

TURKIC TRADE

Early Postclassical (Pre-Islamic) Period

Overview Trade was an extremely important element of both Gök Türk and Uighur society and politics. Trade not only provided essential goods that these societies could not produce themselves, but also luxury goods that could be traded profitably to other peoples or distributed to nobles as prestige gifts. However, the trade networks controlled by the Gök Türk and the Uighur brought more than wealth and exotic goods; they also were conduits for new ideas, art and culture.

Gök Türk Trade

The Gök Türk's earliest known external trade was with China, and despite the later expansion of the Gök Türk Empire to the west and the new trade opportunities it created, trade with China would remain vital to the Gök Türk state throughout its existence. Gök Türk trade was multi-faceted in that it was an important activity not only for purely economic reasons, but was also an essential part of both their internal as well as their external political relations. While cross-border trade between China and the Gök Türk had probably existed before its first mention in the historical sources, by the time it is described it has assumed a fairly well established form. The Gök Türk sought to obtain Chinese luxury goods, the most important among them being silk, in exchange for the produce of the steppe, especially horses that could be used by the Chinese military. If China appeared to be unwilling to trade in the items or the quantities that the Gök Türk wanted, booty raids or lending support to rival dynasties were used to pressure the Chinese to change their trade practices. Initially, before the westward expansion of the Gök Türk Empire many of these Chinese goods were used as prestige gifts for both Gök Türk nobility and for the leaders of the tribes allied with the Gök Türk. So important was this trade with China that some scholars have regarded it as the 'glue' that held the Gök Türk Empire together.

While in the east the Chinese could be directly pressured to trade on terms favorable to the Gök Türk, in the west the Gök Türk could influence and manipulate trade through control of the major trade routes that passed through Gök Türk territory or by extracting tribute small, local rulers. However, like the trade with China, trade in the western regions of the Gök Türk Empire was intertwined with politics, and was strongly influenced by the Sogdians who now lived under Gök Türk rule. At some point before 568 a Gök Türk commercial mission led by Sogdians traveled to the Sasanids in the hope of obtaining permission to trade in silk in Sasanid territory. Persian officials bought the silk and then burned it, an indication that they were not inclined to grant permission. A second mission comprised entirely of Türks was sent to the Persians, but all died under somewhat suspicious circumstances. Following this event, the Gök Türk decided to revive the northern Silk Roads that circumvented Persian territory and extended to the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine officials, as it turned out, were less interested in trade than in an alliance against the Sasanians. Although political relations between the Gök Türk Empire and the Byzantines were often tense, trade flourished, enriching the Sogdians and their capital Samarkand. In addition, these trade networks that were established and supported by the Gök Türks stimulated the development of new trade routes and linked China, Central Asia, India, Persia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Uighur Trade

Almost all aspects of the Uighurs' trade and commerce, particularly with China, were inherited from those of the Gök Türk states before them, with the exception of the direct, far western trade of the First Gök Türk Empire. This included the trade in horses, as well as hides, yaks and camels for Chinese silk. As with the Gök Türk, silk was used by the Uighur as a prestige gift to retain the loyalty and support of tribal leaders within their state, as well as a profitable commodity in trade with outsiders. In addition to the animals and animal products of the steppe, the Uighur also conducted a profitable trade with China in Siberian furs obtained by trade or tribute from northern tribes. Trade with China shifted dramatically in the Uighur's favor after they allied themselves with the T'ang to help end the An-shu-lan Rebellion in the mid-8th century, providing vast amounts of booty from sacked Chinese cities during the rebellion, and extremely favorable trade agreements after it was over.

In addition to direct trade, the Uighur controlled highly profitable trade routes through the Kansu corridor which provided them the opportunity to impose heavy tolls on caravans travelling between China and Central Asia.

Finally, as in the time of the Gök Türk states much of the Uighur's trade and trade policy was in the hands of the Sogdians. While the Sogdians' knowledge and experience in matters related to trade generally benefitted the Uighur, there were risks. The Sogdians were ultimately out to protect and to further their own commercial interests, and what was in the Sogdians' interest did not always coincide with that of the Uighur.

Summary

For all the Turkic states under consideration trade was a vital part of the economies and political arrangements. Chinese luxury goods in general, and silk in particular, were a major element in maintaining internal loyalties among the tribes within these states, as well as generating wealth from trade with peoples outside their borders. In all of these states, the Sogdians were extremely active in trade directly, and in influencing trade policy in general.

The reopening of the northern silk roads during the First Gök Empire had a profound impact not only on trade between China, Central Asia and the Mediterranean, but also helped to stimulate the development of other trade routes to Khwarezm and other regions.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What was distinctive about trade under the First Gök Türk Empire in contrast to trade under the Second Gök Türk Empire and the Uighur states?
2. What was the effect of the Persians' reluctance to conduct trade with the Gök Türks and the Sogdians?
3. How and why did foreign trade create internal divisions in Gök Türk and Uighur society?
4. What was the role of the Sogdians in foreign trade in the Gök Türk and Uighur states? What were the risks to these states from Sogdian involvement in foreign trade?