

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 Tang 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. How and why did foreign trade create internal divisions in Gök Türk and Uighur society?
2. 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?