

## **Baghdad and Silk Route**

*A study on the commercial function of the city of Baghdad in the middle ages.*

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### Introduction

This research deals with the commercial importance of Baghdad in the Middle Ages and its important role, as the capital of the Islamic state, in international trade within its region and the Islamic world, and between east and south-east Asia, the Mediterranean Sea and Western Europe, as well as between all these areas and eastern Africa.

Baghdad was an important center through which international trade routes passed including the silk route. Baghdad's importance emerged as its commercial hinter land had extended to reach China, Indonesia and Japan in the east and to reach Scandinavia and the British Isles in the west. Moreover, Baghdad's markets were full of goods from all over the world. Baghdad was also the center of interest of merchants from the east and the west as well.

### The commercial factor and its effect in choosing Baghdad's situation:

The commercial element had played an important role in selecting the situation of the city of Baghdad to be a capital for the Islamic state in the Abbaside era. Baghdad is situated in the center of Iraq at an equal distance between Basrah and Mosul. Its geographical position, in the middle between the northern and southern areas, made Baghdad a market for various products and goods which came from both the north and south of Iraq. Moreover, Baghdad situated on the routes of trade and caravans since it is found on the road of Basrah, Baghdad, Mosul, Diar Bakr and Anatolia and on the road of Sham, Iraq and the Arab gulf. Therefore, Baghdad was the place by which most land and river trade caravans passed. (1)

Among the important aspects about which the caliph Al-Mansour asked to select the city's situation were those related the supplies and trade, and he was answered "You are, head of the believers, in the Sarat, where you receive supplies by ships from the west via the Euphrates

and you receive goods of Egypt and Sham. You also receive supplies carried by ships from China, India and Wassit via Tigris”. (2)

Before turning Baghdad into a capital for the caliph Al-Mansour, a huge market was organized at the position of the city where merchants gathered. When the Muslims headed for Iraq and conquered Al-Sawad area Al-Muthanna Ibn Haritha Al-Shaibani was told about Baghdad’s market and he went there. (3)

Historians and geographers praise the great commercial role played by the city of Baghdad. Al-Yaqoubi said that goods and supplies easily arrived at Baghdad in various kinds from India, Sindh, China, Tibet, Turkey, Daylam, Khazar, Abassania and other countries. Baghdad had more goods than the original countries from which those goods came.

It was the place where all the world’s wealth was gathered and all the blessings of the universe existed.” (4)

Al-Maqdesi said in his book “Al-Taqasim” that the advisors told the caliph Al-Mansour that “you are on the Surat and the supplies come to you via Euphrates ships and caravans from Egypt and Sham in the desert and the tools come from China via sea and from the Romans and Mosul via Tigris.” (5)

Sources of Baghdad’s trade

Table No. 1, which was taken from various historical and geographical books, (6) the sources of the goods which were brought to Baghdad. This reflects the significant and wide commercial dealings of the city and shows its importance in the field of trade in the middle ages.

Table No. 1 showing the sources and kinds of goods exported to Baghdad:

<u>Source</u>	<u>Kinds of goods</u>
China	Chinaware, musk, curtains, saddles, post, ink, paper, silk, peacocks, workhorses, silver and gold pots, medicines, silk brocade, lock.
India	Tigers, elephants, tack wood, sandals wood, diamonds, post and dishes, minerals, paintings, Tigers skins, ebony, coconuts, medicines, ivory, spices, chess.
Ceylon	Diamonds, spices.
Sind	Spear poles, camphor, cotton and silk clothes, elephants, cedar, ivory, medicines, diamonds, bamboo, spice, incense.
Japan	Gold, ebony, silk clothes, dishes.
Korea	Medicines, silk
Russia	Fox skins, fur, honey, wax, swords
Sicily	Swords
Romans land	Pearls, linen textiles, cedar, olive, carpets, perfumes, gum, skins, swords, chewing gum
Ahwaz	Sugar, silk brocade, silk
Tastur	Silk brocade, fruits, steel, lead
Kerman	Lead
Sus	Sugar, violet oil, workhorses
Abadan	rugs
Nisapor	Clothes and textiles, steel, gold, leathers
Nesa	Silk, sesame, fox fur
Tus	Rugs, crops
Azerbaijan	Silk, linen, saffron, horses, carpets
Sarkhas	Crops, camels
Turmuth	Soap
Karmenia	Handkerchiefs
Armenia	Wooden plates, clothes, textiles, rugs, wood

Khurasan	Textiles, clothes
Samarkand	Paper, silver, clothes
Balakh	Soap, grapes, sesame, nuts, oils, honey, Sulphur, lead, leather
Gorgan	Pomegranates, silk
Amad	Clothes, wool
Rai	Fruits, mercury, combs, cotton
Khawarism	Sheep, fur of camels, musk
Makran	Clothes, cumin
Kermes	Axes, clothes
Halwan	Pomegranate
Bukhara	Woolen clothes, rugs, leathers
Qazwin	Robs, socks
Isfahan	Honey, drinks, wax, silk, textiles
Maru	Melons, precious stones, cheese, copper, cotton clothes
Arjan	Soap, oil
Mahran	Fish
Siraf	Pearls, scales
Tarem	Waterskins, fans
Fesa	Peanuts, glass
Abbassinia	Ivory, ebony
Aithab	Pearls
Eastern Africa	Ivory, ebony
Northern Africa	Gold, fur of camels
Egypt	Textiles, crops, copper, gold, precious stones, rugs, carpets
Yemen	Incense, swords, precious stones, giraffes, buffaloes, clothes
Sinjar	Almonds
Nusaibin	Soap, pens
Amed	Wool, lenin
Jazirat Ibn Omar	Salt

Al-Husniya	Cheese, fruits
Ma'althaya	Coal, fruits, grapes
Damascus	Silk textiles, olive oil, glass
Mosul	Textiles, white honey, crops, coal, cheese, oils
Hejaz	Horses
Malaqa archipelago	Minerals, paints
Wassit	Rugs, crops
Misan	Willows, fashions
Kaskar	Wheat
Kufa	Crops
Basrah	Dates, imported goods via sea

The areas to which the goods, produced in Baghdad, were exported, extended from China in the east to Morocco and Western Europe in the west. Topmost of the exported goods were silk textiles, glass, paper and Qashani. Moreover, a lot of goods and products coming to Baghdad from the production areas were also exported from Baghdad which was an international trade center where the world's products at that time gathered and then re-exported to the areas they needed them. (7)

#### Baghdad city and the Silk Route

Baghdad represented an important trade communication hub linking east and west in the middle ages. Along the platforms of Baghdad post, hundreds of ships from all areas of the eastern parts of the empire from China to Africa were carrying various kinds of goods and products from Baghdad. (8) In return, the Arab merchants carried to the Middle East and Europe various goods produced in Baghdad and then they carried these northwards to Russia, Bulgaria, Bukhara, Samarkand and South-east Asia.

In addition to the sea lane from Baghdad to Basrah and Ubullah and across the Arab gulf to the ports of India and China, there were the land routes that linked Baghdad with the east to China and Japan, with the north across Asia minor, Russia, Bulgaria and with the west to Syria, the Mediterranean and Europe.

Those routes had various functions as follows:

- A) Routes for commercial caravans among the provinces and cities
- B) Routes for human immigrations among provinces
- C) Routes for armies transport
- D) Routes for mail
- E) Routes for the Haj (Pilgrimage) caravans

These routes were not confined to a specific function.

The most important routes that linked Baghdad with the neighbouring regions are as follows:

- 1) The Baghdad-Sham routes which extended from Baghdad to Anbar then to Rahba near the meeting point of the Khabour tributary with the Euphrates river. Then it was divided into two branches, the first of which went up along the river to Raqqa and Aleppo and the second went through the desert towards “Qassr Al-Hair” where it divided into two branches, one to Tadmor, Homs or Damascus and then to Egypt and the second directed to Al-Tiba, Balis, Aleppo, Antakia the Roman empire and then went to the south towards Ladakiya and the Mediterranean sea. (9)

Al-Idrisi defined the Baghdad-Raqqa route (the war route) as follows: (10)

Baghdad, Al-Silhin, Anbar, Al-Rab, Heet, Nawosah, Alousah, Aanat, Daliah, Rahba, Khabour, Qarquesia, Kharouqa, Raqqa.

- 2) The Baghdad-Arab peninsula route, which was route of Haj Via Kufa and then entered the desert to Hail oasis across the Shammar Mountain and Ramm a valley and from Khanaqiya to Al-Madina and Mecca. This route might have also started from Baghdad to Basrah and then to Wadi Al-Batten and Enezah oasis and from there to wadi Al-Raqqa to meet the first routes at the Khannaqiya. (11)

Al-Istakhri said “There were about 20 stages from Kufa to Madina and about stages from Madina to Mecca.

The road that started from Kufa towards Mecca is shorter than this route by about three stages when it reaches Madam Al-Nuqra and then emerges from the town to reach Bani Sulaim and that Erq and ends in Meoca. As for the Basrah-Madina route, it consists of 18 stages and it meets with Kufa route near Nuqra.” (12)

Al-Idrisi mentioned Hejaz route on which Al-Qadessiya situated and from Qadessiya to Baghdad. The town of Qadessiya was the center, due to the growing of dates, to provide camels on Hejaz route with fodder. (13).

Al-Yaqoubi described the road as follows:

Baghdad-Kufa-Qadessiya-Maghitha, Qara's-Waqssa-Aqaba-Al-Qa'a-Zebala-Shuquq-Qabr Al-Ebadi-Al-Tha'labiya-Zurud walajfar-Fid-Nuz-Sumera Al-Hajer-Al-Nuqra and Ma'dam Al-Nuqra. Then one branch went to Madina via Batten Nakhal and another branch went towards Mecca via Maghi that Al-Mawan-Rabatha-Salila-Omuq-Ma'dan Bani Sulaim-Afieiya-Musllah-Gamrah-That Erq-Bustan Ibn Amer-Mecca.

- 3) The Baghdad-Northwards (Mosul) route which linked Baghdad with the northern provinces and it extended as follows:

Baghdad-Tharthar-Okbura-Bahamsha-Qadessiya-Samarra-Kharkh-Jabatat Al-Sudqaniya-Barma-Al-Sin-Al-Bawazich-Haditha-Bani Tumian-Tikrit-Mosul.

The routes starting from Mosul westwards were as follows:

- A) Mosul-Jazirat Ibn Omar (Qudi) towards Miafarqin.
- B) Mosul-Nussaibin-Mardin-Aamed
- C) Mosul-Raqqa
- D) Mosul-Raqqa-Al-Raha

These routes, which led to Romans land in the north, were linked with the roads that led to Sham in the west.

- 4) The Baghdad-southwards route (silk sea lane) which was as follows: Baghdad-Mada'en, Jerjeraya, Jabal-Wassit, Ayan river-Farouth-Deir Al-Ommal-Hawanit-Qassr-Abi Al-Assad river-Dijla Al-oura-Maqal river-Faidh Al-Basrah-Basrah. (15) From Basrah it went to Abbadan or Ubulla and then to the Arab gulf and the sea towards eastern Africa or towards south-east Asia.

Commercial ties via sea between Baghdad and south-east Asia were very close to the extent that the Arab gulf was called the Chinese gulf (16) due to the large number of merchant ship that carried goods between Baghdad and China.

The Chinese knew the Arab peninsula and called it (Ta-Shi). In the 9<sup>th</sup> century the emperor of China was known among the Arabs as Baghbor of Faghbor. Meanwhile large numbers of Chinese ships navigated the ocean to arrive in Basrah. (17) Arab Muslims existed mainly in the port of Canton or Khango of China. The large Chinese ships were led by Arab captains. (18)

Al-Yaqoubi said that Canton was the great Chinese city “where vessels of the Arab traders anchored” (19)

Some sources said that the merchants of Basrah had arrived in China during the reign of the caliph Abu Ja’far Al-Mansour. (20).

It was said that Prophet Mohammad (peace and God’s blessings be on him) had sent Sa’ad Ibn Abi Waqqass as his ambassador to China and even now the tomb of Sa’ad in Canton is still considered a holy place.

Chinese writings belonging to the 8<sup>th</sup> century said that Al-Muminin “Chief of the believers” was called (Hanmi Momoni) and that Abu Al-Abbas Al-Saffan was called (Abu Luba) and that Haron Al-Rashid was named (Alonà. During the eras of these caliphs a number of Arab Muslims settled in China and they were called (Tashi), which might be a different pronunciation for the word Tsei or Tai. Then they were called Hoi Honi (Mohammadion). (21)

Other Chinese sources said that some Arab traders carried Arab horses from the Arab peninsula to the Chinese emperor before Islam. The sources added that a famous Arab merchant arrived in China called Ibrahim and he was a pilot for a commercial vessels and he was known with the name of the Chinese Ibrahim due to his long living in China. In the following year, Ibrahim sent another Arab pilot as an envoy caring gifts to the emperor of China. (22)

The Chinese sources also said that the first mosque was built for Muslims in the town of Changh Aan, the capital of China. An Arab ambassador, called Abdullah arrived in China in 1469 and settled in Canton and committed himself to teaching in that mosque. On the island of Ha’tan, an Arab center was established in the first centuries of Islam in Ghai Hin town for the successors of the Arab seamen who settled there because of the storms that destroyed their ships. Among the remaining evidence in the Arab pilot mosque that tells the story of the Arabs settling of this island and the death of some of them there.



Even today, there is a small group of Muslims and a number of mosques on this island. (23)

The Arabs also settled in the port of (Juan Chu) which was called by the Arabs (Zaitoon) port. An Arab called (Abu Shawqin) was appointed by the government to control the marine trade (24).

Among the evidence on the Arab-Chinese naval relations is the existence of Chinese ships in the port of Ubullah near Basrah when it was conquered by the Arab Muslims during the reign of the Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab. The Polish researcher Lewicki discovered evidence, which proved that the Arabs had reached the Chinese port of Canton. (25)

The Arab and Islamic books of geography and travels contain a lot of information about the existence of the Arabs in China and the marine trade between Iraq and southern and eastern Asia.

Al-Serafi mentioned a “Muslim person in Canton, whose society was of sea merchants. This man was assigned by the ruler of China to judge as advisory among the Muslims who went to that place. When in China became the prayers imam for the Muslims and begged God to bless the Muslims sultan. The Iraqi merchants do not oppose to judgements and decisions according to the holy Kuran and the rules of Islam. (26)

He also said that the goods were transported from Basrah by Chinese ships in the Arab gulf and then via sea lanes to China, which the same way followed by Sulaiman Al-Tajer and it was as follows:

Basrah-Muscat-Kalam (Al-Melbar coast) – strait of Talek (north of Ceylon) – Bengal bay-Lingbalos island (one of Nikobar islands) – Kulabera (the Malayo western coast) –Theomin island (south west Malaqa) – Saint Jacob cape (near Saigon) – Hanian island-Canton port. (27)

Ibn Battuta said that “There was a quarter for the Muslims in every Chinese city where they had their own residence and mosques to perform prayers and other rites and they were highly respected. (28)

Al-Masoudi, who travelled by sea from India to Ceylon and then to China and described its rivers and mountains, referred to the Arab Muslims’ existence in the two Arab centers Canton and Zaitoon and also talked about the Chinese musk which was brought to Iraq. (29)

The Italian traveller Marco Polo referred to the effective Arab existence when he talked about an Arab minister called Ahmed, who was influential and powerful in the country of Kablai Khan (the greatest Khan) and had a big family with 25 sons each of them occupied an important state position. (30) Marco Polo also talked about Baldash (Baghdad), through which great river (Tigris) passed, and via this river merchants shipped their goods from and to the sea of India, covering an estimated distance of 17 days of navigation due to the numerous turning along the flow of the river. Those who sailed in the voyage stopped after departing the river at a place called Kaisi (Qais) from where they proceeded towards the sea. Before anchoring there, they passed by a city called Basrah, situated near groves of date plants, which produced the world's best kinds of dates.

Baldash (Baghdad) produced the silk which was woven with gold threads. It also produced raw silk and velvet, embroidered with the shapes of birds and animals. (31)

On the way to China, the Arabs had many commercial centers in which they settled, the Arabs headed for the coast of Melbar in India and then to Ceylon and from there they continued their trip on the Bengal way to the East India islands where they established strong Arab communities in Singapore, Bornio, Java and Sumatra. (32)

The Arab traveller Ibn Battuta, who travelled from the Arab Maghreb and China, became a judge in Thibat Al-Mahal islands (the Maldives islands) for one and a half years. Before that he had occupied that post for several years in the city of Delhi (Delhi) and toured Ceylon and Bengal. (33)

Ibn Rusta quoted Abi Abdullah Ibn Ishaq who spent two years in Qema (Khmer) (the ancient name of Cambodia) (34).

Calicut (Qalqott), which is now Calcutta in India, was the largest Arab trade center on the Indian coast (Mabar coast). To the south, there was also Ghadirat city, a banking center and a commercial goods exhibition, where Muslims built many mosques. To Ghadirat's south there was the city of (Ghulam-Mali) and then the city of Sohaj, which were commercial centers where Arabs existed because they were trade centers on the sea lane to China and South-east Asia. (35)

5) The Baghdad east-bound road (land silk road):

This road, which started from Baghdad towards the east, was considered the world's most important trade road in the middle ages. This route was not confined to the merchant's caravans who carried silk from China to Baghdad and then to the Mediterranean sea and Europe, but it was also a commercial road for all kinds of goods and products which were transported via Baghdad between south and south-east Asia and the Mediterranean sea and Europe. This land road was recently called the Silk Road by the German affairs. He meant by the commercial roads network which was divided and met in inner Asia and reached Changan (present Sian) across Teklamkan desert, Tarim Basin, Kashgar and then Antioch on the Mediterranean sea. (36)

In fact, Richthofen studied only some parts of the road or the northern road which went across Asia Minor to the Caspian Sea and then to China and that road was little used. (37)

Silk was China's major trade material with the Mediterranean Sea countries and western Asia where raw silk, its threads and silk cloth were transported and processed in Iraq and either used or exported to other area. (38)

Dr. Nicola Ziadah followed (Hamadan)-Maru-Bakethra (Balakh)-Samarkand-Kashgar-Belad seris or Sekai (Turkistan)-Tarim basin-Hesian Fo (silk homeland) in China.

Alisiev followed the Silk Road as follows: (40)

Baghdad-Diala and Khanqin-Kermanshan-Hamadan-Rai-Damkhan-Khurasan-Nisbor-Tour-Mashad-Sarkh-Marubukhara-Samarkand-Snash-Kashgar. Then the road passed through the land behind the river towards north China turning round Tibet near the southern borders of the great Siberian plains. There was also another road passing through Segistan towards southern China along the southern plateaus at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains.

Dr. Abdul Rahman Hemida said that the Silk Road that passed through Baghdad crossed the Zagros Mountains towards Kermanshah-Rai-Nisabor-Tous-Marubukhara-Samarkand-Kashgar. From Maru or Samarkand a route emerged towards India through Balakh or Kabul. (41)

It is worth mentioning that there was a secondary road heading from Bukhara across Khawarizm to reach the Caspian Sea and then to Astrakhan, the capital of Khazar then to Kama-fiatka and Bulgaria (42)

We can follow the road starting from Baghdad in delays, depending on Arab geographical and historical books. Al-Idrisi (43) defined the road emerging from Baghdad towards the east as follows: Baghdad-Nahrawan-Deir Barma –Daskara-Jalawla-Khanaqin-Qassr Shirin-Hulwan.

Al-Istakhri completed the tracing of the road as follows: (44) Hulwan-Marj al-Qala's-Al-Zubaidi-Qarmasin-Biston-Abu Aiyob village-Abu Aiyob crossingbridge-Abu Al-Numan crossing bridge-Matheran-Qassr Al-Lussous-Asad Abad-Hamadan-Sawa-Rai-Afrandin-Kahda-Kuwar-Al-Molh village-Ras Al-Kalb samnan-Aliabad-Jermjoy-Al-Damghan-Qomes, Al-Damkhan) (45)-Nisabor-Tous-Nofan-Zozan-Asfraein-Sakhas-Ashtermghan-Telestaneh-Al-Dendaqan-Kenokerd (46)-MARu (Al-Shahjan Maru)-Maruroth-Zam-Amal-Al-Turmuth-Al-Saghanian-Al-Khathal-Upper Bukharastan-Febarbar-Bakand-Bukhara (47)-Karmenia-Al-Khathal-Upper Bukharastan-Febarbar-Bakand-Bukhara (47)-Karmenia-Al-Dabbosiyar-Rabanjan-Al-Keshaniya-Eshtikhin-Samarkand-(48)-Hajanda-Shanh. (49)

The main silk road, which we tried to follow and to draw in this research through the available Arab geographical sources that were concerned with routes, kingdoms and countries, was the main route of trade and mail. In addition to that, it was a road for battles and military conquests and a way for human immigration among the regions through which it passed.

Undoubtedly, it was a road through which human civilizations were transferred and people knew each other's achievements.

### Summary:

Despite the fact that its name of the silk road was a modern one given by the German expert in Chinese affairs, Ferdinand Richthofen, this main land route which played an important role in transferring trade, people and civilization between the east and west Asia and the Mediterranean sea and Europe.

During the period of this road's prosperity position in the middle ages, in the world's textile and silk industry. Baghdad exported and imported textiles silk products to and from four corners of the world. Therefore, it had a great human and civilizational effect on the people.

Margines:

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- 10- Dr. Ibrahim Shawkat: Tahqiq Al-Jazirah Waliraq min Nuzhat Al-Mushtaq. Adopted from the magazine no. 23 of the Iraqi Academy volume. Baghdad 1973 pp. pp. 2-5
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- 12- Al-Istakhri: Al-Masalek Walmamalek. Revised by Dr. Mohammed Al-Hini. Egypt 1961 p. 28.
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- 14- Al-Yaqoubi: Al-Buldan pp. 71-72
- 15- Ibrahim Shawkat: The same source pp. 24-26 which was mentioned by Al-Idrisi in Nuzhat Al-Mushtaq
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- 18- Dr. Abdul Rahman Hemida: *Aalam Al-Goghrafiyen Al-Arab*. Damscus. 1969 p. 49
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- 35- Elisiev: the same source p. 289
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- 40- Elisiev: the same source pp. 291-292.

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- 42- Elisiev: the same source p. 292.
- 43- Tahqiq Al-Jazira Wal-Iraq pp. 23-24.
- 44- Al-Istakhri pp. 115-166.
- 45- Al-Istakhri p. 126
- 46- Al-Yaqoubi: Al-Buldan p.42
- 47- Al-Yaqoubi: Al-Buldan pp. 53-54
- 48- Al-Istakhri p. 177
- 49- Al-Yaqoubi p. 56









