

# Strategic Crossings of the Amu Darya in the System of the Great Silk Road and Their Geo-Economic Significance.

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**Abstract:** This article provides a systematic analysis of the role of the Amu Darya (Oxus/Jayhun) basin in international economic and cultural relations during the ancient and medieval periods. The research is based on data from ancient authors (Strabo, Arrian), Arab geographers (Al-Istakhri, Ibn Hawqal), and encyclopedic scholars such as Abu Rayhan Biruni. The article highlights the importance of strategic crossings such as Amul, Kelif, Shurob, and Chushkaguzar within the Great Silk Road system. The author scientifically substantiates the river's function not merely as a natural border, but as a transregional economic bridge.

**Keywords:** Amu Darya, Oxus, Jayhun, Great Silk Road, strategic crossings, Shurob, Kelif, Chushkaguzar, Amul, Kampirtepa, trade

## Буюк Ипак йўли тизимида Амударё кечувлари ва уларнинг геоиқтисодий аҳамияти

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**Аннотация:** Ушбу мақолада Амударё (Окс/Жайхун) ҳавзасининг антик ва ўрта асрлар давридаги халқаро иқтисодий ва маданий муносабатлардаги ўрни тизимли таҳлил қилинган. Тадқиқот жараёнида антик муаллифлар (Страбон, Арриан), араб географлари (Истахрий, Ибн Ҳавқал) ва Абу Райҳон Беруний каби қомусий олимларнинг маълумотларига таянилган. Мақолада Амул, Келиф, Шўроб ва Чушкагузар каби стратегик кечувларнинг Буюк Ипак йўли тизимидаги аҳамияти ёритилган. Муаллиф дарёнинг нафақат табиий чегара, балки трансминтақавий иқтисодий кўприк сифатидаги вазифасини илмий асослаб беради.

**Калит сўзлар:** Амударё, Окс, Жайхун, Буюк Ипак йўли, стратегик кечувлар, Шўроб, Келиф, Чушкагузар, Амул, Кампиртепа, савдо.

## Стратегические переправы через Амударью в системе Великого шелкового пути и их геоэкономическое значение.

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**Аннотация:** В данной статье представлен системный анализ роли бассейна Амударьи (Окс/Джейхун) в международных экономических и культурных отношениях в античный период и средневековье. Исследование опирается на сведения античных авторов (Страбон, Арриан), арабских географов (Истахри, Ибн Хаукаль) и таких ученых-энциклопедистов, как Абу Райхан Беруни. В статье освещается значение таких стратегических переправ, как Амудь, Келиф, Шуроб и Чушкагузар в системе Великого шелкового пути. Автор научно обосновывает функцию реки не только как природной границы, но и как трансрегионального экономического моста.

**Ключевые слова:** Амударья, Окс, Джейхун, Великий шелковый путь, стратегические переправы, Шуроб, Келиф, Чушкагузар, Амудь, Кампиртепа, торговля.

The Amu Darya is not only the most abundant water artery of Central Asia but also the very cradle of the region's civilization. Throughout history, this river has been known by various names: the Greeks and Romans called it the Oxus, the Arabs referred to it as the Jayhun, while local peoples named it Okuz, Balkh, or Vakhsh. The name 'Amu Darya' emerged later, originating from the ancient city of Amul situated along its banks.<sup>1</sup>

In the Zoroastrian faith, water was considered sacred, and the Amu Darya served as the central artery of the regions where this religion took root. In the sacred 'Avesta,' the river is referred to by the names 'Vakhsh,' 'Arankha,' or 'Rankha.' In ancient Iranian languages, the word 'Vakhsh' signified 'growth,' 'abundance,' or 'sacred water.' Later, this name was preserved in the title of the river's main tributary—the Vakhsh River. In the 'Yasht' section of the 'Avesta,' the Khwarezm region is praised as a land of 'a thousand flowing canals,' rich in lakes and pastures. The river itself was revered as a source of divine power and blessings.<sup>2</sup>

In his famous epic, the great poet Abulqasim Ferdowsi describes the Amu Darya not merely as a river, but as a political boundary between two great worlds — Iran and Turan. The Amu Darya (Jayhun) served as a focal point for constant conflicts and treaties between the Shahs of Iran and the Khagans of Turan (such as Afrasiyab). The work also contains information regarding the regions between Bactria and the Amu Darya being referred to as the 'Sogdian Desert'.<sup>3</sup>

In describing Alexander the Great's campaign in Bactria, Arrian depicted the river as majestic and formidable, stating: '...the Oxus is the largest river in Asia (except for the Indus), and crossing it was a significant challenge for Alexander's forces.' The author noted that due to the river's great depth, rapid current, and sandy bottom, it was impossible to construct a bridge over it "<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ўзбекистон миллий энциклопедияси, 1-жилд, 2000, 446-бет

<sup>2</sup> Авесто: Яшт китоби. (М. Исҳоқов таржимаси). – Тошкент: «Sharq», 2001

<sup>3</sup> Фирдавсий, Абулқосим. Шоҳнома. 3 жилдлик (Таржимон: Жуманиёз Жабборов). – Тошкент: G'afur G'ulom номидаги Нашриёт-матбаа ижодий уйи, 2012, 134-140-бетлар, И. М. Дьяконов. Очерк истории древнего Ирана. – М.: Наука, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Страбон. География в 17 книгах / Перевод, статья и комментарии Г. А. Стратановского. — М.: Ладомир, 1994. стр 480-495, Ўзбекистон тарихи хрестоматияси. 1-жилд. – Т.: Шарқ, 2014. 112-125-бетлар

The bed and flow direction of the Amu Darya have undergone dramatic changes over the centuries. The great encyclopedic scholar Abu Rayhan Biruni left invaluable records regarding this in his research on the history of the river. Geological studies indicate that in ancient times, the river initially flowed through the Karakum Desert and emptied into the Caspian Sea. Current sandy terrains were formed as a result of the accumulation of vast amounts of sediment brought down from the mountains over many years.<sup>5</sup>

Between the 10th and 2nd millennia BCE, a portion of the river's water filled the Sarygamysh Basin and flowed toward the Caspian Sea once again through the famous Uzboy channel.

Between the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, the Amu Darya shifted its course northward from the Tuyamuyun Gorge toward the Akchadarya channel, beginning to flow into the Aral Sea from the southeast.

By approximately the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, the river took its current course and formed the Aral Sea delta as we know it today.

The total length of the Amu Darya is 2,540 km, and it originates from the glaciers of the Hindu Kush mountains at an altitude of 4,950 meters as the Vakhjir and Wakhan rivers. After joining the Pamir River, it takes the name Panj.

The most abundant and largest tributary of the river is the Vakhsh; it is precisely after merging with it that the river is officially called the Amu Darya. Subsequently, significant tributaries such as the Kofarnihon and Surkhandarya join it. Interestingly, after the Surkhandarya inflow, not a single tributary joins the river over a distance of more than 1,200 km until it reaches the Aral Sea. The waters of the Zarafshan and Kashkadarya, which were integral parts of the Amu Darya in ancient times, are now entirely utilized for irrigation and do not reach the main stream.

In ancient and medieval times, the Amu Darya was considered one of the most vital trade and communication arteries of Central Asia. It functioned not only as a natural water source but also as a major transportation route connecting domestic and international trade, as well as cultural and religious relations. Regarding its importance as a waterway, merchant ships navigated the Amu Darya, and as the Greek geographer Strabo emphasized, Indian goods (spices, textiles) were transported via the Oxus (Amu Darya) to Central Asia and subsequently toward the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea.

According to Greek and Roman sources, trade products were transported via the Amu Darya to the Hyrcanian (Caspian) Sea, and from there to the cities of the Caucasus and the Black Sea.<sup>6</sup> Chinese records (by the envoy and traveler Zhang Qian and the historian Sima Qian) also note that merchants living along the banks of the Amu Darya transported their goods to distant lands through both water and land routes.<sup>7</sup>

This significance further enhanced the role of the Amu Darya in international transit trade. The river connected Central Asia with India, Iran, Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea regions. Consequently, it served as a strategic trade artery, integrating both land and water routes.

<sup>5</sup> Абу Райҳон Беруний. Танланган асарлар. IV жилд (Геодезия). Араб тилидан А. Ирисов таржимаси. — Тошкент: «Фан», 1982, 168-175- бетлар; Абу Рейхан Бируни. Избранные произведения. Том IV (Геодезия). Перевод и примечания П. Г. Булгакова. — Ташкент: «Фан», 1966. стр 530-546

<sup>6</sup> Арриан. Поход Александра (Анабасис Александра) / Перевод М. Е. Сергеенко. — М.: МИФ, 1993. стр 125-127

<sup>7</sup> Сыма Цянь. Исторические записки («Ши цзи»). Том IX. Перевод с китайского Р. В. Вяткина. — М.: Восточная литература, 2010. стр 192-210

In ancient and medieval times, the Amu Darya served not only as a natural barrier but also as a vital communication system linking terrestrial trade routes. The strategic crossings and passes formed within the river basin were considered key logistical hubs connecting various branches of the Great Silk Road.

In particular, historical crossings such as Shurob, Kelif, and Chushkaguzar (near Termez) were the shortest and safest transit points connecting South and Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> Through these crossings, continuous economic and cultural ties between Bactria (Tokharistan) and Sogdiana were maintained.

As a result of the convergence of caravan routes at these points, major urban centers developed along the riverbanks and in their vicinity. For instance, while the city of Termez served as the largest port and transit hub on the Amu Darya, subsequent caravan routes were connected to metropolises such as Kesh (Shahrisabz) and Marakanda (Samarkand). This defined the region's geopolitical status within the international trade system.

The Amu Darya was of immeasurable importance in developing economic and cultural ties; not only precious stones<sup>9</sup>, metals<sup>10</sup>, handicraft products<sup>11</sup>, birds and animals<sup>12</sup> were transported across the river, but also cultural and religious<sup>13</sup> ideas. This process transformed Central Asia into a vital bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations. Through the river, Central Asia maintained economic and cultural relations with India, the Caucasus, the Black Sea region, and the Middle East.

The Amu Darya was a vital part of ancient trade routes, with numerous crossings, cities, and control posts situated along its banks. These locations were considered the primary hubs of caravan routes.

One of the oldest and most strategically significant crossing points in the Amu Darya basin is the Kelif crossing.<sup>14</sup> This crossing served not only as a means of connecting the two banks of the river but also as a geo-economic center where regional and international caravan routes converged.

The main routes passing through the Kelif crossing hold a special place in the region's history:

1. The Nasaf – Balkh route: This road was the shortest and most convenient trade artery connecting the southern oases of Sogdiana with the capital of Bactria.

<sup>8</sup> Ртвеладзе Э. В. Буюк Ипак йўли: Энциклопедик маълумотнома. — Тошкент: Ўзбекистон миллий энциклопедияси, 1999. — Б. 124–126.

<sup>9</sup> А.В.Ртвеладзе. Кўрсатилган асар.19 бет

<sup>10</sup> Шефер. Золотые персики Самарканда. М.. 1987.330-339-бетлар

<sup>11</sup> Шефер Кўрсатилган асар 261-274-бет

<sup>12</sup> Шефер Кўрсатилган асар 87-140-бетлар

<sup>13</sup> Б.А. Литвинский Древние связи Индии со Средней Азией. — Москва: Издательство восточной литературы, 1962.

А.Гафуров Таджики, Л.И. Альбаум. Живопись Афрасиаба. Ташкент, 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Камалиддинов Ш. С. Историческая география Южного Согда и Тохаристана по арабоязычным источникам IX — начала XIII вв. — Ташкент: Фан, 1996.

2. The Bukhara – Bezda – Kelif – Balkh route: This direction served as the primary transit route bringing trade caravans from the Bukhara oasis to the markets of South Asia.

The historical significance of the Kelif crossing lies in the fact that it intertwined the Sogdian culture and economy of the north with the Bactrian (later Tokharistan) civilization of the south. The continuous trade and cultural exchanges carried out through this crossing played a decisive role in ensuring the sustainable operation of the Great Silk Road.

Another crucial strategic point located in the middle reaches of the Amu Darya is the Shurob crossing. Its significance lies in the fact that Kampirtepa—a unique architectural monument of antiquity—is situated here. Archaeological research, particularly the excavations led by Academician Edvard Rtveladze, reveals that Kampirtepa served several vital functions throughout its development. From a military-strategic perspective, it was initially established in the late 4th century BCE as a fortified military fortress guarding the river crossing. By the Kushan period (1st–2nd centuries CE), Kampirtepa had transformed into a major trade and customs post on the international trade route and a port city serving as a harbor for ships.

Trade caravans moving through the Shurob crossing functioned as an economic bridge between Bactria and Sogdiana. Here, goods were inspected, and safe passage to the opposite bank of the river was ensured by ships. Today, the inclusion of Kampirtepa in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List confirms its high status not only in regional but also in world history.<sup>15</sup>

The Chushkaguzar crossing was considered not only a means of local communication but also a central transit hub on the southern branch of the Great Silk Road. Its significance is evident in several aspects. Through this crossing passed the primary trade highway connecting Margiana (Merv oasis) and Bactria (Balkh direction) in the south with the Surkhan oasis (Termez) and Sogdiana (Samarkand) in the north. At this specific point, the river's width and current provided the most favorable conditions for crossing by means of ships and rafts.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding its archaeological significance, numerous remains of ancient and early medieval fortresses and customs posts have been discovered in the vicinity of Chushkaguzar. Archaeologists (particularly E. Rtveladze) have proven the existence of military structures that guarded the ancient crossing in this area.

Excavations conducted at the Pattakesar site, located near the crossing, revealed coins and handicrafts from the Kushan period, indicating a high volume of trade turnover in this area.

The Chushkaguzar crossing can also be recognized as a significant religious and cultural center. It was precisely through the Chushkaguzar and nearby Termez crossings that Buddhism entered Central Asia from India. Pilgrims and monks crossed

<sup>15</sup> Кампиртепа 2008 йилда ЮНЕСКОнинг Бутунжаҳон мероси рўйхатига номзод сифатида («Ипак йўли: Сурхондарё коридори» таркибида) киритилган. 2018 йилда академик Эдвард Ртвеладзе томонидан Кампиртепанинг антик даврдаги машҳур Окс Александрияси (Alexandria on the Oxus) эканлиги ҳақидаги илмий хулосалар тақдим этилганидан сўнг, ушбу обиданинг халқаро мақоми янада мустаҳкамланган.

<sup>16</sup> Ртвеладзе Э. В. *О древних путях сообщения через Окс (Амударью)* // *Общественные науки в Узбекистане*. — Ташкент, 1982; Камалидинов Ш. С. *Историческая география Южного Согда и Тохаристана*. — Ташкент: Фан, 1996; *Ўзбекистон Миллий Энциклопедияси*, 1-жилд.2000. 446-447-бетлар

the river at these specific points to journey toward the Fayaztepa and Karatepa monasteries in Termez.

The Amul crossing (near the present-day city of Turkmenabat) was considered the most significant and famous crossing point in the middle reaches of the Amu Darya. It is precisely due to this crossing that the river later came to be called the Amu Darya. For centuries, the Amul crossing served as the 'heart' of the international transit route. Its geostrategic location and economic importance were of immense value. The Amul crossing connected two major regions of Central Asia—linking caravans coming from the south and west (Khorasan, Merv) with the oases in the north and east (Mawarannahr—Bukhara, Samarkand). One of the busiest branches of the Great Silk Road—the Merv – Amul – Bukhara – Samarkand highway—passed through this point.

In Arabic sources (for instance, in the works of Ibn Hawqal and Al-Istakhri), the Amul crossing is described as an extremely busy and bustling location.<sup>17</sup>

Hundreds of ships and rafts were engaged here in transporting merchants, their goods, and mounted troops from one bank of the river to the other.

The city of Amul developed around the crossing and transformed into a major center of trade and craftsmanship. Caravanserais, customs houses, and money exchange offices operated there.

Biruni and other encyclopedic scholars noted that the name 'Amu Darya' was formed based on the river passing near the city of Amul. During the period of the Arab conquests, the forces of Qutayba ibn Muslim also crossed into the heart of Mawarannahr specifically through the Amul crossing.<sup>18</sup>

Trade routes passing through the Amu Darya served to connect major cities; in particular, cities such as Termez, Balkh, Bukhara, Nasaf (Karshi), Kesh (Shahrisabz), and Marakanda (Samarkand) were vital hubs for caravan trade.

The Amu Darya river has served as a vital transit route in international trade since ancient times. Its geographical location and water resources transformed it into a strategic path connecting the major trade centers of Bactria, Sogdiana, and Central Asia.

It is worth noting that throughout the ancient and medieval periods, the Amu Darya (Oxus/Jayhun) served not only as a natural-geographical feature but also as the economic and strategic artery of Central Asian civilization. The conducted research and analysis of historical sources allow for the following scientific conclusions:

1. Trans-regional Trade Route: As a vital component of the Great Silk Road, the Amu Darya served as a primary water and land corridor connecting South Asia (India), the Middle East, and Europe. Ancient authors (Strabo, Arrian) and Chinese sources (Zhang Qian) confirm the river's transit significance in delivering Indian goods to the Caspian and Black Sea basins.
2. Strategic Crossings and Urban Development: Crossings such as Amul, Kelif, Shurob, and Chushkaguzar in the river basin served as logistical hubs ensuring interregional economic integration. The formation of major port cities like Termez and Amul around these crossings laid the groundwork for their development as both military and customs-trade centers.

<sup>17</sup> Ал-Истахрий. *Китоб масалик ал-мамалик*. (BGA — Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum, pars 1). — Lugduni Batavorum (Leiden), 1927. стр.282-285

<sup>18</sup>Бартольд В. В. *Работы по исторической географии*. — М.: Восточная литература, 2002 ; Ўзбекистон миллий энциклопедияси. 1-жилд. — Тошкент, 2000. 446-бет ; Камалиддинов Ш. С. *Историческая география Южного Согда и Тохаристана*. — Ташкент: Фан, 1996. 142-145-бетлар

3. Cultural and Technological Diffusion: The Amu Darya valley was not merely a space for commodity exchange, but a primary cultural corridor through which technological achievements (glazed pottery, metallurgy) and religious ideas (Buddhism, Islam) spread. Unique artifacts, such as the kidney-shaped vessels discovered at the Jarkutan site, prove the synthesis between Indo-Mesopotamian and Central Asian cultures.

The Amu Darya basin acted as a "global bridge" with high transit potential in the ancient and medieval world, fostering a shared economic space between peoples despite serving as a political boundary in literary works like the 'Shahnameh'. Analyzing this historical experience is critical for developing modern regional transport corridors.

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