

The Role Of Ustrushona And Choch In Sughd's Regional Relations Along The Great Silk Road

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Abstract: The Great Silk Road and the prominent role of the Sogdians as major traders are well known to us all. The Sogdians not only engaged in trade but also, when necessary, took an active part in diplomatic relations between states.

Sogd and its people, the Sogdians, were not only merchants but also producers of goods and suppliers of their products abroad. In particular, there was great demand for Sogd's agricultural and handicraft products.

Sogd's earliest external relations began with its neighbor Ustrushona, which was within its sphere of influence. The achievements of Sogd in areas such as trade and horticulture directly contributed to the development of neighboring states as well. One such city-state was Ustrushona. This region, being a "contact zone" between settled and nomadic areas, remained under the political and economic influence of both Sogd and Choch.

Keywords: Sogdians, Mug Fortress, Ustrushona, Choch, the Great Silk Road, Kushan, Han Dynasty, Kanpira Wall, Tang Dynasty, the West, Byzantium, China, animal husbandry, horticulture.

Introduction: The network of regional and international trade routes known as the Great Silk Road, which played a crucial role in the lives of many peoples living on the Eurasian continent, is believed to have begun functioning as early as the 3rd–2nd millennia BCE. In particular, in 138 BCE, the Chinese envoy and monk Zhang Qian opened these routes for China. In addition, as early as the 4th–3rd centuries BCE, there also existed the so-called "Steppe Route," which connected the region and led the Sogdians to the Chinese frontiers.

This "Steppe Route" started from the Altai and extended through Iran, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and North Africa, as well as the steppes between the Volga (It'il) and Ural (Yayiq) rivers, reaching India as a transit trade route. It played a significant role in the migration of nomadic tribes. Furthermore, from the middle of the 1st millennium BCE to the 1st millennium CE, the Sogdians dominated the trade network stretching from the Amu Darya to the Hexi Corridor of Gansu. The Hexi Corridor, located west of the Hexi River in Gansu, China, extended from west to east, being much longer than it was wide. Because of its strategic importance on the

Silk Road and its suitability for trade, the corridor was considered a zone largely free from wars and military campaigns.

In antiquity (1st–4th centuries CE), political and economic struggles for control of the Great Silk Road took place among Rome, Parthia, Kushan, and the Han Empire. When the Kangju and Kushan states disintegrated in the 3rd–4th centuries, Sogd and the Sogdians, who had been under their authority, strengthened their independent role on the Silk Road for nearly 350 years. This period came to be recognized as the "Sogdian Era" in the development of regional and international relations.

By the early Middle Ages (5th–first half of the 8th century), new political structures, states, and federations emerged. At this stage, competition for control of the Silk Road arose among China, Iran, Byzantium, and the Turkic Khaganate. This rivalry carried not only commercial but also significant political and economic importance.

Sogd and its people, the Sogdians, were not only merchants but also producers of goods and suppliers of

their products abroad. In particular, products manufactured in Sogd reached, by land and sea routes, from Byzantium in the West to Korea and Japan in the East, and from Tibet to Sri Lanka in the South. There was especially high demand for Sogd's agricultural and handicraft products. For instance, Chinese sources report that Sogd exported horticultural products (peaches and cherries), viticulture products (raisins), as well as pedigree horses and sheep to China. Sogd even competed with China, the homeland of silk, in the field of sericulture.

The Sogdians were engaged in international commerce, and along the northeastern trade route stretching from Chach to Gansu, they established a system of "Sogdian settlements" known as kent (k'nδ). Within these settlements, representatives of various cultures — particularly sedentary, semi-sedentary, and nomadic Turkic tribes and clans — developed closer ties with the Sogdians through political, economic, and cultural relations. In this process, the Sogdians benefitted from the political and military potential of the Turks. Therefore, these settlements, which served as centers of trade and handicrafts, also began to influence the cultural and ideological-religious life of the regions. Such connections of the Sogdians became a vital factor in their international relations.

Sogd's earliest external relations began with its neighbor Ustrushona, which was within its sphere of influence. This region was a "contact zone" between sedentary and nomadic areas and remained under the political and economic influence of both Sogd and Chach. The trade routes passing through Ustrushona linked the desert areas and the Syr Darya basin with the Zarafshan Valley — Sogd — and the south — Tokharistan. Moreover, the Sogdian villages in the upper reaches of the Zarafshan were also accessed through Ustrushona. In the 6th–8th centuries, the defensive system known as the "Kanpirak Wall" was built to protect them from nomads.

The people of Ustrushona also took part in international trade within the caravans of the Sogdians. According to the chronicles of China's Tang dynasty, between 618 and 626, the ruler of Su-duy-sha-na (Ustrushona) sent envoys to China together with Kan (Samarkand). In 627, Ustrushona, together with Bukhara, Samarkand, and Ishtikhon, dispatched its caravan to China. Another source, Xuanzang (7th century), reported that the customs of the people of Sutulisen (Ustrushona) were similar to those of Chach. This proves that Ustrushona was under the influence of both Sogd and Chach.

The Mug archive document A-14 from the early 8th century — the "Letter of Fatufarn," an envoy sent by

the governor of Panch, Devashtich, to Chach — as well as document A-9, indicate that both politically and economically, "Estrushana" (Ustrushona) shared its history and destiny with Sogd. The fact that the rulers of Ustrushona — known as afshin — served in the Arab Caliphate also testifies to their political activity.

Like the people of Sogd and Chach, the inhabitants of Ustrushona followed Zoroastrianism and were linguistically close. They spoke a dialect of the Sogdian language. Wooden tablets inscribed with ink found by V. A. Livshits in Chilkhujra were written in Sogdian, similar to the Mug archive. This shows that in Ustrushona, administrative affairs were conducted in the Sogdian language and script. Overall, Sogd's political and economic influence on Ustrushona played an important role in international relations of the early Middle Ages.

The regional ties between Sogd and Chach (the Tashkent oasis) also held particular importance for international relations. Located in the Chirchiq and Ohangaron basins along the northeastern route of the Silk Road, this territory was of strategic significance. Sogdians first entered Chach during the Achaemenid and Greco-Macedonian conquests in the 6th–4th centuries BCE, and at various times settled in its mountainous and foothill regions. They began living together with the semi-nomadic and sedentary local (proto-Turkic) population. The settlement of proto-Turkic tribes in Chach dates back to the last quarter of the 1st millennium BCE. During this period, several sedentary local (Saka) and Sogdian settlements emerged in Chach. In the second half of the 6th century, Chach came under the rule of the Turkic Khaganate.

Historically, during the Kangju state (2nd century BCE – 4th century CE), the Great Silk Road connected vast territories, including the Sogd and Chach oases, both politically and economically. By the Hephthalite period (5th–6th centuries), Chach's strategic importance in the region increased further, as Chach, like Sogd, began to pursue an independent internal and external policy. The "Wei Shu" chronicle (6th century) and the "Bei Shu" chronicle (7th century) mention Chach as the state of Chjeshe (Chiachiat). They state that in 437, independent Chach sent envoys to China. Another source, "Tongdian," refers to the diplomatic relations of the Chach state with the Sui dynasty (581–618).

Moreover, until the early 7th century, like in Sogd, the rulers of Chach (up to 605) belonged to the Chjaou dynasty, whose lineage traced back to the Yuezhi (Ruzie). During the Kangju period, Chach was governed by local Chjaou rulers, while after the rise of the Turkic Khaganate in 605, representatives of a Turkic dynasty

assumed power. In political and administrative governance, both local Turkic elites and Sogdians continued to play a significant role. The Khaganate's control over the Silk Road further stimulated the development of the oasis economy.

Like Sogd and the Sogdians, the people of Chach also actively participated in international trade. Chach exported Lashkarak silver, Tunket and Tokket metals, and blue turquoise from Qoramozor. For the domestic markets, local rulers minted coins. In particular, the inscriptions on these coins were written in the Sogdian script and language. For example, in the territory of Chach, coins inscribed in Sogdian bore the name of the Western Turkic Khagan Tardu (576–603), and later, coins known as the "Yabghu-Khagan's money" belonging to Ton Yabghu Khagan (618–630) were also in circulation. The circulation of these coins contributed to economic growth and the expansion of international trade. Chach merchants, together with Sogdian traders, exported goods abroad and lived as communities in foreign settlements. As contributors to the Khaganate's treasury, the merchants of Turan were politically and militarily protected by the Khaganate.

A vivid example of Sogd–Chach relations is reflected in the wall paintings of Afrasiab. Alongside the envoys from China and Chaganiyan to the court of the Sogdian and Samarkand king — the ikhshid Varxuman (Avarxuman) (650/655–675) — there was also an envoy from Chach. This embassy was likely sent to Sogd by the Chach ruler Ton Tudun (658).

In the early Middle Ages, the people of Chach used the Sogdian language and script, which carried both regional and international significance. The Sogdian language served as a lingua franca for the Turkic population in the area. The rulers of the oasis employed the Sogdian language and script in their administrative affairs. By the 7th–8th centuries, Turkic rulers also issued coins bearing traditional Sogdian inscriptions. Alongside the Sogdian language and script, the Turkic language and script were also in use in Chach, as evidenced by the discovery of a pottery vessel in the ruins of the city of Qanha, inscribed with a Turkic runic inscription referring to Chach as c'c.

Spiritual factors also played an important role in the relations between Chach and Sogd. In particular, Zoroastrianism spread in Chach through Sogd. Evidence of this can be seen in ossuaries dating back to the 6th–7th centuries, discovered in Tashkent in 1871 and in Beshkapa, To'ytepa (present-day Nurafshon), in 2001.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Sogd and the Sogdians, who were active along the Great Silk Road, extended their caravans and goods through Ustrushona and Chach, which were

important branches of the northeastern route of the Silk Road. From there, they reached Jetisu, Eastern Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang–Uygur Autonomous Region of China), China's inland regions, and even the Far East, before returning to Sogd under the protection of the Turkic Khagans.

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