

THE COMPETITION BETWEEN THE NORTHERN AND THE SOUTHERN SILK ROADS IN THE TIME OF TAMERLANE

Uli Schamiloglu

Nazarbayev University & University of Wisconsin-Madison

Astana, Kazakhstan, Madison, USA

uschamil@wisc.edu

Abstract. The article provides a comparative analysis of trade routes functioning in the vast territory of Eurasia in the XIII–XV centuries, characterized by Tamerlane's policy to strengthen the socio-economic and military-political condition of Samarkand in order to turn it into one of the largest centers of world trade, craft and culture. Tamerlan's success was largely determined by the socio-demographic situation in The Golden Horde caused by the consequences of the so-called "black death", as well as by the climatic cataclysms that took place in this period of time.

Keywords: southern and Northern branches of the great silk road, Tamerlane, Samarkand, Golden Horde.

Thinking back on a modest article I published over two decades ago in a volume devoted to medieval Samarqand, I can see that my thinking about my topic for today, namely the competition between the “northern Silk Road” and the “southern Silk Road” in the time of Timur or Tamerlane (from *Temür-i leng*) has evolved quite a bit [1]. I would like to begin my discussion with a review of one of my main theses, namely that there indeed were two Silk Roads, a “northern” and a “southern” one, and that the emergence of Samarqand as Tamerlane’s capital had an underlying economic basis. What do I mean by this?

I have argued that trade was very important for the economy of the Golden Horde in the 13th-14th centuries. When the Mongol forces invaded western Eurasia first in the early 1220s and then again beginning in the late 1230s, I would argue that one of their main goals was disrupting the existing politico-commercial centers [2]. By disrupting political centers such as Suğdaq or later Bulğar, they were also disrupting these towns as commercial centers. As a result, the towns would lose the valuable revenues on which they relied for functioning as political centers maintaining the loyalty of its population and military forces. Unlike the conventional historiography of the Russian Empire, there is no need to repeat the

worn phrases about how the Mongols destroyed cities such as Kiev, for Kiev quickly revived under Mongol rule, as did the politico-commercial centers in the Turkic-speaking regions of western Eurasia. This is because the Golden Horde (specifically) and the Mongol World Empire (generally) was a commercial empire which promoted trade. This is not the place to explicate this thesis in detail, but I have been developing this argument in my history of economy, society, and civilization in the Golden Horde (in preparation) [3]. Bulğar revived as an important early politico-commercial center for the Golden Horde, as did the cities of the Crimean region. As a result of this same process we see the transition from migratory proto-cities to cities in the form of first Saray Batu and later Saray Berke. When the great traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited Saray, he described a great city with many religious institutions as well as a city with many different quarters inhabited by merchants from around the world as they knew it [4: volume 2, pp. 447-448; 5: volume 2, pp. 515-516].

By the end of the 13th century the economy of the Golden Horde (including Khwarezm in this period) was booming as a result of exports through the Black Sea, its economy was becoming monetized as the result of the inflow of silver bullion, and the surplus resulted in patronage of the arts, literature, and science [3, chapter 3]. It was a time of the second efflorescence of a Turko-Islamic civilization in Central Eurasia. This is the region by which I understand the term “northern Silk Road”. This situation which I have described would not, however, last beyond the mid-14th century.

There was at the same time the region of the Chağatay Khanate in Central Asia proper. When the great traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited this region in 1333, in addition to Khwarezm he saw cities which might be termed cities in “decline” (however much I dislike that term professionally as a historian). In Bukhara the mosques, colleges, and bazaars were almost all in ruins, the city’s inhabitants were looked down upon, and nobody in the city possessed any religious learning or showed any interest in acquiring any [4: volume 3, p. 22; 5: volume 3, pp. 550-551; on Bukhara in general see: 6]. Samarqand also seemed to be in a state of disrepair, with most of the palaces of earlier times destroyed, nor did the city have walls or gates [4: volume 3, pp. 51-52; 5: volume 3, pp. 567-568]. Even so, it appears from Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s account that he had a more favorable impression of Samarqand and the quality of its religious figures. Given the strong persistence of nomadic tendencies among the Chinggisid élite of the Chağatay Khanate (whether the reports of their intentions to turn the urban into grazing lands for the horses was, in fact, true or simply a legend), it should perhaps not be surprising that the cities of the Chağatay Khanate seemed to be less healthy than the vital and economically lively cities of the Golden Horde territories.

The situation changed dramatically beginning in the mid-14th century. As I have argued elsewhere, from the mid-14th century on Eurasia – and perhaps the rest of the Old World – is ravaged by an outbreak of the bacterium *Yersinia*

pestis called by historians the “Black Death”. Central Eurasia, and afterwards the Middle East and Europe, too, suffered from wide-scale depopulation, decline in urban centers, political chaos, as well as other phenomena such as labor shortages, inflation, cultural and technological regression, and increased morbidity and religiosity [7]. These were universal phenomena in the Old World. Just as we witness the collapse of the Golden Horde from 1360 on, in the south we see the earlier phenomenon of the partition of the Chağatay Khanate. This begins with the overthrow of Tarmashirin in 1334 (soon after Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s visit) and culminates in the division of the patrimony of Chağatay into two parts, the eastern territory known as Moğolistan and the western territory known as Transoxiana (what Manz refers to as the “Ulus Chağatay”) [8]. By the late 1340s, the former Chağatay Khanate had fallen into complete disarray. Later the territories of the former Chağatay Khanate would be reunited once again under Tamerlane.

One of the sources offering a version of Tamerlane’s rise to power, the travelogue of Ruy González de Clavijo, describes that Tamerlane was originally a relatively unimportant figure who gained notoriety and followers by attacking and plundering the countryside and highways. He gained significant wealth by capturing a rich caravan (the reader might recall that this is exactly what the followers of Muhammed Khwarezmshah did in Otrar in the early 13th century). Finally, he took advantage of dissatisfaction with the ruler in Samarqand to overthrow the ruler and establish his rule in Samarqand [9, pp. 127-128]. As in the case of Chinggis Khan, this was a classic example of a leader who was able to recruit followers through his ability to reward them.

Early in his career Tamerlane concentrated his efforts on Transoxiana, including Khwarezm, and the other former part of the patrimony of Chağatay, that is the neighboring region of Moğolistan. Beginning in 1380-1382, he expanded his campaigns beyond the territories of the former Chağatay Khanate into Khurasan, capturing Herat. He then continued a series of campaigns on various centers in Iran and eastern Anatolia until 1388, followed by a first campaign on the territories of the Golden Horde in 1388-1391. He continued campaigns against Iran, Anatolia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and India [on his career see: 8].

What I consider to be notable about the first campaign against the Golden Horde in 1388-1391 and the second campaign in 1395 is that it is very clear from the historians of Tamerlane’s campaigns that his attacks were aimed against the commercial centers of the northern Silk Road such as Suğdaq and Saray, which he practically destroyed during these campaigns. The northern silk road went from the Crimea to Saray and other cities along the Volga, skirting the northern shore of the Caspian to finally reach Khwarezm and points east. In contrast, the southern silk road extended from the southeastern Black Sea or the Mediterranean to Central Asia passing south of the Caspian Sea. One of Ruy González de Clavijo’s routes passed south from Trebizond on the Black Sea coast to Arzinjan, and from there east to Tabriz. The route then continued southeast passing through towns such as

Sultaniya, Tehran, Damghan, Nishapur, and Meshhed to finally reach Merv and Balkh. Another branch of this route turned northeast from Jajarm via Abivard to Bukhara and Samarqand. One could also travel from Samarqand to Balkh via Tirmiz after passing through one of the so-called “Iron Gates” in Central Asia [9, pp. 61ff].

These commercial centers could not survive the combination of the devastation of the Black Death followed by the ravages of Tamerlane’s campaigns. The major result of these campaigns was to shift commerce for at least a century to the southern Silk Road, which passed through the territories he controlled, including his capital of Samarqand. Another important development in this period is that in contrast to the earlier rulers of the realm of Chağatay, Tamerlane fully appreciated the importance of urban centers and contributed to the development of Samarqand as an urban center.

By destroying competing trade routes and diverting trade to those territories which he controlled, Tamerlane stood to profit immensely. This would create the economic basis for the renaissance of an Islamic high culture in Transoxiana under Tamerlane and his successors. The account of Ruy González de Clavijo gives us a good idea about routes followed by merchants following the southern Silk Road leading from the Black Sea through Tabriz, Sultaniya, Tehran, and Damghan leading finally to Bukhara and Samarqand. Samarqand was also situated at a particularly felicitous site controlling a major pass known as the “Iron Gate” leading south to Afghanistan. Thus, it served as a crossroad linking trade routes not only from the Mediterranean and the Black Sea passing across Iran heading further east, leading south from Central Asia via Samarqand to Afghanistan as well. In this regard, Samarqand served not only as an imperial center, but as a valuable commercial center controlling access along a major trade route.

It would be an oversimplification, however, to claim that Tamerlane merely profited from the favorable geographical situation of his imperial capital Samarqand. In fact, he aggressively promoted commerce on the territories he controlled, especially in Samarqand. Many of these policies remind us of the policies followed by the khans of the regional khanates of the Mongol World Empire a century earlier. First of all, Tamerlane transferred population on a large scale to Samarqand and prevented them from leaving. Ruy González de Clavijo estimates that the number of people moved to Samarqand might number as high as 100,000, and that as a result the population of the city had climbed to 150,000, which is certainly a very high figure for that period [9, pp. 120 and 170-171]. In particular, he brought the finest craftsmen from the areas in which he led campaigns. He brought from Damascus all the silkweavers, makers of crossbows, armorers, and craftsmen in glass and porcelain. From Turkey he brought gunsmiths, smiths, masons, and representatives of other crafts. He also brought to Samarqand specialists in artillery, both engineers and bombardiers, as well as the people who make the ropes for these machines. He even introduced the cultivation of hemp and flax for

the first time ever in Samarqand to supply the needs of these specialists. Tamerlane even took measures to create facilities in Samarqand to attract and serve the needs of merchants. He ordered that a broad new street be laid out with shops lining the street, with all the work paid for by the city council [9, pp. 165-166; see also 10]. These few examples illustrate the importance that Tamerlane attached not just to exploiting commerce, but to actively seeking to expand it.

From the booty gained on his campaigns, but especially from the profits that he derived from the taxation of commercial activity, Tamerlane was able to accumulate a vast fortune. Some of this wealth can be seen in the large quantities of expensive silk, cotton, and other fabrics of which he made use for ceremonial tents as described by Ruy González de Clavijo [9, pp. 136-137, 142-146, 150-152, and 159-162]. Another was the intensive activity of constructing monumental architecture that is one of the best-known legacies of the reign of Tamerlane, which is of course yet another indicator of a state's prosperity. Tamerlane, but especially his successors, also sponsored a wide range of artists, artisans, and men of letters now centered in Samarqand. In fact, Tamerlane and his descendants ushered in one of the most significant chapters in the history of Islamic and Turkic civilization through their sponsorship of the arts.

Over two decades ago, in trying to understand why there was a struggle between the northern route Silk Road and the southern Silk Road, I would have considered that the goals of Tamerlane were purely economic, namely that he wished to control the trade routes in order to amass wealth for his empire. Under those circumstances, I thought that attributing the collapse of the Chağatay Khanate and the subsequent reunification of those territories under Tamerlane to be an important insight. Today, however, I would add two additional points. The first is that we must also consider regional variation in depopulation according to bubonic plague. There are indications that the territories of the former Golden Horde may have suffered from far greater depopulation than might have been true for the empire of Tamerlane (Manz's "*Ulus Chaghatay*"). In this case, Tamerlane's strength may have also been a reflection of a stronger demographic position vis-à-vis the territories the former Golden Horde.

But that still does not explain why Tamerlane seemed to have a preference for and, indeed, exploited the southern Silk Road rather than the northern Silk Road. Here I would add one additional insight, namely the changing nature of climate. While the study of the history of climate change in Central Eurasia is still in its infancy as regards to its impact on political, social, and economic history, we do have some idea about the contours of climate change across Eurasia. I have proposed that effects of the climatic downturn marking the beginning of the "Little Ice Age" may have begun to be felt along the region of the Volga River already in the 1280s [11, 12]. As we move into later centuries we can imagine that the Shibanids were moving south in response to a climatic downturn. By the time of the Noğays and the Kazakh Khanate there are reports of hunger in the steppe.

Could it be that the climatic downturn which began at the end of 13th century was already a factor in Tamerlane's preference for the southern Silk Road over the northern Silk Road?

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About the author: Uli Schamiloglu, Ph.D. (History), Professor, Nazarbayev University (Astana 010000, Kazakhstan); Department of German, Nordic and Slavic, University of Wisconsin-Madison (1220 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706, USA), e-mail: uschamil@wisc.edu

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СОПЕРНИЧЕСТВО МЕЖДУ СЕВЕРНЫМ И ЮЖНЫМ ШЕЛКОВЫМИ ПУТЯМИ В ЭПОХУ ТАМЕРЛАНА

Юлай Шамильоглу

Назарбаев Университет и университет Висконсин-Мэдисон

г. Астана, Казахстан, г. Мадисон, США

uschamil@wisc.edu

Резюме. В статье дается сравнительный анализ торговых путей, функционирующих на просторах Евразии в XIII – XV вв., характеризуется политика Тамерлана по укреплению социально-экономического и военно-политического положения Самарканда с целью его превращения в один из крупнейших центров мировой торговли, ремесла и культуры. Успехи Тамерлана в немалой степени определялись социально-демографической ситуацией в Золотой Орде, вызванной последствиями т.н. «черной смерти», а также климатическими катаклизмами имевшими место в данный период времени.

Ключевые слова: южная и северная ветки Великого шелкового пути, Тамерлан, Самарканд, Золотая Орда.

Сведения об авторе: Юлай Шамильоглу, Ph.D., профессор, Назарбаев Университет (Астана 010000, Казахстан); департамент немецкого, скандинавских и славянских языков, Висконсинский университет в Мадисоне (1220 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706, USA), e-mail: uschamil@wisc.edu

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