

The Trade Routes and the Silk Trade along the Western Coast of the Caspian Sea from the 15th to the First Half of the 17th Century

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The Silk Road usually implies a network of trade and communications that stretched from east to west and connected China and the countries of the Far East via Central Asia and the Middle East to the eastern Mediterranean, or through the northern coast of the Caspian Sea and the Volga basin to the Black Sea coast. However, at certain historical stages, a network of maritime and overland routes stretching from north to south, commonly called the Volga-Caspian trade route, also played a significant role in international trade and cultural contacts. The geopolitical realities of the early Middle Ages relating to the relationship of Byzantium, the Sassanid Empire, and the West Turkic Khaganate, the advance of the Arab Caliphate to the north, the spread of Islam in the Volga region, the glories and fall of the Khazar State, and the Scandinavian campaigns in the Caucasus, closely intertwined with the history of transport and communications connecting the north and south through the Volga-Caspian route. In a later era, the interests of the Mongolian Uluses, and then the political and economic aspirations of the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid State, and Russia, collided or combined on these routes. The article discusses trade contacts existing between the north and the south in the 15th and first half of the 17th century along the routes on the western coast of the Caspian Sea.

Keywords: Caspian Sea, Silk Road, Volga-Caspian route, Astrakhan, Shirvan, Derbent, Shamakhi, Gilan, silk trade

Background of the Volga-Caspian Trade Route

Active commercial relations between the peoples of the Middle East and the north were known even to ancient authors. In particular, Strabo wrote about the nomadic people of the Aorses, who controlled most of the northwestern coast of the Caspian Sea and maintained the caravan trade of Indian and Babylonian commodities on camels, in cooperation with Median and Armenian merchants. According to Strabo, as a result of this trade, the Aorses gained such high wealth that they wore rich gold jewelry. The information given by Strabo caused lively discussions in the academic community. However, we can assume that at the turn of the Common Era, an international north-south trade route existed and ran along the western coast of the Caspian Sea, being in fact the Caspian way or Caspia Via, and passing through the Derbent Pass and the territory of Caucasian Albania, or modern northern Azerbaijan. Commodities from India and the Middle East were delivered to the north Caucasus along this trade route.¹ Here the strong and warlike Aorses or, otherwise, the Sarmatians, were actively involved in trade relations between the north and the south, engaged in escorting caravans and delivering these goods to the merchants of the northern peoples. Thus, if we talk about the prehistory of the north-south trade route, then its age approximately coincides with the rise of the Silk Road. The peoples of the Volga region, the north Caspian region, the Caucasus and the Middle East could enter into direct or indirect contact and receive information about each other due to this commerce.

In the 2nd century AD, there was an influx through the Caspian steppes into the north Caucasus of powerful and numerous Hunnic masses, which penetrated through the Darial Pass or the so-called Alan Gate, and through the Derbent Pass, or Caspian Gate, to the territory of Caucasian Albania and Persia. The constant influx of new tribes from the Volga gave a powerful impetus to the formation of a new ethnopolitical Hunno-Bulgarian massif in the north Caucasus, and it put strong pressure on the possessions of Sassanid Persia.² The desire to put a barrier before their onslaught, as well as a concern for the safety of trade routes connecting the north with the south, prompted the Sassanid kings to begin the construction of strong fortifications at their northern borders, running through the western coast of the Caspian Sea. The remnants of the so-called Beshbarmak, Gilgilchay and Derbent walls and fortifications located on the territory of Azerbaijan and south Dagestan are relics of that era.

The establishment of the Western Turkic Khaganate in the 6th century, as well as setting allied relations between the Turks and Byzantium, and their joint struggle with the Sassanid Empire, contributed to the gradual intensification of the northern routes of the Silk Road, which crossed the Volga lands and the Caspian steppes and reached the Byzantine possessions in the Black Sea region, thus bypassing Persian territory. The Turks in alliance with Sogdian commercial corporations, or the Turko-Sogdian alliance, during this period became the

¹ M. S. Gadjeiev, "Strabo Route" as a Part of the Great Silk Road (Proceedings of the International Conference. Baku, November 28-29, 2008) (Samarkand-Tashkent: MICAI, SMI-ASIA, 2009), 27.

² P. Darabadi, "Prikaspiyskiy i Volzhsko-Kaspiyskiy vodnyye puti v geistorii epokhi srednevekov'ya (V-XVII vv.);" *Kavkaz i Globalizatsiya* 3, no. 1 (2009): 146-147.

main intermediary in the international trade in Chinese silk. A well-known historical fact is the successful mission to Byzantium of the West Turkic Khaganate ruler's envoy – the Sogdian merchant Maniakh – who arrived with a large batch of Chinese silk. As a result of this mission, a trade agreement was concluded between Byzantium and the Khaganate, also supported by the military alliance against Persia.

After the collapse of the West Turkic Khaganate in 651, the role of its political heir was assumed by the Khazar Khaganate. Its formation marked the most successful stage in the functioning of the Volga-Caspian trade route. The emergence of the Arab-Muslim Caliphate, which defeated the Sassanid Empire and in a short time spread its foreign expansion far beyond the limits of the former Sassanid Empire, belongs also to this period. A sharp confrontation with Byzantium in the west prompted the Arabs to seek alliances with the powerful rulers of the Khazar Khaganate with whom they first waged bloody wars for the possession of the south and north Caucasus. However, starting from the first decades of the 9th century, around the time of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, both Muslims and Khazars began to realize that peaceful relations and the development of trade between the north and the south promised many benefits to both partners. Thus, a trade alliance between the Arab Caliphate and the Khazar Khaganate gradually developed, and it greatly contributed to the rapid flourishing of caravan routes along the coasts of the Caspian Sea to the Volga region, as well as urban life and craft production throughout these lands.³

As some researchers rightly note, although until the mid-ninth century, the main commerce of the caliphate went through the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, the western, southern and southeastern coasts of the Caspian Sea included in the caliphate, strengthened trade links through the Volga and the Don with Europe. At the same time, the international trade routes connecting the caliphate with the Khazars, eastern Slavs, the Baltic countries and Scandinavia ran through the territory of Azerbaijan. Ports located on the Caspian coast from Abeskun and Astarabad in the south to Derbent in the west supported active navigation. The Arabs undermined the Byzantines' trade routes through the Black Sea, turned them to the east, the Caspian Sea, and took control of the Volga-Caspian trade route, which previously was in the hands of Byzantium.⁴

An important role was played by the activation of the so-called Baltic-Volga route, the commercial and military activities of the Scandinavians (Varangians), and, finally, the formation of the Russian State. The Russian *Tale of Bygone Years (Povest' Vremennikh Let)* describes an actively operating trade route from the Baltic to the Volga, from there to the Caspian Sea, designated as Khvalisskoe (i.e., Khorezmian Sea), and then the maritime route ran to Khorezm and coastal Caspian cities. The source says: "There, from Russia, it can travel along the Volga to the Bulgarians and to Khvalisa (Khorezm)." It is obvious that north-eastern Russia was connected along the Volga route with Bulgar and Khorezm, where the

³ F. Asadov, "Khazaria, Byzantium, and the Arab Caliphate: Struggle for Control over Eurasian Trade Routes in the 9th-10th Centuries," *The Caucasus and Globalization* 6, no. 4 (2012): 140-150.

⁴ Darabadi, "Prikaspiyskiy i Volzhsko-Kaspiyskiy vodnyye puti v geoistorii epokhi srednevekov'ya (V-XVII vv.)," 148.

caravan route led. According to I. V. Dubov, in the early Middle Ages, the Baltic-Volga route was a trans-European artery to which the designation “From the Varangians into the Arabs” was fully applicable.⁵

Indeed, sources’ information suggests that during this period, the Khazars managed to create and lead commercial and political alliances that ensured the passage of commodities in two main directions. This is, above all, the path from Khorezm through the Volga to the Dnieper and further to Western Europe. The second main trade route was access to the markets of the Caliphate for the goods of Khazaria and northern peoples through the south Caucasus. It should be said that Varangians began to play a significant role in commercial operations along these routes, and their squads reached the south Caucasus in their boats. Trade relations between the Varangians and the population of the Caucasus and the southern coast of the Caspian Sea were quite intensive.

Finally, another extremely important stage should be noted in the functioning of the Volga-Caspian route, associated with the establishment of Mongol domination. The emergence in the 13th century of a number of Mongol Uluses – the Golden Horde with its center in the Volga region and the Ilkhanid Empire with its center in Azerbaijan – contributed to the revitalization of economic and cultural contacts along this trade route. Along with other handicraft goods, the silk and silk fabrics of Azerbaijan occupied a special place in the relations between these two Mongolian states in the 13-14th centuries. Military troops from Ulus Juchi were attached to the army of Hulagu Khan (1256-1265) during his conquest of the Middle East. Later on, these troops remained in the territory of the Ilkhanid Empire and settled in Azerbaijan. This was one of the reasons why the Golden Horde khans claimed Azerbaijan was a country conquered by the sword of their soldiers. However, a more important cause of the conflict between these two Mongolian states was the desire to control the urban centers of Azerbaijan, where crafts, particularly textiles, were developed, and international caravan routes intersected. Sources indicate, for instance, that at the request of the Golden Horde ruler Berke Khan (1257-1266) the Ilkhanids allowed a large weaving workshop (*karkhaneh*) to open in Tabriz, and all of its products were sent to the Golden Horde. After the discord between the two states, Abaka Khan (1265-1282) ordered the destruction of this workshop. However, it was restored later on and continued to function, sending fabrics and clothing to the Volga region.⁶ The active mutual influence of the cultures of the Volga region and Azerbaijan is confirmed in many areas – literary works, architectural monuments, and elements of the archaeological heritage, such as ceramics and metal products.

The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453, followed by the establishment of Turkish domination in the Black Sea basin, and the liquidation of Italian trade colonies in this region prompted Europeans to look for new ways to the eastern markets. At this time, the role of the Russian state or Muscovy in international trade started to grow. All this gave a new impetus to the intensification of the Volga-Caspian route. Traveling along

⁵ I. V. Dubov, *Velikiy Volzhskiy Put'* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta, 1989), 33-34.

⁶ A. A. Alizade, *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskaya i Politicheskaya Istoriya Azerbayjana*, XIII-XIV vv. (Baku, 2012), 338.

this way, European merchants could reach Shirvan and the Caspian region of Persia for the purchase of silk and other eastern goods, bypassing the territory of the Ottoman Empire. This period included active attempts by Italian diplomats to get to Azerbaijan and Persia, using the maritime route across the Caspian, although Marco Polo had already in the 13th century reported that “the Genovese merchants have recently begun to navigate” the Baku (Caspian) Sea and brought from there the kind of silk called *ghellie* (gilani).⁷ At the same time, the first direct diplomatic and trade contacts of Shirvan with Muscovy are observed. In 1465, the first diplomatic mission headed by Hasan Beg was sent by Shirvanshah Farrukh Yasar to the court of the Great Prince of Muscovy Ivan III in order to establish trade relations. In response, a Russian embassy headed by Vasilii Papin arrived from Muscovy in Shamakhi, the capital of Shirvan, the following year. Together with this embassy, Russian merchants from Tver, including the notorious Afanasiy Nikitin, set sail on two ships via the Volga River and the Caspian Sea to Shirvan to conduct commercial affairs. From then on, we see the intensification of Russian policy in the Volga region and in the north Caucasus, and the desire of Muscovy to take control of the entire trade route along the Volga and get direct access to the shores of the Caspian Sea and the markets of the Caspian countries. This cherished desire of Russia was realized in the middle of the 16th century by the conquest of the Kazan and Astrakhan Khanates, what radically changed the fate of Volga-Caspian trade, as well as the peoples along this highway.

From Astrakhan to Derbent: The Northern Section of the Trade Route along the Western Coast of the Caspian Sea

In the 15th century, the main Caspian Sea gate on the northern coast was the Tatar city of Haji-Tarkhan (Astrakhan), located near the Volga (Itil or Idil) River’s delta. According to the testimony of Ambrogio Contarini, the Venetian ambassador to the court of the Aqqoyunlu state’s ruler Uzun Hasan, it was about 75 miles from the city to the mouth of the river. It was not a simple matter to make this journey for ships sailing from south to north, as well as in the opposite direction. Contarini pointed out that on April 26, 1476, their ship entered the mouth of the Volga, which formed a wide delta of 72 branches and which flowed into the “Baku Sea” (Caspian Sea). But because of the strong stream, with the help of a cord, then with a certain wind they reached Haji-Tarkhan only after four days.⁸ A little less than a century later, on August 6, 1558, the representative of the English Muscovy Company, Anthony Jenkinson, on a ship with his companions as well as with Tatar and Persian merchants, sailed down the Volga mouth from Russian Astrakhan, noting that this place was “very crooked, and full of flats towards the mouth.” He went into the Caspian Sea also four days later on August 10,

⁷ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian*, ed. Thomas Wright (London: George Belle & Sons, 1845), 36.

⁸ J. Barbaro and A. Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia: A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia in the 15th and 16th Centuries*, trans. William Thomas and S. A. Roy (London: Hakluyt Society, 1873), 149.

indicating that the river mouth consisted of 70 branches.⁹

Merchant ships sailing from the north completed their river route along the Volga in Haji-Tarkhan, and from this place the maritime voyage started. After the destruction of this city by Timur at the end of the 14th century, it has to a considerable degree lost its former significance as one of the main centers on the Silk Road's northern segment. Indeed, Contarini noted this, indicating that it was a small town surrounded by low walls. Haji-Tarkhan contained a few houses built of bricks, although it was "evident that it possessed several edifices at no very distant period." In ancient times, as the author pointed out, it was "a place of considerable trade," and the spices which came to Venice by way of Tana on the Black Sea coast, located a distance of 8 days from there had passed through it.¹⁰ Another Venetian ambassador and contemporary of Contarini, Josafa Barbaro, reported in the same manner about Haji-Tarkhan. He mentioned significant quantities of silk along with spices delivered through this city to Tana until the end of the 14th century. Six or seven heavy merchant ships arrived solely from Venice to pick up this cargo. However, as Barbaro noted, as a result of the destruction of Haji-Tarkhan by Timur, this once big and famous city had turned into a small ruined town.¹¹

Haji-Tarkhan under the new Russified name Astrakhan began to get reconstructed rather intensively after the Russian conquest, when the role of the Volga-Caspian trade route grew again. The conquest in 1552 and 1556 of the Kazan and Astrakhan khanates by Ivan the Terrible, as mentioned above, allowed Russia to take under its control all the trading routes of the Volga region and get direct access to the Caspian Sea. From that time, there was an irresistible desire of the Russian state to penetrate the markets of Eastern countries. The commercial relations of Russia with the East that had started about two centuries earlier acquired a continuous and steady character. The level of commodity exchange greatly increased, and these relations started to play a pivotal role in the general trade turnover of Russia. Trade with Eastern countries through the Volga-Caspian highway contributed to the rapid development and growth of such Volga cities as Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Astrakhan and others, many of which possessed the so-called Tezik,¹² Bukhara, Armenian merchants yards and inns. For instance, the Russian "ambassadorial books" (*posol'skiye knigi*) indicate that in the second half of the 16th century, merchants from Bukhara, Khiva, Shamakhi, Gilan, and Persia conducted constant trade in Kazan. Indeed, in the 16th century, the Eastern trade was incomparably more important for the economic development of Russia than the trade with the West. The documentary sources of this period, in particular the inventory of the Tsar's, nobility's and church's property, parish monastery books, and the inventory of the property of the townspeople, show that Eastern goods were much more common than

⁹ E. Delmar Morgan and C. H. Coote, eds. *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia by Anthony Jenkinson and Other Englishmen: With Some Account of the First Intercourse of the English with Russia and Central Asia by Way of the Caspian Sea*. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1967?), 59-60.

¹⁰ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 151.

¹¹ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 31.

¹² The Russian sources of this period called mainly merchants from Central Asia and Persia "Teziks."

commodities of European origin in Russian life during this period.¹³

The rather intensive growth of Astrakhan as the main port of Russia at the mouth of the Volga and at the entrance to the Caspian Sea, as well as an important transit point on the northern route of the Silk Road from Central Asia to Eastern Europe was not by chance. The Russian authorities actually built a new city, Russian Astrakhan, 12-15 km lower along the river from the old Tatar city of Haji-Tarkhan.

It should be noted that in the first years after the Russian conquest, the commerce in Astrakhan remained still in such a deplorable state that Anthony Jenkinson was very skeptical about the possibility of doing business there. He reported that the castle of the city was neither beautiful nor strong and that the buildings were low and simple, with the exception of the houses of noblemen and superiors. The island on which the Russian city was built was “most destitute and barren of wood and pasture,” and as the land did not give birth to bread, the local population ate mostly the fish. The trade operations carried out in Astrakhan were also not distinguished by large volumes, since the merchants were so impoverished that it was hardly worth building big plans for active commerce there. At the same time, merchants from different places still were coming to Astrakhan. In particular, the Tatars brought fabrics made of cotton and silk, and Shirvan merchants from Shamakhi brought silk threads and fabrics, used in Russia in large quantities, various varieties of variegated silks for belts, chain mail, bows, swords, and in other years – cereal and walnuts. However, all this was delivered in small quantities.¹⁴

The situation started to change by the beginning of the 17th century. As evidenced by the Russian merchant Fedot Kotov, who traveled with a trade mission from Moscow to Azerbaijan and Persia in the second decade of the same century, for the construction of stone buildings in Astrakhan, they used bricks from the former capital of the Golden Horde Saray-Berke (Noviy Saray) located on the river of Ak-Tube (Akhtuba). The stone buildings of the Khan’s palace, chambers, mosques and houses that were preserved there were dismantled, and the stone was brought to Astrakhan to build various structures. In any case, Kotov described Astrakhan as standing on the “meadow side” (i.e., on the left bank) of the Volga, a large stone city with a cathedral church and the Trinity Monastery, and noted that the city towers were decorated with glaze.¹⁵ A member of the Holstein diplomatic mission to Russia and the Safavid state, Adam Olearius, who traveled from Moscow to Persia in 1636-1637 along the Volga-Caspian route, also confirmed that after the destruction of Saray-Berke or “Tsar’s city” (*Zaaref gorod*) as the Russians called it, material for the construction of stone structures, such as city walls, churches, monasteries and other buildings, was delivered mainly from there. “Even in the time of our passage that way, they were loading several great boats with brick, bound for the place aforesaid,” the Holstein envoy noted.¹⁶

¹³ M. V. Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel'stvo Kul'turno-Prosvetitel'noy Literatury, 1956), 5, 45.

¹⁴ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 57-59.

¹⁵ F. Kotov, *Khozheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoy Literatury, 1958), 66.

¹⁶ A. Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors Sent by Frederick Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Muscovy, and the King of Persia* (London: John Starkey and Thomas Basset, 1669), 123.

Of the goods that were exported from Astrakhan to other countries and regions in large quantities, the city was known primarily for its salt, which was mined basically on the right bank of the Volga, in the dry steppe zone, which was abundant in salt lakes and ponds. Russian merchants from Moscow sailed on their boats to Astrakhan to buy salt in the 15th century.¹⁷ Contarini reports that between the city and the coast there was a large salt lake yielding salt of excellent quality, where Russia was principally supplied from, and “which would suffice for a great part of the world.”¹⁸ After the conquest of the Astrakhan Khanate, the Russians also started to conduct extensive trade in this product, collecting it in huge amounts on the banks of the Volga and transporting it in various regions of Russia. Kotov saw large heaps of salt brought from the lakes that were 60 miles away from the Volga on the “Crimean,” i.e. right bank.¹⁹ However, according to Olearius, it was a mistake to believe that the salt trade extended to the southern Caspian countries, Shirvan, Persia, etc., since they possessed their own magnificent salt places.²⁰ Other main types of export goods of Astrakhan were salted fish and caviar.

Even before the Russian conquest of the Astrakhan Khanate, the Tatars were engaged in active trade in horses and cattle – the main type of goods produced by them. Ibn Battuta in the 14th century reported fairly cheap prices for horses, sold for just 4 dinars per head in the city of Saraichik in the lower Volga region.²¹ The Venetian ambassador Barbaro witnessed how the Tatars drove huge herds of horses, sometimes with 4,000 heads, into Azerbaijan and Persia for sale in the local markets. For the tall two-humped camels, they secured 25 ducats per head in Persia. At that time, the Tatar steppes continued to provide beef markets in many countries, so that “very faire and great” oxen were delivered even to Poland, Wallachia, Transilvania, Germany and Italy.²² In the 16th century, Noghai Tatars sold up to 20 thousand horses in Kazan markets every year, and the number of sheep brought to the city from the Noghai Horde for sale in other years was 20,300 heads.²³ Olearius noted that the cattle of the Tatars was large and strong, like the Polish, and the sheep, like the Persian, had large thick tails of pure fat, sometimes weighing from 20 to 30 pounds. Tatar horses were inconspicuous, but differed in strength and endurance. Tatars also bred camels, mainly Bactrians.²⁴

One can judge the commercial turnover between Astrakhan and the Caspian littoral countries during this period according to the Astrakhan archive’s documents. Thus, the number of recorded trade operations about the shipment of commodities from the city to the south reaches 257, about 63% of which was transported by maritime routes. Of these, Derbent accounts for the largest volume – 99, Niyazabad (“Nizovaya” in the Russian version)

¹⁷ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 31.

¹⁸ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 150.

¹⁹ Kotov, *Khozheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 67.

²⁰ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 127.

²¹ G. A. Fedorov-Davydov, *Zolotoordynskkiye Goroda Povolzh'ya, Keraimka, Torgonlya, Byt* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 2001), 223.

²² Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 20-21.

²³ Fekhner, *Torgonlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 45.

²⁴ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 129.

– 16, and Shamakhi – 13.²⁵ Accordingly, extensive international trade relations carried out through Astrakhan were reflected in the structure of both the city and its population. The customs, market-places, taverns, and courtyards of residents, as well as Bukhara, Shirvan and Gilan merchants' houses, including the courtyard of the Crimean Tatars, were located in the city, outside the Kremlin, in the early 17th century.²⁶ Anthony Jenkinson, on his return from Bukhara, also met in 1559 in Astrakhan Shirvan merchants from Shamakhi, and tried to establish business relations with them, but the deal between them did not take place.²⁷ Olearius noted that not only Russians lived in Astrakhan, but also Persians and Indians who had their own separate market-places there, while local Tatars were forbidden to settle in the city. The Bukhara and Armenian merchants and the Crimean and Noghai Tatars who brought all kinds of goods for sale also carried on large-scale trade in Astrakhan. Accordingly, in the 1630s, the city brought to the royal treasury the income from customs duties alone of about “25 thousand Crowns a year.”²⁸ Without sticking to the marinas and without going to the ports, the ships of Gilan merchants trading with Russia stood at sea at anchor below Astrakhan. The goods were unloaded from these ships and delivered to Astrakhan in small single-mast boats (*sandals*) and carts.²⁹

The agreement between the Holstein Company and the Russian Government provides comprehensive information on the nomenclature of commodities exported from Azerbaijan and Persia, which Russian merchants traded and which European merchants were interested in obtaining through the Volga-Caspian route. In 1634, the ambassadors of the Holstein Prince Frederick arrived in Moscow to conclude an agreement on providing the opportunity for German merchants to trade with the Safavid State and India through the territory of Russia. On December 3 of the same year, a corresponding document was signed in the presence and with the certificate of the Swedish ambassadors. Interestingly, this document notes the types of goods that Germans didn't have the right to trade in order not to compete with Russian merchants. This nomenclature included, above all, various types of dyed silk fabrics – velvet, atlas, gold-woven and silk *kamka*, *zenden*,³⁰ the so-called *kutni*,³¹ and silk belts

²⁵ J. T. Kotilaine, *Russia's Foreign Trade and Economic Expansion in the Seventeenth Century: Windows of the World* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 452.

²⁶ Kotov, *Khozheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 67.

²⁷ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 98-99.

²⁸ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 128.

²⁹ Kotov, *Khozheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 68.

³⁰ The word *zenden* meant a fabric of Central Asian origin, noted in Muslim sources under the name *zandanechi*, associated with the village of Zandana in the Bukhara region, where the production of this fabric was known from the 10th century. Presumably, before the Arab conquest of Mawarannah, this fabric was made of silk. But in the future it began to be produced from cotton. Specialists do not have a common opinion whether the fabric *zenden*, noted in Russian historical documents and sources of the 16th-17th centuries, was cotton or silk, although many of them tend to the first option (A. N. Belenitskiy and I. B. Bentovich, “Iz istorii sred-neaziatskogo shelkotkachestva (K identifikatsii tkani “zandanechi”),” in *Sovetskaya Arkeologiya* 2 (1961): 66-78; R. V. Almeyev, “Istoriya i etimologiya drevnego toponima “Zandana” i tkani “zandanichi” v okrestnostyakh Bukhary,” in *Tsivilizatsii Velikogo puti iz prosblogo v budushcheye: perspektivy yestestvennykh, obshchestvennykh i gumanitarnykh nauk* (Samarkand: MICAI, 2017), 136-142.

³¹ In Russia, especially in Moscow in the 16th – 17th centuries, *kutnya* (*kutni*) is the name of a semi-silk fabric of

or ribbons. It was also forbidden for Europeans to buy cotton fabrics of all colors in the markets of Shirvan and Persia and transport them through the territory of Russia, including *kumach* – a type of red fabric, coarse calico, so called *viboika*, which was a cotton or linen fabric with a printed monochrome pattern, as well as another type of cotton fabric, called *kindyak* (or *kindyuk*), a thin cotton fabric called *mitkal*, and sashes. The list of goods that were banned for trade by German merchants was rather long and included, besides the above, carpets, varieties of dyes, including ink nuts, i.e. any paints, glue, and non-edible oil (*mostatelnyye* products). Such commodities as incense, saltpeter, which was an important component for the production of gunpowder, various types of leather goods, especially morocco, weapons and armor, including sabers, knives, bows, bracers, as well as the so-called *tulunbases*,³² tents, blankets and others also were prohibited to trade. The document emphasizes that Russian merchants exclusively could trade these Eastern commodities and exchange them for their own goods: therefore, the Germans “do not buy them, and do not interfere with the Russian merchants in their trade.” Accordingly, the Europeans who wanted to trade duty free with the Safavid state, paying a one-time fee to the Russian treasury in the amount of 300 thousand Russian rubles annually, had to focus on the nomenclature that was not included in the priorities of Russian merchants, namely, raw silk, some types of dyes, luxury goods, precious stones and others.³³

Thus, the document signed by the Holstein ambassadors with representatives of the Russian Tsar indicates the predominance of silk and silk products as the main commodity in the Volga-Caspian trade during this period. The reason for the high demand for silk fabrics and products in Russia can be understood from the description of the clothes of Russian nobility and rich people given by Anthony Jenkinson. According to him, the Russian “upper garment” consisted of brocade, silk and cloth; it was very long, almost to the ground, and fastened with large silver buttons or silk laces. Under the upper garment, another long garment was worn, which was also buttoned with silk buttons. Then he mentioned a thin shirt embroidered with silk or gold.³⁴ Thus, silk fabrics and laces were an important element of clothing of rich people, which stimulated Russian merchants to import large quantities of these products from Eastern countries.

No less were Europeans interested in oriental dyes for use in their own rapidly growing weaving industry. The recommendations given by R. Hakluyt to the merchants of the English Muscovy Company in connection with the journey to open new markets in the East in 1580, stipulate the need to pay special attention to the excellent condition of the dyeing industry

Asian origin; the word comes from the Turkish *kutnu*, *kutni* – a type of sateen mixed with cotton thread (from Arabic *gūn* or *kūn* – cotton, chintz). (M. Fasmer, *Etimologicheskij Slovar' Russkogo Yazyka* Vol. II (Moscow: Progress, 1986.) 434-435.) Along with the *kutni* of Bukhara and Ottoman production among these types of fabric, exported to Russia, there was also “Kyzylbash” *kutni*, manufactured on the territory of the Safavid state. (M. Kh. Geydarov, *Goroda i Gorodskoye Remeslo Azerbajjana XIII-XVII Vekov*, (Baku: Elm, 1982), 167.)

³² *Tulunbases* were percussion instruments of the military in the form of a small tambourine, which merchants from the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid state and Bukhara brought. (Fekhtner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 93.)

³³ Oleariy, *Opisaniye puteshestviya v Moskoviyu*, 5-8.

³⁴ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 39.

in China (Cathay), and instructed them to notice their clothes and painted home decorations, to inspect their dye and see the materials and drugs the Chinese people use, and to bring samples of paints and materials, as this could be of great service to England, producing various fabrics.³⁵

From Astrakhan to the south to the Caspian countries, consignments of goods could be transported in two ways – maritime and land ones. The merchant ships that sailed along the coast to the south could land on the western coast of the Caspian Sea at several main points – Derbent, Niyazabad, and Baku. It should be noted that, according to European travelers, there were no good and reliable harbors on the Caspian coast, especially the western one. The strait between the island of Chechen and the land beyond Tarki was considered the safest shelter for ships. For this reason, Shirvan and Gilan merchants often stayed there overnight. The harbors of Baku, Lenkoran and Fakhrabad were also considered relatively reliable, where, depending on the wind direction, vessels could stand on the leeward coast.³⁶

Depending on the type of vessel on which merchants sailed from Astrakhan to the south, and on the chosen route, ships could use marinas on the coast at several intermediate points. As such, the next stop after Astrakhan could be the town of Terek (*Terskiy gorodok*),³⁷ to where the caravan route stretched along the steppe on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. Adam Olearius described this road in detail during the return journey of the Holstein diplomatic mission from Persia to Astrakhan. According to him, the entire journey from Terek to Astrakhan on carts, horses and camels, when the caravans of Persian, Turkish, Greek, Armenian and Russian merchants joined the embassy, took eleven days. During this time, people had to go through incredible trials. After leaving the town of Terek, the road to the north went not far from the seashore, and during the whole journey they “saw neither city, nor village, nor tree, nor hill, nor any river but that of *Kisilar*,” or any birds. Everywhere there was only a vast deserted, dry, sandy plain, covered in some places with a little grass, as well as “standing pools of salt, corrupt and stinking water.” Because of the intense heat and the abundance of wetlands, swarms of insects circled there, from which neither man nor animal could escape; “the camels, which have no tails to keep away those insects, as the horses have, were all bloody.” An even more difficult problem was the lack of fresh water sources, and people sometimes had to take water from rotten salt puddles that gave off a foul odor, so one had to pinch his nose while drinking.³⁸ Obviously, under such conditions, the merchants engaged in the Caspian trade, whenever possible, tried to use the maritime route across the sea, which was, moreover, shorter and took less time.

The town of Terek stood on the Tyumenka River, and in the early 17th century was a relatively small settlement built of wooden structures. There were bazaars, churches, and houses of residents inside the fortress. A wooden bridge connecting the two banks was

³⁵ *Angliyskiye Puteshestvenniki v Moskovskom Gosudarstve v XVI Veke*, trans. Yu. V. Got'ye. (Moscow, 1937), 147.

³⁶ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 143.

³⁷ This city was founded by the Russians in 1567 on the River “Suyunchi” (or “Sunsha,” in the Russian version), but soon disappeared. In 1588, it was rebuilt in a new place – at the mouth of the Tyumenka River (Fekhner, *Torgonlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 32).

³⁸ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 311.

built across the Tyumenka River, so that traders could transport their commodities by land. The city stood at a distance of five *verst*s from the Caspian coast, and along the riverbed it was quite difficult to get from it to the sea, since it was thickly overgrown with reeds. At the same time, opposite the mouth of the Terek, there was the island of Chechen, which could be reached in a sailing boat in half a day. This island is mentioned in the notes of many travelers who sailed along the western coast of the Caspian Sea. The abundance of sea fish in this place led to the local residents, Kumyks from Tarki and the Highlanders-Circassians carrying on fishing on the island. However, sailing in these places was by no means safe, since merchants could be attacked by robbers. For example, Anthony Jenkinson, who traveled this way to the Safavid state in 1562, reported that when their ship arrived at the mouth of the Terek River, “to the country of Tyumen,” where pirates and robbers usually roam, for fear of meeting them, they went to the open sea.³⁹

Sea vessels bypassed Chechen Island to the east, since the passage between it and the Agrakhan Peninsula stretching to the north was difficult due to the large number of small islands. Merchants tried not to moor in the possessions of the Tarkovsky principality because of the fear of being robbed or high customs duties. However, if they followed the land route along the western coast of the Caspian Sea to Shirvan, they could not avoid the town of Tarki (Tarku), to which caravans could get from Terek in about 6 days. This town is identified by some historians with the ancient capital of the Khazar Khaganate, the city of Semender. In the Middle Ages, it was the capital of Kumyk Shamkhal or so-called Tarkovsky principality (*Shamkhalstvo*). According to Adam Olearius, Tarki was the main city (metropolis) of Dagestan, located on high terrain, on the slope of and between the mountains among steep cliffs. It had no defensive walls. There were about a thousand houses, “built according to the Persian way, but not so well.”⁴⁰ Kumyks lived in the city itself and in the surrounding mountains and valleys, which, according to Kotov, had their own ruler and did not obey anyone. The Russian merchant complained that the people of Kaytag Utsmy who inhabited the land between Tarki and Derbent lived far away in the mountains and did not obey anyone, robbed and seized traveling merchants and sold them into slavery, and if they did not rob, they levied a tribute “on each of three pieces of cloth (*kindyak*) from a bum.”⁴¹ The ship of another Russian merchant Afanasiy Nikitin, who sailed to Shirvan in 1466-67, got into a storm and was smashed on the shore at this place. In his notes, Nikitin noted that “there is a town Tarki, and people came ashore, and the *kaytags* came down and took all the people.”⁴² In the case of safe passage from Tarki, caravans with goods in 3 days could reach Derbent along the road between the mountains and the sea.⁴³

³⁹ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 127.

⁴⁰ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 303-304.

⁴¹ Kotov, *Khozheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 71.

⁴² A. Nikitin, *Khozheniye za tri morya Afanasiya Nikitina* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo “Nauka,” Leningradskoye Otdeleniye, 1986), 6.

⁴³ Kotov, *Khozheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 70.

Shirvan Section of the Trade Route along the Western Cost of the Caspian Sea

For a long time, Derbent ranked first among the port cities on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. Its main advantage, of course, was its geographical location on a narrow passage between the sea and the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. The powerful fortifications erected in the times of the Sassanid Empire were designed to prevent the penetration of numerous nomadic tribes into the territory of the south Caucasus and Persia. European travelers believed that the city was built by Alexander the Great, as evidenced by Marco Polo.⁴⁴ According to Contarini, Derbent was also called the “Iron Gate” (“Demir Kapu” or “Temir Kapu” in Turkic) due to the fact that it was “only possible to enter Media and Persia through this city.”⁴⁵ If we take into account that Media meant Shirvan, and Persia the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, i.e. Gilan, Mazandaran and Jurjan, then Derbent played the role of the main land gate for entry into these countries. Due to its reliable walls ensuring the safety of the city and its convenient location and the availability of a pier for ships, Derbent before the Mongol conquest was one of the main points on the maritime and land trade routes on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. Commercial relations between the Middle East countries, including Azerbaijan and Persia, and Eastern Europe along the Volga-Caspian route were kept mostly via Derbent. However, starting from the 13th century, this city gradually began to lose its leading position, giving way to Baku, which had the best and most convenient natural harbor in the Caspian Sea. Barbaro discovered in Derbent huge anchors disused, each weighing more than 400 kg, while according to his estimate anchors of even very large Caspian ships weighed between 75-125 kg. He assumed that they had “very great ships in past time” in Derbent.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, even in the 15th century Derbent remained one of the centers of transshipment trade on north-south routes, so that the ambassador of the Grand Duke of Muscovy Marco Rosso and Venetian diplomat Ambrogio Contarini got to this city from Tabriz by land and made from there sailing on a ship to Haji-Tarkhan. In Derbent, they were joined by local merchants who were taking to Haji-Tarkhan rice, silk, and fustians for the Russian market, and some Tartars going to procure furs for sale in Derbent.⁴⁷ At the same time, according to the description of the Venetian diplomat, although Derbent still was “surrounded by five broad and well-made walls,” not a sixth part of it was inhabited, and the portion bordering on the sea was all destroyed.⁴⁸ Even in the early 16th century, another Italian traveler Giovan Maria Angiolello, who visited Derbent, reported that it was “a port with many ships, which trade to *Citrachan* (Haji-Tarkhan) and other places. They used to have

⁴⁴ Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian*, 34.

⁴⁵ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 145.

⁴⁶ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 90

⁴⁷ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 147

⁴⁸ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 145

large ships of eight hundred tons burden, but now only those of two hundred can enter.”⁴⁹

Sources, including travel notes by Europeans who visited the region, indicate that Derbent belonged to Shirvan during this period. In particular, Contarini points out that Derbent belonged to Shirvanshah, “on the confines of the Tartar country.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Derbent was part of the Shirvan state, where the Shahs of the “Derbent dynasty” (1382-1538) ruled. It should be noted that the Russian merchant Kotov in his notes also repeatedly indicated that the cities and regions of the western coast of the Caspian Sea belonged to Shirvan. He emphasized that “both Shabran, and Shamakhi, and Derbent with all counties, cities and suburbs of olden days were Shirvan land,” but then they were conquered by the Ottoman Sultan 20 years before, and at the very beginning of the 17th century, they were re-conquered by Safavid Shah Abbas I.⁵¹

According to Contarini, one could leave Derbent and reach Tabriz in 20 days. However, on this road there were several other important towns through which the caravans certainly had to pass. Contarini, who alongside Marco Rosso made this way in the opposite direction from Shamakhi to Derbent, reported that their path followed the mountains and plains, and they had to stop in Turkic villages, where they were hospitably received. Midway, they got an agreeable little town where apple trees of excellent quality were grown.⁵² Apparently, we are talking about the city of Quba (Firuz-Qubad) in the north of Azerbaijan, which is famous for its apples even today.

The next important transit point after Derbent, which could be reached by taking land or sea to the south, was Niyazabad. This city was also in the possession of Shirvan. The ship with Kotov on board left the mouth of the Volga in Astrakhan on August 8 and arrived in Niyazabad or the Nizovaya pier in six days. The Russian merchant reports that their ship reached the “Kyzylbash” (Safavid) possessions and stuck “to the Shirvan land at the Nizovaya pier.” Niyazabad had a convenient pier, was located in a deserted and low place where two small rivers flowed, the mouths of which were covered with sand. It was possible to recognize this pier from the sea by three tall trees, although there was a small and low forest there as well. The coast in this area was soft, not stony, and sandy. Below, on the sea, there were other piers located near towns and desert places.⁵³ According to Adam Olearius, their ship was forced to land in Niyazabad because of a terrible storm. The Holstein scholar reports that it was a small village in which there were about “15 or 16 poor houses scattered up and down, and all built of clay, and absolutely square, having flat roofs, and covered with turfs, so that a man might walk upon them without either danger or inconvenience.” Indeed, it was ordinary among the local people “to erect tents upon them to eat, and in the summer-time to lie on them all night.” The inside of all these peasant houses was very tidy, and in the

⁴⁹ Charles Grey, trans. and ed., *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1873), 114.

⁵⁰ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 145.

⁵¹ Kotov, *Khozheniye kaptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 69.

⁵² Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 145.

⁵³ Kotov, *Khozheniye kaptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 68.

rooms the floors were lined with carpets.⁵⁴

Niyazabad, apparently, was one of those coastal towns in Sirvan where ships were built. In any case, while the Holstein mission was there, ambassador Brugman ordered them to select for making gun carriages the thickest beams, brought here specifically for the construction of ships for the Safavid Shah. This caused dissatisfaction with local authorities, who complained that in this case, due to a lack of material, they could not build a ship for the Shah this year.⁵⁵

The next point after Niyazabad on the caravan route to the south along the western coast of the Caspian Sea was the city of Shabran. The Holstein diplomats had to travel by land from Niyazabad to the south. On the way, they stayed for the night in caravanserais erected in Shirvan, according to Olearius, on main roads in large numbers and at a distance of a day's travel from each other. Most of them were empty vaulted rooms and stables, so travelers and merchants had to bring provisions and food with them. The first caravanserai after leaving Niyazabad, in which they had to make a stop, "was a very ancient structure, all built with large free-stones, being forty two paces square. Over the gate, there were two chambers."⁵⁶ The Russian merchant Kotov also spoke about Shirvan caravanserais, and described them as strong stone and empty buildings with storage rooms (barns), stables and gates erected in ancient times to stop and spend the night and to protect them from brigands.⁵⁷

From Derbent, walking along the steppe belt between the spurs of the Caucasus Mountains and the sea, it was possible to get to Shabran in three days. Shabran was located about 20 km south of Niyazabad and at the same distance from the coast. However, at the mouth of the river of the same name, there was a pier where vessels could sail from Astrakhan or Derbent. It should be noted that there was another small wharf between Niyazabad and Shabran at the mouth of the Velvele-Chai River, called "Bilbil" in Russian sources, which was also sometimes used for mooring by sea vessels.⁵⁸ Shabran was famous for its madder, which, according to Abd al-Rashid al-Bakuvi, was exported to other countries. Anthony Jenkinson and his companions set out from Derbent in early August by land and, having traveled 80 miles to the southeast, reached Shabran on August 6. He was very afraid there for the safety of his goods, since, according to him, many robbers from nomads were operating around there, and, therefore, the local ruler put 40 armed guards around his tent.⁵⁹ Shabran experienced decline already in the 16th century, and in the next century it became even more desolate. Fedot Kotov found the city almost destroyed, with only a wall, a stone tower and several stone houses remaining.⁶⁰

The caravan route from Shabran followed south, passing by the foot of the mountain Beshbarmak (in Azerbaijani Turkic "Five Fingers"), or "Barmak" (in Azerbaijani Turkic "Finger"). It received such a name as it was topped with a high round rock resembling an

⁵⁴ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 149.

⁵⁵ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 151.

⁵⁶ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 152.

⁵⁷ Kotov, *Khobzheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 72.

⁵⁸ Fekher, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 25.

⁵⁹ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 130-131.

⁶⁰ Kotov, *Khobzheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 69.

upraised finger. In the first half of the 17th century, the inquisitive Holsteins who followed this road to Shamakhi climbed this rock and had the opportunity to observe the remains of the once imposing fortifications – the Beshbarmak fortress and walls erected during Sassanid times. Adam Olearius left a wonderful description of these ancient ruins. He wrote that the old ruins and remnants of the walls on the mountain made it easy to conclude that there was probably a magnificent building and a beautiful fortification. At the foot of the rock there was “a plain of about fifty perches square, which had in the mid of it a very fair well, built about with stone, and about that well may be seen the ruins of a very thick wall” with towers at their corners; a large part of the wall hewn from basement stones stood at the northern part, at the very rock, which probably constituted a special fortification. From there, through several carved steps, it was possible to penetrate almost to the top of the cliff. There was a special stone-carved vaulted building that could serve as the third stronghold. Olearius assumed that it might have been “one of those fortifications, which the Ancients called *Porte Caspia*.”⁶¹

After the Beshbarmak Mountain, the caravan route went for some time south along the sea shore at the foot of the hills, where it soon split in two – one road turned west to Shamakhi, the other one followed the Absheron peninsula and Baku. Most of the merchants followed this to Shamakhi, the capital of Shirvan, since this city was one of the most important markets where European and Russian traders could purchase first-class Shirvan silk and many types of oriental goods. In general, the road from Derbent to Shamakhi, which twisted between the mountains in places, took about six days.⁶²

The Venetian envoy Contarini, who arrived in Shamakhi on November 1, 1475, enthusiastically described the city. He noted the abundance of silk in this area, mentioning that they produced a special type of silk fabric there, called *talamana*.⁶³ There were many different types of silk fabrics such as light ones, but especially many atlases (satins). According to the Venetian, although Shamakhi was inferior in size to Tabriz, it certainly was better in every respect, including the abundance of provisions.⁶⁴ Barbaro also noted that it was “a very good city.” It had between 4,000 and 5,000 houses, and people there manufactured “silks, fustian, and other things after their manner.”⁶⁵ Despite a certain decline that Shamakhi experienced in the 16th century, Jenkinson called it “a faire place,” which king of Shirvan possessed. The English merchant was received by the Governor of Shirvan Abdullah Khan Ustajlu not far from the city in the mountains, where the latter escaped from the sweltering summer heat. Jenkinson vividly described the dwelling and clothes of Shirvan’s ruler and noted that he sat in a rich tent upholstered with silks and gold; he was richly dressed in “long garments of silk,

⁶¹ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 153.

⁶² Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 153.

⁶³ In the original *la seta Talamano*; Pegolotti calls him *seta Talani*. This word comes from the name of the Gilan city of Dileman, located on the historic caravan route from the port of Lengerud in the south of the Caspian Sea to Qazvin. Silk from Gilan and Shirvan was highly valued in Europe (Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 31).

⁶⁴ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 144.

⁶⁵ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 86.

and clothes of gold, embroidered with pearls and stone; upon his head was a turban with a sharp end standing upwards half a yard long, of rich clothes of gold, wrapped about with a piece of Indian silk of twenty yards long, wrought with gold.”⁶⁶

From the 15th to the first half of 17th century, Shirvan was one of the main suppliers of raw silk to the world market. The environs of Shamakhi and Aresh were the most important centers of production of this product in the country.⁶⁷ At the end of the 16th century, about 100 thousand pounds of raw silk were exported from Shirvan to foreign markets – to Persia, the Ottoman Empire, India, and Italy.⁶⁸ High-quality fine Shirvan silk was highly valued throughout the world, and European merchants sought to establish direct trade relations with this country via the Volga-Caspian road to export these goods to the West. Anthony Jenkinson reported about Shirvan that “the cheapest commodities there, be the raw silks of all sorts, whereof there is great plenty.”⁶⁹ Russian merchants also started to trade actively in silk and cotton fabrics, spices, rice, and nuts from the end of the 15th century in the markets of Shamakhi.

The Ottoman-Safavid wars contributed to the further decline of the economic life of Shamakhi, as evidenced by Adam Olearius. According to him, in former times there were about 6,000 houses in the city, but the number of the population significantly decreased as a result of the wars that the Safavid Shah Abbas I had with the Turks. Shamakhi at this time consisted of two parts, the southern and northern, each of which was surrounded by walls. The northern part of the city lay at the foot of the hill, and was smaller than the southern one. According to Olearius, there were about nine hundred houses there. It was surrounded by stone, but low and bad, walls which had five gates. In this part of Shamakhi, Turks, Armenians and some Georgians lived, but all the inhabitants spoke Turkic, which was “common not only in Shirvan, but also all over Persia,” according to Olearius. The main occupation of this part of the city was spinning, weaving and embroidery with silk and paper. The main bazaars of Shamakhi were on the south side. In particular, there was a large market with several covered streets, in which there were many shops of local merchants. Mostly silk and cotton fabric, silver and gold brocade, bows, arrows, sabers, and other handicrafts were “sold there at a very reasonable rate.” In the southern part of Shamakhi there were also two large caravanserais with chambers and galleries, where overseas merchants stayed and wholesale trade was carried out. In one of them, under the name *Shah Caravanserai*, mainly Russian merchants stopped, bringing tin, leather, copper, furs and other commodities for sale. In another one, called *Lozgi Caravanserai*, traders from the north Caucasus offered for sale horses and slaves. There were quite a few Jews engaged mainly in trade in Shamakhi. Olearius reported also about stone baths, mosques and other structures in the city.⁷⁰ In the

⁶⁶ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 131-132.

⁶⁷ Aresh was located in the west of the country's capital on the territory of the modern Yevlakh region in Azerbaijan. Jenkinson noted that a huge amount of silk was produced in Aresh, and Turkish and Syrian merchants came to trade there (Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 136).

⁶⁸ S. Ashurbeyli, *Gosudarstvo Shirvanshakhov* (VI-XVI vv.) (Baku: Elm, 1983), 292.

⁶⁹ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 136.

⁷⁰ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travels of the Ambassadors*, 165-166.

same period, the Russian merchant Kotov mentioned the presence of seven courtyards (caravanserais) in Shamakhi – the so-called Tezik, Lezgi, Armenian, Gilan and others.⁷¹

In addition to high-quality raw silk, various types of fabrics and other oriental goods, merchants had the opportunity to purchase oil from the Shamakhi markets, which was brought there from Baku. The economic and political importance of Baku started to increase particularly from the 15th century. Waterways closely connected it with the coastal cities on the Caspian Sea (Derbent, Astrakhan, Mangyshlak), and caravan roads with Shamakhi and Derbent. Giovan Maria Angioiello, who in the early 16th century visited Baku, reported that in their march, they reached a place named Baccara, four days journey from Mahmudabad, and two from Shamakhi, and it was also called Baccuc (Baku), being “one of the ports of Tauris (Tabriz), with an excellent harbour; it was anciently the principal place on the sea, which is called the Sea of Baccuc after it, although, others call it the Caspian, from the Caspian mountains.”⁷² In 1403, Abd al-Rashid al-Bakuvi, whose father was originally from Baku, reported that it was a city of stone, built on the seashore, and its walls were washed by the waters of the Caspian Sea. There were large deposits of salt and sources of oil, which was mined daily in amounts equal to 200 camel packs. Here was another source, “pouring continuously, day and night, oil as white as jasmine oil.” The income from it reached 1,000 *dirhams*.⁷³ Oil was the main and very valuable export commodity of Baku. According to agents of the English trading company, merchants from the farthest ends of the Safavid state came there to take it around the country in caravans of donkeys and mules, which often reached 400-500 heads.⁷⁴ It is also known that the Gilan merchants systematically went on their ships to Baku harbour especially for the purchase of oil, which they delivered by sea to the east coast of the Caspian Sea.⁷⁵ According to the testimony of Adam Olearius, in Baku and nearby mountain of Barmak, special oil was extracted in very large quantities from permanent wells, and it was transported all over the country for sale.⁷⁶ Oil was used to illuminate the houses and as a medicine, since it served as an ointment for various skin diseases. Barbaro reported that it was used to anoint camels twice a year so that they would not suffer from a scab.⁷⁷ At the end of the 15th century, one Venetian traveler reported in his notes that large batches of spices were being transported from India to Shamakhi, and from there they arrived in Baku, four days distance from Shamakhi, on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Baku was a city where large trade was conducted, and because of this, it was called “the Baku Sea.” Spices in the port of Baku were loaded onto ships and carried for sale in Haji-

⁷¹ Kotov, *Khobzheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 72.

⁷² Grey, *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, 112-113.

⁷³ Abd ar-Rashid al-Bakuvi, *Kitab Talkhis al-Asar va Vjajib al-Malik al-Kakbkhar* (“*Sokerashcheniye knigi o “pamyatnikakh” i chudesakh tsarya moguchego*”), trans. and ed. Z. M. Bunyatov. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Nauka,” Glavnaya Redaktsiya Vostochnoy Literatury, 1971), 89.

⁷⁴ Ashurbeyli, *Gosudarstvo Shirvanshakhor*, 283.

⁷⁵ Fekhner, *Torgonlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 30.

⁷⁶ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 144.

⁷⁷ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 88.

Tarkhan, a Tatar city on the Volga.⁷⁸

Of course, Shamakhi was not always the ultimate goal of the merchants who came there from the northern countries. Often caravans moved from this city to the south along a road that stretched towards Ardabil, one of the main cities on the territory of southern Azerbaijan. The path of trade caravans ran through the Mughan Steppe, which Kotov described as a place where there were “no cities, no villages, no living courtyards.” Immediately after leaving Shamakhi, at a distance of about 4 miles on the right side of the road, there was Tahī caravanserai. A few days later, the road led travelers to the village of Javat, located at the confluence of the Kura and Araks rivers and on the border of Shirvan and Mughan, a historical region in Azerbaijan. In this place, there was a pontoon bridge through which it was possible to cross the Kura, the largest river in the south Caucasus.⁷⁹

Along the caravan road, travelers could reach Ardabil, rich in all sorts of goods. The road split in two there – one route went west to Tabriz, the former capital of the Safavid state, and the other went south-east, to the cities of Qazvin and Kashan. Usually merchants made their way to Isfahan, to where in 1598 Shah Abbas I transferred the capital of the country. Then from Isfahan, they could get to Ormuz, from where there was access to maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean.

In general, the distance from Astrakhan to Shamakhi by land was about 1000 km, which, under the best of circumstances, the merchants managed to overcome in 25-27 days.⁸⁰ However, as M. V. Fekhner noted, due to the considerable length of this road, unfavorable transport and technical conditions and the danger of being robbed along the road, merchants used the land road only due to forced circumstances. The main trade route connecting the Kazan and Astrakhan khanates, and later the Russian state with Shirvan and Persia, was the waterway.⁸¹

Features of Marine Navigation along the Western Coast of the Caspian Sea

Navigation along the Volga and the Caspian Sea had its own characteristics, which were described by some European and Russian merchants and diplomats who traveled along these routes in the 15th and first half of the 17th centuries. Usually, if the Europeans or Russian merchants set sail from north to south, then Moscow or Yaroslavl could serve as starting point, from where they descended in their ships to the Volga and on to Astrakhan. Since the long journey along the river, especially through the sparsely populated places between Kazan

⁷⁸ Ashurbeyli, *Gosudarstvo Shirvanshakhov*, 288-289.

⁷⁹ Kotov, *Khobzheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 72-73.

⁸⁰ Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 32. Merchants needed approximately the same time for sailing in case of favorable weather from Astrakhan to the pier near the Lengerud River, located 10-15 km from the city of the same name in Gilan, as the caravan route which went from there to Qazvin via Dileman (Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 31).

⁸¹ Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 34.

and Astrakhan, promised all sorts of dangers, ships could assemble in Nizhniy Novgorod in large caravans and sail further together.⁸² Navigation along the Volga also caused serious technical difficulties, since in many parts of the river there was a lot of shoals and shallows, the overcoming of which was hard and required special skills.

Active navigation along the Volga began in spring, when the northern rivers overflowed and brought a lot of water. Ships sailing along the Volga to Astrakhan tried to observe this time, since in May and June the water level in the river was especially high, and they could pass relatively safely not only through small places, but even low islands that were flooded at that time. However, in the summer, when the water began to decrease, ships mooring at such islands for the night could get stranded by morning due to the rapid fall of the water. Adam Olearius saw plenty of such boats abandoned by their masters during their trip along the Volga.⁸³

Particularly difficult was sailing against the stream. Olearius speaks of a large ship going from Astrakhan up the Volga and having about 200 workers on board. According to him, Russians “cannot be without such a great number of mariners, by reason that, instead of maneuvering or rowing, when the wind is against them, they cast anchor a quarter of a league before them, and all those men pull the cable to which it is fastened, and so they advance by little and little with much expense of time and pains, making but two leagues a day at most, by reason of the greatness of those boats.”⁸⁴

In general, the route from Moscow to Astrakhan was about 3,300 km, and under favorable circumstances, was overcome by travelers in about 1.5-2 months, taking into account possible long stops at intermediate points. After the arrival of the trade caravan in Astrakhan, it usually used to get disassembled, since part of the merchants preferred to sell their goods to merchants who came from Eastern countries – Bukhara, Khiva, Shirvan, Gilan. Others decided to sail on the Caspian Sea and set off south.⁸⁵ Navigation along the Volga River was carried out on riverboats. In Astrakhan, goods were dragged into special sea ships which went to the Caspian Sea. This is reported also by Jenkinson, who, after a three-year journey to Central Asia and Bukhara, returned to Astrakhan and from there to Moscow with letters from the Bukhara ruler. In Astrakhan, he and his companions remained a few days to procure “small boats to go up against the stream of Volga.”⁸⁶

Merchants who went from Astrakhan to Shirvan also tried to go to sea in the summer, since in late autumn and winter frequent and strong winds made navigation across the Caspian Sea extremely dangerous. The route and duration of the sea route from Astrakhan to the south depended on the types of ships on which merchants sailed. Merchants could sail in large ships between Astrakhan and Derbent without stopping for a long time at intermediate points on the shore. If merchants had to use smaller ships, the voyage started in Astrakhan,

⁸² Fekhner, *Torgonlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 19-20.

⁸³ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 112.

⁸⁴ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 113.

⁸⁵ Fekhner, *Torgonlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 20-21.

⁸⁶ Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, 97.

and from there the route went to Cherni, then to Terek, to Tarki, and from Tarki to Derbent and Niyazabad. However, the path on small vessels was fraught with great dangers. First, they were less stable in stormy conditions, which was not uncommon while sailing across the Caspian Sea. Secondly, if during bad weather such vessels were washed ashore in Tarki or Derbent, then heavy duties were levied on the merchants. If they were marooned on a deserted shore, then the danger of being robbed by the local militant population was very great. According to Kotov, they attacked merchants, killed them and took goods, and looting was constantly going on.⁸⁷

Therefore, wealthy merchants tried to make safer sailing on large ships. The same Kotov noted that they sailed from Astrakhan on Russian *busas* and on large *strugs* by the sea past Cherni. However, this way was far away – in windy weather the sea trip took two days to sail, and in calm weather the ships sailed for a week.⁸⁸

M. V. Fekhner described the types of river and sea vessels that were used mainly by Russian merchants on the Volga and the Caspian in the 16th and early 17th centuries. The most common type of water vehicles, mainly of river type, were the so-called *strugs*, which were light rowing and flat-bottomed boats with steep sides. With a tail wind, they could move under sail. The dimensions of the boats varied from 6 to 20 m in length, and, accordingly, their displacement also varied. Heavier vessels with a large displacement from several tens to hundreds of tons and sizes of 35-40 m in length were *nasads*. *Nasads* were rowing vessels which could be drawn upstream by rope, as well as go sailing in windy weather. At the same time, due to their heavier weight, their movement upstream against the current was incredibly difficult. By the end of the 16th century, a new type of heavy sea ship called the *kolomenka* appeared, designed to carry heavy cargo such as metals. These ships were also flat-bottomed with sides almost equal in height.⁸⁹ The sources of the end of the 16th to the first half of the 17th centuries often referred to *busas* – round-bottom single-sail ships, built mainly in Astrakhan. However, as mentioned above, Kotov wrote also about the so-called “Gilan *busas*,” anchored in the Caspian Sea at the mouth of the Volga.⁹⁰ During the voyage, large ships were always accompanied by smaller boats – *sandals* or *pazukas*, which served to unload heavy ships during the passage through the shoals or rifts on the river, or to transport people and commodities to the shore in the shallow part of the sea.

English ships built in Yaroslavl appeared in the Caspian Sea due to the intensification of attempts by the English Muscovy Company to establish trade relations with the Safavid state via the Volga-Caspian route in the 1570s.⁹¹ A ship built for the Holstein diplomatic and trade mission to the Safavid state became a great novelty for Muslim and Russian navigators and merchants in the first half of the 17th century. According to the description of Adam Olearius, the ship *Frederick* was specially built for them from pine boards by their captain

⁸⁷ Kotov, *Khobzheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 71-72.

⁸⁸ Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 69.

⁸⁹ Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 21-22.

⁹⁰ Kotov, *Khobzheniye kuptsa Fedota Kotova v Persiyu*, 68.

⁹¹ Fekhner, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka*, 24.

Michael Cordes with the help of Russian carpenters. It was a 120-foot long, with 3 masts and 24 oars, with a flat bottom vessel.⁹² The ship was designed mainly for sailing along the Volga, so that it was possible to navigate through numerous rapids and shoals, as well as in the absence of a fair wind to move forward with the help of oars. A special boat was built which was supposed to accompany the ship, and served to remove part of the cargo from the ship, if necessary, to go through the shoals. Shirvan and Gilan merchants, constantly sailing around the Caspian Sea, boarded this ship in Astrakhan to learn more about its structure, marveling at its impressive size and claiming that they had not seen such a large vessel sailing before on the Sea of *Culsum*, as they called the Caspian Sea. However, they were quite skeptical about the suitability of such a ship for sailing on this sea, where the waves were “high, and in a manner contiguous” ones, and that “there was a necessity of taking down masts.” The ships of the Shirvan and Gilan merchants themselves were just little “barks,” according to Olearius, “made like bathing-tubes in Europe.” They did not have a pump, so they “had to cast out the water with shovels”; they had only one big sail, like the Russian vessels. Therefore, they could not “sail with a side-wind,” and in stormy weather, they were “forced either to go with the wind or cast anchor.” Commonly they went “within pistol-shot of the shore.”⁹³

In general, it is hardly possible to speak of a high level of maritime business and navigation in the Caspian Sea during this period. Venetian envoy Contarini was very skeptical about the qualifications of the Shirvan sailors and the quality of the ships, in one of which he had to sail from Derbent to Haji-Tarkhan. He reported that these ships were made similar in shape to fish, as the locals called them, i.e. “being sharp at the head and stern and wide amidships. They are built of timbers caulked with rags, and are very dangerous craft. No compass is used, as they keep continually in sight of land. They use oars, and, although everything is done in a most barbarous manner, they look upon themselves as the only mariners worthy of the name,” as Contarini complained.⁹⁴ Thus, traveling on these boats was a very dangerous thing.

The Venetian envoy himself had to sail on a similar merchant ship in April 1476. His colorful and emotional story about this trip gives a vivid idea of the details of navigation and all the difficulties and vicissitudes of voyages and trade in the Caspian Sea in the second half of the 15th century. Contarini wrote the following:

“It having pleased our Lord God, however, to send us at length a favourable breeze, we all assembled on the shore, and, the vessel being set afloat, we immediately embarked and made sail. We were in all thirty-five persons, including the captain and six mariners; there were on board some merchants... We started, then, on the above-mentioned day with a favourable wind, and kept constantly at the distance of about fifteen miles from a mountainous coast. After three days’ sail we passed these mountains and came to a beach shore, when, the wind becoming contrary, we dropped one of our anchors: this

⁹² Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 111.

⁹³ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 129-130.

⁹⁴ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 146.

was at about four hours before evening. The wind having increased, however, and the sea got rough in the night, we looked upon ourselves as lost, so we resolved to weigh our anchor and take our chance in running ashore. When the anchor was raised we crossed the sea, and the waves, which were running high on account of the wind, threw us aground. It pleased our Lord God, however, to save us by means of these big waves, which carried us over the rocks, and we were driven into a little creek, as long as the vessel itself, and it really seemed as if we had entered a port, as the sea broke so many times before it reached us, that it could do us no damage. We were all obliged to jump into the water, and carry our things ashore well soaked. The vessel leaked also, from having gone on the rocks, and we ourselves were very cold, both from the wet and the wind. In the morning, after holding council, it was determined that no fire should be lighted, as we were in a most dangerous place on account of its being frequented by Tartars, the foot-marks of whose horses were visible on the beach. As there was a boat, which appeared to have been lately broken, we thought that the horsemen, whose traces we had seen, had been there to capture the crew, either dead or alive; we were, therefore, in great fear and in continual expectation of attack. We became reassured, however, when we perceived beyond the beach a number of marshes, which proved that the Tartars could not be very near the shore. We remained at this place until the 13th, when the weather became favourable for continuing our voyage. The things belonging to the mariners were then put on board, and when the vessel had been taken off the rocks the other baggage was taken in, and we set sail.”⁹⁵

Thus, the coastal voyage across the Caspian Sea was carried out in favorable seasons, and in winter these boats were pulled to the shore until the next season. However, even in the summer time, the voyage was coastal, which, of course, affected the duration of the trip. Even in the first half of the 17th century, Shirvan and Gilan sailors sailing across the Caspian Sea, with rare exceptions, did not yet use a compass. Adam Olearius noted that most of the “Persian” navigators made their voyage on the Caspian Sea only along the coast, and did not “venture very far into the sea, but for the most part kept in the sight of land.”⁹⁶ He wrote that the Persians, Tatars and Russians sailed on this sea only in summer. Since they sailed “wretched small barks or boats,” they kept as near as they could to the shore, and never were out of sight of land, where they could drop anchor if necessary or in danger.⁹⁷

This information gives an idea of the level of seafaring and the features of navigation in the Caspian Sea not only in relation to the late Middle Ages, but also earlier times, especially

⁹⁵ Barbaro and Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, 147-148.

⁹⁶ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 135. It should be noted that Adam Olearius called all subjects of the Safavid Shah “Persian” merchants and navigators, although for the most part these were Azerbaijani Turks and Gilanis. Thus, a “Persian” sailor, who served on a German ship as a pilot while sailing across the Caspian Sea to Shirvan, saw his brother on the boat, and spoke with him in Azerbaijani Turkic, persuading him not to be afraid of the Germans: “*Korchma, duschmanlar dekul?*” (“Do not fear, these are not enemies”) (Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 138).

⁹⁷ Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors*, 143.

from the 9th-10th centuries, so widely described in detail in the classical Arab geographical literature, in the works by Ibn Khordadbeh, Masudi, Istakhri and other authors.

Conclusion

The maritime and land routes along the western coast of the Caspian Sea constituted an integral part of the Volga-Caspian trade route, which historically functioned in parallel with the Silk Roads. These ancient highways – Volga-Caspian and Silk Roads – were so intertwined, so closely interconnected by a number of interpenetrating routes and contact points, concentrated, for the most part, around the Caspian Sea, that, in fact, they represented a single system of transport and communications. For a long time during the Middle Ages, such important junctions were Haji-Tarkhan (Astrakhan) on the northern coast of the Caspian Sea, Derbent, Shamakhi, Baku, Ardabil, and some cities of Gilan, as well as coastal points in Mangyshlak. Many of them were markets of international trade, where an exchange and redistribution of goods of different origin occurred – Chinese silk and porcelain, Indian spices, furs and leather from northern countries, carpets, silk fabrics, metal products and glass from Persia and Azerbaijan, and many other products of a wide range. At present, the results of archaeological excavations in settlements in the Volga region, Azerbaijan and Central Asia provide an opportunity for estimation of the intensity of commercial and cultural contacts between the peoples of these regions due to the existence of caravans and water ways connecting them along the Volga-Caspian route. The activity of these ties largely depended on the geopolitical changes that took place in the vast region of Eurasia. Relations between the great empires in different periods, various combinations of trade and political alliances or rivalry between them had a decisive influence on the state and viability of international trade routes. However, the experience of the maritime and land routes along the western coast of the Caspian Sea from the 15th to the first half of the 17th century indicates that the need for commercial and economic ties and the vital need for the exchange of outcomes of the material and intellectual production of peoples were decisive, and eventually outweighed the destructive results of geopolitical confrontations between different empires.

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Fig. 1) Map of the Caspian Sea, laid down by cartographer Emanuel Bowen from the memoirs of the Georgian prince Orbeliani, in 1747, London.