

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE KHAZARS – Trade

OVERVIEW

The Khazar economy was based on a combination of pastoralism, agriculture, and trade. Trade was the most important source of their income, and a way to impose their authority. The Volga River and Caspian Sea trade networks were major north-south and east-west passageways for trade. In addition to the River Volga, there were other important trade routes like the River Don, the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and the Caspian Sea connecting Asia with Europe that were under the Khazar control.

Trade between Christians and Muslims took place through the land of Khazars. Goods such as furs, spices, slaves, hides, weapons, silver coins, honey, wine, and livestock were transported along the river. The Khazars imposed custom taxes paid in cash on traders using these trade routes.

This area, separating the Byzantines and the Arabs, was home to numerous Turkic tribes related by similarities in language, origin and a common geographic ancestry. In addition, the Khazars had developed their military technology to a high level. All these factors contributed to the rise of the Khazars.

TRADE

In the 8th and the 9th centuries, the Khazars were active traders and Khazaria was a major trade center. The major commercial activity was conducted in southern Russia and Ukraine, and the goods were transported from the Baltic Sea to the Caspian Sea by the Rus' via the Volga River. The important bodies of the merchants trading with the Khazars included the Rus', Byzantines, Jews, Arabs, Chinese, and various Asian merchants. Another element in the Khazars' commercial power was their control of gold and silver mines in the Caucasus.

Khazaria became a vast tributary state by extracting tribute from all their subject peoples, among them the Rus' and the Volga Bulgars. Much of the tribute from European Russia was paid in fur. In the mid-9th century, the Khazars imposed a tribute of one white squirrel skin per household on the east Slavic tribes. The Volga Bulgars had to pay a similar tribute, a sable skin for each household, to the Khazars. The Arabs were particularly interested in purchasing what they called *khazari* furs, that is, those furs which came from the territories of Burtasia and Volga Bulgaria that were under Khazar control.

Whether transported by land or water routes through Khazar territory, traders were required to pay customs dues and tithes on their merchandise. The Khazars assessed these taxes based on the value of the merchants' goods. With the revenues obtained from tribute and trade, the Khazars were able to supplement their forces with auxiliary forces from Khwarizm and other parts of the Islamic world.

Caravans transported to Itil cloth, silks and spices from China and Persia. Rus' merchants brought furs from Siberia and the north via the Oka and Volga Rivers that were traded to the Arabs in Itil for silver coins. The Khazar khagans and elites were most interested in purchasing fox pelts and the pelts of sables and martens to be used in hats and kaftans.

The slave trade was also a very active.. The Rus' brought Slav slaves to Itil who were purchased to serve as workers, household slaves, or military conscripts in the army in Itil.

The Khazars exported a number of goods to diverse regions. Candle-wax, honey and the wine that was originated from the vineyards around Samandar was exported to the Caucasus and Mesopotamia. Persian coins and Central Asian silver dishes and to the Urals, and Arab silver to eastern Europe.

Sometimes the Khazar traders traveled to Volga Bulgaria to barter other goods like clothing. Clothing was imported to Khazaria from the Byzantine Empire, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Persia, and Turkmenistan. Trading relationships were developed between Khazaria and China. From China, the Khazars imported mirrors and silk garments. The Khazar merchants traded imported quilts, cotton goods, felt, and cushion covers from in Khwarizm's capital, Kath. In addition to these, there are cases where Khazar merchants who traded in Birka, Sweden, settled there in small colonies.

Discussion/Questions

1. What was the part played by the Khazars in the economic life of Kievan Rus'?
2. Why did the Eastern Slavs have to pay tribute to the Khazars?

Readings

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