, the trade potential of the Bulgars suffered a sharp decline, when the Kara-Khitai in Central Asia defeated the Kara-khanid. The whole of Central Asia was divided between different powers (notably the Seljuk Turks), which reduced trade contacts with the northern part of the Caspian. The political and economic power of the Khvaraz people appeared from this chaos.

⁵³ Constantine Porphyrogenitus mentions that the Rus came down the Dnieper to Kyiv. See Константин Багрянородный. *Об управлении империей*, 9. 4-17.

⁵⁴ The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, p. 140. According to Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Chersonesus had a great trade with the Rus, the Pachanics, and in general a lot of things were found in these areas. Константин Багрянородный. *Об управлении империей*. 6. 1-6, 53. 52-57.

(Tmutorakan) and the mouth of the river Don⁵⁵, from where the Rus reached the point where the Don and the Volga rivers were closest geographically. The Rus then crossed the Volga by land, from where they reached the capital of the Khazars, Atil.

The geographical penetration by the Rus into the Caspian Sea introduced them to the Middle East. Numerous rich cities in the region were founded or revived as a result of expanding trade routes around the Caspian Sea. Therefore, it can be argued that the Rus expeditions to the Caspian Sea, Aran, and Shirvan⁵⁶ were motivated by economic interests and the desire to gain as much information as possible about existing trade routes.

Later the dominance of the Seljuk Turks in the Middle East and especially on the routes from the Persian Gulf and Central Asia/China to the Mediterranean weakened Byzantium's economic position in the 11th century. These geopolitical shifts were to have an impact on Black Sea trade relations as well. Tmutorakan, rather than Kherson, became the Rus' main Black Sea port in the 11th century. Later that century Tmutorakan was replaced by Sudak from which a century later Rus merchants exported furs to Constantinople and the Seljuk-controlled territories⁵⁷.

Byzantium on the Black and Mediterranean Seas

Among the important economic centers located near Georgia, the largest were the Byzantine Empire with its megapolis Constantinople. The Byzantine economy developed differently than the economies of Western Europe or the

⁵⁵ It seems that the Khazars also controlled the mouth of the Don, where they had built the fortress of Sarkel.

⁵⁶ Simultaneously with the campaigns in the territories around the Caspian Sea, the Rus saw economic benefits in the direction of another important economic center, Byzantium. As a result of the military campaign against Byzantium in 907, the Rus got the right to trade freely in the imperial capital. The same rights were strengthened by the agreement concluded in 945. Instead of fur, the Rus imported silk, wine and glassware from Constantinople. Another important economic center with which the Rus had active contacts was Scandinavia. The Rus represented a kind of mediators between the North and the Near East by importing silk and glassware to Scandinavia.

⁵⁷ It should be added here that in the 12th century, another trading city, Novgorod, was promoted on the territory of medieval Russia. Novgorod had active relations with the cities in the Baltic and also with the peoples living in the north, from whom the Novgorod Rus obtained furs and skins.

R. L. Kovalev. «L'économie de Novgorod». Novgorod ou la Russie oubliée. Une république commerçante (XII^e-XV^e siècles). 2015, pp. 199-222.

Middle East. The Byzantine economic model was more centralized, with Constantinople holding the most important economic position by being somehow separated from the rest of the empire.

Just as the empire under Justinian or his successors depended on the benevolence of Sasanian Iran whether to keep trade routes through the Middle East open, so did Byzantium depend on the trade routes through the Arab territory following the expansion of the caliphate. The Arabs, like the Sasanians, could easily block the key routes to Byzantium. In other words, in the 8th-13th centuries finding alternative trade routes to Central Asia, China, and India was of strategic importance to Byzantium.

However, the Arabs controlled the trade routes on a much grander scale than the Sassanians. We have noted in the beginning how the Arabs controlled the starting and end points of the major Middle East trade corridors thus putting Byzantium in a more dependent position than what the Sasanians were able to achieve.

It is no wonder that from a purely economic standpoint the Byzantines desired to maintain peaceful relations with the Arabs. Often when active hostilities between the two powers took place in the 7th-8th centuries, Byzantium economy was reorganized and adapted to new trade routes.

The geography of the empire is also an important factor in the study of trade routes through Byzantium. The latter in the 8th-13th centuries comprised the territories around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Trade relations in the Mediterranean were larger in scale than in the Black Sea. Geography separates these two seas by the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. Ideally, this should not have posed any serious obstacle to active trade relations between the two geographic areas. However, the Black and Mediterranean seas served as separate economic units within the Byzantine world. For instance, Kherson and Tmutorakan were not so much connected to Constantinople as they were to Trebizond. The latter was connected more to the main trade routes in the Middle East than the Byzantine capital, and served as a collection point for a 10% *ad valorem* tax⁵⁸.

The Seljuk conquest of eastern and central Asia Minor harmed Byzantium's Black Sea trade. The capture of Baghdad and the rest of Mesopotamia by the Seljuks cut off important trade routes running from the

⁵⁸ The Cambridge Economic History of Europe. Vol. II. Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages. ed. M. M. Postan, E. Miller. Cambridge. 1987, p. 139.

Persian Gulf to the north in Trebizond. As was often the case, the closure of trade routes due to political upheavals resulted in the opening/finding of new/alternative routes. The decline of the Persian Gulf-Mesopotamia-Trebizond road was followed by the revival of the sea route from India to Egypt, specifically via Alexandria. The Byzantines did not want to rely on the Seljuks' benevolence, so they encouraged Egypt's political and economic rise⁵⁹. This, in turn, led to the slow decline of Mesopotamia's transit potential, which was further exacerbated by the arrival of the Mongols in the 13th century.

In the 10th-12th centuries began the reorientation of the economy of the Middle East towards the Christian Europe⁶⁰. The Catholic Europe, cut off from the Mediterranean Sea as a result of the Arab expansion in the 7th-8th centuries, was slowly regaining its lost economic positions in this important market. Christian Europeans possessed high quality gold coins, which the Arabs dearly needed⁶¹.

At the time when the Seljuks pressed upon Byzantium in Asia Minor, major events were taking place in the Mediterranean Sea. If before one of the guarantors of the power of the Byzantine Empire was a strong military and commercial fleet, in the 10th-12th centuries the ships of the Italian city-states emerged, and at a slow pace (by the decisions of the Byzantine emperors) gained trade privileges in the imperial cities. In most cases they were exempted from trade taxes⁶², which weakened the positions of the Byzantine merchants.

Although the Seljuk campaigns in the 11th century changed the Middle East's economic landscape, over time, however, following the initial shock, in the 12th-13th centuries the cities in Georgia and the wider South Caucasus began to rise in prominence. Caravan routes through Mesopotamia were actively used again. A good example of this is the story told by Michael the Syrian, in which he mentioned 400 merchants coming from Persia but who unfortunately perished due to heavy snowfall in the mountains of Anatolia⁶³.

The issue of the first silver coin in the 12th century, and the first gold coin in the 13th century, can be seen as an indicator of the overall improved

⁵⁹ Egypt's economic rise coincided with its independence from the Baghdad Caliphate under the Fatimid dynasty. The strength of the Fatimid economy was reflected in the quality of the issued gold coins.

⁶⁰ The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, p. 421-422. A. E. Laiou. The Byzantine Economy. Cambridge. 2007, pp. 133-146, 155-163.

⁶¹ H. Pirenne. Medieval Cities. Their Origins and the Revival of Trade. Princeton. 1946, pp. 77-105.

⁶² A. E. Laiou. The Byzantine Economy, pp. 143-144.

⁶³ The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, p. 456.

economic situation in the Seljuk-controlled territories. This is especially relevant because Anatolia was generally rich in silver but lacked gold⁶⁴.

The geography of the empire largely helped the evolution of the Byzantine economy. Long coasts and numerous large and small islands in the Mediterranean Sea created favorable conditions for the movement of merchant ships from Asia Minor to the Peloponnese peninsula and vice versa. Constantinople, with its large population, was another center of attraction. Due to the size of the population of Byzantium and the rise of Egypt and other power centers, trade in the Mediterranean Sea must have been quite extensive.

In the 10th-13th centuries, there must have been, though smaller in scope, but nevertheless active trade in the Black Sea basin. As previously stated, the main highway here was the sea route from Crimea to Trepizond. Despite the limited information, Georgia's Black Sea coast most likely was actively involved in the Black Sea trade. Georgian merchants are mentioned in the context of commercial activity in Constantinople and other Byzantine cities⁶⁵.

All of the above-mentioned routes – to the north of the Caspian and Black Seas, in Central Asia, across the lands inhabited by Rus, the Trebizond-Crimea corridor, or in the Mediterranean Sea – were of primary or transcontinental importance in the 7th-13th centuries Middle East and Eurasian steppes. It should also be noted that all these roads passed around Georgia, and only their smaller branches passed directly through Georgian lands.

As a result, in the 7th-13th centuries Georgia was cut off from transcontinental trade, the situation largely conditioned by the country's relatively unfavorable geography. The Caucasus range served as a decisive geographic impediment, while the small Caucasus range in the country's south likewise limited the expansion of international trade routes to major Georgian cities. However, this did not stop numerous trade routes from developing near Georgia's borders since the 11th century. Those were smaller in scale, more as regional trade routes rather than larger transcontinental ones.

⁶⁴ The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, pp. 446-447.

⁶⁵ Т. Н. Берадзе. Мореплавание и морская торговля в средневековой Грузии, стр. 73-74.