

## **Abstract: Economic Aspects of the Islamization of the Silk Road**

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From the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE the principal actors in the trans-Eurasian overland trade networks now referred to as “the Silk Road” were the Sogdians, ancestors to today’s Tajiks and Uzbeks, whose principal city at the time was Samarkand. A major factor in the Sogdians’ development and domination of these trade networks, which linked Central Asia with Iran and the West, India, and China, was the connections they established with these other regions through religious networks. That is to say, Sogdian merchants entered into relationships with religious institutions – including those of Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism – in the diverse territories where they conducted business, and thus facilitated the spread of these religions into new areas. As representatives of these religions, merchants as well as missionaries, attached themselves to caravans and followed the trade routes from West to East, they entered into agreements and alliances with local rulers and elites who often provided them with patronage and support in exchange for inclusion in the international trade networks in which these individuals were active.

This patronage could include the establishment of monasteries or other kinds of religious institutions, sometimes funded through the income of associated agricultural lands. These institutions were further enriched by donations from passing merchants (who were usually Sogdians), and many grew enormously wealthy as a result. This is vividly illustrated in the written account left by the seventh-century Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang, who traveled the Silk Roads through Central Asia on his way to India, which describes in detail the extravagant wealth on display at the Buddhist monasteries of Balkh. Manichaean and Christian networks also existed and sometimes thrived in this way (as can be seen from remains at Qocho, for example), but throughout the Sogdian period it was the Buddhists who were the most prominent and successful participants in the commercial and cultural exchanges between Iran, India and China.

An analysis of the relationship between religion and trade along the Silk Roads highlights the practical aspect of merchants’ choices to identify with an international religious network. These choices were perhaps in the first instance a matter of group affiliation and only secondarily, if at all, of personal conviction, although with the subsequent generation the new religious identity would take root. A Sogdian businessman might find it advantageous to belong to a Manichaean, Christian, or Buddhist network, in the same way that one today might benefit from membership in an international organization.

By the time of the Muslim incursions into Central Asia during the early 8<sup>th</sup> century and after, Silk Road trade was heavily dominated by Buddhist networks. It should be noted that a primary motivator for the Arab conquests was to spread their control over trade networks, and a large proportion of the earliest “converts” to Islam came from the merchant class. Moreover, as the Muslims extended their influence into Central Asia, the Buddhist networks were their principal competitors in the economic sphere. This fact surely explains in part the exceptional antagonism towards Buddhism found in the Islamic sources of the period.

This paper will explore the dynamics of the conversion of the Sogdian merchant classes to Islam from the 8<sup>th</sup> through the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the resulting emergence of a new Islamic Tajik identity.