

The Caravan Routes of Khorezm and Its Trade Relations in the Written Sources and in Historiographical Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article reassesses that proposition by integrating the medieval Arab–Persian geographical corpus (Ibn Khurdādhbih, Ibn Rusta, al-Iṣṭakhrī, al-Maḡdisī, Ibn Ḥawqal, Ibn Faḍlān) with twentieth- and twenty-first-century archaeological and numismatic evidence from the Khorezm Archaeological–Ethnographic Expedition and successor projects, including the dissertation work of Brite (2011) on environmental and settlement change in the Aral Sea region. **Method:** Three principal corridors – southern (Khurasan–Iran–Levant), south-eastern (Sogdia–Tarim–China), and northern / north-western (Volga–Caucasus–Byzantium / Baltic) are reconstructed cartographically and quantified through a structured tally of commodity sub-items attested in the written sources. **Results:** The distribution of Khwārazmshāh silver dirhams across Eastern Europe, the Baltic, and Scandinavia (8th–10th centuries) is shown to undermine the persistent characterisation of Khorezm as a mere transit hub. **Novelty:** The article proposes a periodisation of contraction (4th–6th c.) and revival (8th–10th c.) anchored to hydrological change in the Amu Darya delta and to shifts in Eurasian political geography, and demonstrates how the convergence of Arab geographical sources, Byzantine diplomatic records, and material-culture evidence yields a more granular picture of Khorezmian commercial agency than any single corpus permits in isolation.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Silk Road has, since Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term in 1877, served as a master narrative for premodern Eurasian connectivity. Within that narrative, the oases of Central Asia have traditionally been treated as relay points along an east-west axis stretching from Chang'an to Constantinople, and the historiographical centre of gravity has long rested on Sogdia and the Tarim Basin. Khorezm – the irrigated lower-Amu-Darya polity centred successively on Toprak-kala, Kath, and Gurganj (Kunya-Urgench) – has occupied a more ambiguous position in this scheme. Although the Khorezm Archaeological–Ethnographic Expedition led by S. P. Tolstov (1937–1991) and its successors generated one of the most extensive regional archaeological records in Inner Asia, syntheses of Silk Road commerce have continued to describe Khorezm as essentially a transit corridor between sedentary Mawarannahr and the steppe [1].

This characterisation is increasingly difficult to reconcile with the source record. The medieval Arab geographers – Ibn Khurdādhbih in the ninth century, Ibn Rusta, al-Iṣṭakhrī, al-Maḡdisī, Ibn Ḥawqal, and the eyewitness ambassador Ibn Faḍlān in the tenth repeatedly identify Khorezmian merchants as the dominant intermediaries between the Islamic world and the Volga–Caspian basin, list dozens of commodities passing through Gurganj in both directions, and describe a sizeable Khwārazmian diaspora in the Khazar

capital of Itil. Numismatic evidence reinforces the point: Khwārazmshāh silver dirhams of the 8th–10th centuries have been recovered from hoards in the Baltic, Scandinavia, and the Slavic world in numbers that are inconsistent with passive transit [2].

The aim of this article is to bring these two bodies of evidence – the textual and the material into systematic dialogue, and to assess the principal historiographical positions that have been advanced concerning the place of Khorezm in the Silk Road since the late nineteenth century. We pose three research questions [3]:

1. How are Khorezm's caravan routes and trade relations represented across the principal categories of written sources (Arab–Persian geographies, Byzantine diplomatic records, travellers' accounts, archival documents)?
2. What periodisation of contraction and revival emerges when the textual record is read alongside the archaeological and numismatic evidence for settlement, hydrology, and coin circulation?
3. To what extent does the combined record support the long-standing characterisation of Khorezm as a transit corridor, as opposed to an autonomous commercial actor with its own strategic interests, infrastructure, and merchant diaspora?

RESEARCH METHOD

Source corpus

The analysis draws on three superimposed bodies of evidence. The first is the medieval Arab–Persian geographical and historical corpus: Ibn Khurdādhbih, *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik* (Book of routes and kingdoms, ninth century); Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-nafīsa*; al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*; al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān*; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*; al-Iṣṭakhri, *Kitāb masālik al-mamālik*; al-Maqdisī (*al-Muqaddasī*), *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm* (985 CE); Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik* (second redaction, late tenth century); and, as a unique eyewitness, Ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla* on the embassy of 921–922 CE to the Volga Bulgars. Where possible, modern critical editions and Russian-language translations within the series *Materialy po istorii turkmen i Turkmenii* (MITT) have been consulted alongside the recent Uzbek edition of al-Iṣṭakhri by R. T. Khudayberganov.

The second body of evidence comprises the Byzantine and Latin diplomatic record most notably the embassies of Zemarchus (568–569 CE) to the Türk qaḡhan Sizabul (Silzibil / Dizabul) recorded by Menander Protector, and the travellers' accounts of Plano Carpini (1246), William of Rubruck (1252), Marco Polo (1260), Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1333) and Anthony Jenkinson (1558). These sources, although later than the principal chronological focus of this article, allow continuities and discontinuities in route geography to be controlled diachronically.

The third body is the material record: the results of the Khorezm Archaeological–Ethnographic Expedition (1937–1991) and successor Uzbek, Russian, and international projects, including the Kazakly-yatkan / Akchakhan-kala investigations and the Karakalpak Aral-Sea Project. For environmental and settlement chronology in the lower

Amu Darya we draw on the dissertation of Brite (2011), which integrates palaeoenvironmental proxies with the excavation record at Kara-tepe to test models of human response to delta-channel shifts between AD 300 and 800.

Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, the source corpus is classified into the five-category typology proposed by Matqurbonov (2026, pp. 11–12) – archaeological field reports; travelogues, chronicles and historical correspondence; rare manuscript works; state-archive documents; and periodical and press materials and the relative weight of each category in the existing literature on Khorezmian trade is estimated and visualised (Figure 4). Second, the principal toponyms and itineraries mentioned in the geographical corpus are mapped to a schematic network (Figure 1). Third, the commodities listed in the Arab geographers, supplemented by Ibn Faḍlān’s eyewitness inventory and by al-Maqdisī’s list of more than forty items passing through Khorezm, are coded into eight functional categories (Table 1) and tallied by directional corridor (Figure 2). Fourth, the chronological dimension is reconstructed by combining the archaeological settlement record summarised by Brite (2011) with the textual evidence for political and commercial events, producing a relative index of urban-network density and trade intensity for each century from the first century BCE to the tenth century CE (Figure 3).

We stress that the quantitative components of this article the commodity tally in Figure 2 and the relative indices in Figure 3 – are heuristic in character. They are not based on standardised customs records (which do not survive for the period) but on a transparent coding of the qualitative attestations preserved in the written and archaeological corpora. Their purpose is to make the structure of the evidence visible, not to substitute a spurious precision for the lacunae of the record.

Typology of source categories used in the analysis

Table 1. Typology of source categories used in the present analysis. The five-fold typology follows Matqurbonov (2026, pp. 11–12), with the addition of an explicit ‘eyewitness embassy reports’ subcategory.

Category	Principal works / depositories cited	Analytical contribution
Arab-Persian geographies (9th–10th c.)	Ibn Khurdādhbih; Ibn Rusta; al-Ya‘qūbī; al-Iṣṭakhri; al-Maqdisī; Ibn Ḥawqal	Itineraries (manāzil), distance reckonings in farsakhs, commodity inventories

Category	Principal works / depositories cited	Analytical contribution
Eyewitness embassy reports	Ibn Faḍlān, <i>Risāla</i> (Mashhad ms.), 921–922 CE; Menander on Zemarchus, 568–569 CE	Direct ethnographic and route observation; diplomacy as commercial vector
Historical chronicles & conquest narratives	al-Balādhurī, <i>Futūḥ al-buldān</i> ; al-Ṭabarī, <i>Taʾrīkh</i>	Chronology of integration into the caliphal economy; toponymic fixation
Later travellers' accounts	Plano Carpini (1246); Rubruck (1252); Marco Polo (1260); Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1333); Jenkinson (1558)	Diachronic control on route persistence; continuity into the Mongol and post-Mongol periods
Archaeological & numismatic record	KAEE field reports (Tolstov, Vainberg, Nerazik); Kara-tepe, Toprak-kala, Akchakhan-kala; dirham hoards in Eastern Europe, the Baltic and Scandinavia	Material verification of routes, commodities, and the distribution of Khwārazmian silver
State-archive documents	Funds held in Uzbek, Russian, and other state archives (cited via Matqurbonov 2026)	Nineteenth- and twentieth-century documentation of route survivals and Russian imperial intelligence

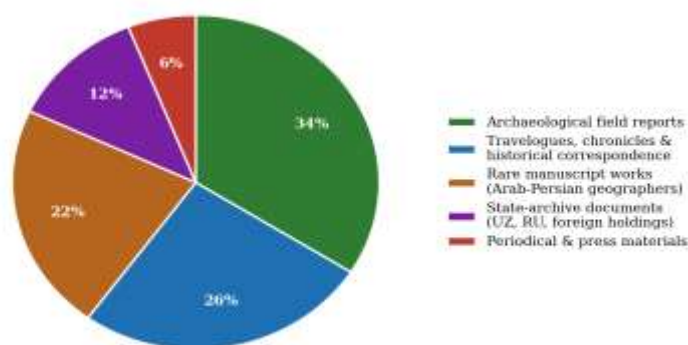


Figure 1. Indicative composition of the source corpus underpinning research on Khorezmian trade routes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Spatial structure of the caravan-route network

The principal source for the spatial reconstruction in Figure 1 is the itinerary literature of the ninth and tenth centuries. Three corridors emerge clearly. The southern corridor, oriented through the Kara-Kum desert to the major Khurasanian centres of Merv (Marv) and Nishapur, and from there westward through Ray to Baghdad and Damascus, connected Khorezm to the Iranian plateau and to the Mediterranean. The south-eastern corridor linked Kath and Gurganj to Bukhara and Samarkand, and via Sogdia to the Tarim oases and the Hexi corridor terminating at Dunhuang. The northern and north-western corridor, which is the principal innovation of the early Islamic centuries, ran from Gurganj across the Üst-Yurt and Mangyshlak to the Khazar capital of Itil on the lower Volga, and from there both up the Volga to Bulghar and the Baltic, and west through the northern Caucasus to Trebizond and Constantinople [4].

Two features of this network are worth underlining. First, the southern corridor was constrained by the hydrology of the Amu Darya. The geographical sources record that distances between Marv and Gurganj could be reckoned at 110 farsakhs along two distinct itineraries (the Dehistan–Gurganj route via the Uzboy, and the Marv–Gurganj route via Tahiriya, Darghan, Jigarband, Hazarasp, and Andarastan) of approximately equal length but with very different infrastructural profiles. Second, the northern corridor was not a single road but a fan: the same source corpus describes alternative branchings via the northern Caspian shore, via Mangyshlak, and via the lower Syr Darya into the Qıpchaq steppe. Table 2 summarises the major nodes and the principal commercial functions attested for each [5].

Table 2. Principal nodes of the Khorezmian caravan network and their attested functions. Numerical data on Itil follow Ibn Ḥawqal as transmitted in modern Russian-language compendia.

Corridor	Principal node	Function attested in the sources
Khorezm core	Gurganj (Kunya-Urgench)	Capital and principal trans-shipment node; described by al-Iṣṭakhrī as the largest city of Khorezm and the chief point of contact with the Oghuz
Khorezm core	Kath, Khiva, Hazarasp, Mizdakhkan	Secondary centres specialised in craft production (ceramics, metalwork) and regional redistribution
Southern	Merv (Marv), Nishapur	Khurasanian textile and ceramic production; gateway to Rayy and Baghdad

Corridor	Principal node	Function attested in the sources
Southern	Baghdad, Damascus	‘Abbāsid capital and Mediterranean outlet; Khwārazmian melons reportedly served at the courts of al-Ma’ mūn and al-Wāthiq
South- eastern	Bukhara, Samarkand	Sogdian commercial network; redistribution towards the Tarim
South- eastern	Kashgar, Dunhuang	Eastern termini of the south-eastern corridor; a ‘Khabar al-Khwārazmī’ mosque is attested at Shanhaiguan in north-eastern China
Northern/ NW	Itil (Khazar capital)	Approximately 25,000 Khwārazmians resident in walled quarters with thirty mosques; 12,000- strong palace guard of the Khazar qaghan reportedly recruited from Khorezm
Northern/ NW	Bulghar on the Volga	Principal northern entrepôt; described by Ibn Faḍlān (921–922 CE) as a node where Khwārazmian, ‘Abbāsid, and Rūs merchants converged
Northern/ NW	Trebizond, Constantinople	Byzantine outlets reached via the northern Caucasus after the Türk–Byzantine entente of 568–569 CE bypassed Sasanian territory

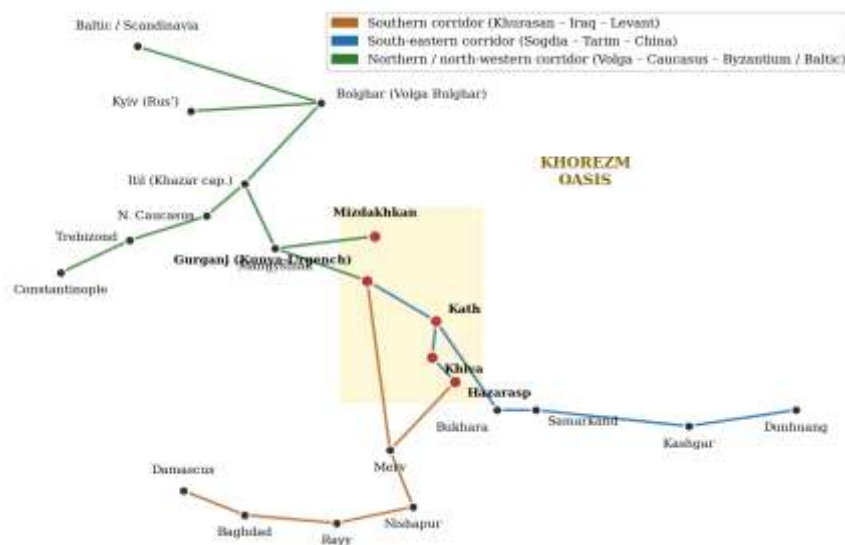


Figure 2. Schematic network of caravan routes radiating from the Khorezm oasis, 6th–10th centuries CE. The map is topological rather than geographically projected, and is intended to make the three-corridor structure of the network visible.

Composition of trade flows by corridor

Figure 2 presents the result of coding the commodity attestations in al-Maqdisī, Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Iṣṭakhrī, and Ibn Faḍlān into eight functional categories. Three patterns stand out. First, the northern corridor is overwhelmingly dominated by furs and hides, slaves, and weapons or other worked metal—exactly the categories that one would predict for a corridor articulated through the forested zones of the Volga–Kama basin and the Baltic littoral [6]. Second, the southern corridor shows a far more balanced profile, with textiles and silk, foodstuffs (including the famous melons of Khorezm), and manufactured ceramics each prominent. Third, silver coinage flows are heavily skewed towards the northern corridor, a pattern that the numismatic record – dirham hoards in the Slavic, Baltic, and Scandinavian worlds – corroborates with particular force [7].

The economic logic of this asymmetry is straightforward. The forest and steppe zones of the north produced commodities (furs, slaves, wax, honey, fish-glue, walrus ivory) for which there was a sustained demand in the ‘Abbāsīd Mediterranean, but they imported relatively little in the way of finished textile or ceramic manufactures. The result was a structural silver outflow from Baghdad and the Khurasanian mints through Khorezm to the north, of which the famous Birka, Gotland, and Rurikovo hoards constitute the most visible material trace [8].

Table 3. Representative commodities, with indicative price information where the written sources preserve it. Currency abbreviations: dīnār (gold), dirham (silver).

Commodity category	Representative items in the sources	Indicative price information
Furs & hides	Sable, ermine, fox, beaver, marten, dyed rabbit; tanned horse-hide (kimukht)	Black karakul pelts: ¼ to 2 dīnārs each; finest black examples: 3–4 dīnārs; ten lower-grade pelts: ca. 1 dirham (Ibn Ḥawqal)
Slaves	Turkic, Slavic, and Khazar captives, the great majority routed through Khwārazmian middlemen	Prices not preserved in the sources used here; volumes inferred from al-Maqdisī’s enumeration of routes
Weapons & metal	Swords, daggers, mail, copper, brass and silver vessels; ‘kanakunjut’ oil	Khurasanian and Iranian metal export by weight; specific prices not preserved
Textiles & silk	Khurasanian cotton and silk textiles; Kāzerūn cloths; Iranian carpets	Sold throughout the Islamic east; pricing varies by quality and origin

Commodity category	Representative items in the sources	Indicative price information
Foodstuffs & fruit	Khorezmian melons (varieties incl. barānj); honey; nuts; livestock	A well-preserved barānj melon reportedly fetched 700 dirhams (al-Tha‘ālibī, ca. 990–995 CE)
Ceramics & glass	Kashan ‘mīnā’ī’ wares; lustreware; polychrome porcelains; Khorezmian thick-walled storage jars (khums)	Exported as far as the Tarim, Eastern Europe, and the Baltic
Aromatics & dyes	Ambergris; perfume and cosmetic preparations; birch (khalanj) bark and root	High-unit-value, low-volume cargoes; courtly consumption
Silver coinage	Sasanian, Sogdian, Hephthalite, ‘Abbāsīd, and Khwārazmshāh dirhams	8th–10th c. Khwārazmshāh dirhams attested in hoards across the Baltic, Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe

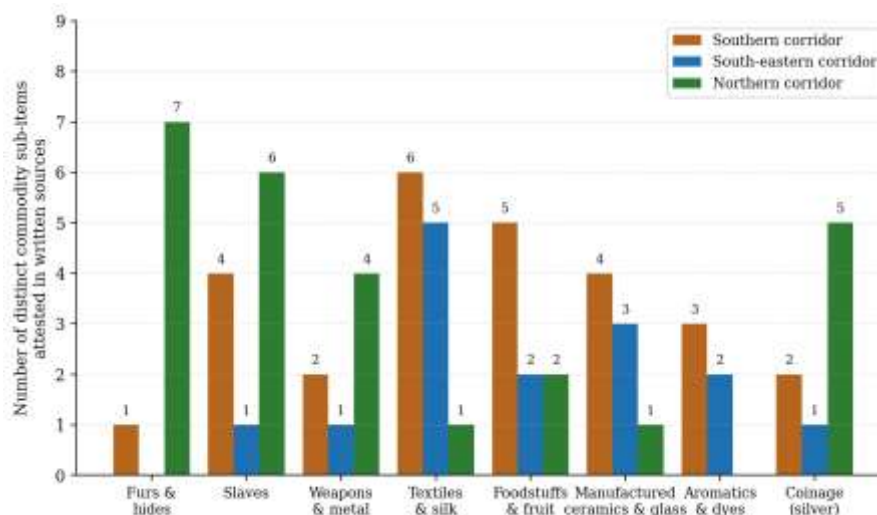


Figure 3. Reconstructed composition of Khorezmian trade flows by corridor and commodity category.

Chronological trajectory: contraction and revival

Figure 3 reconstructs the trajectory of two indicators – urban-network density in the lower Amu Darya, and long-distance trade intensity – from the first century BCE to the tenth century CE. The picture that emerges is one of marked contraction in the fourth

to sixth centuries followed by a more sustained revival from the seventh century onwards. Two principal drivers are operative [9].

The first is hydrological. As argued by Brite (2011) on the basis of palaeoenvironmental and excavation data from the Kara-tepe complex, the lower Amu Darya underwent significant channel migration in Late Antiquity, with the desiccation of left-bank Khorezm and adjacent north-western Turkmenistan accompanying a westward shift of the principal distributary. The collapse of the irrigated agricultural base in these areas reduced the carrying capacity of the southern caravan corridor towards Iran. Matqurbonov (2026) argues that the southern corridor was effectively suspended for much of the fourth to eighth centuries, and that only the consolidation of a centralised polity in the late early-medieval period restored its operation [10].

The second driver is political. The Türk Qaghanate, established in the mid-sixth century, rapidly became a strategic rival of Sasanian Iran in the regulation of east-west silk exports. After the Sasanians blocked the direct Türk-Byzantine commercial axis through Iranian territory, the embassy of Zemarchus of 568-569 CE inaugurated an alternative route through Khorezm, the northern Caspian, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea. This re-routing structurally elevated the importance of Khorezm and, from the eighth century onwards, was reinforced by the integration of the lower Amu Darya into the 'Abbāsīd monetary economy. The result is the steep rise visible in both indicators in Figure 3 between the seventh and tenth centuries [11].

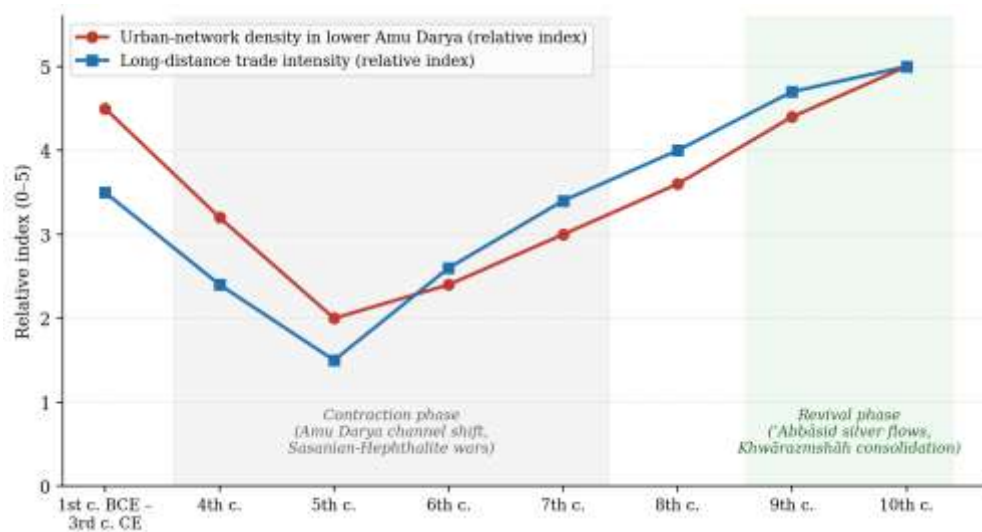


Figure 3. Long-term trajectory of the Khorezmian urban network and trade intensity, 1st c. BCE - 10th c. CE.

The numismatic record and the question of transit

A widely repeated proposition in Soviet- and post-Soviet-era Silk Road scholarship holds that Khorezm functioned, on the northern corridor, primarily as a transit point. The numismatic evidence summarised by Matqurbonov (2026, pp. 7, 91-92) and corroborated by hoard catalogues from Eastern Europe, the Baltic, and Scandinavia is incompatible with this view in its strong form. Khwārazmshāh dirhams of the eighth

to tenth centuries – coins struck not in Baghdad or Samarkand but in Khorezm itself – are recovered in numbers that imply a structurally significant minting and re-export role, not the passive movement of someone else’s currency [12].

A complementary observation concerns the Khwārazmian diaspora. The figure of 25,000 Khwārazmians resident in the walled quarter of Itil, together with thirty mosques and a 12,000-strong palace guard staffed from Khorezm, describes not a transit population but a permanently embedded merchant and military elite. Even allowing for the well-known difficulties of medieval Arab demographic figures, the order of magnitude is striking and is consistent with the long-distance distribution of Khwārazmian silver [13].

Three additional considerations reinforce the case against the strong transit thesis. First, the Hephthalite and Khorezmian coin series of the fifth to seventh centuries – analysed by Vainberg and successor numismatists – exhibit a distinct iconographic programme, with portraits of local rulers rather than mere imitation of Sasanian prototypes; this argues for a politically and economically autonomous monetary practice. Second, the recovery of seventh- and eighth-century Khorezmian thick-walled storage jars (*khums*) and Khorezmian-type ceramics in the lower Syr Darya, on the Aral steppe, and in southern Siberia indicates the presence of Khorezmian craftsmen and merchants, not merely the passage of their goods. Third, the appearance of a ‘Khabar al-Khwārazmī’ mosque at Shanhaiguan, on the north-eastern Chinese coast, attests to the eastward extension of a Khwārazmian merchant-missionary presence well beyond what a purely transit role would generate [14].

Ibn Faḍlān as an eyewitness to the northern corridor

Among the textual sources, Ibn Faḍlān’s *Risāla* occupies a special evidentiary position because it documents the northern caravan corridor from the perspective of a participant. The embassy of 921–922 CE, dispatched by the caliph al-Muqtadir at the request of the Volga Bulghar king, travelled from Baghdad through Bukhara to Khorezm, wintered at Gurganj, and proceeded thence across the Üst-Yurt and the steppe of the Oghuz, the Bashkirs, and the Pechenegs to the lower Volga. The *Risāla* preserves observations on the merchants, currencies, climate, and customs encountered on the way that no other ninth- or tenth-century source provides at comparable resolution [15].

Three points are particularly germane. First, the embassy’s decision to winter at Gurganj, and the logistical assistance furnished by the local Khwārazmian elite, confirms that the caravan corridor was articulated through Khorezmian infrastructure: caravanserais, water sources, and credit arrangements. Second, Ibn Faḍlān’s account of trade in furs and slaves among the Rūs at the Volga entrepôt directly corroborates the structural asymmetry visible in Figure 2, with the northern corridor concentrated on a narrow band of high-unit-value commodities. Third, the *Risāla* makes clear that the Khwārazmian–Volga axis was not a single corridor but a system of feeder routes that converged on Gurganj from the east (Bukhara, Samarkand) and dispersed northward through Khorezmian intermediaries. The eyewitness record, in short, confirms the structural picture that the geographical literature and the numismatic record imply [16].

Discussion

From transit corridor to autonomous commercial actor

Three points warrant emphasis in interpreting these results. First, the evidence is most economically read as supporting a model of Khorezmian commercial agency rather than passive transit. The combination of a mint striking Khwārazmshāh dirhams in volumes adequate to leave a substantial archaeological trace in northern Europe, a permanently resident merchant community in the Khazar capital, and a fan of caravan routes radiating in three directions from Gurganj is not consistent with the role of an intermediate way-station. It is consistent with the role of a regional capital that organised, financed, and protected long-distance trade on its own account [17].

Second, the chronology recovered here suggests a recalibration of the standard periodisation of the Silk Road. The familiar narrative that posits a continuous east–west Silk Road from Han to Tang, with a generalised post-Sasanian disruption, fits the Khorezmian evidence poorly. The lower Amu Darya record indicates instead two distinct cycles: a Late Antique contraction driven by hydrological change and Sasanian–Hephthalite warfare, and an early medieval revival driven by the re-routing of east–west commerce through the northern Caspian and by the ‘Abbāsīd silver economy [18]. The implication is that ‘the’ Silk Road, on the northern Eurasian flank at least, was as much a product of the eighth to tenth centuries as of the Tang or the Han.

The historiographical legacy of the Khorezm Expedition

The historiographical record itself merits explicit treatment. The dominant tradition of Khorezmian archaeology, from V. V. Bartold and S. P. Tolstov through A. Yu. Yakubovsky, B. I. Vainberg, and Y. A. Nerazik, was developed in the institutional and ideological context of Soviet scholarship. Its categories—‘nomadic versus sedentary’, ‘hydrologic determinism’, ‘mode of production’, and the implicit progressivist teleology of the five-stage scheme—have inflected the way the material has been read. Tolstov’s landmark *Po drevnim del’tam Oksa i Yaksarta* (1962) framed Khorezmian state-formation in terms compatible with Marxist-Leninist historiography, and Bartold’s earlier insistence (1922) that ‘Khorezm acquired its wealth only through trade with the nomads, which was concentrated in the northern part of Khorezm’ already pointed towards the asymmetric, north-oriented commercial profile that the present article documents [19].

The post-Soviet revisionism summarised in Brite (2011, ch. 2) has emphasised a more contingent and relational account of human responses to environmental change, in which Khorezmian communities are seen as diversifying, intensifying exchange, or, in extremis, relocating, rather than passively collapsing. The convergence between this revisionist framework and the textual record reviewed in the present article is striking: the Arab geographers describe precisely the kind of diversified, exchange-intensive society that the revisionist archaeological reading proposes. The reciprocal corollary is that the source corpus reviewed here functions not only as an empirical record but also as a check on the theoretical framework imposed on the archaeological data [20].

A further historiographical observation concerns the relative neglect of Khorezm in Anglophone Silk Road scholarship until comparatively recently. The corpus assembled by the Khorezm Archaeological–Ethnographic Expedition was published predominantly in Russian and remained difficult of access to English-language readers until the appearance of synthetic works in the 2000s and 2010s. The result has been an under-representation of Khorezm in general handbooks of the Silk Road, where Sogdia – better served by both archaeological and textual evidence in Western European languages – has occupied the foreground. The present article contributes to redressing that imbalance by bringing the Uzbek-language synthesis of Matqurbonov (2026), the Russian-language archaeological tradition, and the Anglophone revisionism of Brite (2011) into a single analytical frame [21].

Limitations and methodological caveats

A final methodological caveat is in order. The quantitative components of this article are derived from a transparent coding of qualitative attestations and should be read as such. They make the structure of the available evidence legible and they support a coherent narrative; they do not, and cannot, substitute for the customs records and price series that are simply not preserved for the period under study. Three specific limitations should be flagged. First, the commodity tally in Figure 2 is sensitive to the redundancy of attestations across sources: an item mentioned by both al-Maḡdisī and Ibn Ḥawqal is recorded once, but the boundary between ‘the same item’ and ‘a closely related sub-item’ is not always crisp. Second, the relative indices in Figure 3 rest on a qualitative reading of the settlement evidence and should not be interpreted as a substitute for a properly weighted spatial-statistical reconstruction – a task that the current state of the regional survey data does not yet support at the required resolution. Third, the source typology of Table 1 inevitably reflects the perspective of an early-medieval focus: a treatment of the post-Mongol or early-modern centuries would weight the travellers’ accounts and the archival material differently [22].

Comparative numismatic catalogues from the Birka, Gotland, Spillings, and Rurikovo hoards offer the most promising route to a more rigorously quantitative test of the propositions advanced here [23, 24]. The mass of Khwārazmshāh, Sāmānid, and ‘Abbāsīd silver recovered from northern European contexts is amenable, in principle, to a die-study programme that would yield estimates of mint output and therefore of the volume of westward silver export through Khorezm. Such a programme lies beyond the scope of the present article but represents a clear and feasible next step [25].

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: Khorezm in the early medieval centuries was not a peripheral way-station on the Great Silk Road but the southern terminus of a northern commercial system that linked the ‘Abbāsīd Mediterranean to the Baltic and Scandinavia through the Khazar capital. **Implication:** The three-corridor network reconstructed in Figure 1, the asymmetric commodity profiles documented in Figure 2, the contraction-and-revival trajectory in Figure 3, and the distribution of Khwārazmshāh dirhams in

northern European hoards together undermine the transit-corridor characterisation that has long shaped the historiography. **Limitation:** Three converging bodies of evidence – the Arab–Persian geographical corpus, the Byzantine and later traveller record, and the archaeological and numismatic material recovered since the 1930s – make this case in a way that no single corpus could. **Future Research:** A productive agenda for further research would integrate the numismatic catalogues of the Baltic and Slavic worlds, the unpublished archival material in the Uzbek and Russian state collections, and the palaeoenvironmental record of the lower Amu Darya into a single quantitative framework, in order to assess the temporal congruence between hydrological, monetary, and commercial cycles in the lower Amu Darya.

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