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Full Length Research Paper

The importance of Silk Road, and Merv in the great Seljuk state's commercial life

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This paper studied the Great Seljuk State's commercial life which has a significant place in Turkish economic history. We studied the trio of trade, Merv and the Silk Road and chose three main headings; in the first, we analyzed the commercial policies of the Great Seljuk State. In the second, we stressed the importance of the Silk Road under the heading of trade and the Silk Road. In the third, we emphasized the importance and contributions of Merv as a commercial city to trade life. Nearly a thousand years ago, the Great Seljuk State knew the significance of importing and exporting for the welfare of its people, and therefore, provided merchants with various opportunities, so that this transit road could pass through Merv. Today, do those who want to be a developed country take a lesson from these practices? In this study, the related literature, books and articles mostly written Cyrillic alphabet were researched thoroughly. According to Turkmen sources this extensive research indicated that the Seljuks attached a great importance to the Silk Road and it is possible to conclude that in addition to protecting the Silk Road, they considered the issue of facilitating transit caravans and providing them with what they needed.

Key words: Trade, Silk Road, Merv, great Seljuk.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Seljuk State, belonging to the Kinik tribe of the Oghuz Turks, was founded by Tugrul Beg (993-1063) and Çağrı Beg (991-1061), the descendants of Oghuz Khan. The victory of Dandanakan, against Ghaznavid Mahmut, is the foundation year of this powerful state (1040-1194) (Saparmyrat, 2001). Throughout the history of the Great Seljuk State, mighty commanders came to power. Among these were Alparslan, opening the doors of Anatolia, Malik Shah, extending the borders of the state, and Sultan Sanjar, giving importance to science and civilization. The Great Seljuk state expanded its boundaries between Istanbul and China, gained the great honour of being a big state by acting as the protector of the Islamic world, and contributed to culture and

civilization by ruling the peoples under its administration justly and equally with a universal domination idea in mind. In addition to its political success, this great state built roads, bridges, mosques, caravanserais, religious colleges, hospitals, and it reconstructed the country, and therefore, had a powerful economic life.

Upon examining the significant place of the commercial life of the Great Seljuk State in Turkish economic history, it is clearly seen that the trio consisting of trade, Merv and the Silk Road had a deep impact on economy. We believe that the three issues that deserve meticulous study are the commercial policies of the Great Seljuk State, the importance of the Silk Road, the contributions of Merv to trade life as a commercial city. While studying these issues, the opportunity to make on-site research provided us with great advantages. In our experience in Turkmenistan, we recognized that the houses of Turkmen people were like libraries, so we benefited especially from

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these libraries and others in Ashgabat, Merv, Dashoguz in cooperation with our Turkmen colleagues. That most of the works were written in the Cyrillic alphabet made it necessary to translate these works meticulously. We tried to show that this state gave importance to trade, so trade had a crucial place in its development. Apparently, the Seljuks attached a great importance to the Silk Road and we concluded that in addition to protecting the Silk Road, they supported transit caravans and provided them with what they needed.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE COMMERCIAL POLICIES OF THE GREAT SELJUK STATE

The eleventh century was the right time for the Great Seljuk State to emerge because there were powerful and respected commanders such as Duka, who descends from the line of Oghuz Khan's Kinik grandson and his son Seljuk, who wanted to take the place of the sultan (Gullugy, 2008). The Great Seljuk State became relatively stronger and expanded its boundaries during this time (Löllekowa, 2010). The Great Seljuk State managed to annex other states through peaceful methods. Regarding this issue, Krimski, a Russian scientist, clearly notes that, "During their journeys to conquer Iran, the Seljuks did not act brutally unlike what the Mongols did". On the contrary, they established powerful states that affected the development of the world's economy (cited in Nobatowa, 2010).

In the eleventh century, after the foundation of the Great Seljuk Empire, the division of labour among cities and villages became even more apparent. For example, cities were not only capitals or centres of civilization, but they also became advanced areas of specialization. Within market relations, the international caravans' accommodations turned into places where they sold their own goods and imported the goods they needed. Villagers often worked in the production of agricultural products and goods which were necessary for families or they were goldsmiths (Nobatowa, 2009). Under the rule of Seljuks, Khorasan, Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, and other Middle East states were the most developed economies of those times, and functioned as a bridge between other states and continents in trade. The land of the Seljuks was the most appropriate place for cultivating all kinds of agricultural products; thanks to its geographical and natural riches, harvests were abundant. There were no problems regarding the supply of wheat and other basic foods needed and their prices were also very low considering the conditions of those times (Taňrygulyýew, 2002).

Bazaars were usually known as the places where goods were purchased and sold. But at the same time, bazaars were the places where people heard the latest news, and here the state edicts were declared by middlemen. Besides the bazaars that we know, there

were also special places where a variety of goods, domestic animals and slaves were bought and sold (Nobatowa, 2009).

In large commercial activities, trading through work agreement (contract) became even more widespread. When trading, merchants took money not only in cash, but they also took it in the form of loans. Commercial relations were controlled in terms of morality. Religious people grouped all goods bought and sold as halal and haram. There were times when selling of some goods was banned. For example, the sale of toys for children in the form of animals was prohibited during religious festivals. Instead of these, wooden swords and shields were allowed to be sold (Nobatowa, 2009).

By making commercial agreements with other countries, import-export incentives were encouraged by applying highly low tariffs. Uniting all Islamic countries from China, Egypt, and Caucasus to the Indian Sea under a government and establishing the political integrity in the Islamic world, Seljuk sultans facilitated the unimpeded functioning of the world transit trade flowing from the east to west, from north to south and speeded the progress of it. However, not satisfied with all these, they also took some measures to make trade keep going unhindered and regularly. For example, by constantly keeping roads which formed the infrastructure of economy under control, they guaranteed the securely functioning of the trading caravans and their arriving in their destinations on time. The caravan groups carrying rich commercial goods were accompanied by a military force led by the caravan leader. The commander leading such troops was called Rahdar or Tutgavul (Kayaođlu), meaning road guard. Sometimes such forces were composed of one or two hundred armed men. In return for this service, merchants used to pay the caravan leader certain amount of caravan fee (money paid to the caravan leader as a duty) based on the amount negotiated beforehand. If caravans were robbed, bandits were punished through wars declared against them (Salim, 2002). Losses caused by bandits in the seas and deserts were compensated by the state treasury. Compensation of losses and damage played a great role in further development of trade. Insurance provided by the state for merchants was a distinct encouragement in addition to all the ease provided. Another safety measure was the stables along on the road (Taňrygulyýew, 2002).

The Great Seljuk State is also famous for its caravanserais. The Great Silk Road was the longest road of caravans. In their own research, the Arab pilgrims of the 9th and 10th centuries, Ibn al-beh Hordad and Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al Istahri mention that within the distance from Merv (Mary) to Balkh there were nearly 21 caravan cities and villages, 8 of which are now located within the borders of Turkmenistan (Nobatowa, 2009). Caravanserais were specifically established for the two purposes.

Firstly, they protected the rich caravans carrying

commercial goods and the borders of the state from the enemy. Second, they met various needs of the caravans accommodated there. The distance between the two caravanserais took nine hours at the speed of a camel. Each caravanserai was established within a distance of a nine-hour walk (Nobatowa, 2009).

After the Turkmen Seljuk Empire gained the possession of Anatolia at the end of the 12th century, the region became an international trade centre. The Great Seljuk sultans had caravanserais established everywhere in Anatolia, from one end of it to the other. In these foundation buildings established by sultans and other statesmen, caravans were accepted as the guests of the person who had that building built and they were not asked to pay any money (Nobatowa, 2009).

State revenue sources were the tribute as the land tax (the type of tax taken from lands conquered as a result of wars to ensure the safety of the people who live in that land), the Islamic tithe taken from agricultural commodities, land tenure (the running of economic institutions of the state by an enterprise by paying a certain amount of money), trophies, gifts and annual incomes of the dependent and the neighbouring states. There were almost no economic difficulties; the inflation rate didn't go beyond 10% during the 75-year time period between 1056 and 1113 (Tańrygulyýew, 2002).

In such an advanced state's proper and strong economic policy formation, national monetary policy, or the art of minting played a significant role. By referring to the research done by Ibn-Al-Esir, W. Bartold, the famous scientist of eastern history, writes that coins were issued on behalf of Çağrı Beg in Merv in 1037, and on behalf of Tugrul Beg in Nishapur in 1038 (Atayew, 2009). The second era of minting started when Sultan Alparslan, the son of Sultan Çağrı Beg, began to rule the country in 1063 in the Great Seljuk State. During the first years of the administration of Sultan Alparslan, pure gold coins were issued in circulation, and thus the value of gold coins of this state was recognized as a top-ranking measure of value in international trade (Atayew, 2009).

Since the Great Seljuk State was politically and economically one of the powerful states of its time, it became an integral part of world civilization with its unique culture. Historians researching the history of this state note that it was a well developed state in all respects and that the ruling sultans had fair policies. This in turn helped the Silk Road, an international trade route, become operational in the full sense (Atayew, 2009).

TRADE AND THE SILK ROAD

"The Great Silk Road"... the romanticism of long distance journeys and the exoticism of overseas countries are felt in the composition of this word. However, hidden behind it, above all, are geographers' fight, the courage of caravan leaders and daring sailors, and witty reckonings

of merchants and foreseeing politicians. And naturally, skillful handcraft work of craftsmen whose goods were carried from east to west and from west to east, along the vast steppes, dense forests, and mighty mountains reaching the sky and along the width of the seas and oceans. The Great Silk Road is an exchange not only of goods, but also of the ideas produced in science, culture, arts, and eventually lives of people (Boris, 2002). The great road of the Old and Middle Ages, which had connected China with the Middle East and Western countries since end of the old era and the beginning of the New Age, was given the name "Silk Road" a century ago. This name was put forward by the German geographer Karl Richtgofen Fund in 1877, and it has been used since then (Ierusalimskaya, 2002).

Silk is a soft and shiny fibre produced by silkworm and most often used as an industrial material in China previously, was later utilised as a commercial medium of exchange. Each country had a profit in transporting silk to the west. It was very important to possess the caravan routes for this. The roads which caravans used were called as "the Silk Road". On the Silk Road, in addition to silk, spices, precious stones, fur, grain, glass, oil, honey, ivory products were transported. The caravan setting out from China's historical city of Xian, which is considered as the beginning of the Silk Road arrives in Istanbul passing through China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, respectively. From Istanbul or the Aegean coast, Venetians and the Genoese transport these goods to Europe. Since Europeans are the final buyers the products carried through the Silk Road, they buy them at high costs, as well (Oz, 2011).

During the times when such Turkmen states as Parfia, Hun and Gokturkmens gained strength, they kept the control of the Great Silk Road. This in turn had a major impact on the strengthening of the public economy and the increase in welfare. The goods of trade caravans travelling through the Great Silk Road were marketed in the September bazaar established every year in the city of Batnu in Mesopotamia by Parfians. In this place, they sold Syrian, Greek, Roman and other European traders of silk Indian fabrics, expensive stones, iron products, ivory and so on (Garayew, 2010).

Commercial activities developed within the setting of political unity provided by the Seljuks. We can handle trade in three categories: internal trade, external trade and transit trade. There was an interaction between the domestic trade and development of city life. Open space markets and grand bazaars in retail trade and public houses in wholesale trade were important. The merchants in the open space markets and grand bazaars were busy with production and retail trade. The merchant body was a group of entrepreneurs participating in internal and external trade, equipping caravans, importing goods and organizing industrial activities for trade. Bazaars and fairs were under state protection and control. Exchanges of goods and cash took place side by

side. Measures were taken to ensure the safety of the market (Sosyal, 1990). Apart from the taxes collected from markets, other goods of all kinds brought in and out of the city were subject to taxes. This tax called *tunga* during the time of Ilkhanids was collected by *sahnes*. In the 13th century, masters of trade and crafts came together within the body of organization called Akhi community. This organization regulated economic, political and moral rules and performed important services in overcoming of political crises and difficulties (Tezgen, 2011).

During the time of the Anatolian Seljuks, by acting as judges in problems of various professions, members of the Akhi community controlled institutions' relations with the state. The control of goods sold in bazaars and markets in terms of both quality and price was one of the main tasks of the organization of Akhis. Akhi organization, operating in a wide range of fields, gathered many statesmen, brethren and scholars. From the 14th century onwards, it highlighted its activities in the economic field by taking the form of organized trade unions. 12th century onwards the Turkmens settled in Anatolia were involved in foreign trade both among themselves and with the Greeks and Armenians (Tezgen, 2011).

Horses, camels and mules transported people and their loads in caravans. Since camels were able to carry the load at all times and in difficult conditions, they were ideal transporters. A camel could carry around an average of 250 kilos, which was at least twice as much of the load a horse or a mule could, at a relatively low cost. Furthermore, hybrid camels Turkmens bred from Double-humped camels of Central Asian camels and single-humped Arabian camels (Baktriane) were highly appropriate for cold and rainy Anatolian climate and harsh Anatolian land. These camels used in the caravan traffic between Tabriz and Istanbul could carry heavier loads than the Arabian camels. However, since slowly walking camels were useless riding animals, merchants used to hire or buy horses, mules or donkeys in addition to the camels which carried their loads (Alkan, 2006). Although the Silk Road, which undertook a very effective role in the development of economy of countries, functioned as a bridge of friendship between nations in the past, it is a fact that in various periods of history there were battles to hold the possession of this international road (Garayew, 2010).

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADE AND MERV

We think that importance of Silk Road is;

- a. This road was bridge between trade and culture of west and east.
- b. Trade was developed and economy on this road was stirred up.
- c. Life was improved by exchanging goods and foods from east to west.

The "Great Silk Road" was effective especially in the conversion of Merv into a cultural centre. This road's passing through Merv made it possible to get acquainted with Western culture and neighbouring peoples' cultures. Moreover, the translation of Greek and Indian books written in the 8th century about philosophy and medicine paved the way for this. There were many scholars from Merv such as Parfian scholar AN-shih-gao, who founded the school translating the Buddhistic texts into Chinese in 148 AD in China, Mar Ammon, who translated Mani texts into Parfian language, vizier Anushirvan I, the physician Barzia, musician and singer Barbad, Jewish scholar Sehil Ibn Rabban et Tabari, who translated Batlamius' *Almajest* into Arabic, Farabi's teacher Iohannn, who brought new views into world culture such as the idea that science, philosophy and religion are essentially the same and the idea of political science, and ibn Haylan's teacher. The philosophy, expelled from Athens during the Hellenistic period reached Antioch from Alexandria and was passed on to people from Merv rather than those who had come from other cities. This indicates that there is an intellectual culture accumulated based on a solid foundation within the community that existed in this region (Soltanmiradov, 2002).

One of the Middle-Age historians mentioned Merv as "the mother of the cities of Khorasan." Caravans leaving from Merv went to Serahsa, then Nisaphur (Iran), and later Merv Abiverd, Nusay, Ferab and Dehistan. They went in the direction of Amul (now the city of Lebap in Turkmenistan) from Merv as the third road. One of the greatest trade routes in Merv was the caravan road that reached Horezm (Gubayew and Gurbanow, 2010).

In the 9th century, geographer Hordatbeg, who was considered as the caravan leader of Arabian authors, (Ebul kasım İbadullah İbn Abdullah İbn Hortatbeg between 205 and 820 AD) mentioned Merv in his book "Kitab al-Masalikval-Memalik"; in other words, Roads and Provincial Areas. In his work, he mentioned two channels (Al-Ruzeyk and al-Macca) and drew attention to the difference between the population along this road and that in other residential areas by saying that, "Merv, 375 leagues¹ from Baghdad is placed on a side of the large road" (Ahmedow, 1993). It is understood that the city of Merv was also a centre where agricultural products were grown. Because of the dense population in Merv, the available wheat wasn't enough and the wheat was supplied from Abivert (the name of a city in Turkmenistan, Kahka city) and Serahs. Moreover, the money earned through exports in Merv increased. Goods produced in Merv were sold to Iraq and Egypt, so serious export proceeds were gained at that time. In this regard, it is mentioned in the historical resource "Hudud al-alem" that products coming from Merv such as high-quality cotton, cookies made of goat's milk, vine vinegar, silk fabrics were sold (Ekayew and Gündogdyew, 1998).

¹Fersah is a Persian word one fersah (league) equals to 6-7 kilometers.

Merv's dried fruits including raisins, melon and various other dry foods were highly demanded in other states. Istahri approved the quality of the fruits by saying that Merv's fruits were so sweet that melons were sliced and sold to Iraq...such a situation cannot be witnessed anywhere else. Similarly, Kazvini says the best of (Merv's) fruits such as pears, grapes and melon were dried and sold in several provinces (Ekayew and Gündogdyew, 1998).

Raw materials that formed the basis for trade were brought to Turkmens from neighbouring countries. When there were trade relations with Turkic peoples during the Middle Ages, such metals as gold and silver and stones like agate, turquoise, garnet, coral, ruby, emerald and chrysolite were frequently brought from Iran, Eastern Turkistan, China and India (Fahretdinova, 1985). These precious stones that came to Merv and processed by Turkmen goldsmiths were a significant source of income. One of the Turkmen handicrafts that was immemorially practised and transferred to younger generations through master-apprentice relationship was jewellery. In the hands of goldsmiths, jewellery turned into a fine art and means of subsistence. Available archaeological and ethnographic sources demonstrate that the jewellery and craftsmanship were developed in Turkmenistan (Cakir and Dinc, 2010).

During Seljuk period there were gold-filled bracelets in which there were large gold beads and remaining parts of gold, silver and brass items that belonged to sultan's treasury. Slime lines and marks in the patterns of priapus god, found in Namazgadepe, are an indication of the importance given to women's jewellery and embroidery in those times (Turkmen, 2003). As is clear from the excavations in Turkmenistan today, during the period before Christ, the presence of jewellery and precious stones is a sign of their use as ornamental materials and commercial items.

Most of the rare jewellery, product of Goldsmith art's handicraft, was made for women. Some other adornments were used to embellish horses, camels; household items, farming and war tools, which have an important place in Turkmen culture. Moreover, jewellery was frequently encountered in the Turkmen culture and proverbs in that period. To cite a few examples, Turkmen proverbs including the words gold and silver are as follows:

*Silver and gold never get old; parents are beyond price.
Don't rely on gold and silver; rely on your skills.
Guests are gold in the first day, silver in the second one and copper on the third one.
Don't romp if you have gold (much money) don't get furious if you have silver (little money).
If you grow wheat and barley you have soup to eat; if you have gold and silver, you have stones.
You see lots of silver in a bazaar and so many chores at home.
One who keeps gold never starves.*

*Don't buy gold; earn people's appreciation instead.
When copper is in question, gold is not mentioned.
It is much better to have some land than to have some gold.
If you find one adornment keep it broken; if you find two, tie a knot and keep it (Geldiyev, 2004).*

Jewellery is named differently based on why it was produced and used. The names of jewels are related to where they are placed in the body and human limbs. For instance, "boyuntovuk", "saçlık", "saçyüzü", "bracelet", "ayak bukav", "yenselik", "manlaylık", "alınşay", "yakabağcıği", "göb eklik", "damaksırğa," etc. (Dinc and Cakır, 2008) The cross çangas² gupbas (hats), sculptures, buckles, bracelets, sümsüles³ and butterflies made by silversmiths from Merv were also known in far-away places.

Based on what Pruger states in the work titled "Turkmenistan'ın Yadigarlıkları" (Relics of Turkmenistan), which he published in Ashgabat in 1970, Dinç and Çakır (2010) state that, among the stone ornaments found in ancient Merv, goods made of turquoise and 18 pieces of unprocessed turquoise attract attention. Among findings that belong to the second and third centuries were six beads and a ring with turquoise stone. Masson (1970) reports that these belong to the 12th century. These relics indicate that there were jeweller's mills in Merv at one time in the past to make beads and other items, and to process turquoise stone.

These findings provide information on the emergence and development of the art of jewellery among Turkmens. According to the information given by researchers, most of these adornments consist of ornamental jewellery items designed for women. The existence of necklaces, earrings, rings, bracelets among these items shows that adornments by jewellers were designed for ornamental purposes and each of these had a significant place.

In this context, an international scientific research group called "the Great Silk Road –a dialog path – a path to peace" was formed with the decision of UNESCO by taking into account the historical significance of the famous Silk Road, and lots of effort is made to revive this international trade road. In this regard, six of the countries which "The Great Silk Road" goes through agreed to the opinion that this important heritage should be accepted as a part of the world heritage with the sponsorship of UNESCO.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Seljuks gave importance to international trade and division of labour between cities and villages. They took the necessary precautions to develop international trade. These successful practices belonged not only to the

²Çangas are ornaments hanging down the collar of women's dress.

³Sümsül esare ornaments that women and girl place their in caps and scarves on their heads

Seljuks, but also to other states under their administration. These states also had the most developed economies of the time. The economic successes of the Seljuk State were a bridge between states and continents, and they can also be a bridge between different times. Today's people have not gained the experience of international trade totally in our time. Advancing and changing form in time, trade has evolved into different "-isms" (for example, merchantilism, capitalism). Over the centuries, conditions have changed and camels were replaced by ships, lorries, but the needs, logic behind trade, and the concepts of profit and loss have always existed. If there was an economic success in a period in history, we can accept it as a model or at least can take lessons from it. Functioning as a bridge, the Seljuks had the mission to transfer previous experience to the future. If we adapt the experiences of the Seljuk period into today's world, perhaps we can develop trade and experience less severe economic crises.

Conclusion

It is not easy to set up a state, but apparently, the Seljuk State took the advantage of its deep historical experience in this task. Even the idea of improving its economy and move forward it to an advanced point had a positive effect on the world economy. It is seen that Seljuk state was successful particularly in the development of village-city relationship. While producers in villages were producing their products, they acted with all the convenience provided by the fact that marketing problem had already been solved. At the same time, abundance of production brought cheapness. Advanced and comfortable commercial atmosphere brought forth new situations such as sale on account, sales to foreign countries, transit trade and fast trade, etc. Another characteristic of a powerful state is that it has a strong economy, and this is seen in the Seljuk State. It is seen that strong monetary policy seems to play an important role in the formation of a strong economic policy. Issuing coins of behalf of Çağrı and Tugrul Begs in the city of Merv can be cited as an example for this.

The gains on the silk road were its positive influence of the purchasing power of the people, increased prosperity, lively economic atmosphere with the help of caravans' being accommodated in the city and caravan trade and the supply of products which are not manufactured at home and so on. Trade was handled in three groups: interior, exterior and transit. Open and closed markets and public houses were used for retail and wholesale trade. Market and fairs were protected and encouraged by the state. The state collected taxes from the bazaars which were established, and commercial export goods.

Merv not only became one of the commercial centres, it also reached the status of being a cultural centre thanks to the Silk Road. Being able to find the books of the East

and West in libraries in Merv is an indication of the richness of that period. The excessive population of Merv, where all kinds of products could grow, resulted in lots of importing. Raw materials were imported especially from Eastern Turkistan, Iran, China and India. The jewellery found in excavations indicates that the art of jewellery and handcrafts were developed in Merv.

Economic liveliness is very important for today's economies. To make their economies lively, today's states put into practice monetary policies. This study indicated that Seljuk state kept its economy lively by controlling trade routes, attracting merchants and meeting commercial needs. This state also contributed to the welfare of its people by paying attention not only to agriculture, but also to transportation. Today, modern states can become more successful if they consider these previous experiences. It might not be possible to answer the question whether the Great Seljuk State can be a model for today's world, but it can be a good source of experience. If we utilise the experiences of the Seljuk period and take lessons from them, perhaps we can experience less severe economic crises.

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