
THE ROLE OF STEPPE CITIES IN THE CIVILIZATION OF THE NOMADS.

performed by Aisulu Tokan

WHAT WE'LL DISCUSS



The nomads of the Eurasian steppes, semi-deserts, and deserts played an important and multifarious role in regional, interregional transit, and long-distance trade across Eurasia. In ancient and medieval times their role far exceeded their number and economic potential. The specialized and non-autarchic character of their economy, provoked that the nomads always experienced a need for external agricultural and handicraft products. Besides, successful nomadic states and polities created demand for the international trade in high value foreign goods, and even provided supplies, especially silk, for this trade. Because of undeveloped social division of labor, however, there were no professional traders in any nomadic society. Thus, specialized foreign traders enjoyed a high prestige amongst them. It is, finally, argued that the real importance of the overland Silk Road, that currently has become a quite popular historical adventure, has been greatly exaggerated

REGIONAL AND INTERREGIONAL TRADE

THE MOST IMPORTANT TRADE TO THE NOMADS WAS THE REGIONAL TRADE WITH NEIGHBORING SEDENTARY SOCIETIES. THE MAIN MERCHANDISE THAT NOMADS OFFERED THEIR SEDENTARY COUNTERPARTS WAS LIVESTOCK AND ITS SECONDARY PRODUCTS: WOOL, HIDES, AND OTHERS. HORSES WERE ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT IN SUCH TRADE.

THE CAMEL IS INFERIOR TO THE HORSE IN THIS REGARD. MANY SEDENTARY STATES, LIKE CHINA, OR THE STATES OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT, HOWEVER, ALWAYS EXPERIENCED A SHORTAGE OF MILITARY HORSES AND KEEPING THEM WAS QUITE EXPENSIVE. EVEN RUSSIA WAS INTERESTED IN REGULARLY PURCHASING HORSES FROM THE NOMADS. THUS, IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, THE RUSSIANS ANNUALLY PURCHASED FROM THE NOGAI, ONE OF MANY NOMADIC GROUPS, 20,000 TO 80,000 HORSES, AND THE LIMITS WERE SET NOT BY A DEMAND BUT BY A SUPPLY.





ALTHOUGH NOMADS AND SEDENTARY POPULATIONS USUALLY OCCUPIED SEPARATE ECOLOGICAL ZONES, SPATIAL DIFFICULTIES FOR SUCH TRADING OR EXCHANGE WERE FAR FROM INSURMOUNTABLE. LIVESTOCK COULD BE DRIVEN AND CARRIED OVER GREAT DISTANCES. SOMETIMES MERCHANTS FROM SEDENTARY COUNTRIES PENETRATED DEEP INTO THE STEPPES. FOR EXAMPLE, IBN FADLAN, A SECRETARY OF THE EMBASSY SENT BY THE ABBASID CALIPH AL-MUQTADIR TO VOLGA BULGARIA, TESTIFIED THAT IN THE TENTH CENTURY MUSLIM MERCHANTS FROM CENTRAL ASIA TRADED WITH THE OGHUZ NOMADS IN THEIR OWN TERRITORY, IN THE EUROPEAN STEPPES.

TRANSIT TRADE



THE FATHER OF HISTORY, HERODOTUS, WAS THE FIRST WHO NOTICED THE NOMADS' INVOLVEMENT INTO THIS KIND OF TRADE. HE MENTIONED THAT IN THE FIFTH CENTURY BCE THE SCYTHIANS, WHO LIVED IN THE EAST EUROPEAN STEPPES AND FOUNDED THE EARLIEST NOMADIC STATE IN HISTORY, BROUGHT MERCHANDISE MADE ON THE TERRITORY OF CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE TO THE FOOTHILLS OF THE URALS.



THE SILK ROAD AND ITS MYTHS

THE “SILK ROAD” IS A TERM COINED BY A FAMOUS GERMAN SCHOLAR, RICHTHOFEN IN 1877 . PROMOTED BY HIS FOLLOWERS, LIKE HIS STUDENT SVEN HEDIN (1938) AND OTHERS, IT WAS RECENTLY REINVIGORATED MAINLY FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REASONS. IN SOME COUNTRIES, ESPECIALLY IN CHINA, ITS IMPORTANCE IS GREATLY EXAGGERATED. THE CHINESE “ONE BELT, ONE ROAD” INITIATIVE AND ITS “HERITAGE DIPLOMACY” ARE BUT ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE COUNTRY’S SOFT POWER STRATEGY . NOWADAYS, THE SILK ROAD ALSO CAPTURES IMAGINATION OF MANY AMATEURS ATTRACTED BY ITS ALLEGEDLY EXOTIC CHARACTER. IT FIGURES IN MANY POPULAR AND SEMIPOPULAR PUBLICATIONS. IT APPEARS ALSO IN MOVIES, AND TV SHOWS.

The Silk Road and its Myths

The Silk Road was not the only transcontinental trading route. In many historical periods other routes were much more important than the Silk one, and they served to transport across Eurasia not only silk and spices but many other goods, as well as technologies, know-how, cultural styles, religions, and diseases, were transported along these routes. Thus, more than one million Samanid coins have been discovered in Eastern Europe, in the Khazar period. By contrast, only a few Samanid coins have been found in China. There is no evidence that there was a direct caravan trade between China and the Middle Eastern, East European, and mediterranean countries at that time. It is true that silk and silk clothing were found in many graves, from the north Caucasus to Switzerland and Scandinavia. But most of them were made in Byzantine and Central Asia . Apparently, few Chinese silks were delivered to eastern Europe not directly but from central Asian countries.

CONCLUSION

IN SUM, THE ROLE OF THE STEPPE NOMADS IN THE EURASIAN TRADE WAS MULTIFARIOUS AND FAR EXCEEDED THEIR NUMBER AND ECONOMIC POTENTIAL. IN SOME HISTORICAL PERIODS, THE NOMADS CREATED DEMAND ON SPECIFIC LUXURY GOODS, STIMULATED THEIR PRODUCTION IN SEDENTARY COUNTRIES, AND FACILITATED THEIR DISSEMINATION ACROSS THE TWO CONTINENTS. STILL, THEIR GENERAL ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL EURASIAN TRADE SHOULD NOT BE EXAGGERATED. THEIR ROLE IN THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY HISTORY OF EURASIA WAS MUCH GREATER. AT ANY RATE, EVERYTHING WAS CHANGED IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD. THE ROLE OF THE EURASIAN STEPPES AND CENTRAL ASIA IN THE TRANSCONTINENTAL TRADE BETWEEN EUROPE, THE MIDDLE EAST, AND CHINA RAPIDLY DECLINED. THE GREAT GEOGRAPHIC DISCOVERIES AND IMPROVEMENTS IN SEAFARING SHARPLY DIMINISHED THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSCONTINENTAL OVERLAND TRADE . THE MARITIME ROUTES BECAME SHORTER AND EASIER. CARAVELS, AND LATER STEAMBOATS, DEFEATED CARAVANS IN EURASIA. AND WITH THESE NEW DEVELOPMENTS ANY SIGNIFICANT ROLE THAT THE NOMADS HAD BEEN PLAYING IN THE EURASIAN TRADE GRADUALLY CAME TO THE END.

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