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## TRANSCASPIAN TRADE DURING THE PERIOD OF KHAZAR DOMINANCE IN THE WESTERN EURASIAN SECTOR OF THE SILK ROAD (8th-9th CENTURIES)

*This article describes relations between the Arabs and Khazars after their military confrontation in the South Caucasus based on the analysis of the Arab sources of the 9th and 10th centuries. The established partnership of former adversaries brought about favorable conditions for international trade along the Silk Road. Particular attention is paid to the organization of trans-Caspian Sea links between the main ports of the Caspian Sea which flourished in the 9th century along the entire coast of the Caspian Sea including the Khazar capital of Itil, along with the cities of Derbent, Baku, Abaskun in Jurjan, the ports in Dekhistan, and in Mangyshlak. This article also characterizes the role of the Khazars in mobilizing the export opportunities of the dependent Central Eurasian territories as well as emphasizes the contribution of the Scandinavian merchants and their armed groups and ships in organizing navigation and providing trans-Caspian commercial traffic in the 9th century. The article reveals the connection and interdependence of information of the Arab historians and geographers about the Caspian region, and assesses its authenticity.*

**Key words:** *The Caspian Sea, trans-Caspian trade, Mangyshlak, Abaskun, Derbent, Itil, Khazars.*

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THE FORMATION of the Khazar state coincided with the rise of the Arab Caliphate in the world political arena which, after the crushing defeat of the Sassanian army in the Battle of Nehavand in 642, began to shift its borders northward and eastward. Having occupied the area of Sassanian Iran, the Arabs even managed to move beyond their predecessors in the spread of their political dominance. During the 8th century consistent hostilities took place with the Central Asian Turks following the collapse of the Western Turkic Khaganate. Those Turkic tribal leaders who replaced them competed with each other but also supported the Sogdian trading cities in resisting Arab expansion. The war with the Turks of Central Asia was difficult and in their border conflicts the Arabs switched from the offensive to the defense for the first time (*Barthold 1963a: 121, 163-64, 229-30; Barthold 1963b: 244*).

The Arab governors of the captured areas of Maverrannahr fortified the barrier walls along the border with the Central Asian Khazars. Behind the resistance to the Arab conquest were the interests of Tang China, which pursued an active policy in Central Asia as never before. The confrontation with China led to a decisive battle at the Talas River in 751. Chinese ex-

pansion was halted, and Islamic civilization began to bide its time for the conquest of the peoples of Central Asia: the nomadic Turks and a settled population of mixed Turkic-Iranian origin.

### Results of the Arab-Khazar Wars (642-799).

In the north, the Arab advance through the South Caucasus encountered fierce and significantly better organized Khazar resistance. The struggle against the strong, centralized Khazar state was intense and lengthy. The fierce confrontation lasted until the end of the 8th century. In 737 the Arab general – and later the last Umayyad caliph Marwan b. Muhammad – once again and decisively established Arab rule over Derbent. Separate military actions on the border and raids of the Khazar troops in the Muslim provinces of Arran and Azerbaijan continued for several more decades. But, after the last raid of the Khazar Kagan in 799, which probably was a kind of instant reaction to the situation in relationship between the Khazars and the local Arab administration in the South Caucasus, a military-political balance and peace was established (*Dunlop 1954: 58-88; Artamonov 1962: 248*); *Buniyatov 1965: 115*), in which former rivals and enemies

Fig. 1. Pre-Caspian regions in the 9th-10th centuries. Caspian campaigns of the Rus. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rus\\_Caspian.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rus_Caspian.png)



became good partners in lucrative international trade along the Silk Road. Traders who entered into a contract in the capital of the Khazar state enjoyed special honor in Baghdad (*Ibn Khordadbeh* 1967: 124).

### The Path from the Khazars to the Middle East.

The stability and significant income from trade turned Khazaria into a powerful state that for almost three centuries kept the northern borders of Byzantium and the Caliphate locked, thus, preventing nomadic raids on the lands of its southern neighbors. Three superpowers for a certain time delimited their spheres of influence in Eurasia and the Middle East: the Muslim Caliphate, Christian Byzantium, and Khazaria, in which presumably the political elite at the end of the 8th century converted to Judaism. In the 9th century Khazaria controlled the entire western sector of the Eurasian routes. Goods from the borders of China could be delivered to the Khazarian-dependent ports on the Black Sea coast; and from there they entered into Byzantium. Merchants could also gain access to the Franks through Eastern Europe. The capital of the Khazars, Itil, located at the mouth of the Volga, was the largest trade center. The city hosted permanent merchant guilds with various trading posts that included the Rus, Jewish merchants, and Muslims comprised of Arabs, Persians, and Khorezmians along with the Khazars themselves. The merchant class was held in high esteem by the Khazars. Even the members of the royal Kagan family

were engaged in trade in Itil. Al-Istakhri reported that one of the worthiest contenders for the Kagan throne was engaged in the bread trade but that he was not considered as a candidate just because he was a Muslim (*al-Istakhri* 1961: 131).

The earliest systematic information about trade routes patronized by the Khazars in Eurasia was provided by Ibn Khordadbeh, a government official who left descriptions of trade routes and postal links in the Caliphate and neighboring countries. He labored in the middle of the 9th century. Textual critics and scholars have noted the likelihood of the existence of an early revision which dates from no later than 233 AH (847/848 AD), and a later revision dating back to 882–886 (*Ibn Khordadbeh* 1986: 18). Be that as it may, the information we are interested in concerning trade routes through the territories adjacent to the Caspian Sea can be firmly attributed to the middle of the 9th century.

This information from written sources affirms that during this period the Khazars managed to create and lead trade and political unions which ensured the delivery of goods in two main directions. First, was the way from Khorezm through the middle and lower reaches of the Volga to the Dnieper and further onward to Western Europe. The initial sections of this route were founded by Sogdian merchants in the middle of the 6th century. Delivery of goods to Western Europe along the former southern route became difficult due to the troublesome Arab-Byzantine border and difficult to overcome because of their regu-

lar, mutual military conflicts. It was critical to bypass Byzantium. Thus, the assistance of the Khazar state was essential since they dominated the territories from the Caspian to the Black Sea steppes and established control over the middle reaches of the Dnieper by the middle of the 9th century. Thus, the northern route to Europe already had two main branches: One led to Byzantium through the Khazar possessions in the Caucasus and Crimea, and the other through Eastern Europe to the Frankish kingdom.

The second trade route supported by Khazaria accessed the markets of the Caliphate for the goods of Khazaria itself and other northern peoples. It was the southern road through the South Caucasus. In the opposite direction, goods came from the Middle East along with the highly valued silver Abbasid coin, which was in great demand among the northern peoples who did not have their own coinage, yet, were forced to pay part of their taxes to the Khazars in coinage (Kovalev 2005: 80). For Muslim merchants who intended to deliver goods to Eastern and Western Europe, the route from their borders through Byzantium was unreliable because of the hostile relations between the Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire. Thus, the route ran beyond the Caucasus ridge to the capital of the Khazars and the Eurasian steppes became transit territories for the Middle East's trade with Western Europe.

The Khazar capital Itil at the mouth of the Volga turned into a kind of distribution center or emporium where merchants flocked from all over the world. Both Ibn Khordadbeh and the authors of geographical works of the 10th century such as Ibn al-Fakih, al-Istakhri, Ibn Hawkal, al-Masudi, al-Mukaddasi wrote about this fact. From Itil, the goods proceeded along two alternative routes to the Middle East. First, along the western coast through the territory of modern Azerbaijan. This path, most likely, was under the control of Muslim merchants, both locals from Khazaria and Azerbaijan as well as experienced merchants from the central regions of the Caliphate. As previously mentioned information provided by Ibn Khordadbeh states that the merchants who entered into a contract in Khazaria's capital enjoyed special respect in Iraq. The main overland highway from Iraq followed on to the large trade center of Ardabil in South Azerbaijan,<sup>1</sup> then through the city of Varsan, which was on the border of Arran (North Azerbaijan). This road led

<sup>1</sup> This historical region of Azerbaijan is now part of Iran. The territory of the present Republic of Azerbaijan was known to Arab authors mainly as Arran (the designation of the state of Albania, borrowed from the Parthian tradition through the Sassanian one). Today, in politics and historiography, it is customary to talk about South Azerbaijan (in the north of Iran) and North Azerbaijan (the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan).

to the largest international trade center of that time, Barda (Partava), the former capital of Caucasian Albania. Three roads diverged from Barda: west toward Dvin, northwest toward Tiflis, and northeast through the Derbent passage to Derbent and eventually reaching the Khazars (Ibn Khordadbeh 1967: 122). The authors of the 10th century provided more details about the overland route from Barda to Derbent. It included the cities of Shamakha (ash-Shamakhiyya), Shabran<sup>2</sup>, and Abkhaz,<sup>3</sup> along with the crossing at the Samur River, eventually reaching Derbent itself.

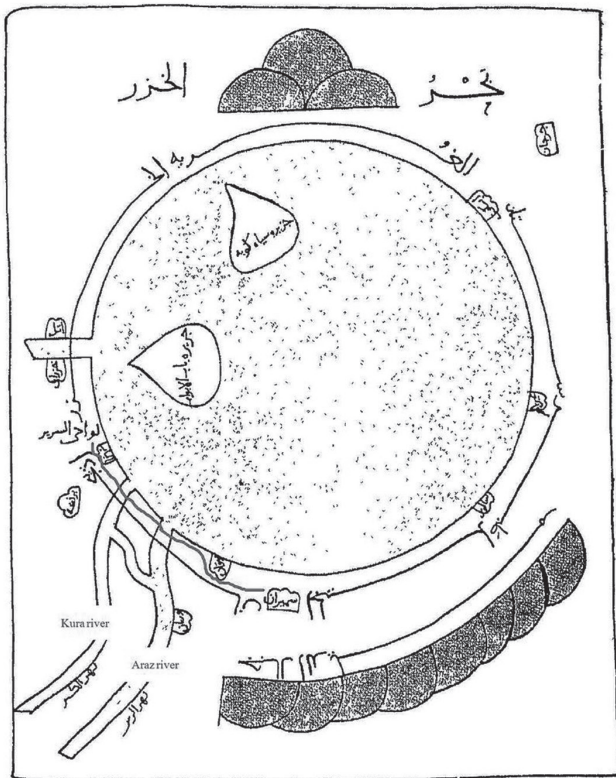
### Trade Routes across the Caspian.

In the Khazar capital, the merchants who brought goods from the east and north had to decide on the onward route for their cargo. This was either by the overland route described above, or to transport their goods across the Caspian Sea. Ibn Khordadbeh paid special attention to the sea route from Itil. He reported that the journey across the sea with a favorable wind from the South Caspian port of Abaskun to Itil took eight days (Ibn Khordadbeh 1967: 124). These messages of Ibn Khordadbeh were repeated by his followers, in particular, Ibn al-Faqih (Ibn al-Faqih 1885: 298). This is probably how the goods of Muslim merchants were transported from Itil by land both to the west and to the east. In the opposite direction, goods were transported from China in transit via Khazaria, as well as goods of the northern peoples which particularly included furs and slaves from among the pagans, since in Khazaria it was forbidden to sell Muslims, Christians and Jews into slavery (al-Istakhri 1961: 131).

The Khazars did not have their own ships to transport goods through the unpredictable and dangerous Caspian Sea. Al-Masudi definitely testifies to this, arguing that the Khazars had only boats (*zavarik*) that could deliver goods from the northern regions along the tributaries of the Volga to Itil (al-Masudi 2005: Vol. 1, 143). This famous writer and traveler, who himself sailed along the Caspian shores, left evidence that local navigation was most likely coastal.

<sup>2</sup> According to al-Istakhri's text Sharvan was located along this route but a city with this name is not mentioned by all the authors. There are no descriptions of it and it has not been located. Yakut, who cites this passage in his work, instead of Sharvan indicates Shabran – a fairly well-known city located in this sector of Azerbaijan. The archaeological finds of old Shabran clearly testify to its prosperity and importance on the trade routes during the era of Arab rule.

<sup>3</sup> There is significant controversy concerning the identification of al-Abkhaz, but the problem lies in correctly conveying and origin of the name. It must be admitted that the approximate location should be determined by the place of the toponym in the chain of settlements along the road from Barda to Derbent.



صورة بحر الخزر التي في الصفحة ١٠٥ ظ من الأصل،

**Fig. 2. Map of the Caspian Sea and Pre-Caspian regions from the Arab geographer Ibn Haukal (10th century).**  
Source: <https://oldmaps.amireyvaz.com/2012/04/ibn-hawqal-khazar-caspian-map.html>

The seamen of the Muslim regions on the western and southern coasts avoided going to the high sea on their ships (*al-Masudi* 2005: vol. 1, 147; *Minorsky* 1963: 201-202; *Konovalova* 1999: 91). But 9th century author Ibn Khordadbeh provided more details about the organization of sea transportation across the Caspian. His writings suggest that the Khazars managed to entice the flow of goods from Itil to the Middle East not only from their fellow tribesmen among the inhabitants of the Eurasian steppes east of the Caspian shores, but also the warrior merchants whom the Arab sources called *ar-rus*.<sup>4</sup> This source reported that they sold furs and swords, which they brought from the remote corners of the country “saklabs” to the “Rum Sea,” and then paid duties to the Byzantines. They could also supply goods up the Don to the Khazar city of Khamlija,<sup>5</sup> where they paid tribute to the

Khazar king and followed further along the Caspian Sea to the southern coast. At this location they could unload their goods ashore and deliver them by camel to Baghdad (*Ibn Khordadbeh* 1967: 154). This means that Russian merchants did not necessarily hand over their goods to Muslim merchants in Itil, but preferred to remain in possession as long as possible in order to obtain more profit from a more distant point of sale.

Ibn Khordadbeh, while speaking of the transfer of goods onto camels along the southern coast of the Caspian, specifically mentioned Jurjan, or ancient Hyrcania, which is today’s Gorgan region in Iran. This area was on the border with the Turkic nomads. This was a key distribution center, being both a city and port for long-distance trade goods and bordering the nomads. It is probable that goods from the eastern countries were also brought here to determine their onward route which would be either back across the Caspian Sea to Itil, Derbent or Baku; or by land along the same route which, according to Ibn Khordadbeh, was used by the Rus to transport their goods. The most important port of Jurjan was Abaskun (*al-Masudi* 2005: Vol. 1, 146). The Rus could land not only in Abaskun, but also along the entire southern and eastern coast. This conclusion can be made if one takes into account the words of Ibn Khordadbeh: “... they sail on the Jurjan Sea and land on any shore they want” (*Ibn Khordadbeh* 1967: 124). Indirect confirmation of this is also provided from the testimony of al-Masudi, dating to the 10th century, when the situation completely changed and the Rus in the Caspian Sea appear not as peaceful merchants and seafarers, but as cruel invaders and robbers. The targets of their attack were the shores of Jurjan, Tabaristan, Gilan, Deilem and Azerbaijan (*al-Masudi* 2005: Vol. 1, 146). To determine their attacks, they had to choose the wealthy areas of which they apparently had sufficient knowledge.

The information about the Rus from Ibn Khordadbeh (the mid-9th century) and al-Masudi (mid-10th century) paint two different pictures of their penetration of and navigation in the Caspian Sea. Ibn Khordadbeh does not say a word about armed assaults, there is only mention about the trade operations of the Rus. They delivered traditional goods from the northern regions, and apparently acted as reliable contractors for the Khazar-Jewish and Muslim merchants. Just like other merchants in the Muslim world, they strove to follow the well-trodden trade routes as far as possible in order to return with greater profit. Sometimes, they resold goods on the

<sup>4</sup> The origin of this term is unclear, and it will not be focused upon here. It is important that both Byzantine and Arab sources, judging by the description, used this word to refer to the military units of the Scandinavians whose campaigns may involve the representatives of the tributary Slavic population.

<sup>5</sup> There is no unequivocal opinion about the correct reading

and localization of the toponym in the scholarly literature. The prevailing opinion is that this word is a distortion of the Turkic Khanbalyk – the city of the Kagan (Khan). This could be the name of a part of the Khazar capital at the mouth of the Volga.

southern coast of the Caspian Sea, and at other times they traveled from Jurjan to Baghdad. Their direct passage when traveling east with their goods is not noted in the Arab sources. Most likely, however, part of the goods supplied and transported by the Russians did go east which Muslim merchants bought in Abaskun and other southern Caspian ports. In another source, Ibn Khordadbeh designated this path as the route of the Jewish merchants, whom he called *rahdaniyya*, meaning “those who know the path.” He indicated the route from Jurjan to Balkh, Maverannahr, the country of the Toguz-oguz, and to China (*Ibn Khordadbeh* 1967: 155). Since the land routes of the Jewish merchants of *ar-rahdaniyya* approached Khazar Itil in the north, it is natural to assume that ships of the Rus transported their goods across the sea to Jurjan which Ibn Khordadbeh mentioned between his reports about the routes of *ar-rahdaniyya* (*Asadov* 2009: 19).

Strabo reported on the delivery of Indian goods from Hyrcania (Jurjan) through the Caspian Sea to Albania and further along the Kura River to the Black Sea ports. He also mentioned that Indian goods were transported to the Caspian ports on the east coast along the Amu Darya River (*Strabo* 1924, book 11, ch. 7, section 3). The previous existence of a navigable branch of the Amu Darya coming from Sarykamysh Lake to the Caspian Sea is an obvious fact and confirmed by archaeological and geological data. This branch is known from the sources as the Uzboy. Even if the channel of the Uzboy was not navigable in the 9th century, the caravans from the Khorezmian city of Gurganj (present day Kunya-Urgench) could still proceed to the Caspian coast where the ships of the Rus were waiting for them. As a hint, one can consider the legend preserved by the 12th century writer al-Garnati concerning the buildings with green domes surrounded by impenetrable swamps to the east of Khorezm. According to the story, a traveler who accidentally wandered to that location found an emerald bowl bringing it to the Khorezmshah. However, the ruler and his army could not get through to the green domes and decided to dig a canal from the Amu Darya, however, he died before finishing the work. Additionally, the written sources, testify to the diagonal trans-Caspian shipping transiting from the northwest to the southeast coast. After Ibn Khordadbeh's information about the trans-Caspian traffic between Itil and Jurjan regarding the transportation of the natural madder dye from Arran (present Azerbaijan) to India, there is a report by al-Istakhri – the author of the 10th century (*al-Istakhri* 1927: 190). He does not speak specifically about the route that the goods traveled but his indication of the point of departure and destination of the goods undoubtedly echoes Strabo. In full accordance with his message is

the report of the scientist-geographer from the 12th century, al-Idrisi, who stated that Arran was famous for the production of madder, a dye that was extracted from herbs that could be collected anywhere from Bab al-Abwab (Derbent) to Tiflis and transported across the Khazar Sea to Jurjan, and from there to India by land caravans (*al-Idrisi* 2002: 829-830).

Thus, in the southern Pre-Caspian area, Jurjan and its main port Abaskun played the key role in the reception and distribution of goods to further locations. From Jurjan, Arab geographers began describing the caravan routes along the eastern coast and western coasts. Baku, Derben and Itil were the terminal ports on the western coast shipping through the Caspian, although Itil itself was not located directly on the seashore but situated on both banks of the main channel of the Volga at its very confluence with the Caspian Sea (*al-Istakhri* 1927: 190). From Abaskun along the western coast to al-Bab (Derbent) the seacoast was inhabited, and not far beyond Derbent lay the Kazarian city of Samandar, then from Itil were the steppes (*al-Istakhri* 1927: 219; *Ibn Haukal* 1992: 329–330). Apparently, along these shores it was possible to make coastal voyages in small ships. Along the east coast, the Arab authors noted only two places of habitation. Dehistan's harbor was 50 farsakhs away. The sea was shallow there and ships took shelter from storms as well as engaged in fishing. The second inhabited place was the island Siyah-Kukh which was how the Arab authors designated the Mangyshlak peninsula. This area reportedly had rich pastures and springs. The population of Mangyshlak was made up of the Oghuz Turks who had arrived in that area only as recently as the middle of the 10th century. Maneuvering in the coastal waters of Mangyshlak was fraught with the danger of shipwreck due to the narrowness of the coast's navigable passage. The Arab sources warn that shipwrecks near the coast involved a risk of complete loss of cargo, which fell under the control of the Turks' who seized the coast. Ibn Khordadeh did not provide this information, but it appeared first with al-Istakhri, and then was delivered by Ibn Haukal (*al-Istakhri* 1927: 219; *Ibn Haukal* 1992: 330). Neither is such information found in the works of al-Mukaddasi, writing in the late 10th century.

### Conclusion

The Arab sources provide enough information to conclude that intensive shipping occurred across the Caspian Sea from the north to the south, specifically from the mouth of the Volga to the southern Caspian ports. Sending goods in this same direction could also be realized from Derbent and Baku. The largest port in the south, which received and distributed

cargo in various directions, was Abaskun in Jurjan (Hyrkania). The east coast apparently contained several less significant ports where land caravans from Khorezm, and even India, arrived. It is possible that coastal shipping was performed by ships from the local population. Navigation on the Caspian in the 9th century was most likely provided by the ships of the Rus merchants that were patronized by the Khazars. It was Khazaria that was able to organize this trans-Caspian trade, making peace with the Arabs and joining forces with them to organize shipping across the Caspian Sea.

Change of power in Kiev followed the capture of the city by Oleg in 882. Trade agreements between the Rus and Byzantium caused the new trade partners to block transport routes from the north to the south – both land roads through the Derbent Passage along the western coast of the Caspian Sea and the sea trans-Caspian routes. This also led to the con-

solidation of an anti-Khazar alliance to the east and west of the Khazar state. The forces of Khazaria were depleted, and control over the tributary tribes of the Eurasian steppes as well as the Rus was weakened. The Oghuz and Muslim merchants of Khorezm were now interested in the overland north-Caspian route connected with the Volga-Baltic route “from the Khvalis” to the Rus, and to Western Europe – primarily to Scandinavia, where in the middle of the 10th century the number of Muslim silver coins minted in Central Asia increased. There was also an alternative southern route from the Rus to Byzantium “from the Varangians to the Greeks.” The main routes of the Silk Road during the Arab-Khazar trade partnership, sea and land routes through the territory of modern Azerbaijan, fell into decay. The Caspian Sea, transformed from being a sea route that brought trade partners together on both sides of the sea into a natural obstacle, bypassed by trade caravans.

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