

# HISTORICAL SCIENCES

## THE ROLE OF CAMEL CARAVAN ROUTES IN THE HISTORICAL SYSTEM OF TRADE AND CARGO TRANSPORTATION OF AZERBAIJAN

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### Abstract

This article examines the significant role of caravan routes operated by camel caravans during the ancient and medieval periods in developing trade and freight transport networks, expanding economic exchange, and fostering interregional integration. The study explores the structure of transport and trade networks established along caravan routes, the logistical advantages of camel transport, and its function in ensuring the resilience of long-distance trade relations. Furthermore, it highlights the impact of this system not only on economic development but also on the expansion of cultural and civilizational interactions. The primary objective of this research is to determine the functional significance of camel freight transport within the historical caravan transport system of Azerbaijan and to provide a scholarly rationale for its position in the regional trade system.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, ancient and medieval periods, transport, camel caravan routes, trade, freight transport.

**Introduction.** Azerbaijan's geographical position at the crossroads of Asia and Europe has, since ancient times, created highly favourable conditions for its development as a major transit hub for trade and freight transport, thereby driving the demand for transport infrastructure. Caravan routes represent one of the oldest communication and trade networks, having played a pivotal role in shaping economic, cultural, and political relations throughout human history. These arteries served not only for the transportation of commodities but also acted as the primary channels for transferring knowledge, technology, religious concepts, and cultural values between diverse civilisations. Established in deep antiquity, this networked system spanned the vast geographical expanse of Eurasia, functioning as a strategic bridge connecting East and West. Notably, within the framework of the Silk Road system, caravan routes acquired a more structured and international character, intensifying trade and cultural ties between China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The cities and outposts situated along these thoroughfares evolved not only into major economic hubs but also into spaces of intercultural convergence. The territory of Azerbaijan was an integral part of this extensive caravan network. The region's advantageous geographical location at the intersection of the East–West and North–South trade routes fostered the dynamic development of local transport and logistical infrastructure. Consequently, urban centres such as Baku, Shamakhi, Ganja, and Tabriz emerged as key transit points on international trade routes.

The study of caravan routes holds significant theoretical importance not only for reconstructing historical trade systems but also for understanding the dynamics of regional socio-economic development, intercultural interaction processes, and geopolitical transformations. Within this context, a comprehensive investigation into these issues is highly relevant to both historiography and cultural studies. Researching the historical, geographical, and functional characteristics of caravan routes is fundamental to a scholarly comprehension of regional economic development dynamics, the transformation of trade networks, and cultural integration processes. This subject remains a pertinent area of study at the intersection of historiography, the history of intercultural relations, and economic history.

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the historical development dynamics of caravan routes, their economic and cultural functions, and the strategic position of the territory of Azerbaijan within international trade networks. The work aims to conceptualise caravan routes not merely as commercial paths, but as multifunctional systems that played a pivotal role in shaping inter-civilisational ties. To achieve this objective, the following tasks have been defined: to investigate the genesis and formative stages of caravan routes; to analyse the structural features of the Silk Road system; to identify the main caravan routes that traversed the territory of Azerbaijan; to evaluate the cultural and social consequences of trade relations; and to determine the role of caravan roads in regional and international integration.

Alongside this, structural-functional analysis provides a scholarly evaluation of the economic, political,

and cultural functions performed by caravan routes within society. The source base for this research comprises archaeological materials, historical chronicles, notes and diaries of medieval travellers, as well as contemporary research literature.

Domestic animals played a vital role in the economic activities of Azerbaijan, serving as a key means of freight transportation. For centuries, Azerbaijanis and their ancestors utilised horses, donkeys, mules, camels, as well as oxen and buffaloes as riding and pack animals.

Based on archaeological materials, it has been established that the inception of camel utilisation in the South Caucasus dates back to the second half of the 2nd millennium BCE (27). The results of archaeological excavations conducted in 1896 in the village of Qarabulag indicate that by the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE, the camel was already being actively exploited as a means of transport and riding in Azerbaijan (9). This thesis is further corroborated by the works of B. B. Piotrovsky (17). In particular, materials dating to the 1st–2nd centuries CE indicate that camels were the primary mode of transport for delivering Caspian fish and other trade commodities to distant countries (21). Medieval sources also note the use of camels as a priority means of freight transportation (7).

Caravans were formed for the transportation of goods and long-distance travel. Originating in deep antiquity, the caravan served as a mechanism for merchants and travellers transporting goods over long distances to overcome road hardships and ensure security against robber attacks. Caravans were frequently accompanied by armed guards and specially trained dogs. A caravan could include a significant number of horses, as well as thousands of pack and riding animals (29).

Since ancient times, the development of agriculture, animal husbandry, and crafts in Azerbaijan has fostered urban growth and expanded the region's trade and economic relations with numerous countries. The intensity of caravan traffic led to the emergence of specific occupational roles, such as the *gafilesar* (caravan leader) and *sarvan* (camel driver/caravan master). Their primary responsibilities included the formation of armed detachments to protect and escort the caravan during its journey.

Data from written sources and the findings of archaeological excavations confirm that during the Classical antiquity period, animals such as horses, mules, and camels played a pivotal role as riding and pack transport vehicles.

For centuries, the camel not only provided the population with food and the textile industry with raw materials, but also served as a crucial means of locomotion. One of the regions where the Bactrian camel (two-humped camel) was domesticated was Southern Azerbaijan, where these animals began to be utilised for transport purposes as early as the late Chalcolithic period. The significance of the camel as freight transport increased substantially during the Classical antiquity era, when it became the primary means of moving goods for export operations to neighbouring and distant countries.

Claudius Aelianus, in his description of the Caspian region, noted the extraordinary abundance of local camels; he indicated that the largest individuals reached the size of a tall horse and were covered with excellent wool, which in its softness and fineness was not inferior to that of Miletus (24). Attesting to the use of camels by Caspian tribes as a means of transport, Claudius Aelianus wrote: *"In the lands of the Caspians, there is a large lake where big fish are found... The Caspians catch them, salt or dry them, then pack them onto camels and take them to Ecbatana"* (24). From the provided information, it is evident that Aelianus places particular emphasis on the high camel population, their physical parameters, their value for wool production, and their active application in trade.

The development of camel husbandry facilitated the formation of overland caravan routes and the expansion of trade networks, while the organisation of security ensured that merchants reached their destinations in a timely and safe manner. The high resilience of camels to water scarcity under scorching heat, combined with their ability to traverse burning sands without difficulty, drove a substantial demand for these animals as an efficient pack and transport vehicle.

Overland caravan routes possessed international significance. A vital role within the transport communication system was played by internal roads that linked the cities and rural settlements of Caucasian Albania. The ancient thoroughfare leading to the city of Gabala branched out in a locality known as Chaybogazy: one direction extended eastward, while the second led towards Mingachevir. Another caravan route traversing Albanian territory proceeded from the area of modern-day Qazakh through Shamkir, Ganja, and Mingachevir to Shamakhi (32).

In the south, the city of Ecbatana served as a key junction for intersecting trade routes. It was precisely here that the primary caravan roads passing through the territory of Atropatene converged.

During the Medieval period, camels played a fundamental role in the freight transportation system of Azerbaijan. The high carrying capacity of these animals enabled the efficient organisation of caravan communication and ensured the transport of various categories of goods to both neighbouring and distant countries in the shortest possible timeframe.

According to research, while the *bugur* (a male Bactrian, two-humped camel) and the *kyak* (a male dromedary, one-humped camel) possessed a carrying capacity within the range of 130–170 kg, the *nar* (hybrid males obtained from crossing dromedary and Bactrian camels) were capable of transporting loads weighing 400 or even 500 kg (11,185). The exceptional significance of the camel as a key means of caravan transport in medieval Azerbaijan was reflected in the epic poem *Isfandiyar-name* (The Book of Alexander) by the great poet Nizami Ganjavi:

*"Of the four thousand camels designated for freight transport and following the army everywhere, One thousand were selected from the bisurak breed; under their heavy tread, stones turned to dust. Another thousand comprised the bukhti (Bactrian camels), laden with delicacies and provisions for the warriors."*

*The third thousand were represented by the swift-footed naqa (female camels), whose cargo consisted of gold and jewels. The fourth thousand consisted of noble camels, each of which in its speed was like a goitered gazelle or a gust of hot wind" (30).*

An analysis of depictions of pack camels in book miniatures indicates that the rules of camel loading during the Medieval period remained virtually unchanged until recent times. This continuity allows for the reconstruction of this process based on contemporary ethnographic observations.

To load a camel, a special wooden pack frame known as a *navar* was fitted onto its back. This frame consisted of a pair of wooden rods (*mils*) wrapped in felt and interconnected by means of breast and breeching (*crupper*) straps (*paldym*). Depending on the number of the camel's humps, the branches of the frame were secured with connecting straps in two or three places. In cases where the load was light or the transportation was carried out over short distances, a simplified and lighter pack saddle or padding called a *palan* was used instead of the frame. The *palan* was placed between the humps, tightly fastened in two places with ropes (*orkyan*), and secured with a belly girth strap (32).

As evidenced by book miniatures, various receptacles were utilised for camel loading depending on the nature of the cargo, including chuvals (large sacks), chests, baskets, and wineskins. In particular, Sultan Muhammad's miniature "The Hunting Feast of the Shah" for A. Jami's work *Silsilat al-Dhahab* (The Chain of Gold) depicts a camel laden with chests (12). In another miniature, "The Battle of Kay Khosrow with Afrasiab", a camel is illustrated carrying packed baskets (12). It is also known that Baku oil was transported to the country's interior regions and abroad in wineskins loaded onto camels. Furthermore, camels were actively employed as a means of riding transport, a fact visually corroborated by the aforementioned miniatures.

The quantitative composition of caravans varied. Most frequently, groups of 15–20 camels were formed, though in specific cases, their number could reach up to one hundred heads. The leadership of the caravan was undertaken by an experienced specialist—the *caravanbashi* (caravan leader) or *sarvan*. The system of tethering the animals en route was structured as follows: the halter (*nokhta*) of each subsequent camel was tied to the saddle pack frame (*navar*) of the animal walking ahead, while the lead rope of the first animal remained in the hands of the *sarvan* (31).

Historical evidence indicates that substantial transformations occurred along international trade routes during the 8th and 9th centuries. By expanding its commercial ties with various countries, the Caliphate established hegemony over world trade, disrupting Byzantine trade turnover across the Black Sea and successfully redirecting the primary caravan and maritime routes through its own territory (28). The Caliphate's trade relations with northern countries were conducted predominantly via the Volga-Caspian overland and maritime transit routes, which traversed the territory of Azerbaijan.

The Caliphate's Northern trade and caravan route originated in Baghdad and, passing through Ardabil and Barda, led via Derbent into the lands of the Khazars, Bulgars, Burtas, and Rus' (34). This route simultaneously connected remote provinces of the Caliphate, including Azerbaijan, Arran, and Shirvan, with the state's centre. At Mount Behistun (Bisitun), the Northern route branched: one branch extended north-eastward to Zanjan, and from there to Ardabil and Barsan (Varsan); the second branch ran through Sisar in Southern Azerbaijan and, bypassing Maragheh and Tabriz, headed towards Ardabil and Mughan.

The 9th-century author Ibn Khordadbeh, listing the key nodes of the first caravan route and specifying the distances between them, wrote: 'From Dinavar to Zanjan is 29 stages (*manzils*); thence to Maragheh, 11 stages; to Miyanij, 2 stages; to Ardabil, 11 stages; and to Barsan, the final point of the province of Azerbaijan, 11 stages(8)

Describing the second branch of the Northern route—a caravan itinerary that ran from Dinavar to Barzand—Ibn Khordadbeh provided the following information:

*"From Dinavar to Khubardjan is 7 farsakhs; to Tall Wan, 6 farsakhs; thence to Sisar, 7 farsakhs; to Andarab, 4 farsakhs; then to Baylaqan, 5 farsakhs; to Karzai, 6 farsakhs; to Saburkhast, 8 farsakhs; to Maragheh, 7 farsakhs; to Dehkhorrqan, 11 farsakhs; to Tabriz, 9 farsakhs; to Marand, 10 farsakhs; to Khan, 4 farsakhs; to Khoy (Khuvvayyi), 6 farsakhs. From Maragheh to Kursara is 10 farsakhs; thence to Sarang, 10 farsakhs; to Nir, 5 farsakhs; to Ardabil, 5 farsakhs; and to Mughan, 10 farsakhs. From Ardabil to Khushsh is 8 farsakhs; thence to Barzand, 6 farsakhs; [and] from Barzand across the Balasajan plain to Barsan is 12 farsakhs" (8).*

By providing such meticulous data on the caravan routes, Ibn Khordadbeh thereby placed particular emphasis on their strategic significance.

While the city of Ardabil served as the key junction for intersecting caravan routes in Southern Azerbaijan, a similar function in Northern Azerbaijan was, in all probability, performed by Barda. Based on the works of Arab geographers and travellers of the 9th and 10th centuries, it is possible to reconstruct four primary macro-directions of caravan communication originating from Barda:

- **The Southern Direction:** It ran through Yunan, Baylaqan, Barsan, Balkhab, and Varvard, connecting in Ardabil with the routes leading further south.

- **The Northern Direction:** It proceeded through Bardij, Shamakhi, Shirvan, and Abkhaz to the Samur Bridge and further to Derbent.

- **The North-Western Direction (towards Tiflis):** It passed through Ganja, Shamkir, Khunan, and the Ibn Kandman fortress, reaching Tiflis.

- **The Western Direction (towards Dvin/Dabil):** It traversed Kalqatus, Matris, Davmims, Qulaqvin, and Sisakan, ultimately reaching the city of Dvin (8).

The sources indicate that caravanserai facilities were situated at key nodes along the caravan routes, de-

signed to provide overnight halts and rest for both travellers and animals. Postal stations and customs houses were also established at these same locations (5). Furthermore, stones that functioned as road signposts were erected along the thoroughfares. An inscription has been preserved on one such stone, dating to the 7th century and uncovered during archaeological excavations, which reads: "In the name of Allah, three miles from Tiflis" (35).

The aftermath of the Mongol invasion dealt a severe blow to foreign trade, and between the 1230s and 1290s, caravan routes were dominated by bandits. The regular operation of caravan itineraries was restored only at the close of the 13th century. The capital of the Ilkhanate—the city of Tabriz—emerged as the most critical hub where the primary trade veins converged. The Southern caravan route connected Tabriz with Baghdad and Mosul, the Eastern route linked it with Rey and Khorasan, and the Western route extended to Russia and other European countries (18).

In his work *Nuzhat al-Qulub*, Hamdallah Qazvini provides a detailed description of the caravan routes running from Sultaniya to Ganja, from Sultaniya to Tabriz and onward to Erzurum, as well as the itinerary from Karabakh to Tabriz via Ahar. The caravan highway followed the trajectory of Sultaniya–Ardabil–Bajjarvan–Mahmudabad, from where it proceeded into Karabakh, Ganja, and subsequently to Tiflis (22).

During the 14th and 15th centuries, owing to the expanding role of Shirvan silk in international commerce and its export to both European and Eastern markets, the significance of the Bilesuvar–Mahmudabad–Shamakhi–Shabran–Derbent caravan route increased substantially. Beginning in the 15th century, the Niyazabad–Shabran–Shamakhi–Tabriz caravan route was brought into operation; the intensity of its functioning grew noticeably throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. During this period (16th–17th centuries), alongside the Tabriz–Bilesuvar–Mahmudabad–Shamakhi–Shabran–Niyazabad thoroughfare, the Isfahan–Qazvin–Rasht–Astara–Lankaran–Baku–Shabran–Derbent trade route was also actively utilised (33).

The western route extending from Tabriz held vital importance for the execution of Azerbaijan's commercial and economic ties with Europe: Tabriz–Marand–Asdabad–Nakhchivan–Iravan–Kars–Trabzon–Istanbul. Furthermore, two caravan routes led from Tabriz to Syria: Tabriz–Van–Diyarbakir–Aleppo–Syria and Tabriz–Salmas–Jazira–Aleppo–Syria (33).

Extensive caravan routes led from Tabriz to Isfahan, bifurcating into two primary directions in the vicinity of Lake Urmia:

- **The first branch:** Tabriz–Qom–Kashan;
- **The second branch:** Tabriz–Ardabil–

Qazvin–Isfahan.

Additionally, a direct, through-caravan highway operated along the trajectory of Tabriz–Zanjan–Sultaniya–Qom–Kashan–Isfahan (33).

Up until the 19th and early 20th centuries, camels remained the pivotal means of freight transportation. Owing to the high efficiency of this mode of transport, camel husbandry constituted one of the most lucrative branches of the livestock economy. In regions where

landscape conditions precluded the utilisation of wheeled transport, trade turnover was maintained predominantly via camel caravans; consequently, particular attention was dedicated to the development of this sector in a number of Azerbaijani zones (4).

The camel is an animal biologically adapted to hot climatic conditions, which explains why this industry achieved its widest distribution in the lowland (*Aran*) districts of Azerbaijan. The employment of camels as pack transport in the plains zone dates back to profound antiquity. According to archival sources, the largest camel populations were concentrated in the Baku, Shamakhi, Nukha, Shusha, Lankaran, Aghdam, and Salyan *uyezds* (districts). While in 1845 the number of camels in the aforementioned *uyezds* stood at 4,637 heads, by 1858 this figure had reached 11,542 heads (20). Such growth dynamics were driven by the high demand for camels as an optimal labor force characterised by substantial carrying capacity.

In the final quarter of the 19th century, there were 310 heads of camels recorded in Sharur; in the Erivan *uyezd* (within the households of both nomadic and sedentary rural populations), there were 989 heads (14); in the Echmiadzin *uyezd*, 2,363 heads; and in the Surmali *uyezd*, 4,314 heads (23).

From the beginning of the 19th century until the 1840s, camel husbandry remained the primary transport resource in the Elizavetpol and Nakhchivan *uyezds*, as well as in the Belokan *okrug* (district). However, in the subsequent period, the demand for this mode of transport in these administrative units declined, and by 1850, its exploitation had virtually ceased (20, p.48, tab.3).

From the mid-19th century onwards, the initiation of Baku oil transportation to the *uyezds* in wineskins (*tuluks*) served as a catalyst for the rapid development of camel husbandry on the Absheron Peninsula. This trend is clearly discernible in the statistical materials of the 1880s, which reflect the camel population across individual villages of the Baku *uyezd*. During this period, the largest centers of camel husbandry were the villages of Jorat (300 heads) and Kobu (200 heads). In the villages of Mashtaga and Saray, 100 heads of camels each were maintained for the needs of oil transportation, while the villages of Novkhani, Qala, Sabunchi, Fatma, Nardaran, Bilajari, Guldek, Amirjan, and Zabrat held several dozen heads each (25). However, by the close of the 19th century, a downturn in the development of camel husbandry was observed in these settlements. The primary factor behind the reduction in the camel population was the construction of railway lines and the laying of oil pipelines (11).

During the winter period, camels were housed on the outskirts of villages in specialised stone sheds, known as *develik* (camel houses). The length of such structures reached 30–40 m, the width was 8–10 m, and the height stood at around 6 m (10), which allowed a pack animal to enter unobstructed together with its cargo. In the summer season, the livestock was kept under open canopies (*talvars*). The remnants of such specialised structures are still preserved to this day in the villages of Hovsan and Kobu.

The lifespan of a camel is 30–35 years (13), of which approximately 20–25 years constitute its period of economic utility. Upon the expiration of this timeframe, the animal was slaughtered for meat. Camel meat is characterised by high fat content and, in terms of its flavor profile, is close to water buffalo meat. Camel milk was also actively used in daily life. It is worth noting the ethno-confessional specificity regarding the consumption of this product: while Azerbaijani families adhering to the Shia *madhhab* (school of jurisprudence) consumed camel meat, this type of meat was not practiced among the Sunni population (13).

The draft power and carrying capacity of a single camel is equivalent to that of 2–3 horses. At the same time, compared to horses, the camel required significantly less maintenance. Despite the absence of horseshoes, the anatomical structure of the feet allowed the animal to move freely and painlessly across rocky and rugged terrain. Nevertheless, sources record instances where special leather footwear was used for camels when navigating particularly challenging sections of the route (23).

The weight of the transported cargo varied depending on the length of the route, as well as the specific species of the camel. As a rule, the maximum load capacity for a single individual constituted approximately half of its own body mass (16). At the beginning of the summer season, during the molting period, the animal's organism was significantly weakened; consequently, excessive physical exertion could lead to skin damage and the formation of deep wounds on the back that were difficult to heal. To prevent this, owners treated the camels' skin with seal blubber. By mid-August, the animal's body became covered with a new coat of wool (15), after which it once again became fit for intensive economic exploitation.

The establishment of camel husbandry as the leading sector for freight transportation was conditioned not only by the specifics of Azerbaijan's topography but also by the dominance of commodity production in its economic life. Such commodities produced within the region as silk, flax, cotton, grain, petroleum, salt, wine, and other products were actively transported to both domestic and foreign markets.

A number of researchers indicate that in the Baku Province, camels were maintained exclusively by individuals engaged in *charvadarstvo* (the commercial freight trade) (1). The transport industry was practiced by the inhabitants of the Shamakhi and Kuba *uyezds*, as well as the settlements of Khachmaz and Qutqashen (now Qabala—Authors' Note). According to statistical data from the 1880s, the Shamakhi *uyezd* alone accounted for 4,282 heads of camels, with sources noting that for the majority of their owners, *charvadarstvo* constituted their primary occupation (10). These transport operators executed freight haulage between various cities of Azerbaijan. For instance, to meet the needs of the Lahij artisans, thousands of *puds* of copper were annually supplied from Gadabay, Elizavetpol, Zangezur, and other regions via *charvadar* camels, while the copperware manufactured by local masters was sent back on the very same caravans (26).

In the 19th century, there existed a number of villages within the territory of Azerbaijan that numbered up to 50–60 *charvadars*, each owning from 10–13 to, in exceptional cases, 25 heads of camels (26). This fact finds its corroboration in ethnographic materials. According to oral history informants, professional *caravan-bashis* who had 20–30 camels at their disposal operated in the Absheron villages of Amirjan and Guldek (Guzdek).

The caravan routes traversing Azerbaijan since ancient times necessitated the formation of a well-developed network of well-appointed caravanserais. These structures were erected predominantly in major commercial and craft centres, as well as along the primary trade highways. However, with regard to the period under study, data indicating the functioning of caravanserais directly on the trade thoroughfares leading from Baku to Salyan, Tiflis, and Derbent, as well as to Nakhchivan and Iran via Karabakh and Shusha, remain absent (3).

9th-century caravanserais exhibit a significant resemblance to their ancient counterparts. Research indicates that the structural and spatial differences between them were negligible (19).

Such complexes performed the function of hotels (inns) for the rest of caravan personnel, while also serving as fortified sanctuaries that ensured protection against bandit attacks.

The external facades of the caravanserais facing the street were traditionally constructed as blind walls (without window openings). Urban caravanserais were utilised not only for overnight lodging but also functioned as critical nodes for executing various commercial, trade, and financial exchange transactions. Consequently, within urban spaces, they were predominantly localized in bustling commercial districts. Specialized trade stalls (shops) and offices were integrated into the structural layout of these caravanserais, a prime example of which is illustrated by the complexes erected in Baku (19).

As a rule, the infrastructure of all caravanserais—in addition to residential quarters (*hujras*) designated for rest—comprised isolated quarters for riding and pack animals, alongside secure storage facilities for commercial cargo. According to certain sources, two-storey caravanserais operated in a number of regions, wherein warehouses and granaries were situated on the upper level (6).

Bieberstein notes that the most well-appointed caravanserais were situated along the routes between Beshbarmag, Baku, and Salyan. According to his testimony, these structures were equipped with water-bearing wells, enclosed by a perimeter wall of ashlar stone, and featured domed ceilings (3). Ethnographic materials demonstrate that, alongside the permanent service staff, a significant number of *charvadars* (freight transport operators) and *ambals* (porters) were constantly present within the caravanserais.

**Conclusion.** In drawing together the findings of this study, it is possible to formulate the following synthesis. It must be emphasized that historical caravan routes constituted one of the foundational catalysts in the formation and development of human civilization.

These transport arteries not only ensured the institutionalization of trade links between disparate regions but also created the necessary conditions for the expansion of multi-lateral political, economic, and commercial relations between nations. Throughout history, the caravan itineraries linking East to West and North to South made a substantial contribution to the intensification of inter-civilizational interaction, the diffusion of cultural values, and the development of international relations. In this context, caravan routes possessed not merely a purely economic character but held profound socio-cultural and geopolitical significance in world history.

Owing to its strategic geographical position, Azerbaijan has served since profound antiquity as one of the pivotal transit hubs at the crossroads of international trade routes. The primary caravan itineraries traversing the country's territory exerted a significant influence on the economic and cultural development of various Azerbaijani regions. Via these pathways, silk, spices, precious stones, and other commodities brought from Eastern countries were transported to Western markets; concurrently, European and Near Eastern products entered the region. Consequently, Azerbaijan did not merely function as a passive transit space but emerged as a major epicenter of commercial and economic relations.

The development dynamics of the cities situated along the caravan routes merit particular attention. Historical sources demonstrate that intensive growth in commerce and craft production was observed within the zones adjacent to these routes, while new settlements simultaneously coalesced. Under the influence of international trade ties, the economic consolidation of cities such as Shamakhi, Ganja, Tabriz, Baku, and Nakhchivan, among others, took place, facilitating their transformation into the preeminent cultural centers of the region. Caravanserais, marketplaces, bridges, and fortifications were integral elements of the commercial and economic life of the era under study. These facilities performed not only utilitarian economic functions but played a vital role as spaces for communication and intercultural exchange among representatives of diverse ethnic groups.

One of the most significant characteristics of caravan routes was their function as an instrument of socio-cultural integration. It was precisely through these arteries that the diffusion of religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, literary works, architectural styles, and everyday lifestyles was executed among various peoples. Merchants, travellers, scholars, and artisans moving along caravan itineraries acted as conduits of cultural experience from disparate regions, which in turn determined the processes of mutual influence and enrichment among ethnic groups. In this context, caravan routes represented not merely economic pathways, but a crucial historical mediator that facilitated the formation of the shared cultural heritage of humanity.

At the same time, it is necessary to note the substantial role of caravan routes in the development of inter-state political relations. Control over trade arteries was one of the key factors defining the economic po-

tential and political authority of powers. For this reason, throughout history, various empires and states waged struggles for hegemony over caravan routes, dedicating particular attention to ensuring their security. This, in turn, exerted a direct influence on securing regional political stability and the institutionalization of diplomatic relations.

Conducted research proves that the study of historical caravan routes is of substantial significance not only within the context of retrospective analysis but also for comprehending the nature of contemporary international relations. For centuries, these thoroughfares facilitated the deep rooting of the principles of inter-ethnic cooperation, mutual benefit, and sociocultural integration. To a certain extent, the implementation of modern international transport and logistics projects can be viewed as an institutional continuation of the historical traditions of caravan communication.

Alongside this, the preservation of the tangible cultural heritage associated with caravan routes presents itself as one of the most critical objectives. Historical caravanserais, bridges, ancient marketplaces, and other architectural monuments are invaluable assets reflecting the historical memory of the people. The study, restoration, and transmission of these monuments to future generations are of paramount importance for safeguarding the national cultural domain. Simultaneously, this heritage makes a significant contribution to the development of tourism potential and the promotion of the country on the international stage.

Thus, in world history, historical caravan routes functioned not merely as commercial pathways, but as a vital communication system linking civilizations. Via these arteries, economic cooperation expanded, intercultural ties strengthened, and the process of forming universal human values intensified. Azerbaijan's geographical position at the intersection of these routes played a pivotal role in its historical development, securing for the country a distinct status in the economic, political, and cultural life of the region. By virtue of this, the comprehensive investigation and preservation of the caravan routes' heritage consistently retains its scientific and practical relevance.

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