

Caravanserais and the Silk Road system in Azerbaijan: from Medieval trade infrastructure to contemporary geopolitical networks

M.M. Mustafayev

*Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences
Baku, Azerbaijan*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8462-9495>

(E-mail: mustafayev_info@yahoo.com)

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Great Silk Road, Azerbaijani caravanserais, Architectural heritage, Intercultural dialogue, Archaeological heritage, Turkic architecture, Medieval trade routes, Shirvanshah dynasty, Safavid state, TRACECA, Cultural diplomacy, Zangezur Corridor.

IRSTI 03.41.91

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32523/2664-5157-2026-2-36-53>

This article examines the historical evolution, architectural typology, and geopolitical significance of medieval caravanserais located along the Azerbaijani segment of the Silk Road. Investigating Azerbaijan's strategic transit position from antiquity to the modern era, the research demonstrates that caravanserais functioned as complex socio-economic, cultural, and administrative hubs that structured long-distance trade across Eurasia rather than merely as resting stations. This study is based on archaeological evidence, written sources from Islamic geography, numismatic materials, and architectural analyses of surviving monuments. The earliest traces of caravanserai-type structures in Azerbaijan date back to the 6th–3rd millennia BCE. However, this architectural tradition did not reach its peak until the medieval period under Turkic political entities. The article focuses on the interregional roles of the Bukhara and Multani caravanserais in the Icherisheher (Baku's Old City). These caravanserais served merchants from Central Asia and India, respectively, and their foundations reveal continuity with earlier urban infrastructure. The article analyzes the transit significance of the Sangachal and Garachi (Miachik) complexes along the Caspian coastal route in terms of their architectural characteristics and function within the broader Silk Road landscape. The Maragheh Observatory, founded in the 13th century, is evaluated as a center of intellectual exchange where scholars from China, India, and Syria collaborated. This illustrates the civilizational dimension of the Silk Road, which extended beyond commerce. Additionally, the article explores the architectural similarities between Azerbaijani caravanserais and monuments in Central Asia and Anatolia. Notable examples include Sultan Han in Turkey and Rabat-i Malik in Uzbekistan. These similarities demonstrate the transnational spread of Turkic architectural engineering under the Seljuk, Timurid, and Safavid empires. The article also emphasizes the

role of state patronage, particularly that of the Shirvanshahs and Shah Abbas I, in shaping the caravanserai network as an instrument of trade diplomacy. Additionally, the research addresses how the Silk Road routes changed after the geographical discoveries of the late-15th century and the subsequent growth of the Volga–Caspian corridor. In the contemporary context, the study explores the connection between medieval heritage and modern geopolitical realities by examining the TRACECA transport program, the "Virtual Silk Road" initiative, and the strategic importance of the Zangezur Corridor. Ultimately, the article concludes that Azerbaijan's caravanserai heritage is a universal architectural legacy and living cultural and strategic resource for regional cooperation among Turkic states.

М.М. Мустафаев

*Әзербайжан Ұлттық ғылым академиясы Археология және антропология институты,
Баку, Әзербайжан*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8462-9495>

(E-mail: mustafayev_info@yahoo.com)

Әзербайжандағы керуен сарайлар және Жібек жолы жүйесі: ортағасырлық сауда инфрақұрылымынан қазіргі геосаяси желілерге дейін

Аннотация. Мақалада Ұлы Жібек жолының Әзербайжан аумағындағы бөлігі бойында орналасқан ортағасырлық керуен сарайларының тарихи эволюциясы, сәулет типологиясы және геосаяси маңызы қарастырылады. Зерттеу Әзербайжанның ежелгі дәуірден қазіргі кезеңге дейінгі стратегиялық транзиттік жағдайын талдай отырып, керуен сарайлардың тек қонақ аялдайтын орындар ғана емес, Еуразия кеңістігіндегі ұзақ қашықтықтағы сауда байланыстарын ұйымдастырған күрделі әлеуметтік-экономикалық, мәдени және әкімшілік орталықтар болғанын көрсетеді және олардың аймақтық интеграциядағы рөлін айқындайды. Зерттеу археологиялық деректерге, ислам географиясының жазба деректеріне, нумизматикалық материалдарға және сақталған сәулет ескерткіштерін талдауға негізделді. Анықталғандай, Әзербайжан аумағындағы керуен сарай типіндегі құрылыстардың ең ерте іздері б.з.д. VI-III мыңжылдықтарға жатады, алайда бұл дәстүрдің сәулеттік дамуы орта ғасырларда түркі саяси құрылымдары кезеңінде қарқынды дамып, халықаралық сауда жүйесінің кеңеюімен тығыз байланысты болды. Ерекше назар Ичеришехер аумағындағы Бұхара және Мұлтан керуен сарайларының өңіраралық қызметіне аударылады. Олар тиісінше Орта Азия мен Үндістаннан келген саудагерлерге қызмет еткен және қалалық инфрақұрылымның тарихи сабақтастығын көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар Сангачал және Гарачы (Миәджик) кешендері Каспий теңізі

Received 09 March 2026. Revised 10 April 2026. Accepted 30 May 2026. Available online 30 June 2026.



For citation: M.M. Mustafayev Caravanserais and the Silk Road system in Azerbaijan: from Medieval trade infrastructure to contemporary geopolitical networks // Turkic Studies Journal. 2026. V. 8. № 2. P. 36-53. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32523/2664-5157-2026-2-36-53>

бойындағы транзиттік маршруттардағы олардың стратегиялық және архитектуралық маңызы тұрғысынан қарастырылады. XIII ғасырдағы Марага обсерваториясы ғылыми орталық ретінде қарастырылып, онда Қытай, Үндістан және Сирия ғалымдары бірлесіп жұмыс істегені атап өтіледі, бұл Жібек жолының өркениеттік және интеллектуалдық алмасу кеңістігі болғанын көрсетеді. Әзербайжан керуен сарайларының архитектуралық бірлігі Түркиядағы Сұлтан Хан және Өзбекстандағы Рабат-и Мәлік ескерткіштерімен салыстырылады, бұл Селжүктер, Темір әулеті және Сәфәуилер дәуіріндегі түркі сәулет дәстүрінің трансұлттық таралуын көрсетеді және ортақ мәдени кеңістікті айқындайды. Керуен сарайлар жүйесінің дамуына Ширваншахтар мен I Шах Аббас маңызды үлес қосты. XV ғасырдың соңындағы Ұлы географиялық ашылымдардан кейін сауда бағыттарының өзгеруі және Еділ-Каспий дәлізінің маңызының артуы қарастырылады, бұл өңірдің жаңа геэкономикалық жағдайларға бейімделгенін көрсетеді. Қазіргі заман тұрғысынан TRACECA бағдарламасы, «Виртуалды Жібек жолы» бастамасы және Зәңгезүр дәлізінің стратегиялық маңызы арқылы тарихи мұра мен бүгінгі геосаяси үдерістердің сабақтастығы талданады. Қорытындылай келе, Әзербайжан керуен сарай мұрасы әмбебап сәулет құндылығы ғана емес, сонымен қатар өңірлік ынтымақтастық пен интеграцияны нығайтатын маңызды стратегиялық ресурс болып табылады және мәдени сабақтастықты қамтамасыз етеді.

Кілт сөздер: Ұлы Жібек жолы, Әзербайжан керуен сарайлары, сәулет мұрасы, мәдениетаралық диалог, археологиялық мұра, түркі сәулет өнері, ортағасырлық сауда жолдары, Ширваншахтар мемлекеті, Сәфәуи мемлекеті, TRACECA, мәдени дипломатия, Зәңгезүр дәлізі.

М.М. Мустафаев

*Институт археологии и антропологии Национальной академии наук Азербайджана,
Баку, Азербайджан*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8462-9495>

(E-mail: mustafayev_info@yahoo.com)

Караван-сарай и система Шёлкового пути в Азербайджане: от средневековой торговой инфраструктуры к современным геополитическим сетям

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматриваются историческая эволюция, архитектурная типология и геополитическое значение средневековых караван-сараяв, расположенных на азербайджанском участке Великого Шелкового пути. Исследование анализирует стратегическое транзитное положение Азербайджана с древности до современного периода, показывая, что караван-сарай функционировали не только как места отдыха, но и как сложные социально-экономические, культурные и административные центры, обеспечивавшие организацию дальних евразийских торговых связей. Исследование основано на археологических данных, письменных источниках исламской географии, нумизматических материалах и архитектурном анализе сохранившихся памятников. Установлено, что наиболее ранние следы сооружений караван-сарайного типа на территории Азербайджана относятся к VI-III тысячелетиям до н.э., однако наибольшее развитие данной архитектурной традиции наблюдается в средневековый период при

тюркских политических образованиях. Особое внимание уделяется межрегиональной роли караван-сараяв Бухара и Мултан в Ичеришехер (Старый город Баку), которые обслуживали соответственно купцов из Центральной Азии и Индии, а их основания демонстрируют преемственность более ранней городской инфраструктуры. Транзитное значение комплексов Сангачал и Гарачы (Миаджик) на Каспийском прибрежном маршруте анализируется с точки зрения их архитектурных особенностей и функций в системе Шелкового пути. Марагинская обсерватория XIII века рассматривается как центр интеллектуального обмена, где сотрудничали ученые из Китая, Индии и Сирии, что демонстрирует цивилизационное измерение Шелкового пути, выходящее за рамки торговли. Далее прослеживается архитектурное единство между азербайджанскими караван-сараями и памятниками Центральной Азии и Анатолии, в частности, Султан Хан в Турции и Рабат-и Малик в Узбекистане, что отражает транснациональное распространение тюркской архитектурной инженерии в эпоху сельджуков, тимуридов и Сефевидов. Подчеркивается роль государственной поддержки, особенно со стороны Ширваншахов и шаха Аббаса I, в формировании сети караван-сараяв как инструмента торговой дипломатии. Также рассматривается трансформация маршрутов Шелкового пути после Великих географических открытий конца XV века и последующее усиление Волго-Каспийского коридора. В современном контексте анализируется преемственность между средневековым наследием и геополитическими реалиями через программу TRASECA, инициативу «Виртуальный Шелковый путь» и стратегическое значение Зангезурского коридора. В заключение делается вывод, что караван-сарайное наследие Азербайджана представляет собой как универсальное архитектурное наследие, так и живой культурно-стратегический ресурс регионального сотрудничества тюркских государств.

Ключевые слова: Великий Шелковый путь, Азербайджанские караван-сарая, архитектурное наследие, межкультурный диалог, археологическое наследие, тюркская архитектура, средневековые торговые пути, государство Ширваншахов, Сефевидское государство, ТРАСЕКА, культурная дипломатия, Зангезурский коридор.

Introduction

As one of the most remarkable achievements of human civilization, the Great Silk Road played a decisive role in establishing economic and cultural integration between the East and West. Extending over 12,000 kilometers and functioning for more than 1,500 years since the 2nd century BC, this transcontinental network shaped the political and ethnocultural landscape of Eurasia. Silk was not only the primary traded commodity but also held the status of a universal currency and diplomatic symbol of the era.

Azerbaijan's history from antiquity to the late Middle Ages is inextricably linked to this global trade system. The "Water Route", described by the ancient geographer Strabo, connected seas via the Kura and Rioni rivers. Land routes stretching along the northern shores of the Caspian Sea also confirmed Azerbaijan's strategic position within the international transit system (Akbulut, Tugba, 2025: 428; Aliyarli, 2000). On this historical foundation, cities such as Shamakhi, Tabriz, Ardabil, and Derbent emerged during the medieval period as major commercial centers linking territories from India to Italy (Ashurbeyli, 2006).

Archaeological research allows us to substantiate the essence of Silk Road trade with material evidence, not only through written sources. For instance, the ancient water pipeline found under the Multani caravanserai in Baku's foundation shows how these institutions were integrated into urban infrastructure. Recent studies indicate that the beginnings of this route date back to the Eneolithic period (Koltsov et al., 2015: 17). In this context, Azerbaijan functioned as a key geopolitical crossroads where the Northern (Caspian-Volga) and Southern routes intersected. Caravanserais were not merely resting stations; they were also cultural centers that preserved the region's historical memory and facilitated material and intellectual exchange.

The exceptional role of Turkic-origin state formations, such as the Safavids and the Shirvanshahs, in developing this caravanserai network should be emphasized. As brilliant examples of the Shirvan-Absheron and Nakhchivan-Maragha schools of architecture, these monuments serve as tangible evidence of the historical role of Turkic peoples in international trade and intercultural dialogue. Archaeological evidence, including trade vessels, numismatic materials, measuring instruments, and the strategic layout of caravanserais, confirms the reality of the Silk Road. These facts demonstrate that the route in question was not merely a romantic notion, but rather a dynamic, multifaceted economic system.

Written sources, especially Islamic geography from the seventh century onward, play an irreplaceable role in understanding this system. Works by authors such as Ibn Wahb, al-Ya'qubi, al-Istakhri, Ibn Fadlan, al-Mas'udi, and Yaqut al-Hamawi offer a comprehensive overview of the routes' directions and the economic potential of Azerbaijani cities (Ashurbeyli, 2006: 15–17). A major achievement of 10th-century Islamic cartography is the corpus of 21 maps covering the territory from India to the Atlantic Ocean. This corpus proves how systematically trade centers along the Silk Road were recorded (Ashurbeyli, 2006: 18-20).



Fig. 1. Directions of the Great Silk Road across the map of Azerbaijan.

1-сур. Әзербайжан картасындағы Ұлы Жібек жолының бағыттары.

Рис. 1. Направления Великого Шёлкового пути на карте Азербайджана.

Materials and methods

This interdisciplinary study combines historical, archaeological, architectural, and geopolitical analyses. Primary materials include medieval written sources from Islamic geography, such as works by al-Istakhri, Ibn Fadlan, al-Mas'udi, and Yaqut al-Hamawi; numismatic finds; and archaeological evidence from excavations and surface surveys along the Azerbaijani segments of the Great Silk Road. The architectural documentation is drawn from field measurements, photographic records, and a comparative analysis of surviving monuments. This is all supplemented by cartographic materials and historical maps.

The architectural typology was examined through on-site investigations of key caravanserais, such as those in Bukhara, Multani, Sangachal, Garachi/Miachik, Upper and Lower in Sheki, and Qarghabazar. The focus was on plan layouts, construction techniques, materials (limestone, baked brick, and river stone), defensive elements, water supply systems, and courtyard organization. A comparative analysis was conducted with analogous monuments in Central Asia (e.g., Rabat-i Malik) and Anatolia (e.g., Sultan Han) to identify shared Turkic architectural features under Seljuk, Timurid, Safavid, and Shirvanshah patronage.

Archaeological data includes evidence of earlier proto-caravanserai structures from the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods, as well as layers of urban infrastructure beneath later caravanserais, such as the ancient water pipeline under the Multani Caravanserai. Numismatic materials and trade artifacts recovered from Silk Road contexts provide insight into economic flows and intercultural contact. Geopolitical analysis incorporates modern transport corridor studies, such as TRACECA and the Virtual Silk Road, as well as strategic documents related to the Zangezur Corridor, to trace historical continuity into the contemporary era.

All interpretations adhere to the authenticity and contextual integrity principles outlined in the ICOMOS and UNESCO Silk Road heritage guidelines. Quantitative elements, such as the distances between roadside caravanserais (approximately 30–40 kilometers, or about one day's journey), were verified against historical travel accounts and modern GIS mapping.

Research background

Interest in Azerbaijani caravanserais among scholars has developed within the broader framework of Silk Road studies, particularly since the late 20th century, when UNESCO and ICOMOS began researching transnational trade routes. Early Azerbaijani historiography, including foundational works such as Sara Ashurbeyli's (2006) study of the Shirvanshahs and Ziya Bunyatov's (1984) study of the Atabegs, established the region's role as a vital transit node connecting the Caspian, Volga, and trans-Eurasian trade routes.

International contributions have further enriched the field. For example, ICOMOS's thematic studies (Williams, 2014) have positioned Azerbaijani caravanserais as nodal points within a unified "Silk Road landscape", and comparative architectural research has highlighted their links with Central Asian and Anatolian monuments. Recent works by Polvonov (2021) on caravanserai archaeology and by Demirel (2023) on Indo-Azerbaijani cultural and commercial ties have deepened our understanding of specific sites, such as the Bukhara and Multani caravanserais in Baku's Icherisheher district.

Local Azerbaijani scholarship has focused on preservation and typology. Studies of the Sheki caravanserais (Alakbarli & Aliyev, 2000), the Absheron roadside complexes (Sangachal

and Garachi/Miachik), and other regional examples, such as Qarqhabazar (Tapdıqoğlu, 2001), have documented the architectural features and state patronage under the Shirvanshahs and Shah Abbas I. Archaeological excavations and restoration projects, particularly in liberated territories since 2020, have revealed layers of continuity from ancient Albanian traditions to medieval Turkic polities.

Contemporary research increasingly links historical caravanserai networks to modern initiatives, such as TRACECA (Lobzhanidze, 2012), and digital projects, such as the Virtual Silk Road (Atkins et al., 2004). Building upon these foundations, this study integrates archaeological evidence with geopolitical analysis. It emphasizes the civilizational and Turkic dimensions of the caravanserai tradition and addresses gaps in the documentation of neglected roadside monuments.

Analysis

Types of Caravanserais in Azerbaijani Architecture: Urban and Roadside Caravanserais

Etymologically, caravanserais derive from the Persian words ‘karvan’ (group of travelers) and ‘sara’ (palace or enclosed building). They were the economic lifelines of the Silk Road. According to UNESCO research, these structures were built at strategic intervals of around 30-40 kilometers to ensure the safety and rest of merchants (UNESCO, 2020).

The earliest proto-trade stations or transit shelters in Azerbaijan date back to the Eneolithic period. However, caravanserais did not reach their architectural peak until the medieval period.

Determining their exact total number is difficult, though, as many of these structures have collapsed over time and monuments in Karabakh and Shusha suffered severe damage during the period of occupation. Currently, approximately 20-25 well-known caravanserais are registered with the state or partially preserved.

Azerbaijani caravanserais are divided into two main groups according to their location: urban caravanserais, found in cities such as Baku, Ganja, Sheki, Shamakhi, Shusha, and Lankaran, and roadside caravanserais. These structures not only functioned as trade stops, but also as transcultural centers where different languages, religions, and ideas intersected. The following table summarizes the historical and architectural features of major caravanserai complexes located in various regions of Azerbaijan that played an important role in Silk Road trade.

Table 1. The historical and architectural characteristics of the major caravanserai complexes along the Silk Road in Azerbaijan.

1-кесте. Ұлы Жібек жолы бойындағы Әзербайжан аумағындағы негізгі керуен сарай кешендерінің тарихи және сәулеттік сипаттамалары.

Таблица 1. Исторические и архитектурные характеристики основных комплексов караван-сараяв в Азербайджане вдоль Великого Шелкового пути.

Name of Caravanserai	Historical Period / Century City / Region	Architectural and Functional Features
Bukhara Caravanserai	15th century Baku (Old City)	A strategic trading point designed for Central Asian merchants, distinguished by its octagonal courtyard layout.

Multani Caravanserai	14th-15th centuries Baku (Old City)	Intended for merchants from Multan, India. Findings show that its foundation was built upon older structures, possibly dating back to the 7th–10th centuries (Demirel, 2023; ICOMOS, 2000: 28).
Small (Khan) Caravanserai	15th-16th centuries	Constructed by the Shirvanshahs; a rectangular complex with a spacious courtyard and two entrances. Later used as a religious school (madrasa)..
Molla Ahmad (Haji Gayib)	14th century	Old City, near the ancient port Considered one of the first reception centers for merchants arriving by sea, serving both for accommodation and storage of goods.
Shah Abbas Caravanserai	17th century Ganja	Built according to the design of Sheikh Baha'i, a large trading complex reflecting the grandeur of Eastern architecture.
Ughurlu Khan Caravanserai	17th century Ganja	Commissioned by the governors of Ganja; notable for its unique two-courtyard structure, typical of feudal architecture.
Upper Caravanserai	18th-19th centuries Sheki	One of the largest urban caravanserais in the South Caucasus; with more than 300 rooms, a complex cell system, and arched balconies.
Lower Caravanserai	18th-19th centuries Sheki	Combined the functions of trade and lodging; one of five major complexes preserving Sheki's ancient mercantile spirit.
Sangachal Caravanserai	17th-18th centuries Absheron (Caspian coast)	A key stop on Caspian coastal transit routes; located at the junction of sea and land roads, serving as an important site for merchants' overnight stays and exchange of goods.
Garachi (Miachik) Caravanserai	16th century Absheron district	Situated strategically along the Baku–Shamakhi road; rectangular in shape, with strong defensive walls and corner towers, functioning as a roadside caravanserai.

The cities located along the Silk Road in Azerbaijan distinguished themselves as major production centers and strategic logistical hubs with their unique caravanserai architecture. Centers such as Sheki, Barda, and Derbent, in particular, gained decisive importance within this global trade network. Sheki (historically known as Nuxa) hosted five large caravanserais during the Middle Ages as a significant handicraft center. The Upper and Lower Caravanserais, which have survived to the present day, demonstrate the characteristic synthesis of baked brick and river stone that is typical of the Sheki school of architecture. The Upper Caravanserai, with its complex cell system, covers a total area of 6 000 m² and is considered one of the largest urban caravanserais in the South Caucasus (Alakbarli & Aliyev, 2000: 44) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The courtyard of the Upper Caravanserai in Sheki.

2-сур. Шәкидегі Жоғарғы керуен сарайдың ауласы.

Рис. 2. Двор Верхнего караван-сарая в Шеки.

Other important stops on the Great Silk Road included Barda (also known as Partav), the capital of Albania from the 5th century, and Beylagan (also known as Öränqala), a pivotal location on the Mil plain. Both cities played a significant role at the intersection of trade routes. Barda's renowned "al-Kurki" bazaar, in particular, was considered the largest transportation and exchange hub in the region (Ashurbeyli, 2006: 157). Derbent, the northernmost point of this network and known as the "Iron Gate", combined port and land trade and became a magnificent example of Shirvan stone architecture.

Absheron's transit hubs, such as the Sangachal caravanserai (built 1439-1440 by Shirvanshah Khalilullah I) and the Garachi (Miachik) caravanserai on the ancient Baku-Shamakhi trade route, vividly reflect the region's architectural traditions. Constructed of limestone, the Garachi caravanserai bears an inscription above its gate mentioning Shirvanshah Khalilullah II (1524-1535). It preserved its commercial significance until the 19th century. Initially known as "Miachik", the monument became popularly referred to as the "Garachi caravanserai" due to nomadic tribes occasionally settling there during periods of abandonment. Both monuments have guest rooms, utility buildings, and defensive corner towers. However, their current neglected state necessitates urgent conservation to preserve them as part of the "Silk Road memory" (Səngechal karvansarası, 2020). (Fig. 3, 4).

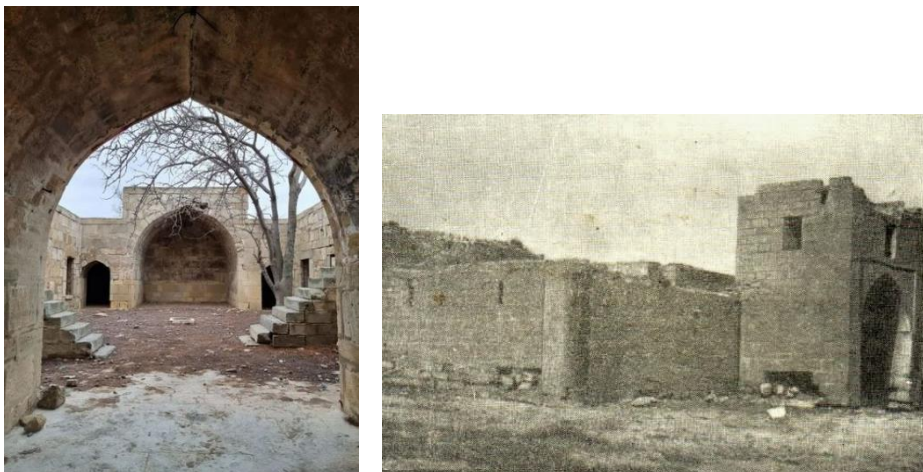


Fig. 3, 4. Sangachal Caravanserai, Garachi (Miachik) Caravanserai.

3, 4-сур. Сәңгечал керуен-сарайы, Қарачи (Миәджик) керуен-сарайы.

Рис. 3, 4. Сангечальский караван-сарай, Карачи (Миаджик) караван-сарай.

The formation and development of Azerbaijan's caravanserai network was directly linked to the economic policies and strategic planning of the ruling states. During the Arab Caliphate (7th-10th centuries), the unification of a vast geography within a single political and economic framework greatly stimulated international trade. Consequently, Tabriz and Barda became major provincial centers along the main global trade routes branching from Baghdad. In the subsequent 11th-14th centuries, the political stability and unified transport and postal system (yampay) established by the Seljuk and Mongol states enabled Tabriz and Sultaniyya to become leading centers of international trade (Ashurbeyli, 2006; Bunyatov, 1984).

This trajectory reached its historical peak in the 15th-17th centuries under the Aq Qoyunlu and Safavid states. The Aq Qoyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan established diplomatic and economic relations with European states. The large-scale construction of caravanserais and trade policies implemented by Safavid rulers Shah Ismail I and especially Shah Abbas I played a crucial role in turning Azerbaijan into a decisive transit hub between East and West. International trade operations carried out via Syria, Rhodes, Cyprus, and Istanbul during this period further enhanced the functional significance of the caravanserai network (Mustafayev, 2020; Seyidbeyli, 2021: 78-80).

The Garachi caravanserai is one of the architectural manifestations of state tradition and strategic economic policy. It reflects the characteristic features of the Absheron school of architecture. Located on the Baku-Shamakhi caravan route at the intersection of the Caspian Sea's coastal trade roads and inland highways, this 17th century monument was built with strong defensive walls and corner towers to ensure security. It included a central courtyard, stables for pack animals, and rooms for merchants to rest, making it a key stopover for international trade for a long time (Ashurbeyli, 2006; Mustafayev, 2020). Despite its current state of neglect, restoring the Garachi caravanserai is important for preserving the region's historical and cultural landscape and transmitting the Silk Road heritage to future generations.

Modern scholarly approaches require evaluating caravanserais as integral parts of a broader "trade corridor" system, not merely as individual architectural monuments. According

to thematic studies conducted by ICOMOS in 2014, Azerbaijan's caravanserai network is considered one of the main "nodal points" of the international trade chain. Caravanserais served not only as shelters but also as complex economic and logistical centers where high-value goods were exchanged and regional economic flows were managed. ICOMOS emphasizes that caravanserais, together with surrounding bridges, water channels (kahrizes), and defensive towers, formed a unified "Silk Road landscape". This concept elevates Azerbaijan's medieval caravanserais beyond the status of individual monuments, making them a strategic component of UNESCO's transnational serial nominations (Williams, 2014).

Unity of Azerbaijani and Central Asian Architecture

The architectural style of caravanserais in Azerbaijan emerged under the patronage of the Shirvanshahs, the Safavids, and local governors. These monuments are an integral part of the broader Turkic cultural landscape. These monuments are distinguished by central courtyard planning, monumental entrance portals, and complex arch-vault systems. They are the result of the integration of Turkic architectural schools and shared engineering thought. A clear example of this unity is the Bukhara Caravanserai in Baku (15th century). With its square design and central octagonal courtyard, it incorporated elements of renowned Central Asian engineering structures, such as the Raboti-Malik, into the Absheron landscape (Polvonov, 2021: 83). The central pool system, which is still preserved in the building today, reflects the era's advanced water supply technologies.

However, Azerbaijan's connection to the Silk Road extends beyond the architectural dialogue of the Middle Ages to the economic foundations of antiquity. Notes by ancient authors such as Strabo and Pliny confirm that, beginning in the 2nd century BC, the territories of Albania and Atropatene attracted foreign merchants due to their favorable geographical location, salt deposits, and abundant metal resources. In 198 BC, the first official Heqin (peace and kinship) treaty was signed between the Hun Empire and China's Han dynasty, establishing the legal basis for the exchange of silk, wine, and rice (Kroll, 2006: 112). This treaty ensured stability in East Asia and stimulated the integration of a vast geography (including Azerbaijan) into the international economic system through the early Silk Road routes.

The Maragha Observatory, founded in the 13th century, was the pinnacle of this intellectual environment. Functioning as a "medieval academy of sciences", it was a place where scholars from China, India, and Syria worked together (Buniyatov, 1984: 248). This level of scientific and cultural activity strengthened Azerbaijan's position as a global production center. The highly valued "Shamakhi silk" in the markets of Venice, Genoa, and London during the 17th–19th centuries is a vivid indicator of this development. By the 19th century, this region was meeting 75% of the Russian textile industry's silk demand, confirming that Azerbaijan's role on the Silk Road was not merely as a "route" but also as a strategic industrial hub (Mustafayev, 2020).

The country's caravanserai network extended beyond major cities to include strategic villages and settlements, forming a broad infrastructure. One of the most important links in this regional network is the Qarghabazar caravanserai, located in the village of Qarghabazar in the Fuzuli district and dated to 1681. Built of unhewn stone with an elongated rectangular plan measuring 23.7 by 34.7 meters, the structure contains two large vaulted halls that ensure the safety of caravan animals and merchants. With geometric ornaments on its portal, a symmetrical layout, and guard rooms, this monument is an example of complex architecture

that synthesizes trade and defensive functions. The building is known among the people as the “Shah Abbas Caravanserai” and stylistically demonstrates continuity with ancient Albanian traditions, once again emphasizing Azerbaijan’s strategic importance along historical trade routes (Tapdiqoglu, 2001: 150) (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Qarghabazar Caravanserai (1681). Qarghabazar village, Fuzuli district.

5-сур. Қарғабазар керуен сарайы (1681 ж.). Физули ауданы, Қарғабазар ауылы.

Рис. 5. Караван-сарай Каргабазар (1681 год). Село Каргабазар, Физулинский район.

The Great Silk Road is a historical legacy of the Middle Ages and a dynamic system that continues to shape the economic and political realities of the modern world. According to Georgian international relations expert and geopolitician Givi Lobzhanidze, the restoration of this route turned "from myth to reality" by the late 20th century, with the South Caucasus states (especially Azerbaijan and Georgia) reestablishing their role as central hubs (Lobzhanidze, 2012: 340–342). However, the roots of this modern reality lie in centuries of complex transformation processes.

Azerbaijan’s caravanserai architecture is part of a unified style that developed along the Silk Road. Typological similarities between Azerbaijan’s caravanserais and magnificent monuments, such as the 13th century Sultan Han in Turkey and the 11th-century Rabat-i Malik in Uzbekistan, confirm this unity through their monumental portals, central courtyard systems, and strong fortress walls. This demonstrates how architectural ideas, construction techniques, and functional requirements spread rapidly across transnational levels during the Seljuk, Timurid, and Safavid empires (ICOMOS, 2000; Seyidbeyli, 2021).

However, the trajectory of the Silk Road was significantly altered by global geographical discoveries from the late 15th century onwards. Vasco da Gama’s discovery of a direct sea route to India in 1498 undermined the strategic advantage of land routes that had dominated for centuries. The shift of European trade with the East to oceanic routes led to a relative

decline in the role of traditional caravan roads, including those passing through Azerbaijan, in international trade (UNESCO, 2020: 103).

Nevertheless, the transformation of global trade routes did not mean the region lost its importance. As the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins became less important, alternative routes (particularly the Volga–Caspian waterway) came to the forefront. The corridor connecting Northern Europe with the East revitalized the strategic position of the port of Baku. During this period, Baku became a major transit hub and the primary maritime gateway for exporting local silk products (Aliyarli, 2000; Ashurbeyli, 2006: 210–212).

From the mid-18th century onward, the Volga–Caspian route became a geopolitical arena where major powers' interests intersected. The rivalry between England and Russia over control of this strategic corridor increased the importance of Azerbaijan's main silk-producing centers: Shamakhi (Shirvan), Ganja, and Rasht (Gilan). The high-quality raw silk produced in Azerbaijan was an indispensable resource for Russia's and Europe's textile industries. Thus, the transformation of global trade routes did not diminish Azerbaijan's economic significance. On the contrary, it established the country as a strategic center of the new world order and geopolitical competition (Mustafayev, 2020; Ashurbeyli, 2006: 225–228).

Modern Reality: From Historical Heritage to Digital and Geostrategic Hub

The Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA) program, established in Brussels in 1993, is regarded as a legal and political model adapted to the modern-era geopolitical and economic demands of the ancient Silk Road. According to Georgian international relations expert and geopolitician Givi Lobzhanidze's analyses, this corridor plays a crucial role in safely delivering Caspian energy resources and other strategic goods to Western markets. It serves as an alternative, multivector transport route that bypasses Russia and Iran for regional states (Lobzhanidze, 2012: 340–342).

The multilateral agreement signed in September 1998 at an international conference in Baku, attended by 12 countries, strengthened TRACECA's institutional status, establishing Baku as the center of its Permanent Secretariat. Thus, Azerbaijan began acting as one of the main coordination hubs in reviving the historical Silk Road in the modern era.

Modern integration processes extend beyond transport and trade. In 2001, the "Virtual Silk Road" (Silk Net) project, supported by NATO's Science Committee, transformed the ancient Silk Road into a digital communication network (Atkins et al., 2004). Thus, the historical hub function of medieval caravanserais continues today through fiber-optic cable lines and energy pipelines (including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline). As Lobzhanidze emphasized, participating in these projects is strategically important for Azerbaijan and Georgia in terms of integrating into global economic and political processes and protecting national interests (Lobzhanidze, 2012: 341).

Infrastructure projects implemented within TRACECA have deepened economic integration among regional countries and have created real conditions for establishing the Baku port and railway network as an international transit center. This process shows that Azerbaijan's role in the historical Silk Road has a new meaning in the modern era, establishing the country as a major hub for energy and communication corridors.

Recent major geopolitical events have furthered the restoration of the Silk Road. The victory in the 44-day Patriotic War of 2020 created a new geostrategic reality in the South Caucasus. The restoration of territorial integrity provided favorable conditions for implementing new

transportation and communication projects in the region. In this context, the Zangezur Corridor holds special strategic importance (Lobzhanidze, 2012: 340-342).

Opening the Zangezur Corridor will provide Azerbaijan with a direct land connection to Turkey via Nakhchivan and, more broadly, to the Turkic world. Along with the existing Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, this corridor will create a shorter, more efficient transit route between Asia and Europe. This will accelerate economic integration for Azerbaijan, Turkey, the Central Asian Turkic republics, and the Turkic world as a whole (Lobzhanidze, 2012; Seyidbeyli, 2021).

In the modern era, the idea of restoring the Silk Road naturally aligns with strengthening economic, transportation, and cultural cooperation among Turkic states. Large-scale energy and transportation projects, such as TRACECA, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, TANAP, and TAP, demonstrate that this integration is already a reality. Thanks to its favorable geographical position and consistent political strategy, Azerbaijan continues to play a pivotal role as a geostrategic bridge connecting East and West, North and South within the new Silk Road system.

Results

The analysis confirms that the medieval caravanserais in Azerbaijan were part of a sophisticated, multifunctional network that served as more than just lodging; they were also socioeconomic, cultural, and administrative hubs along the Silk Road. Urban caravanserais, such as those in Bukhara and Multani in Baku, as well as the complexes in Ganja and Sheki, served as specialized trading posts for merchants from Central Asia, India, and beyond. Often built atop earlier infrastructure, these caravanserais demonstrate urban continuity from the 7th–10th centuries onward. Their architectural feats, such as central courtyards (sometimes octagonal), surrounding cells, arched galleries, and water systems, reflected advanced engineering adapted to commercial and defensive needs.

Roadside caravanserais such as Sangachal (constructed 1439-1440 under Shirvanshah Khalilullah I) and Garachi (Miachik, associated with Shirvanshah Khalilullah II) were strategically positioned 30–40 kilometers apart along the Caspian Sea coast and inland routes. These rectangular structures, which had defensive walls and corner towers, combined accommodations, stables, storage, and security functions. They were part of a broader "Silk Road landscape" that included bridges, kahrizes, and watchtowers.

The study reveals a significant architectural unity spanning Turkic cultural regions, with similarities in portal design, courtyard layout, and vaulting techniques connecting Azerbaijani structures with those in Rabat-i Malik (Uzbekistan) and Sultan Han (Turkey). This highlights the transnational dissemination of Seljuk, Timurid, and Safavid architectural traditions. State patronage by the Shirvanshahs, especially Shah Abbas I, played a decisive role in systematizing this network as an instrument of trade, diplomacy, and economic control.

Intellectual exchange is evidenced by sites such as the Maragha Observatory, which combined commercial activities with scientific collaboration involving scholars from China, India, and Syria. Evidence of proto-traces from the sixth to third millennia BCE and Eneolithic water infrastructure indicates deep historical roots. Meanwhile, the post-15th-century shift toward the Volga–Caspian corridor demonstrates the adaptability of Azerbaijani transit infrastructure.

In the modern context, the caravanserai heritage informs contemporary projects directly. TRACECA revives the multi-vector transport role of medieval routes; the Virtual Silk Road extends digital connectivity; and the Zangezur Corridor promises to restore efficient land links within the Turkic world. The approximately 20–25 documented caravanserais, many of which were damaged during periods of occupation, represent both universal architectural value and a living strategic resource. Preserving and promoting them can strengthen cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation among Turkic states.

These results substantiate Azerbaijan's position as a historical and contemporary geostrategic bridge where caravanserais embody the synthesis of trade, culture, and the Turkic contribution to Eurasian connectivity.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's caravanserai heritage encompasses more than just the economic and logistical infrastructure of the Great Silk Road; it is also the material embodiment of a "dialogue of cultures" that developed over centuries. Although trans-Eurasian land trade lost its initial dominance at the end of the 15th century due to global geographical discoveries, the Silk Road's civilizational legacy continues to be of vital importance in today's system of international relations.

The caravanserais in Azerbaijan are tangible proof of the leading role of Turkic peoples in this system. Built under the patronage of political entities such as the Shirvanshahs, the Safavids, and local governors, these monuments demonstrate the engineering richness of the Turkic architectural school with their central courtyard planning, monumental portals, complex defensive systems, and advanced water supply solutions. This architectural unity makes the caravanserais a universal value and an inseparable part of the tangible cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples.

In the modern era, within the framework of UNESCO's "Silk Roads: Routes of Dialogue" the preservation of these ancient monuments has been defined as a global priority. Azerbaijan has exceptional potential in these transboundary nominations, particularly in heritage projects undertaken with Turkic-speaking countries. The caravanserai complexes analyzed in this study, including those in Bukhara, Multani, Sheki, Ganja, and Sangachal, are integral parts of a unified cultural landscape symbolizing peaceful human cooperation.

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's caravanserai network has become a powerful instrument of cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation in the modern era. Restoring and promoting these monuments internationally further strengthens the country's strategic position on the global cultural map. This heritage is an important cultural-strategic resource for the sustainable development of the Turkic world and humanity as a whole, not only a memory of the past.

Reference

- Буниятов З.М., 1984. Государство Атабеков Азербайджана: 1136–1225 гг. Баку: Элм. 271 с.
Кольцов П.М., Кольцова К.П., Эрдни-Горяев Е. Э., 2015. Дорогами Великого Шелкового пути – региональные аспекты. Вестник Калмыцкого университета. № 4 (28). С. 15–22.

- Akbulut A., Tuğba H., 2025. "Strabon, Geographika (Coğrafya): Kitap XI.1-14." LIBRI: Epigrafi, Çeviri ve Eleştiri Dergisi. No 11. S. 425-452. DOI: <http://www.libridergi.org/2025/lbr-0343>
- Alakbarli F., Aliyev İ., 2000. Silk Road: The Origin of the Mulberry Trees. Azerbaijan International Magazine. Vol. 8.3. P. 52-53.
- Aliyarli S., 2000. The Great Silk Road and trade between the Caspian and Europe. Visions of Azerbaijan. Vol. 4.1. P. 42-47.
- Aşurbəyli S., 2006. Şirvanşahlar dövləti (VI-XVI əsrlər). Bakı: Elm. 416 s.
- Atkins M.S., Janz R.F., Kaffenberger W., 2004. The Virtual Silk Highway: a project to bridge the digital divide. Proceedings of the IPSI Conference. Venice. P. 1-8. Available at: <https://www2.cs.sfu.ca/~stella/papers/2004/ipsi.pdf> (Accessed: 01.03.2026).
- Azerbaijan on the Silk Road, 2020. Ed. by S. Mustafayev. Baku: Tahsil Publishing House. 344 p.
- Demirel Ş., 2023. Tarihi İpek Yolu: Hindistan ve Azerbaycan Arasındaki Kültürel ve Ticari İletişim. Türkiye-Azerbaycan İlişkilerinin 100. Yılı Özel Sayısı. 10 (2). P. 728-737.
- ICOMOS, 2000. Evaluations of cultural properties. World Heritage Committee, 24th session (Cairns, Australia, 2000). WHC.2000/CONF.204/INF.6 + ADD. Paris: ICOMOS. 273 p.
- Kroll J.L., 2006. The Han-Xiongnu heqin Treaty (200–135 B.C.) in the Light of Chinese Political and Diplomatic Traditions. Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities. Vol. 78. P. 109–124.
- Lobzhanidze G., 2012. Historical-Legislative Aspects of "Silk Road" (TRACECA – Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia). 7th Silk Road International Conference. Tbilisi–Batumi. Georgia. P. 340–342.
- Polvonov J., 2021. Caravanserais On The Great Silk Road And Their Archeological Site. The American Journal of Social Science and Education Innovations. 3 (02). P. 80-87.
- Seyidbeyli M., 2021. Azerbaijan on the Great Silk Road between China and Europe (Historical Survey). Global Journals.
- Səngəçal karvansarası. Tarixi abidələrimiz. Milli Kimlik Araşdırmaları Portalı, 14.10.2020. Available at: <https://millikimlik.az/2020/2281/> (Accessed: 01.03.2026).
- Tapdıqoğlu N., 2001. Füzuli rayonunun toponimləri. Bakı: Adiloğlu. 164 s.
- UNESCO. Caravanserais: The Cross-roads of Commerce and Culture along the Silk Roads. Silk Road Online Platform. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/caravanserais-cross-roads-commerce-and-culture-along-silk-roads> (Accessed: 01.03.2026).
- Williams T., 2014. The Silk Roads: an ICOMOS Thematic Study. Charenton-le-Pont: ICOMOS. 154 p.

Reference

- Buniyatov Z.M., 1984. Gosudarstvo Atabekov Azerbaydzhana: 1136-1225 gg. [The State of the Atabegs of Azerbaijan: 1136-1225]. Baku: Elm. 271 p. [in Russian].
- Koltsov P.M., Koltsova K.P., Erdni-Goryaev E.E., 2015. Dorogami Velikogo Shelkovogo puti – regionalnye aspekty [Along the Great Silk Road – Regional Aspects]. Vestnik Kalmytskogo universiteta. No 4 (28). P. 15-22. [in Russian].
- Akbulut A., Tugba H., 2025. Strabon, Geographika (Coğrafya): Kitap XI.1-14. LIBRI: Epigrafi, Çeviri ve Elestiri Dergisi. No 11. P. 425-452. DOI: <http://www.libridergi.org/2025/lbr-0343>

Alakbarli F., Aliyev I., 2000. Silk Road: The Origin of the Mulberry Trees. Azerbaijan International Magazine. Vol. 8.3. P. 52–53.

Aliyarli S., 2000. The Great Silk Road and trade between the Caspian and Europe. Visions of Azerbaijan. Vol. 4.1. P. 42–47.

Ashurbayli S., 2006. Shirvanshahlar dovlati (VI–XVI asrlar) [The State of the Shirvanshahs (6th–16th centuries)]. Baki: Elm. 416 p. [in Azerbaijani].

Atkins M.S., Janz R.F., Kaffenberger W., 2004. The Virtual Silk Highway: a project to bridge the digital divide. Proceedings of the IPSI Conference. Venice. P. 1–8. Available at: <https://www2.cs.sfu.ca/~stella/papers/2004/ipsi.pdf> (Accessed: 01.03.2026).

Azerbaijan on the Silk Road, 2020. ed. by S. Mustafayev. Baku: Tahsil Publishing House. 344 p.

Demirel S., 2023. Tarihi Ipek Yolu: Hindistan ve Azerbaycan Arasindaki Kulturel ve Ticari Iletisim [The Historical Silk Road: Cultural and Commercial Communication between India and Azerbaijan]. Turkiye-Azerbaycan Iliskilerinin 100. Yili Ozel Sayisi. 10 (2). P. 728–737. [in Turkish]

ICOMOS, 2000. Evaluations of cultural properties. World Heritage Committee, 24th session (Cairns, Australia, 2000). WHC.2000/CONF.204/INF.6 + ADD. Paris: ICOMOS. 273 p.

Kroll J.L., 2006. The Han-Xiongnu heqin Treaty (200–135 B.C.) in the Light of Chinese Political and Diplomatic Traditions. Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities. Vol. 78. P. 109–124.

Lobzhanidze G., 2012. Historical-Legislative Aspects of Silk Road (TRACECA – Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia). 7th Silk Road International Conference. Tbilisi–Batumi. Georgia. P. 340–342.

Polvonov J., 2021. Caravanserais On The Great Silk Road And Their Archeological Site. The American Journal of Social Science and Education Innovations. 3 (02). P. 80–87.

Sangachal karvansarasi. Tarixi abidalarimiz [Sangachal Caravanserai. Our Historical Monuments]. Milli Kimlik Arashdirmalari Portali, 14.10.2020. Available at: <https://millikimlik.az/2020/2281/> (Accessed: 01.03.2026). [in Azerbaijani]

Seyidbeyli M., 2021. Azerbaijan on the Great Silk Road between China and Europe (Historical Survey). Global Journals.

Tapdiqoglu N., 2001. Fuzuli rayonunun toponimləri [Toponyms of the Fuzuli District]. Baki: Adiloglu. 164 p. [in Azerbaijani]

UNESCO. Caravanserais: The Cross-roads of Commerce and Culture along the Silk Roads. Silk Road Online Platform. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/caravanserais-cross-roads-commerce-and-culture-along-silk-roads> (Accessed: 01.03.2026).

Williams T., 2014. The Silk Roads: an ICOMOS Thematic Study. Charenton-le-Pont: ICOMOS. 154 p.

Information about the author:

Mustafayev Mikayil Mubariz oglu, PhD., Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Registration and Passportization of Archaeological Monuments, Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, 115H Javid Ave., Baku, Azerbaijan.
Scopus ID: 60249374400

Автор туралы мәлімет:

Мустафаев Микаил Мубариз, PhD, қауымдастырылған профессор, Археологиялық ескерткіштерді тіркеу және паспорттандыру бөлімінің меңгерушісі, Археология және антропология институты, Әзербайжан Ұлттық ғылым академиясы, Джавид даңғ, 115Н, Баку, Әзербайжан.

Scopus ID: 60249374400

Сведения об авторе:

Мустафаев Микаил Мубариз, PhD., ассоциированный профессор, заведующий отделом регистрации и паспортизации археологических памятников, Институт археологии и антропологии, Национальная академия наук Азербайджана, пр. Джавида, 115Н, Баку, Азербайджан.

Scopus ID: 60249374400



Conflict of Interest.

There is no conflict of interest related to this article.

Мүдделер қақтығысы.

Мақалаға байланысты мүдде қақтығысы жоқ.

Конфликт интересов.

Нет конфликта интересов, связанного со статьей.