

The Gök Turks and the Sasanians: The Wars of the Silk Road

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Third Year Paper

Chicago Style Citation

Relations between settled communities and the nomadic tribes have always bordered between all out war or various forms of temporary peace between the two. This balancing act was carried out by all the states that happened to border and interact with the Central Asian Steppe and its inhabitants. It is here that the most vital and important trade route, the Silk Route, passed through to get to the most precious markets of China. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Sasanian Empire, with its mighty Shahanshah's and armies, would sometimes focus on the challenges faced in their eastern borders and try to control or mitigate the threats to their empire to ensure the success of this trade route.

The Gök Turks, one of the earliest Turk Kaghanates, were one of the major states that the Sasanians had to continually deal with during the 6th and 7th centuries. The Gök Turks forced the Sasanian to focus on their eastern border for the second time against a Central Asia opponent. The arrival of the Gök Turks also changed trading relations, especially along the Silk Route, for the Sasanians on a large scale. This paper examines the three reasons that led to the relegated nature of the trade between the Gök Turks and the Sasanians when compared and contrasted to the increasing wealthier relations between the Gök Turks and China.

1. The Rise of the Gök Türks

Central Asia at the moment of the Gök Turk rise was dominated by three vast Central Asian Kaghanates both of which were of Turko-Mongolian backgrounds¹. The Juan-Juan ruled over territories stretching from Mongolia and the Manchurian steppe in the east until Turfan in the west. They also controlled territory from the mountains of Orkhon to the Great Wall of

¹ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, trans. Naomi Walford (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005) 80.

China². The Hephthalites ruled territories closer to Sasanian Persia stretching from Semirechye until the borders of Eastern Iran, incorporating territories and cities such as Merv, Kabul and Soghdiana³. The last group holding sway over Central Asia were the Huns who controlled the Russian steppe. Their power, however, was continually undermined by internal rivalries between two tribes: the Kutigurs, based in the western area of Hun controlled territories, and the Uturgurs in the east who continually sought ascendancy over one another.

The name Juan-Juan is not their real name and variations exist on not only its spelling but the meaning behind the name. The use of Juan-Juan is the “conventional transcription”⁴ translated from Chinese sources. However, even with the naming problems, questions of their ethnicity are raised since Chinese sources, which had the most dealings with Central Asian tribes, are unclear and obscure⁵. The Chinese sources attribute them to being one of the Hsiung-nu which, however, can be considered faulty since most of the sources apply the term Hsiung-nu to almost every Central Asian confederation or tribe that appears on their borders⁶.

Regardless of the issue of their name and ethnicity, what is clear is that from 386 CE until the fall of the Northern Wei dynasty in 534 CE, the Juan-Juan fought unceasing wars with the Chinese based on the claim that one of the ancestors of the Juan-Juan had been taken as a prisoner and then turned into a slave by the ancestors of the Wei in 277 CE⁷. During the reign of the founder of the Northern Wei, T'o-pa Kui (386-409 CE), they emerged as a powerful confederation under the leadership of She-lun⁸. He extended his realm from the west holding the city of Karashahr all the way until it bordered northern Korea⁹.

The various high and low ebbs continued on as they established a firm base for their Kaghanate until the reign of Ch'ou-nu Kaghan who had become attached to a female shaman. His murder, on the order of his own mother¹⁰, and the murder of the female Shaman, led to the rise of A-na-Kuei Kaghan who would eventually face problems with the Gök Türks as his reign neared its end. Still, this action taken by the mother of Ch'ou-nu Kaghan was not well received

² Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 80.

³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴ Denis Sinor, *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 291.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁸ Denis Sinor, *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 293.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

in the empire and the old supporters of the murdered Kaghan rallied to his cause and defeated A-na-Kuei¹¹. He fled to the court of the Northern Wei where they saw benefit from this event and agreed to support him. In the meantime his uncle, Brahman, had been given the throne by Ch'ou-nu's supporters¹².

Brahman's position had not yet been solidified and he tried to garner support of the Hephthalites by marrying his three daughters to their Kaghan¹³. Yet, this action had displeased the Wei Emperor. He was captured and then interned at Lo-yang until his death in 524 CE. This action had left A-na-Kuei as undisputed leader of the Juan-Juan. Due to the disintegration of the Wei into smaller successor states, A-na-Kuei, through the use of matrimonial relations, pacified both the Western and Eastern Wei¹⁴.

The rebellion of Tölös (or Töläch) alongside the tribal confederation of T'ieh-le, who were vassals of the Juan-Juan, had begun in 508 CE; it was not put down until A-na-Kuei had killed their Kaghan in 516 CE¹⁵. However, this was not the end of their troubles and alongside the civil war the Tölös had rebelled once again in 521 CE to take advantage of the chaos and become independent¹⁶. Again, they were defeated by A-na-Kuei and forced into submission. This constant turmoil within the Juan-Juan was where the Türks would first make their appearance within the annals of history.

The Türks, rather at this time called the T'u-Chüeh¹⁷, were supposed descendents of the old Hsiung-nu tribes bearing the name of Ashihna who once ruled the steppes¹⁸. They were originally a part of the state of So, which was located north of the Hsiung-nu Kaghanate¹⁹, but had been absorbed by them. In 439 CE, after the conquest of Eastern Kansu by the Toba, a leader with the name of A-shih-na alongside 500 families had fled to Kocho (Kao-ch'ang), near the city of Turfan²⁰. They then had sought out the protection of the Juan-Juan, since A-shih-na and his

¹¹ Ibid., 294.

¹² Ibid., 294.

¹³ Ibid., 294.

¹⁴ Ibid., 295.

¹⁵ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 81.

¹⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁷ Ibid., 81.

¹⁸ Edward Harper Parker, *A Thousand Years Of the Tartars* (London: Dawsons, 1969), 129.

¹⁹ Denis Sinor, *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 287.

²⁰ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia Volume I: Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 249.

clan preferred the rule of the Hsuing-nu rather than the rule of the Hsien-pi²¹, who sent them to the Altai mountains. Within the valleys of the Altai they had begun to establish their tribal lands. Within this region they found an abundance of iron, which led to the development of metalworking²². This craft was learnt by the Gök Türks from the craftsmen of Minusinsk²³ when they had resided in Kocho. They did not take part in the civil war nor the rebellions, being content to remain near the Altai mountains, where they continued to ply their skills for the Juan-Juan.

During 546 CE, the Gök Türks had begun to stake out a claim at this time by personally dealing with another rebellion to show their loyalty to A-na-Kuei. Once again this rebellion was led by the Tölös and the T'ieh-le who had approached the Gök Türks to join them. However, their loyalty to the Juan-Juan superseded their loyalty to the fellow ethnic group and the Tölös and the T'ieh-le were crushed militarily²⁴. Bumin, the Gök Türk Kaghan, in a show of loyalty and as a reward for his deeds in crushing this rebellion before it began, requested that he be given a Juan-Juan princess to marry and thus form a stronger alliance between the two²⁵.

His request to ask for a marriage with the Juan-Juan, as well as his eliminating the rebellion of the Tölös, coincided with the fact that the Gök Türks, under the leadership of Bumin, had become a more powerful tribe within the Juan-Juan confederation while still retaining their loyalty to the Kaghan²⁶. This had mainly to do their metalworking skills. Since this skill was rare among the people of the steppe, and the Gök Türks were the only ones present with such a skill, it had led to their increased prosperity than before²⁷. Their annual raiding of the Chinese province of Shen-si²⁸ had created not only a substantial force, militarily, but had also imbued them with wealth and status. This had also extended to other tribes and clans who were either fleeing China, at this point in time, or were seeking protection from other tribes within the Juan-Juan Kaghanate²⁹. These tribes were given equal status within the confederation that Bumin had established and had also led to the increase of the amount of warriors that the Gök Türks could

²¹ Edward Harper Parker, *A Thousand Years of the Tartars*, 129.

²² Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 81.

²³ Stuart Legg, *The Barbarians of Asia* (New York: Dorset Press, 1970).

²⁴ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁶ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia Volume I*, 250.

²⁷ Stuart Legg, *The Barbarians of Asia*, 154.

²⁸ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia Volume I*, 250.

²⁹ Rafis Abazov, *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 11.

field³⁰. This rise was not overlooked by the Western Wei who saw this as a sign of “the growing power, maturity and commercial connections”³¹ of the Gök Türks.

A-na-Kuei, much to the chagrin of Bumin, had refused this alliance and berated him through an emissary saying, “You are a blacksmith slave. How dare you utter these words?”³² This resulted in a rift between the two and the death of the emissary. Bumin then asked the Toba, who had various empires in Northern China, to provide him a princess to marry. The Toba found the request for marriage and the potential alliance against the Juan-Juan highly appealing and soon bestowed one of their princesses in 551 CE³³. This had allowed Bumin to create a strong alliance, within the Juan-Juan Kaghanate, against the Juan-Juan in 552 CE.

The rebellion of the Gök Türks had spelt the end for the Juan-Juan. In 552 CE they, alongside the Western Wei troops, had crushed the Juan-Juan on the battlefield, which caused A-na-Kuei to commit suicide within the same year³⁴. Some tribes of the Juan-Juan, who had fled after their consecutive defeats and the destruction of their Kaghanate, abandoned Mongolia completely and “took refuge on the Chinese Frontier” with the Toba dynasties³⁵. This defeat and abandonment of Mongolia had resulted in Bumin establishing the first Gök Turk Kaghanate. It was not only the Juan-Juan who were defeated, but also the tribes of Uyghur, who had come from the area “east of the Jetyssu”³⁶ and Oghuzs who had established a rival Kaghanate after the sudden fall of the Juan-Juan.

Although he died shortly after his military victory, the Kaghanate was secure under his son, Mu-han (553-572 CE), and his younger brother Istämi. The entire Gök Turk domains were split into four distinct regions, Central, Eastern, Western and the Western Frontier region³⁷. Mu-han retained control of Mongolia and the surrounding regions³⁸ known as the Central region; Istämi had inherited the title of *yabghu*, a princely title for the Gök Türks and had received, as his domain, the Western Frontier region consisting of the regions of “Dzungaria...Black Irtysh

³⁰ Rafis Abazov, *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia*, 11.

³¹ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia Volume I*, 250.

³² Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 9.

³³ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶ Rafis Abazov, *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia*, 11.

³⁷ Denis Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 298.

³⁸ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 82.

and of the Imil [alongside] the basins of the Yulduz, Ili, Chu and Talas”³⁹. It was with the Western Gök Turks under Istämi that relations with the Sasanian Empire began. The catalyst for these beginning relations with the Sasanians was due to the presence of the Hephthalite Kaghanate.

2. The Hephthalite and Gök Türk Interactions

The Hephthalites had appeared on the steppes in Central Asia during the mid-fifth to the mid-sixth centuries. In the same case as the Gök Türks, the Chinese sources do not agree on the origin or the appearance of the Hephthalites, with some claiming that they originated near the region of Turfan while others consider them to be decedents of the K’ang-chü who originated in the region of southern Kazakhstan⁴⁰. Some scholars consider the Hephthalites to be a Turko-Mongol grouping, more Mongol than Turk, who had originated in the region of the Altai mountains and had migrated closer to the Sasanian border⁴¹. However, in Middle Persian sources, which were the main opponents of the Hephthalites, they are referred to as the White Huns⁴². This may be a way for the Sasanians to distinguish the Kaghanates of the Gök Türks and the Hephthalites or it may have been a true distinction between these two groups.

Regardless of their ancestry and their background, they had established their Kaghanate over the dying ruins of the Kushan Empire and had wrested away from the Sasanians their recent conquest in this region⁴³. They were not an independent Kaghanate but were subordinated to the Juan-Juan. By 440 CE, they had occupied the regions extending from the upper Yulduz until the Ili basin, incorporating the steppes of Balkhash, Chu and Talas. They had also occupied Sogdiana, Balkh and Bactria⁴⁴. During the reign of the Sasanian Shah Yazdgird II (438-457 CE), the Hephthalites posed a serious problem on their eastern borders. Yazdgird II was forced to not only move his living quarters to be closer to the northern border but had also caused him to wage

³⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁰ B. A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* ed. Ahmed Hassan Dani et al. (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 135.

⁴¹ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 67.

⁴² B. A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” 136.

⁴³ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 82.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 67.

war in 442 CE⁴⁵. By the mid-fifth century the Hephthalites had increased their rule in Tokharistan and the surrounding regions and took control of Balkh from the Sasanians⁴⁶.

Wars were not the only domain of the Hephthalites-Sasanian relations. They played a large political role in the history of the Sasanian Empire. The first case dealt with the Shahenshah Peroz (459-484 CE), Fayruz in al-Tabari⁴⁷, who had fled from his brother Hurmuz after the death of their father Yazdgird II. The Kaghan provided Peroz with troops to “take possession of the kingdom of his father”⁴⁸.

Hurmuz’s victory over his brother Peroz granted the Hephthalites more land, including the district of Taliqan in present day Afghanistan⁴⁹. However, Peroz was not true to his words and repaid the kindness of the Hephthalites with several disagreements, dissolving the alliance between the two and resulting in war. In a series of three wars from the 460s CE until the 470s CE, Peroz continually met with disaster. In the first two wars, he was captured and ransomed for a large amount (the second time being paid by the Byzantines⁵⁰) and for a while had left his son as a hostage as the Sasanians were unable to pay the ransom.

The third war against the Hephthalites led by Peroz was the largest defeat for the Sasanians. The Kaghan of the Hephthalites, Akhshunwaz⁵¹, on hearing of Peroz’s march against him, sent him a representative with the message that this war once again had broken the peace that Peroz had signed, and that he was willfully crossing the borders with “hostile intent”⁵². Ignoring the message the war resulted, once again, with the defeat of the Sasanians and this time the death of Peroz alongside four of his sons and four of his brothers⁵³. His retinue, including his daughter, as well as the Chief Mobadh⁵⁴, were captured and imprisoned alongside a large amount of treasure⁵⁵. Soon after his death, however, those who had been captured from the army and the followers, including Peroz’s own retinue, were sent back to the Sasanian Empire in a show of

⁴⁵ B.A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” 138.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁷ Abu Ja’far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari Volume V: The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen* trans. C.E. Bosworth (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 110.

⁴⁸ B.A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” 138.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 138.

⁵⁰ B.A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” 139.

⁵¹ Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari Volume V*, 113.

⁵² B.A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” 139.

⁵³ Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari Volume V*, 110.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁵ B.A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” 140.

peace by the Hephthalite Kaghan⁵⁶. They however retained control over the region of Talekan, as well as over the city of Merv⁵⁷.

This action once again led to a civil war within the Sasanian Empire and the son of Peroz, Kavad, fled to the Hephthalites to seek their support. This time he lived with them for four years and even married either the daughter or the sister of the Kaghan⁵⁸. This established kinship ties between the two empires and led to the Hephthalites taking part in reclaiming Kavad's throne. This was not the only instance of Kavad seeking Hephthalite support. During the Mazdakite movement, Kavad had once again fled to the Hephthalites who provided him with 30,000 troops⁵⁹. For using Hephthalite forces, territorial concession was given, which included the taking over of Chaganiyan, as well as the payment of tribute from 484 CE until the reign of Khusrau Anushirvan in the mid-sixth century⁶⁰.

At this point in time the Gök Türks had appeared on the borders of the Hephthalite Kaghanate and by the mid-sixth century they were being squeezed between both Sasanian Iran, led by Khusrau Anushirvan, and the Gök Türks, under the leadership of Istämi, who had conquered much of the north-east region of Central Asia. The catalyst to the war between the two Central Asian Kaghanates was the murder of the Gök Türk ambassadors, committed by orders of the Hephthalite Kaghan, who were travelling through Hephthalite territory towards Sasanian Persia⁶¹. Istämi, taking this as a pretext to war, attacked and occupied the city of Chach, the modern day Tashkent, and continued on until they reached the Syr Darya⁶². From here he sought a treaty with Khusrau Anushirvan, whereby the Sasanian monarch, temporarily relieved from fighting their eternal enemy the Byzantines, would attack the Hephthalites from the south concurrent with the Gök Türks attacking from the north. Khusrau Anushirvan accepted the treaty and as a method to confirm the treaty he married a daughter of Istämi⁶³. The Hephthalite Kaghan moved his forces towards Bukhara, bringing them from faraway places such as the Pamirs and southern Tajikistan⁶⁴, and fought an eight day battle in which the Hephthalites had been

⁵⁶ Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari Volume V*, 111.

⁵⁷ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 68.

⁵⁸ B.A. Litvinsky, "The Hephthalite Empire," 140.

⁵⁹ B.A Litvinsky, "The Hephthalite Empire," 140.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 140.

⁶¹ Ibid., 143.

⁶² B.A. Litvinsky, "The Hephthalite Empire," 143.

⁶³ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 82.

⁶⁴ B. A. Litvinsky, "The Hephthalite Empire," 143.

completely routed by the Gök Türks. In the course of the battle the Kaghan of the Hephthalites had been killed and a new one, Faganish, was elected⁶⁵.

The end of the Hephthalites had come about under the rule of Faganish when they were continually perused southwards by the Gök Türks, finally ending up in the region occupied by the Sasanian troops where he submitted to Khusrau Anushirvan in 563 CE⁶⁶. Some of the Hephthalites, like some of the Juan-Juan, had instead fled to the west where they appeared in Europe under various names – most likely the Avars and the Uarkhonites⁶⁷. Although victorious, like previous relations between the Hephthalites and the Sasanians, the Gök Türk relations with the Sasanians had also started to strain. This had shifted the focus of both supposed allies, so much so, that semi-independent Hephthalite city states and principalities had arisen or continued their previous dynasties, either paying tribute to the Gök Türks or the Sasanians⁶⁸.

The straining of relations between the two had resulted from the division of the Hephthalite Kaghanate. Istämi had taken under his rule the region and city of Sogdiana while Khusrau Anushirvan had taken under his rule the principalities of Chaganiyan, Bust, Rukhkhaj, Zabulistan, Turistan and Balistan⁶⁹ alongside Bactria, including the cities of Balkh and Kunduz⁷⁰. Both had agreed that the border between the two would be the Amu Darya River⁷¹.

This, however, did not stop the development of animosity between the two states and it soon carried over to affect the trading relations between the two empires as well. It is here that events took place which would find the Sasanian trading and economic position to be continually weakened and eventually, to a large part, be overshadowed by the opening of new trading routes.

3. Sasanian Inability to Understand the Benefits of Extensive Trading Relations

One of the most important reasons why the Sasanian Empire had been relegated to a minor trading position had been due to their own inability to understand the benefits of extensive trading relations. When the Western Gök Türks and the Sasanian Empire had both conquered the Hephthalite Kaghanate, as mentioned above, territory had been divided between the two allies.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁶ L.A. Litvinsky, "The Hephthalite Empire," 143.

⁶⁷ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 82.

⁶⁸ B.A. Litvinsky, "The Hephthalite Empire," 144.

⁶⁹ J. Harmatta and B.A. Litvinsky, "Tokharistan and Gandhara under Western Türk Rule (650-750)," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* ed. Ahmed Hasan Dani et al. (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 367.

⁷⁰ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 83.

⁷¹ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, 252.

The incorporation of Sogdiana into the Western Gök Türk Kaghanate had created a situation in which the Sogdian merchant class had benefited immensely while the Sasanian Empire's holdings had started to stagnate.

Before the city-state's conquest by the Western Gök Türks, it had been a fairly independent state, neither powerful enough to establish an empire but neither was it completely subjected to any of the surrounding empires at the time. From around the time of the second and third centuries BCE, Sogdian merchants, missionaries and mercenary soldiers were active in various fronts and had been able to travel far and wide⁷².

The merchants who travelled dealt directly with the silk trade although the majority of their wealth within Sogdiana was based on artificially created agriculture through the use of canals and dikes⁷³. However, their trading presence had grown so large that in the fifth century CE they had almost complete dominance of the Silk Route going through Central Asia⁷⁴.

The incorporation of Sogdiana into the Western Gök Türk Kaghanate resulted in many administrators being recruited into the civil service to help run the Kaghanate. This had also allowed, during the second half of the Western Gök Türk Kaghanate, for the use of the Sogdian language as the official language of the administration. Merchants had also benefited from the Western Gök Türk rule. They were allowed to colonize the region of Semirechye and they were allowed free trade along the Silk Route, which the Western Gök Türks had continually patrolled, on behalf of the Sogdian merchants, to keep it safe. These relations had become so well developed that any trade negotiations were given the backing the Istämi and later descendents⁷⁵.

The importance of Sogdiana resulted in the struggle to control and maintain the Silk Route. This need to control was due to the fact that from 569 CE, the various Emperors' of northern China continued to supply the Gök Türks with 100,000 bales of silk each year as tribute⁷⁶. This not only resulted in the accumulation of great wealth but also an accumulation of a large amount of trading goods which had resulted in more aggressive moves to control the route for maximum profit.

⁷² B.I. Marshak and N.N. Negmatov, "Sogdiana," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* ed. Ahmed Hasan Dani et al. (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 233.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁷⁵ B.I. Marshak and N.N. Negmatov, "Sogdiana," 236.

⁷⁶ J. Harmatta and B.A. Litvinsky, "Tokharistan and Gandhara under Western Türk Rule (650-750)," 367.

While the Western Gök Türks only took control of Sogdiana and the surrounding regions, the Sasanians had taken control of most of the city states, principalities, and most importantly trading routes into Persia and other regions such as Chaganiyan, Bust, Rukhkhaj, Zabulistan, Balkh, Turistan and Balistan⁷⁷. However, in spite of controlling the route from China until the borders of Persia, the Western Gök Türks could only sell their products to the Sasanian merchants but could not sell it themselves in Persia or take the products towards either India or Byzantium, which were the true destinations of the silk. Any sort of equalized trading relations was continually being refused⁷⁸.

This refusal prompted Istämi to send a delegation of Sogdian merchants, led by Maniakh, who was the apparent head of the merchants⁷⁹, to try and change the mind of the Shahenshah Khusrau Anushirvan and get permission to sell their silk within Persia itself. Although the Persians had bought the silk that they the merchants carried with them, they refused this request and had publically burnt the silk as not only an offensive answer but as a statement that any such trading mission would be rejected⁸⁰. The Persians valued their own monopoly over trade from which they could theoretically control the flow of silk to Byzantium. The failure of the mission, however, while offensive did not deter the Western Gök Türks and in the next year another mission, this time composed entirely of Gök Türks, had come to make the same request. This time, however, all of the ambassadors were murdered through the use of poison and in violation of the traditions of diplomats and that of their alliance⁸¹.

The murder of the ambassadors had finally destroyed the alliance which was already falling apart. In the years 569 CE to 570 CE, the Western Gök Türks launched an invasion of the vassal Hephthalite kingdoms of Sasanian Persia. In this invasion the Gök Türks were largely successful and had reached the region of Kabul and Gandhara in 570 CE⁸². This was largely due to the fact that the Sasanians were occupied during this time fighting against Byzantium⁸³. Further wars against the Sasanians in 587-588 CE and again in 597-598 CE had continually deprived the Sasanians further, by removing any gains made by the conquest of the Hephthalite

⁷⁷ Ibid., 367.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 367.

⁷⁹ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 83.

⁸⁰ Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, 116.

⁸¹ Ibid., 116.

⁸² J. Harmatta and B.A. Litvinsky, "Tokharistan and Gandhara under Western Türk Rule (650-750)," 368.

⁸³ Ibid., 368.

domains. The territories of Bactria, Heart, the region of Tokharistan and finally the cities of Balkh and Kunduz⁸⁴ were occupied by the Gök Türks.

These occupied principalities and city states accepted the rule of the Western Gök Türks and became vassals. This was largely due to the fact that the Western Gök Türk army was largely tribal in nature and the garrisoning of troops would have required the transference of tribes to the region alongside mass movements of economic needs just to establish a base from which to operate from. It was far easier for the Gök Türks to simply make them accept their status as vassals, something already done under the Sasanians, and continue to rule. Thus dynasties such as the Xingil in Kabul and Gandhara continued there⁸⁵.

The most important factor of this conquest was that it had allowed the Gök Türks to open and control a southern branch of the Silk Route which would bypass Sasanian Persia and go into the markets of India. From the western harbors of India they were able to send it out to various places free from the restrictive control of the Sasanians. This had deprived the Sasanians of their importance in selling silk to foreign markets like India.

The southern route of the Silk Route was not the only place that the Sasanians had to face fierce competition. Once again the role played by the head merchant Maniakh was important. Undaunted by the refusal of the first embassy and then the murder of the second one, he persuaded Istämi to send a third embassy, not to the Sasanians, but this time to the Byzantines⁸⁶.

This was not the first time that the Western Gök Türks had contacted the Byzantines. In 558 CE and again in 563 CE, two embassies were sent which had already established relations between the two⁸⁷. Now in 568 CE, Maniakh was leading the third one which not only carried silk, to be given to the Emperor of Byzantium as a gift, but also a letter of Istämi asking for permission to sell silk by the Western Gök Türks⁸⁸. Although they were unsuccessful, since the Byzantines could already produce a limited quantity of silk within their borders thanks to acquiring “smuggled silkworms from the east”⁸⁹, he was more interested, however, in military alliances against the Sasanians.

⁸⁴ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, 254.

⁸⁵ J. Harmatta and B.A. Litvinsky, “Tokharistan and Gandhara under Western Türk Rule (650-750),” 368.

⁸⁶ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia Volume I*, 253.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

Although not particularly interested in trade, a caravan of silk had been sent by Istämi and the Sogdians in 569 CE to the Byzantines for trade. Relations, however, never improved due to political differences but instead soured after the death of Istämi in 571 CE and the succession of his son, Tardu, as the Yabghu of the Western Gök Türk Kaghanate⁹⁰. The reason for the souring of relations was due mainly to the asylum that was given to the Avars, by the Byzantines, who were considered to be the subjects of the Western Gök Türks⁹¹. This breakdown of relations led to the capture of the city of Bosphorus or Panticapaeum in the Crimea, alongside other cities such as Kerch or Chersonesus, with the help of the Utrighurs, under the leadership of Anagai⁹², who were present in the region.

The capture of the city of Bosphorus had resulted in the revival of trade and cultural contacts becoming stronger across Eurasia. The Western Gök Türk conquests had allowed both the northern and southern Silk Routes to flourish outside the control of the two established settled empires. Sogdian as well as Khorezmian merchants had profited from both routes being opened and controlled by the Western Gök Türks. Sogdiana, alongside other oasis cities such as Turfan, had become richer thanks to the efforts of not only Sogdians but of the Gök Türks as well⁹³. This effect was not only felt within the Kaghanate of the Western Gök Türks but had also allowed new trade routes to develop through Khorezm to the Volga river, which later played an important part in the future powerbase of not only the Khazars but the Viking Rus as well⁹⁴.

Although not entirely ignored by the Western Gök Türks, relations with the Sasanians never improved, and while silk was still being sold to them, their stubbornness had resulted in the relegation of the Sasanian Empire from established networks of trading routes. The capture of both northern and southern Silk Routes had allowed the Gök Türks to trade not only with China but with the Mediterranean and the Near East and effectively bypass the Sasanians. Although the Sasanians, sometimes with the help of certain Hephthalite principalities and city states, fought against the Western Gök Türks, especially in 581-582 CE and again in 588-589 CE under the commander Bahram Chobin, they were never able to close the southern Silk Route. Their trading importance was reduced as the Gök Türks could now sell silk to the Byzantines and

⁹⁰ D. Sinor and S.G. Klyashtorny, "The Türk Empire," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* ed. Ahmed Hasan Dani et. al (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 333.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁹² Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 85.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

India directly without the interference or need to go through Persia. In effect this reduced the position of Sasanians in what was considered to be an important trading network of the world.

4. The perception of the lack of wealth of Sasanian Persia

Another important reason why trade with the Sasanian Empire was relegated was due to the Gök Türks perceiving Persia as a land which lacked wealth. Although the Gök Türks continued to invade Persia at various intervals, as mentioned before, all that the Western Gök Türks conquered and held were the vassal and periphery territory of the Sasanian Empire but never once contested Persia proper even during the war of 616-617 CE, when they penetrated Persia proper and advanced as far as Rayy and Isfahan⁹⁵.

The reasons behind this lack of conquest are more than the commonly held ideas of the victories of the Sasanians in driving the Gök Türks out. Instead the Western Gök Türks found an economy and land that was primarily not that wealthy and problematic to hold.

The Sasanian economy within the empire was based mostly on agriculture with various crops and domestic animals providing the internal industries their material to produce products such as textiles and tanning goods⁹⁶. This agricultural economy was combined with the government, which was more concerned about “siphoning off taxes, levies and custom duties”⁹⁷ than really developing the economy.

This was further compounded by the fact that the economy was constantly torn between the state and the nobility who controlled most of the economic means within the empire. The entire concept of the royal cities had been developed and designed to deprive the nobility of their wealth by creating cities which were either newly constructed or older cities which were renamed for the current Shahs. This enabled the state to directly control various economic means such as agriculture, mining, trade and transportation among other aspects⁹⁸. The creation of the royal cities allowed the state to install officials who were loyal to the state and would collect and deliver levies and taxes, an important income source, directly to the state without it going through the hands of the nobility⁹⁹.

⁹⁵ J. Harmatta and B.A. Litvinsky, “Tokharistan and Gandhara under Western Türk Rule (650-750),” 369.

⁹⁶ Ryka Gyselen, “Economy in Sasanian Iran,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica Volume VIII* (New York: Online Edition, 1996), 104.

⁹⁷ Ryka Gyselen, “Economy in Sasanian Iran,” 104.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

Although this type of economy was successful for a while, it had become problematic for the Sasanians at the end of the fourth century CE. State investment, needed to maintain agricultural implements such as canals, dykes and so forth, had started to decline. As a result of an agricultural economy, the population had begun to boom as well and crown lands had become overpopulated. This reduced the ability of the land to adequately supply the populace with food. This was further compounded by the fact that the Sasanians refused to invest in new lands or develop new royal cities. This line of thinking had come about due to the belief that either the new lands would not return high returns, as they had done before, or that there was no new economic or political advantage to be had by creating new cities¹⁰⁰.

These economic problems that the Sasaian were facing were further compounded by the continually disastrous wars against the Byzantines and more dangerous wars against the Hephthalites. Peroz's capture and ransom, not only once but twice, had put a strain on the economy in which the state tried to recover the money that was paid to the Hephthalites¹⁰¹. The nobility would not, however, be held accountable for the failures of the Shah and continually only paid what was due and in some cases had reduced their contributions. The state could only rely on pressuring the peasants to fill the shortfall but after a series of failed harvests and famines the state had exhausted this source of revenue as well¹⁰².

While the Sasanian economy was facing an internal struggle to maintain its stability, external trade had continued to decline considerably. The conquests of the southern half of the Hephthalite Kaghanate had allowed the Sasanians to gain valuable vassals which could be used to maintain and strengthen their trading networks. However, places like Balkh, situated within the territory of Tokharistan, begun to lose much of its importance when the Gök Türks had begun to divert trade from Sasanian areas at first and then, as mentioned above, when they conquered the region it had completely fallen from Sasanian hands and was never re-conquered¹⁰³.

By the reign of Kavad I and Khusrau Anushirvan, the Sasanians had managed to at first stabilize and then to bring prosperity back internally through the use of progressive policies at the expense of the nobility and the priesthood within the empire. Although successful with the

¹⁰⁰ Ryka Gyselen, "Economy in Sasanian Iran," 105.

¹⁰¹ Ryka Gyselen, "Economy in Sasanian Iran," 106.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁰³ J. Harmatta and B.A. Litvinsky, "Tokharistan and Gandhara under Western Türk Rule (650-750)," 373.

agricultural economy with international trade, they were less successful and continued trying to compete with newly established direct routes, which had sapped much of the economic power away from the Sasanians. By the end of the reign of Khusrau Anushirvan, this experiment in a new economy had ended and the situation had reversed itself even more forcefully than before. At the beginning of the reign of Hormizd IV (579 – 590 CE) the nobility and the priesthood, who had been reduced in power, once again had arisen at the cost of the economy¹⁰⁴.

This economic freefall would continue unabated until the end of the empire by the Arab conquest. Their lack of assertion at regaining the territory lost, as well as their involvement in a series of pointless wars, had made the Sasanian Empire, with their mercantilist tendencies, an unattractive prospect for the Gök Türks to continue to trade with them, thus relegating their position from what it once was.

5. Wealth and Opportunity of China Eclipsed the Wealth and Opportunity of Persia

The last important reason why the trade with the Sasanians was relegated was due to the wealth and opportunity that was provided by China, which easily eclipsed any wealth that could be derived from Sasanian Persia. This was an interesting development in the history of China and Central Asia as traditionally, China, in large part through their adoption of Confucian ideology and philosophy was largely only against trade and had “relegated [the] merchants to the bottom rung on the social ladder”¹⁰⁵ due to their inability to produce what the Chinese termed as essential goods, like those that were produced by the peasants or artistic products but instead focused primarily to the creation of wealth whose goal was to enrich themselves “at the expense of others”¹⁰⁶ giving very little to the state that they lived in.

Similarly, China also relied on its agricultural wealth as well as the taxes from the peasants much like Sasanian Persia. Anything that the nomads produced would have had little use for the Chinese. The Chinese economy was not dependent on trade as the Sogdian economy was and therefore any income from either trade or custom duties were not relied upon to finance any aspect of the government¹⁰⁷. Regardless, China still often allowed nomads to access their products through trade, although in some dynasties there was a clear resistance to this due to the

¹⁰⁴ Ryka Gyselen, “Economy in Sasanian Iran,” 106.

¹⁰⁵ Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall: Nomadic-Chinese Interactions through two Millennia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 3.

belief that trade would encourage either the strengthening of the Kaghanates or that the demands would be so great that they could force China into a weaker position, where it would be unable to survive any attacks from any Central Asian state¹⁰⁸.

Although fears continued to exist against the establishment of trade with the nomads of Central Asia, the reality of the situation was not one of Chinese decision-making. Central Asian states were continually the ones who were dictating when and where to open market and tribute exchanges. The various Kaghanates had often found that the Chinese assumption of superiority and their opinions of the Central Asians themselves as “galling and disruptive”¹⁰⁹ to these relations, which led to military actions being taken against them. These military actions continued to be destructive for the Chinese, while on the other hand they were entirely beneficial for the nomadic states. Chinese armies could not pursue the nomads into Central Asia since they were unable to provision the army adequately. Alongside this logistical problem, was that conducting war within Central Asia for the Chinese was both costly and ineffective¹¹⁰.

Since nomadic military power was often stronger than an agricultural state’s military, this led to the Chinese, quite often, opening frontier markets rather than fighting the nomads when they were unable to match them in military strength or unable to stop their advances behind the great wall¹¹¹. These actions usually led to the signing of treaties with the Chinese, which were galling to their ideas of superiority, since the nomadic states were guaranteed by the Chinese to be viewed and treated as equal states and that often Chinese princesses would be given as tribute to the tribal leaders, often the Kaghan, as a form of tribute and as a method to ensure that the nomadic armies would not raid the border¹¹². Tribute towards the leaders of the Kaghanates usually were in the form of silk or other tributary goods which were then distributed by the Kaghan to the other elites to ensure and secure their support for the empire. Lower status nomads were pacified through the opening of frontier markets so that they would be able to “trade for the goods they desired”¹¹³.

The institutions of frontier markets and tributary relations were a product of nomadic military might, as well as a method to insure that the Chinese northern frontier remained peaceful

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹¹² Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 11.

¹¹³ Ibid., 11.

and productive. These markets were essential for the nomadic Kaghanates to acquire items that it could not produce such as grain and textiles such as silk and other manufactured goods that China could produce easily¹¹⁴.

Trade with China and the Kaghanates took place in three different forms. The first form that it took was directly through the merchants and the peasants who were near the northern border who continually ignored whatever prohibitions that the Chinese government had instituted. The second form would be to humble themselves and show their status as below the Chinese who would then allow them limited access trade for goods. The last form was more militaristic where they could deny that China is superior and continue to attack and raid the frontiers, sometimes going as far as the interior of China, and seizing whatever goods that they wanted¹¹⁵.

In comparison, Sasanian Persia never found a balance between trade and peace that the Chinese had created. This can be attributed to the fact that the Sasanians were more interested in their wars against the Byzantine Empire than the development of trade in Central Asia. These wars continually used the majority of the resources that were present in the Sasanian economy to maintain the ongoing conflict as well as to try and deny the Byzantines a source of silk. The loss of the newly acquired Hephthalite territory in a series of three wars had indeed damaged the opportunity of Sasanian Persia to gain a benefit from newly acquired trade routes. This, however, shows that Persia did not have the resources to maintain a war on two fronts, even after Khusrau Anushirvan's reforms, and could only effectively fight on one front at a time.

These wars continued to show that the Sasanians were more interested in securing the trading routes from Byzantine rather than expanding it to benefit themselves. The control of the territories of Bahrain and Oman ensured that the Persian Gulf would remain completely in the hands of the Persians while their war against Yemen in 570 CE¹¹⁶ had almost entirely cut the Byzantines from the routes into India. This was also done to try and promote the routes that went through Persia rather than promote routes that expanded the economy. Ctesiphon had risen to be the main trading city in the region of Mesopotamia, surpassing other cities in the region and contributing to the decline of other trading cities especially in Syria¹¹⁷. This route which went to

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹¹⁶ A. Shapur Shahbazi, "Sasanian Dynasty," in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (New York: Online Edition, 1996).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.,

both Central Asia and India was the primary route through which the Sasanians gained tariffs which were important to its economy. By forcing the Byzantines to only use routes, the Sasanians ensured that its economic dominance remained in the Near East. This method of gaining wealth was only effective as long as the Sasanians controlled the routes and only allowed Sasanian merchants to ply these same routes and as long as new routes and the Western Gök Türks would not interfere or disrupt the Sasanian superiority in this area. However, once new routes, both to the Byzantines and India had been opened, these Sasanian controls largely failed to deliver their promised goals and both areas, Byzantines and the Indian subcontinent could freely trade with the Western Gök Türks.

Another aspect to this relegation of the Sasanian Empire was its treatment of its merchant class. Although both states saw the merchants as a class which was only out for their wealth and did not contribute to the state, China had allowed the merchant class to develop both as a method to pacify the various Central Asian Kaghanates but also as a method to provide the tribute that was given. In Sasanian Persia, however, this idea had not developed.

Merchants were usually associated by their “associations, companies or families”¹¹⁸ who were in line with the makeup of the Sasanian kin structure and ensured that everyone would have to be associated through such a method. These groupings of merchants were further hindered through the use of complex laws and regulations which ensured that they would only follow what the state had regulated¹¹⁹. These restrictions controlled what the merchant could and could not do, ensuring that he was bound by kin ties, which also subjected them to a form of group ownership rather than individual ownership that limited their actions and opportunities.

Their political power had also been extremely reduced, unlike the situation in Sogdiana. Merchant and Merchant families, alongside guild leaders, were almost equal to the landlords in both power and influence and sometimes even surpassed the nobility in terms of wealth¹²⁰. In Sasanian Persia, however, they were unable to even rise in political power due to the aristocracy and the priesthood who “monopolized power and influence”¹²¹ since they could acquire more land and wealth than the merchants and associations could, nor could they gain the same, if at all any, influence at court.

¹¹⁸ A. Shapur Shahbazi, “Sasanian Dynasty,”.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.,

¹²⁰ Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia from Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996), 186.

¹²¹ Ibid., 187.

Forms of approved trade and regulations further contributed to the stagnation of the merchant class. Trade could only be performed on a monetary basis and not in a barter system¹²². Within Central Asia and in China, trade was done through a combination of both barter and monetary systems. The main goal of nomads was not “trading for profit”¹²³ but for things that were necessary and of importance to them. By restricting one method of trade, the Sasanians had essentially ensured that their expansion into Central Asia, even through their merchant class, was a failed project.

Taxes on any merchant opportunity and high interest on loans that were provided by the state to the merchants restricted what they could try and invest in ensuring that they could only operate on a known route or an investment and not contribute to new developments¹²⁴. This, however, does not imply that trade with the Western Gök Türks never occurred; but what did take place was limited to what risks the Sasanian merchants could take to ensure that their entire association did not fall due to the high interest demanded by the state.

The role played by Sogdiana in supporting the Chinese trading routes over the Sasanian routes had also played a major role. The rejections of the Sasanians to equalize trade had led to a change in focus for the Sogdian merchants. Their external market thus turned towards China, which was much more willing, if by force, to trade and allow the use of trading missions to go into their frontier markets and sometimes within the interior of China itself. This had led to the establishment of new routes to China as well as the creation of colonies near the current routes not only to make the trading expedition more economically viable and valuable but also as a means of ease¹²⁵.

The rejection of the Sogdian merchants by the Sasanians had led to the reduction of trading opportunities for the Sasanian merchants as well. While silk was still a valuable commodity for both the Western Gök Türks and the Sasanians, trading goods such as other forms of cloth as well as woolen garments alongside amber, furs, honey from northern Russia, gems, spices, ivory and other manufactured goods of silver and gold, a product of the new routes

¹²² A. Shapur Shahbazi, “Sasanian Dynasty,”

¹²³ Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 12.

¹²⁴ A. Shapur Shahbazi, “Sasanian Dynasty,”

¹²⁵ Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 185.

opened that went to India, had found a valuable market where the Chinese aristocracy and the courts created a great demand for these items¹²⁶.

This movement to bring goods into China had also led to a change in the coinage system within Central Asia. Previously Sasanian coins, since the time of the Hephthalites, had been commonly used; now a movement towards the abundance of copper coins emerged other forms such as silver and gold were used only for their content in metal¹²⁷. These new copper coins took the form of Chinese style coins, containing a square in the middle and became the only official coinage that was permitted. The only use of the Sasanian silver coins, valued for their purity, was as a method of exchange to acquire legal tender since they were the only ones accepted in various markets within Central Asia¹²⁸.

Both the economies of China and Persia were agrarian by nature and both relied primarily on the taxes that were derived from the peasants. However, the similarities end there. China had realized that trade was an important outlet that would not only keep the nomadic confederations peaceful but ensure that they would not get embroiled on an expensive and ultimately destructive war. Persia had never realized this and their merchant class continued to suffer as territory after territory was continually lost. The only result from this was the continual suffering of the economy which had never been solved even after the economic reforms of Khusrau Anushirvan.

6. Conclusion

As the three reasons show, trade with the Sasanian Empire had been relegated to almost a secondary level. The Western Gök Türks did not need to trade with Persia to survive; they could very well continue their trade with China and still be able to acquire the goods they needed. Sasanian ideology about trade and merchants was their undoing; their inability to extradite themselves from their wars with Byzantium and look towards the economy and increase trade brought about widespread poverty among the lower classes while keeping the aristocracy wealthy.

The Western Gök Türks themselves, however, soon after their conquests of Balkh and Kunduz in 597-598 CE, were embroiled in conflicts over a rising China under the Sui dynasty who had unified the previously divided China in 598 CE and later by a rising T'ang dynasty in

¹²⁶ Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 187.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

618 CE. This, alongside the partition of the state into two states, the Eastern Gök Türks and the Western Gök Türks, had ensured that they were struggling to survive¹²⁹. By 651 CE, the Western Gök Türks who had denied the spoils of war to the Sasanians had collapsed and Central Asia reverted back to small tribes controlling sections of the Silk Route and the cities that inhabited it¹³⁰. Although the Eastern Gök Türks were to reappear in 683 CE, they never again spread westward as they had once done.

Unable to make a lasting Kaghanate, the Western Gök Türks were, however, instrumental in the trading relations of the three settled and agricultural empires. The effect of Sogdian merchants and colonists being allowed to do as they wished had ensured that safe and relatively unrestricted trade became the hallmark of the Western Gök Türks. Their policies and their wars had set the tone of trading relations that were to take place during the rise of other Kaghanates who controlled the same areas as the Western Gök Türks had done. It is unfortunate that this history is largely overlooked and ignored in favor of those who are more easily researched but their importance, especially with their relations to Sasanian Persia, allows them to stand as one of the greatest Kaghanates in Central Asia and one that would have a lasting effect on both the Sasanians and the Chinese.

¹²⁹ Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 89.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.