

*Silk, Spices and Oil - 'Transcaucasian' Trade Route and
Georgia*

Tedo Dundua
Emil Avdaliani

Nowadays Georgia is a comfortable transit passage for Asian oil and gas to the European market. “Transcaucasian” pipelines have increased political sympathies towards the country and continue to contribute to its economic growth. The modern vision of Georgia as a transit hub, however, emerged in ancient times and though the intensity of transit ebbed and flowed, the idea of the Georgian corridor has persisted. The paper traces the dynamics of the silk roads from ancient to modern time indicating the changes along the way and underlining the current geopolitical importance Georgia holds both for the collective West as well as the rising China.

Though the topic is expansive, academic literature in English on Georgia’s silk road history from ancient period to 21st century is lacking. This is a modest attempt to fill in some historiographical gaps with a particular focus on ancient and medieval periods.

An idea of “Transcaucasian” and Pontic (the Black Sea) transit of the Asian goods is not a new one. As far back as in the 4th c. B.C. Alexander of Macedon took his Graeco-Macedonian army towards the very heart of Asia. There, particularly in India, the Europeans tasted the spiced meals for the first time, and they decided that their life would be dull without pepper. So, one could buy some spices for, perhaps, a drachm in the valley of Indus, and sell it in Rome, or maybe, in Athens for hundred (Plin. NH. VI. 101). The profit from the trade was very handsome.

In all there had been the following routes towards India: 1. maritime route – from the Red Sea ports of Egypt via the Indian Ocean towards Malabar coast. Alexandrian merchants profited from this route mostly. According to Strabo, some one hundred and twenty big Alexandrian ships sailed a year to India bringing back the spices, precious woods and stones (Strabo.

II. 118; XVI. 781; XVII. 798). But the Southern coast of Eastern Iran was very wild, without harbors, so one had to load a ship heavily with food and water for a direct sail and only small section was left for the commercial goods.

There existed one more sea route from India through the Persian Gulf to the mouth of Tigris and Euphrates; 2. the second route was very expensive. Starting in India, it climbed to the Iranian highlands, crossing the Iranian plateau to Mesopotamia and Syria. There the spices were placed on the European ships. Iranians and Graeco-Syrians profited from this route; 3. the third route was amazingly cheap, for it was river-route via well inhabited and supplied districts, city of Phasis (Poti, Western Georgia) being a starting point together with a mouth of the river Phasis (Rioni), very comfortable for the large boats. Rioni is prolonged by the rivers Kvirila and Dzirula towards the Likhi mountains. They divide Georgia into two parts: the West (ancient Colchis), and the East (ancient Iberia). The merchants used to climb the mountains, and then board again at the Kura-river boat-station in Eastern Georgia. A voyage down the river towards the Caspian Sea was swift.

According to Herodotus, the Caspian Sea could be easily covered in eight days on a large boat (Herod. I. 203). One could find the river Amu-Daria (Oxus) in the past joining the Caspian Sea in its Southeast section. Amu-Daria – Balkh (Bactra) – Indus is the last section of the route. And the Greek merchants were already in the wonderful country of leisure and the spices, in the homeland of Buddha. The Greeks and the Romans, the Byzantine soldiers and merchants were in Georgia for the transit purposes and within the frames of early European integration.

From the 2nd c. B.C. the Chinese started to send silk caravans via the Chinese Turkestan. Then the usual “Transcaucasian” and Pontic transit took place. This route was cheap, but very fragile. As soon as Iran recovered from the Hellenic onslaught, it cut the route organizing the Caspian fleet (T. Dundua. North and South /Towards the Question of NATO Enlargement/, pp. 5-6 www.nato.int/docu/other/01/010101.htm; T. Dundua. Georgia within the European Integration. Tbilisi. 1999, pp. 30-32).

The route is well traced in Graeco-Roman sources. “Aristobulus declares that the Oxus is the largest of the rivers he has seen in Asia, except those in India. And Patrocles, as well as Aristobulus and Eratosthenes, say that it is navigable and that large quantities of Indian wares are brought down on it to the Hyrcanian Sea, and thence on that sea are transported to Albania and brought down on the Cyrus River and through the region that comes next after it to the Euxine” (Strabo. XI. 7. 3).

All the authors listed above, including Strabo, use the present tense meaning that “Transcaucasian” transit of the Indian goods (along the rivers Indus – Bactra /Balkh/ – Oxus /Amu-Daria/ – Hyrcanian /Caspian/ Sea – Cyrus /Mtkvari/Kura/ – Phasis /Kvirila and Rioni/ to the

city of Phasis /Poti/ in Colchis) worked hard in the 3rd c. B.C., first half of the 2nd c. B.C., and in 19/20 A.D. when Strabo “published” his work.

“Varro says also that during this expedition of Pompejus it was known that it is but seven days journey from India to the Bactrians, Bactra River, which runs into the Oxus; and that the merchandise of India, transported by the Caspian Sea, and so to the river Cyrus, may be brought in not more than five days by land as far as to Phasis in Pontus” (Plin. NH. VI. 52). It is clear enough that Varro speaks about the possibility of “Transcaucasian” transit by 65 B.C., it had been already broken. And Pliny has nothing to add. Again, there is no transit in the 70s of the 1st c. A.D.

The Seleucids gained direct access to the cheap spice market as far back as in the beginning of the 3rd c. B.C. Greeks living in Syria organized a spice supply of Europe via the “Transcaucasian” river-route thus saving much money while transportation of the Indian goods. They started to gain a handsome profit. Then it had to be shared with the allies, Greeks from Bactria. Colchian coins of the 3rd c. B.C. found in Central Asia, Bactrian coins of the 2nd c. B.C. found in Eastern Georgia, and the presence of the Bactrians in Colchis attests to this trade.

Becoming stronger, the Arsacids of Parthia/Iran cut this trade by organizing the Caspian fleet. From that day on only their merchants could have direct access to the spices transported towards Europe. The Seleucids had to do nothing but to pay a huge sum for the goods brought from the left bank of the Euphrates. Romans, already governing Syria, had to do the same.

Thus, Trans-Iranian transit became the most important one, only sometimes being interrupted by the same Romans, humiliating the Parthians and with the help of the Kushans organizing silk and spice supply of Europe via “Transcaucasian” trade route (T. Dundua. Georgia – Early Origin and Antiquity. Appendix /in Georg. with Engl. Summary/. Tbilisi. 2019, pp. 28-40).

When the “Transcaucasian” transit was finally broken, the Byzantines did their best to reach Asia rounding the Caspian Sea in the North, and moving towards the Turks, dwelling already in Central Asia. But this route – steppe route to the North of the Caspian Sea – failed to be nice because of a very low socio-economic level of the Caucasian mountaineers by that time. When this level became a bit higher, Genoa organized silk and spice supply of Europe via the North Caspian regions and the “Northern Caucasus” to Crimea (Caffa). And the rest of the route was as follows: Sebastopolis (Sokhumi, Georgia) – Trebizond – Galata – Italy. When the Ottomans diminished the Italian trade, Africa was rounded by the Portuguese vessels (T. Dundua. The Making of Europe /Toward History of Globalization/. The Caucasus and Globalization. Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies. Volume 2, Issue 2. Sweden. 2008, p. 41).

From the Middle Ages to Modern Period

In the 7th-10th cc. two major foreign policy developments played an important role in Georgian history. First was the emergence of the Arabs and the spread of Islam and second – formation of a powerful semi-nomadic state by the Khazars to the North of the “Caucasus” in the lower reaches of the Volga River (E. Avdaliani. Georgia and Silk Roads (6th-13th cc.) /in Georg. with Engl. Summary/. Tbilisi. 2019, pp. 65-76; A. K. Bennisen. The Great Caliphs. Yale University. 2009, pp. 141-150).

The wars between the Arabs and the Byzantines as well as a long conflict between the Arabs and the Khazars severely undermined the economic potential of the “South Caucasus”. Famous for various trade routes in Late Antiquity, those corridors almost ceased to operate across the “Caucasus” in the 7th c. However, it was at this time that new trade routes (corridors) slowly began to be formed. From the turn of the 7th-8th centuries, economic activity began to shift from Armenian cities to the Kura-Araxes basin, which led to the growth of Tbilisi and various cities in Arran and Shirvan (E. Avdaliani. Georgia and Silk Roads (6th-13th cc.), pp. 100-102).

Another important factor contributing to the economic growth of the Eastern part of the “South Caucasus” were close economic contacts which from the end of the 8th c. were formed between the Islamic world and the Khazars. The economic development and furthering of trade relations should have also been caused by the Abbasids’ decision to move the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, relatively closer to the “South Caucasus” and the Khazars. 9th c. dirhems were reaching Southern parts of modern Russia and Eastern Europe from the mints of Baghdad and other Mesopotamian cities (T. Noonan. The Economy of the Khazar Khaganate. The World of the Khazars. Leiden. 2007, pp. 207-244).

Under the Abbasid rule Georgian and particularly Armenian cities experienced significant development due to a general economic growth taking place in the “South Caucasus” and the Middle East. It is notable that a long and difficult process of unification of Georgia coincided with the above-mentioned distinct economic growth of Georgian cities and villages. These led to the development of a whole network of regional trade routes along Georgia’s borders, which in turn were linked to much larger, transcontinental trade routes running through Mesopotamia, northern Iran and Byzantium (E. Avdaliani. Georgia and Silk Roads (6th-13th cc.), pp. 100-102).

Appearance of the Seljuks in the second half of the 11th c. only slightly slowed the functioning of trade routes near the Georgian borders. From the 11th-12th cc. we again see the economic growth of the cities of Arran, Shirvan, and Armenia well evident in the Georgian, Persian-Arabic and Armenian written sources (V. Minorsky. Studies in Caucasian History.

London. 1953, p. 105).

Thus, like large transcontinental routes, the roads of regional importance too were located outside the Georgian territory, but nevertheless near the borders of the Kingdom of Georgia. This meant that at the time of the unification of Georgia (late 10th c.) the country was again at the periphery of major economic activity in the region.

Since the establishment of the trade routes running through Arran, Shirvan and Armenia took place simultaneously with the formation of a united Georgian monarchy, the Bagrationis (ruling Georgian dynasty) in 11th-13th centuries initiated an expansionist policy driven by the desire to master the regional trade routes which criss-crossed Dvin, Barda, Ganja, Tbilisi, Ani, Trebizond, Ahlat, Tabriz and many other major cities (E. Avdaliani. *Georgia and Silk Roads* (6th -13th cc.), pp. 196-197).

The invasion of the Mongols upturned the entire fabric of the 13th c. trade routes criss-crossing the “Caucasus”, which kicked off the gradual loss of control by the Georgians over regional trade. There were periods when Italians and other Europeans traded with the Western Georgian ports in 13th-15th cc., or when the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in the 18th c. tried to revitalize its “North Caucasus” commerce, but overall the country lost the trade transit role it once possessed (The Role of Trade Routes in Georgian History <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/20840/The-Role-of-Trade-Routes-in-Georgian-History->).

This effectively lasted for several centuries when the Ottoman and Persian empires dominating the Middle East and the South Caucasus till the emergence of Russian Empire as a major player in the region by the end of 18th century, denied the Georgian kingdom and principalities from active participation in the regional trade routes.

With the South Caucasus under the Russian control, some efforts were made by the Tsarist administration to renew the region’s transit capabilities. By the end of the 19th century when the Nobel brothers industrialized Baku and needed viable export routes to the Black Sea ports the Transcaucasian railway from the Caspian to the Black Sea emerged (<http://www.transcaucasian-railway.com/>).

From early Soviet times till the late 20th c. when, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of roads, pipelines, railroads and other infrastructure projects began to run from the Caspian to the Black Sea through the Georgian territory. Georgia returned to its positioning between the Black and Caspian seas, between Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

One of such projects is the 826-kilometer Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, opened in 2017, which enables the delivery of cargo between China and Europe with a haulage duration of approximately two weeks. Up to eight million tonnes of cargo may be carried on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway by 2025. The project was supported by Turkey, Azerbaijan and the collective West as opposed to the railways and other infrastructure projects promoted by Rus-

sia. Moreover, pipelines such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) create a network spanning the Caspian and Black seas with Georgia playing a vital transit role (TANAP <https://www.tanap.com/tanap-project/why-tanap/>).

There is also an emerging Chinese factor. Since 2013, when Beijing announced its near-\$1-trillion “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) Georgia has had a chance to become a part of the initiative which plans to connect China with Europe through Russian and Central Asian corridors (China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Flux <https://www.eurasiareview.com/27022019-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-in-flux-oped/>). True that China lacks a long-term strategic vision for the South Caucasus, but if there is a certain area where China thinks geopolitically in regards to the region it is the latter’s geographic situation – the South Caucasus corridor is the shortest rail route from China to Europe, which potentially makes it an important region within the BRI.

Georgia now works to position itself as a regional transit hub. A good representation of Georgia’s rising position on the new “Silk Road” is a recurrent event dedicated to the new Silk Road concept held in Tbilisi since 2015. The latest event was held in 2019 when up to 2000 politicians, potential investors from all over the world, visited the Georgian capital (Silk Road Forum <http://www.tbilisisrf.gov.ge/>).

A trans-Eurasian dimension has been accorded to the South Caucasus and Georgia in particular when a DCFTA was signed between Tbilisi and Brussels and in 2017 between Tbilisi and Beijing. Georgia saw a chance to turn into an interconnector between the two economic powerhouses.

Thus since 1991 Georgia finds itself in a favorable geopolitical situation when the country is successfully positioning itself as a major transit route for oil and gas heading from the Caspian to Turkey and the Balkans. Furthermore, as argued above, the rise of China and attempts to revitalize the ancient silk roads give Georgia a major opportunity to evolve into a regional transit hub with an ambition to reconnect Asia and Europe. This fits into the historical background outlined in the paper when various trade routes in the South Caucasus of ancient and medieval periods were enumerated. A certain continuity is emerging between the present and the past underlying the importance of the South Caucasus and Georgia specifically as a focal point on the historic silk roads turned nowadays into the gas and oil routes.