

# THE ROLE OF SILK ROAD IN FORMATION OF MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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Republic of Azerbaijan is a country at crossroads of numerous cultures, religions and civilizations. Since antiquity this land was known as a bridge between Europe and Asia. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, Azerbaijan was located on the path of migration of Caucasian and Indo-European peoples. From the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 7<sup>th</sup> AD, it was an important center of Zoroastrianism. Starting from the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, Christianity was brought to the north of Azerbaijan. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century Islam was introduced by the Arabian conquerors. In different periods, the Scythians, Huns, Khazars, Bulgars, Mongolians, Kipchaks, Seljuks and Turkomans invaded Azerbaijan and settled here [1].

The Silk Roads – caravan ways from China to Europe – passed through the territory of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic. These roads played an important role in the intercultural exchange in the region. In the early medieval period and later, Silk Roads connected China with Arab Caliphate and European countries, and contributed to cultural dialogue, growth of cities and development of economics in the region.

Throughout its history, Azerbaijan developed in close cooperation and by means of inter-ethnic cultural dialogue between representatives of various ethnical and religious groups of the region, including bearers of early animistic and pagan cults, Tengrianism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam. We may consider Azerbaijan as an important center of ancient Zoroastrian civilization. Later on, it played great role in cultural development of Christian peoples of the region having close relations with Christian nations of South Caucasus, Near East and Byzantium. After the Arabic invasion and spread of Islam, Azerbaijan became the important center of Islamic culture, but preserved traditions and cultural heritage of Christian and



Zoroastrian periods. As a country with polyethnic composition, Azerbaijan always was a place, where different nations, languages and cultural traditions met and interacted.

Before the Mongolian wars, Azerbaijan as a Caspian country was one of the richest states on the Silk Roads. Medieval historian Hamdullah Qazvini (1280-1349) wrote that during the rule of Seljuks and Atabeks of Azerbaijan (Eldegezids), and also under the rule Shirvanshahs, Azerbaijan's

annual state income stood at 25 million golden dinars. The state budgets of five neighboring countries were: Arabian Iraq – 30 million dinars; Iraq-Ajam – 25 million dinars; Georgia and Abkhazia – 5 million dinars; Rum (Byzantine Empire) – 15 million dinars. [8] Another medieval scholar, Yaqut al-Hamavi (1179-1229), had earlier described the historical reality reflected in these figures as follows: “Azerbaijan is a vast country and a great state” (in Arabic: “Azarbaijan balad kabir wa daula azim”) [9].

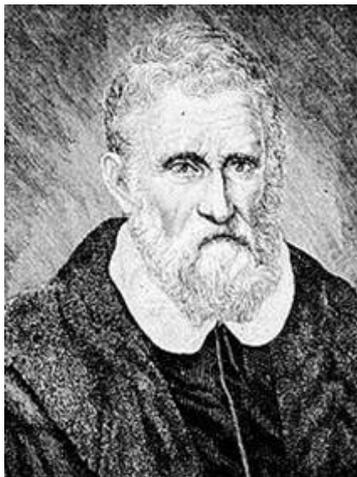
Since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the relations of cities of Azerbaijan with Rome, and Venetian and Genoese Republics started to develop. Marco Polo (1254-1323) wrote about the famous kinds of silk produced in the Shirvan province of Azerbaijan. In those times, Genoese traders founded their colonies on the shores of Caspian. They bargained silk, carpets, jewelry and other goods. Italians even had vessels in Caspian [6].

Similarly, Adam Olearius (1599-1671), a traveler and diplomat who visited Shirvan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, wrote that Azerbaijan produced up to 2.5 million kg of silk cloth each year. In the town of Shaki alone, 14 000 families were engaged in silkworm breeding and produced approximately 240 tons of raw silk each year. Part of this silk was exported; the other part was woven and dyed in local factories [2].

The British traveler and trader Antony Jenkinson (1529-1611) did secure “a decree on privileges” from the beglerbeg (governor) of Shirvan, Abdulla Khan Ustajlu. The decree said: “Considering the persistent results by the gentle and dear envoy Antony Jenkinson, We, Abdulla Khan, who rule Shirvan and Hirkan, with the blessing of Allah, creator of the Earth and Heavens, have shown goodwill and kindness to bestow the following residents of the English City of London – Sir William Herr, Sir William Chester, Sir Thomas Loge, Mr. Richard Mallory and Richard Chamberlain – and their trade company with full freedom, the right to cross freely [custom offices] and visit our country... to trade with cash or to barter goods, to stay in our country as long as they wish, and to leave the country freely whenever they wish.” [3]

Namely the Silk Way contributed to development of cities in Azerbaijan. One of big cities, situated on the Silk Roads was Shamakhi. Now, Shamakhi is one of important administrative centers in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the 9<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries Shamakhi was the capital of Shirvanshah State, which included most part of the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, population of Shamakhi was about 200 000, and it was significantly larger than London or Paris at that time. It was a beautiful city having numerous caravansaries, palaces, bathhouses, schools (madrasas) and libraries. Besides, Shamakhi was an important center of the silk trade. Marco Polo (1254-1324) wrote that the silk from Shirvan is very qualitative, and it is imported from Shamakhi to European countries. The merchants from Genoa and Venice had their trade offices in Shamakhi, Baku and other cities of Azerbaijan. In

the 17<sup>th</sup> century Shamakhi was visited by the German traveler and scholar Engelbert Kaempher (1651-1716). He described Shamakhi as an important trade center in Caucasus [6].



MARCO POLO

Another great city of Azerbaijan which was situated on the path of Silk Road was Ganja. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ganja was often compared with such big cities as Baghdad, Constantinople, or Alexandria in Egypt. Before the Mongolian invasion, Ganja was one of the administrative center of Seljuks and Atabeks of Azerbaijan. According to medieval sources, the population of Ganja in the 12<sup>th</sup> century was about 500 000 residents. Significant part of this population was destroyed during the earthquake in 1139 AD. According to the Seljuk historian Ibn al-Athir al-Jazari (1160-1233), a total of 240 000 persons died as a result of this terrible earthquake. However, the city was quickly repaired and rebuilt

during 2-3 years by the Seljuk governor Kara Sunkur [7].

Ganja was extremely important trade center and this factor contributed to multicultural environment in the city, which was regularly visited by merchants from India, Central Asia Europe and Russia. Various nations and tribes inhabited Ganja during the middle ages. The Turkic, Persian, Arabic languages, and such religions as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism were widespread in Ganja at that time. The multicultural environment in medieval Azerbaijan was reflected in the poems of the great poet from Ganja – Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209), who lived in Azerbaijan, wrote verses in Persian, and whose wife Afaq was a kipchak woman from the Central Asia.

**Below: Gravure of Shemakhi by Engelbert Kaempfer (1683) "Schamachia. im Gebürg der Provinz Schirwan"**



The same things we may say about the other big city of Azerbaijan – Shamakhi. In different periods, this city was a center of Islam, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Imadaddin Nasimi (1369-1417), the great mystical poet from Shamakhi, and the court poet Khagani Shirvani (1120-1199) had good knowledge of not only Islam, but also of Christian and Zoroastrian religions. Khagani in his poem “Tohfatul-Iraqeyn” (“The gift of

two Iraqs”) writes that he knows perfectly Quran, Old and New Testaments, as well as Zend Avesta, and that “the gates of hospitality” are opened for him in Georgia and Byzantium. He also used in his poems the words and expressions in Greek and Georgian languages.

Nakhchivan also was an important Azerbaijani city on the Silk Roads. The first written information about Nakhchivan has been found in Greek geographer Claudius Ptolemy's book, "Geography". Ptolemy wrote: "Naksuana is the center of the vast country. The country has 37 provinces, and Naksuana is one of them." Turkish traveler Evliya Chalabi (1611-1682) believed that the town was founded by the king Afrasiyab, the legendary ruler of Turan. This city was looted by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius the Second in the first century AD. A geographical book in early thirteenth century, entitled "Ajaib ad-Dunya" ("Rarities of the World"), read: "Nakhchivan is a big town in Azerbaijan with a large population. It is a very strong fortified city located on a high ground. There are many palaces, castles and houses beautiful balconies here. There is also a stone fortress near the town. Inside the fortress, there are a madrasah, a mosque and very nice springs. It is said that it is the town with the largest population in the world. All houses here have been built of bricks and mud." Similarly, the French traveler Wilhelm de Rubruck (1220-1293), who visited Nakhchivan, said that it was a large and beautiful capital of a large country until the Mongolian invasion. It suffered serious damage during attacks by the armies of Chinghis Khan in 1221 [7].

Hamdallah Qazvini, a historian and geographer, mentioned Nakhchivan in his book on geography entitled "Nuzhat al-Qulub" ("The Delight of Hearts"). He wrote: "It is a very beautiful location. It is called "Naqshi-Jahan". The residents are white-skinned. They are members of the Safavi sect. There are several large fortresses near the town." [8] Yaqut al-Hamavi, another geographer who lived in the thirteenth century, wrote: "The town of Nashava is in Azerbaijan... Ordinary people call it Nakhchuan." [9]

In the twelfth century, Nakhchivan had a population of 200,000. It was a capital of the state of Atabeyts of Azerbaijan dynasty) - a new state founded on the basis of independent atabeylik (territories ruled by atabeyts or atabekts) during the demise of the Seljuks. This powerful feudal state, ruled by the Eldaniz (Eldanizid or Ildeguizid) dynasty, existed between 1136 and 1225. Nakhchivan was the capital of the state of Eldaniz in the mid twelfth century. In this period, the town developed into a major commercial and trade center of the state of Atabeyts. The rapidly growing town, which was the capital of the state between 1136 and 1175, was of economic and military importance. The treasury of the state was located in the Alinja fortress. A residential quarter (mahalla) called "Atabeyts" exists in Nakhchivan to date [7].

Trade had developed here during the Middle Ages. The town was known for its craftsmen: potters, jewelers and glass makers. Construction had flourished here even more. According to travelers who were fascinated by the beauty of the town, in the medieval period Nakhchivan had palace compounds of the Eldaniz rulers, a Friday mosque, a madrasah (which had turned into a center of Islamic teaching), state buildings and palaces of royal family members. The Turkish traveler Evliya Chalabi (1611-1682) spoke about local baths where the water of swimming pools was flavored with a basket of rose each day [5].

It is also necessary to emphasize the Chinese influence on culture of Azerbaijan in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. During archeological excavations in Baku, Shamakhi, Shabran, Ganja, Beylaqan, Nakhichevan and other medieval cities in the territory of present-day Azerbaijan Republic, it was found many samples of ceramics, including jars, bowls, cups, plates and tiles, which are close to Chinese ceramics by style and ornaments. The medieval book miniature of Azerbaijan was influenced by the Chinese art of miniature as well. We can trace it in on the examples of book miniatures, created in Shamakhi and Baku in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The early miniature art (before the Mongolian invasion) was characterized by influence of Byzantine

miniature art. However, starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century the influence of the Chinese-Uyghur miniature became even stronger [4].

**Below: the 15<sup>th</sup> century Caravansary in Baku.**



Presence of traders and travelers from different countries in cities of Azerbaijan contributed to ethnical and religious tolerance in these cities. Azerbaijan was a multilingual country. The Azerbaijani Turkic was the language of international communication in Caucasus. However, the Arabic and Persian were also widespread as important languages of literature and sciences. There were numerous Muslim, Nestorian, Orthodox and

Zoroastrian temples in Azerbaijan.

Professor Adam Olearius (1599-1671) wrote that Safavid State unlike the Russia “is not a closed country. By paying the required customs duty to the state, locals and foreigners can freely travel in the country. They can also do business and trade here”. [3] Therefore, we may conclude that the Great Silk Roads contributed to multicultural environment, religious tolerance, and ethnical, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity in medieval Azerbaijan.

**Caravan of camels in Baku (the 19<sup>th</sup> century).**



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