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## ARMENIA AND ARMENIANS ON THE SILK ROAD IN THE 17<sup>th</sup> CENTURY (ACCORDING TO TRAVEL DIARIES OF THE FRENCH MERCHANT JEAN-BAPTISTE TAVERNIER)

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This article deals with the commercial and religious activities of Armenian people in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the territories of modern states such as Armenia, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran; determines the level of involvement in intermediary trade between Europe and Asia; explores the reliability of Tavernier’s diaries to compare his description with modern data.

**Keywords:** Armenia, Silk Road, One Belt One Road, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, commerce, religion, Persia, Middle East

**Jean-Baptiste Tavernier**<sup>1</sup> (1605–1689) was a 17<sup>th</sup> century French gem merchant and traveler. Tavernier was a private individual and merchant traveling at his own expense, making six voyages to Persia and India between the years 1630–1668<sup>2</sup>. In 1675, Tavernier, at the behest of his patron, Louis XIV, published *Les Six*

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<sup>1</sup> Tavernier was born in Paris of a French Huguenot family that had immigrated to Antwerp to escape persecution and subsequently returned to Paris after the publication of the Edict of Nantes which promised protection for French Protestants (Fig. 1). Tavernier is best known for the discovery/purchase of the 116 carat Tavernier Blue Diamond that he subsequently sold to Louis XIV of France in 1668 for 120,000 livres the equivalent of 172,000 ounces of pure gold and a letter of ennoblement [“ ‘Cursed’ Louis subsequently had the Tavernier Blue recut into the 68 carat *French Blue* and the *Hope Diamond* was cut from that stone, tests show”. *The Independent*. 11 February 2005]. In 1669 Tavernier purchased for 60,000 livres the Seigneurie of Aubonne, located in the Duchy of Savoy near the city of Geneva and became Baron of Aubonne. As far as his father Gabriel and his uncle Melchior were cartographers it is clear from the accuracy of his drawings that Tavernier received some instruction in the art of cartography/engraving, he was possessed of wanderlust and while still a teenager traveled extensively through Europe and achieved a working knowledge of its major languages.

<sup>2</sup> James Augustus St., 1831, *The Lives of Celebrated travellers, (Volume 1)*. H. Colburn and R. Bentley, p. 167.

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*Voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (Six Voyages)*<sup>3</sup>. Tavernier's writings demonstrate that he was a keen observer as well as a remarkable cultural anthropologist. Diaries of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier are a valuable source for the study of the history of political, economic and spiritual culture of the eastern countries. They also contain significant data about the Armenians and Armenia related to the trade along the Silk Road, as well as the role of Armenians in the area of economic and cultural ties with European countries. His book *Six Voyages* became a bestseller and was translated into German, Dutch, Italian and English during his lifetime. The original book is stored in the National library of France and the translated versions can be found in the British library in London.

Over the centuries, the nation has stubbornly withheld the constant threat of invasion and cultural assimilation from the Roman, Persian and Byzantine empires, and Arab caliphates. However, after the invasion and separation of the Armenian state, Armenians continued to play a significant role in international trade even in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; moreover they were one of those who were actively involved in the processes of cultural, economic and religious interchange along the Silk Road.

Today the concept of "One Belt, One Road" stands for great cooperation in this broad region aimed at connecting the Asia-Pacific and European economies. The study of the issues and activities of different nations along the Road is becoming very important.

Thus, we are specifically interested in the first book (describes the road from Paris to Isfahan), the third (on roads through Turkey and Persia) and the fourth books (explores Persia) – particular in the frame of Armenian people and their activities.

The first mention of Armenians can be found in the second chapter of his first book, "The Road from Constantinople to Isfahan", which the author kept in his fifth travels into Persia.

"...the Bank of the river called Zaccarat, which runs northward and falls into the Black Sea... a League from the River is a great Town called Ada, the cheapest<sup>4</sup> part of the Inhabitants whereof are Armenians. Thither we went for excellent good wine, and other necessary refreshments..."<sup>5</sup> [Tavernier 1677, 3].

This is followed by a detailed description of the Armenian capital Erivan but is most fascinating for the observations made by travelers of the remains of Armenian Kingdom:

"It is the custom of the Armenians, when they hear of the approach of a Caravans, to ride out two or three days journey to meet their Country-Men and carry them fresh Provisions" [Tavernier 1677, 6]. "Erzerom<sup>6</sup> is a frontier Town of Turkey towards Persia... From Kars to Erivan the Caravan makes in nine days journey. The next day you come to the ruins of a great city, called in the Armenian language

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<sup>3</sup> Muzaffar Alam, 2010, *Indo-Persian travels in the age of discoveries, 1400–1800*. Cambridge University Press, p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> Most important.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, 1677, *The Six voyages of John Baptista Tavernier, Baron of Aubonne; through Turkey, into Persia and the East-Indies, for the space of forty years. Giving an account of the present state of those countries, viz. of the religion, government, customs, and commerce of every country; and the figures, weight, and value of the money current all over Asia. To which is added, a new description of the seraglio*. Made English by J. P. Added likewise, *A Voyage into the Indies, &c. by an English traveller, never before printed: publish'd by Dr Daniel Cox*. London: Printed by William Godbid, for Robert Littlebury at the King's Arms in Little Britain, and Moses Pitt at the Angel in St Paul's Church-yard, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Erzurum (now city of Turkey).

the city of Ani, which was the name of Armenian King that was the founder of it” [Tavernier 1677, 9].

Chapter III. “A continuation of the Road from Constantinople to Ispahan, from the Borders of Persia to Erivan”. Tavernier describes Erivan from the religious point of view and highlights the importance of the Christianity: the lifestyle of Armenian monks, names of Armenian saints, religious traditions of Armenians, holy mountain Ararat, legends from Bible, the role of the three Churches of Erivan etc.

“The custom of all the Armenians, as well those that come out of Persia, as those that travel into Persia, is to perform their Devotions as at these Three Churches; and the Caravan stops usually five or six days, during which time they confess, and receive Absolution from the Patriarch...” [Tavernier 1677, 10–11].

We presume that the replenishment of the Patriarch’s treasury was done on purpose. The explanation could be that the Armenian Christians above fifteen years of age had to pay five sous<sup>7</sup> to the Patriarch every year, but if somebody was poor and could not do it rich people compensated by paying two or three crowns per head. The revenue of the Patriarch was six hundred thousand crowns but it does not mean that the money remained in Patriarch’s pockets. He used it to pay the *Carage* for poor Armenians, which is an annual tribute that they owed to Mahometan Princes, to whom they belonged. Otherwise they would have forced them to become Muslims and their wives and children would have been sold. It shows the fact that Armenians used to use the Silk Road not only as a source of enrichment but also as the way to preserve their religion. One more fact speaks about a particular attitude of Armenians to their religion. When the caravan was ready to set out from Nakhichivan for Julfa<sup>8</sup>, which was a few days journey, an Armenian in authority usually chose the way to the Convent of St. Stephen which was laid to the south. This road starts from a great village called Ecclisia. Here lived the richest person in Armenia, a successful silk trader who built a big church there.

Speaking about the inhabitants of Erivan, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier writes:

“...there are many ancient Armenian families in Erivan, which is their native country... The City not being far remote from the Province from where the Silk comes, is the place where all the buyers and sellers resort. But neither in Erivan, not in any other part of Persia are the merchants put to open their bales at the Custom House, as in Turkie. They only pay certain duties toward securing the Highways; which duties they call *Raderies*, and those that gather them *Raders*”<sup>9</sup> [Tavernier 1677, 14].



(Illustration 1) Jean-Baptiste Tavernier in Persian King costume (1665 p.)

<sup>7</sup> One of the three denominations of money at the time in France (12 deniers make one sou).

<sup>8</sup> There are a few versions of the name e.g. Jolfa, Dzhulfa, Jugha.

<sup>9</sup> Rahdar (from Persian) – a keeper of a toll road, road guardian.

By the time of Tavernier's journeys the Great Silk Road was not used as a trade route from West to the East as it was in 2 BC – 16 AD. However, the rules of trade including tax duties, places for staying such as caravansaries, and even the cities which used to be a great trade centers were still used by caravans. Moreover, silk remained one of the most important commodities of Asian trade by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the map of Erivan Tavernier allocated station G and M [Tavernier 1677, 15] which proves the fact that during the Great Silk Road's time Erivan was one of the biggest and most important places on the route (Illustration 2, 3). Tavernier mentioned The Great Silk road plenty of times in his writings calling it The Great Road [Tavernier 1677, 19–20, 104, 247]. In the list of the principal cities of Persia, Chirvan or Erivan are identified as the meeting points of the Silk Caravans and one of the richest *Kanats* or Governments of Persia [Tavernier 1677, 136].

Regarding silk production and trade, the city of Astabat, situated on the banks of Arax River, is the only country in the world that produces *Ronas*<sup>10</sup>.

*This root was used for many centuries (even now in Europe) to dye silk into red, brown, orange colors.*

Tavernier reports then:

“...The Ronas is a root that grown in the earth like Licuorice, and is not much bigger. The use of it is to dye Red, and this that Red which gives that beautiful tincture to all the Calicuts that come out of the Mogul's Country” [Tavernier 1677, 19].

What is the city of Astabat? Does it still exist? In the sources of the Caucasus war there is information about Abbasbad fortress that had been built on the site of an ancient fortress ruined by “The Lion” of Iran, Shah Abbas, at the time when his army completely destroyed the whole of Armenia<sup>11</sup>. The period when the old fortress was built has been forgotten. We know that in the mid-century of Christian chronology a large settlement Asdabad was mentioned, and in the 14<sup>th</sup> century there was a famous Armenian monastery called the Red Monastery (in Armenian “Կարմիր վանք<sup>12</sup>”), which is often mentioned in Armenian history.

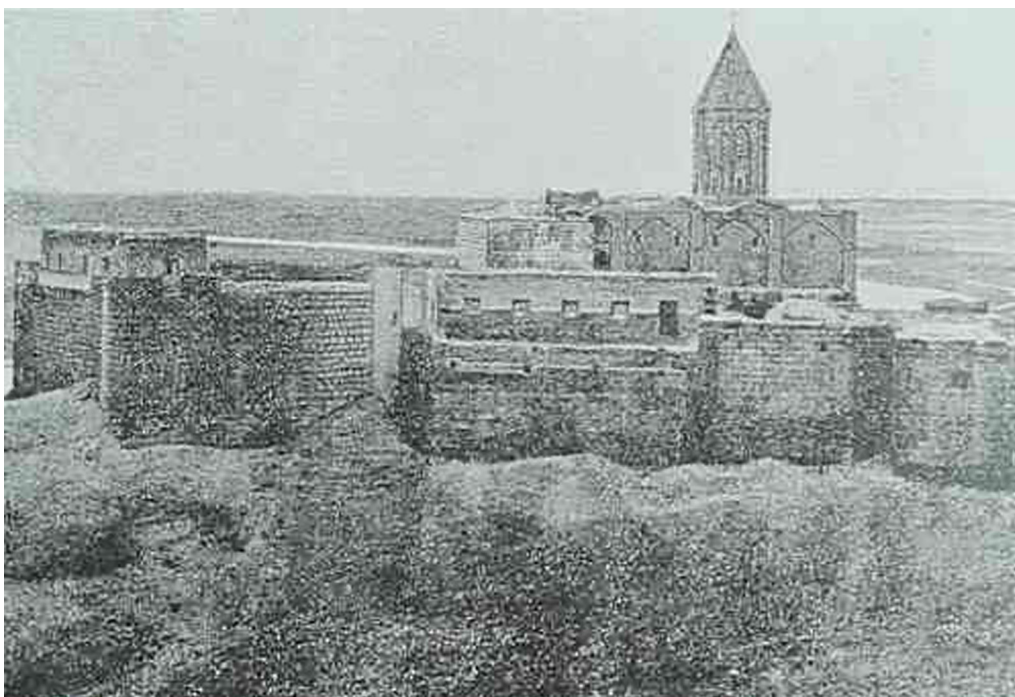


(Illustration 2) The Platform of Erivan and the Suburbs. M. Market place for sale of goods.  
G. The highway for the caravans (1670)

<sup>10</sup> *Rubia tinctorium* (name of the plant).

<sup>11</sup> Gen. V. A. Potto, 1885–86, *The Caucasian Wars of Russia from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward*. Volumes 1–5. SPb, reprinted in 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Because of red color of the blood of Armenians which were wounded by Persians on Avarayr field and were brought to the monastery.



(Illustration 3) *Red Monastery* (ovenk.com/ Armenian memory institute)

In the book of A. M. Khudobashev the city of Asdabad is mentioned as one of the biggest and most beautiful cities of Armenia together with Yerevan, Nakhichevan, Meri, Berde, etc.<sup>13</sup> It means that by the time of Tavernier's travels Asdabad was already a part of Persian Empire.

However, Armenian cities were not just a part of the Silk Road where international bazaars took place but Armenians as a nation were good at trade. It is demonstrated by the fact that when the territory of Armenia was divided between Turkey and Persia, Shah Abbas the King of Persia sent above two hundred and seventy thousand Armenian families into Guilan<sup>14</sup>.

"The Armenians drove a great trade in Silk formerly in this town, which is now very much abated..." [Tavernier 1677, 16].

Guilan was the place where merchants used to bring silk and the best merchants were sent to Isfahan by the King to trade in silk. According to Tavernier's diaries, having lost everything after Turkish invasions, many Armenian merchants had to borrow commodities from the King of Persia which they later repaid. This helped them get back on their feet again.

There is a question why Shah Abbas forced Armenians to move from their motherland to Persian cities where most inhabitants were Muslims? On several occasions, trying to establish good commercial exchange with Europe, the King sent his traders with good quality silk from Isfahan to the King of France, Spain and to the Venetian Republic but without much success. It was assumed that the determining factor was not the talent of Armenians in trading but in their religion. Shah Abbas knew that to cooperate with Europeans it is crucial to understand their

<sup>13</sup> Александр Макарович Худобашев. 1859, *Обозрение Армении в географическом, историческом и литературном отношениях*. Типография II-го Отделения Е. И. В. Канцелярии (Санкт-Петербург), стр. 25–26.

<sup>14</sup> Guilan province is situated in the south of the Caspian Sea, now territory of Iran.

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mentality which was directly influenced by religion. The only devout Christians in the Persian Kingdom at that time were Armenians.

“Sha-Abas observing the little inclination of his subjects to Trade, who were naturally addicted to Pride and Expence, which is no part of a Merchant’s business, caths<sup>15</sup> his eyes upon the Armenians...” [Tavernier 1677, 158].

The King gave to Armenians bales of silk which they had to repay upon their return. This not only enabled Armenians to become brilliant traders but also allowed them to enjoy special privilege among the Christians of the Persian Kingdom. For example, the King prohibited Mahometans to live in Julfa, so the Armenians could freely manifest their religion without any fears of being converted in Islam. Moreover, a famous and rich *khoja*<sup>16</sup> Petrus was permitted to donate his money to build Armenian churches in Julfa.

Tavernier also wrote about two caravanserais, one on each side of the river Arax, established by the rich and famous *khojia* Nazar of New Julfa (now Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, Azerbaijan) in memory of his native city. Armenian sources say that Nazar was a rich merchant from New Julfa who had good relations with Shah Abbas who ultimately made him *kalantar*<sup>17</sup> of Armenian nation. Tavernier’s diary proves it:

“...Cogia Nazar spent above an hundred thousand Crowns, but dying left tow remarkable peaces of work unfinished...” [Tavernier 1677, 19].

Another privilege given by Shah Abbas was the permission to use gold, silver and European silk for Armenian clothes as Persians did. Armenians had the right to choose their own chief in the city whom they called *Kelonter*<sup>18</sup> who charged them taxes they had to pay to the King every year. Armenians who were forced to move there did not only promote flourishing commercial activity but they also built a new city called New Zulfa<sup>19</sup> which was separated from Isfahan by the river of Senderou<sup>20</sup>. A whole chapter of Tavernier’s book is dedicated to Julfa city, i.e. New Julfa that was built by Armenian migrants.

“Zulfa a colony of Armenians which Sha-Abas brought from Zulfa a city of Armenia, is so much increased for some years since, that it may now past for a large, large City... Neither was Sha-Abas so cruel in transplanting the Armenians away out of their own Country; for they were all at that season poor labouring men, who knew not at all what belonged to Trade” [Tavernier 1677, 158–159].

To find some artifacts regarding Armenian merchants’ activity at that time, some sources were researched regarding the history of Persia and the following was found: Marnan Bridge was built in 1599 and measures 160 meters long. It was formerly known as Sar Afraz Bridge, but as it was a connection to Marnan Village it eventually adopted this name. It was built by a rich member of the Armenian community of the Safavid era (1502–1736).

A screenshot from Google Maps shows Marnan Bridge connecting Julfa (Armenian quarter in Isfahan) and the rest of the city of Isfahan. This means that the Marnan Bridge was built by one of those Armenian merchants that were resettled by Shah Abbas to trade in silk.

<sup>15</sup> Caught from catch.

<sup>16</sup> Derives from Persian honorific title *Khwaja* (landlord, master, prince) and means a group of people who converted to Islam. Later it was used for Armenian merchants who played a significant role between Levant and Middle East starting from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>17</sup> From Persian (میرتلاک) means sheriff, marshal; head of the elder.

<sup>18</sup> Քալանտար – mayor.

<sup>19</sup> Now Armenian quarter of Isfahan city in Iran. It’s called also Julfa.

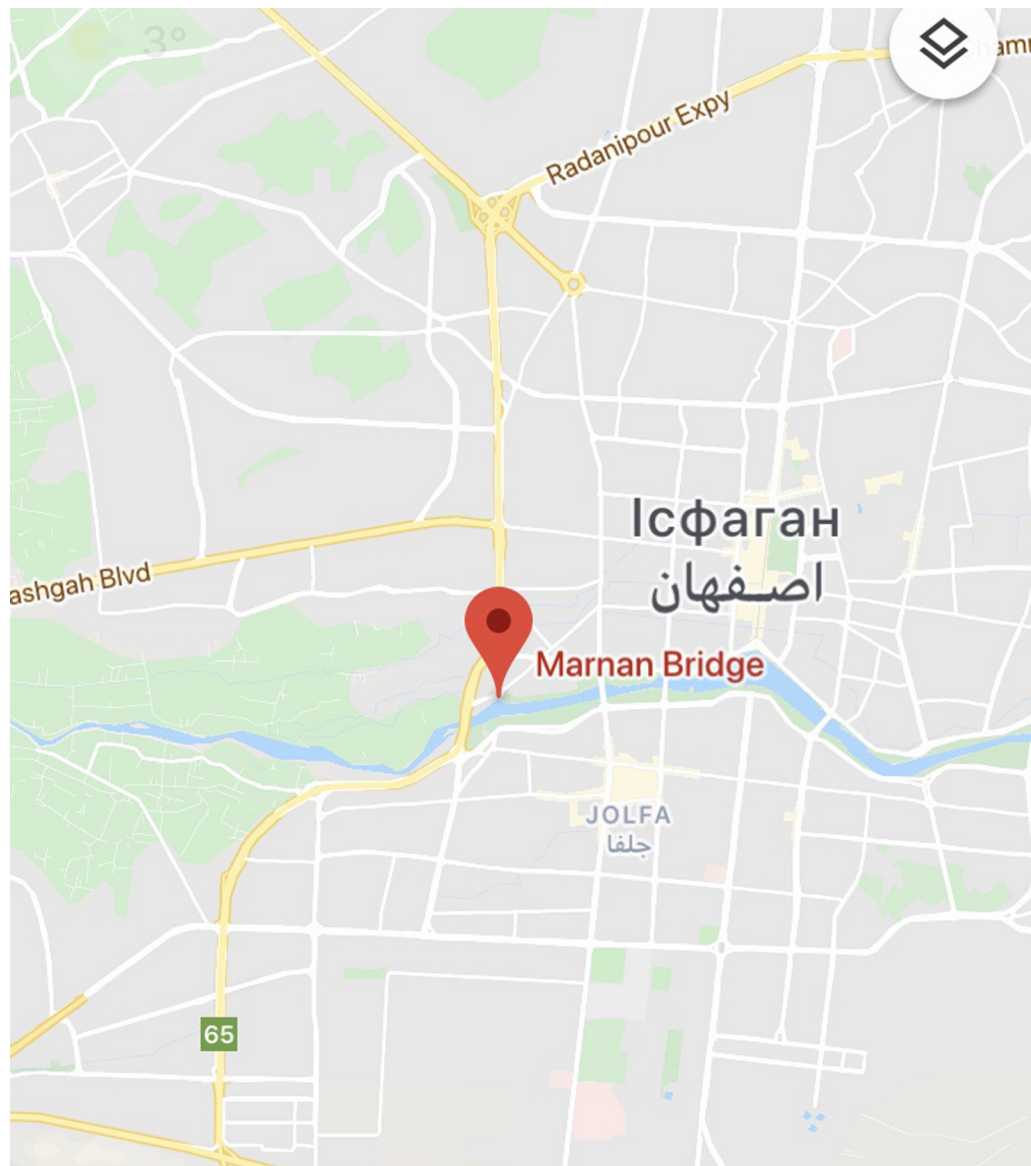
<sup>20</sup> Zayandeh River.



(Illustration 4) On the left – Armenian lady from Julfa (Persia), 1676

In Chapter IX (Book Three) “A relation of the present State of Georgia” Tavernier reports that it was formerly a Kingdom where all the inhabitants were Christian Armenians and that there were also Greek churches. After the King of Persia conquered Georgia, the country was divided into two kingdoms which he called provinces of Persia. The King of Tiflis made silver coins with the name of the King of Persia. These coins were very popular and were used for international trade like the Spanish Real, French Crown, etc. The interesting fact is that, according to the author’s writings, all these coins were brought from Europe by the Armenians in exchange for their goods. This means they were engaged in international trade and had access to both European and Asian markets.

The fourth book “Description of Persia” Tavernier started with the fact that Great Armenia was the most important part of the Persian Kingdom. The principal cities of it were Erivan, Nakhchivan, Julfa and Van. The traveler then gives a very detailed description of all aspects of Persia, including their climate, food, agricultural peculiarities, fruits, animal diversity, etc.



(Illustration 5) A screenshot from Google Maps shows Marnan Bridge, nowadays

Speaking about animals, Tavernier underlines:

“...poultry is very plentiful in Persia; and the Armenians brought out of Europe the way how to feed Capons; the fatted they presented to the King, who liked them so well, that he ordered that the richest of the Armenians should be commanded to provide such a number every year. There are no Turkeys in all Asia; but the Armenians trafficking to Venice carried some from thence, which when the King had tasted, he liked so well, that he ordered the Armenians to breed him up such a number, and to stock the Kingdom with them” [Tavernier 1677, 146].

Tavernier also mentions the talent of Armenians to speak foreign languages, particularly Italian and French, having learnt them in Europe. It is said that they also learnt foreign languages in church in order to conduct commerce with France.

Thus, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Armenians were actively involved in the trade of the Persian Empire with Armenian merchants contributing greatly to East-West trade along the Great Silk Road. Along with Jewish, Greek and Italian merchants, Armenians



played a major role in meeting the European demand for silk and other raw materials.

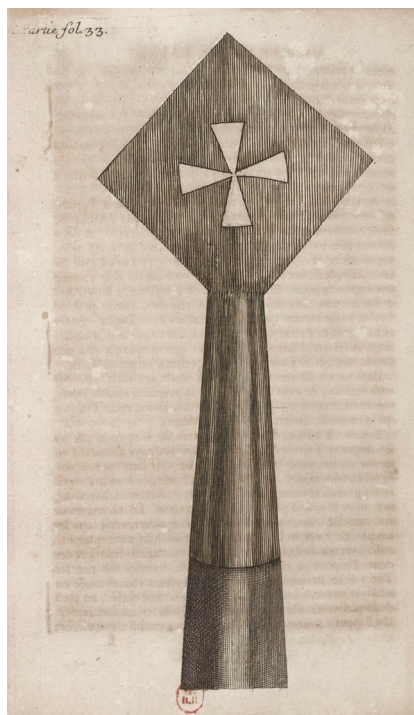
In European countries such as France, Spain and Italy the trade not only involved the merchants from Armenia but also Armenians from Persia who were in charge of distribution activities between Europe and the Middle East. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Armenians had become known for their energy and solid trade relations and acted in the major commercial centers along the Silk Road. Many of the representatives of the Armenian merchants created new horizons not only in economic interaction, but also in cultural relations. Armenians established close links with the commercial centers of Iran and Central Asia. In Julfa city Armenians played an important role in the international barter of goods and were the most important intermediaries in trade between Europe and Asia. They held a monopoly in the export of silk not only from the Far East but also from Iran. Their commercial transactions were conducted according to the rules and laws of the time.

The level of involvement in trade has a broader meaning. Their close adherence to their religious beliefs while trading shows that they used trade to maintain and preserve their religious devotion. The great network of trade routes, well developed access to the European markets, a reputation for being talented traders, the spread of Armenian Church, the preservation of language and national culture – all this explains the importance of the Armenian community in the Persian Empire of that time.

Over the centuries Armenia enjoyed a great cultural and economic experience from being a link between East and West. “One belt, one road” has piqued the interest of numerous countries and the details of how the concept would function economically, politically and culturally have become the biggest obstacle standing in the way of reviving the Silk Road to its past glory. A comprehensive experience, great knowledge, rich cultural background, long history, as well as their geographical position along the Great Silk Road are all factors that would allow the Armenian nation to successfully contribute this project. China and its leaders, who are currently intensively promoting this initiative, should not forget about the historical importance of Armenia for the Silk Road in the past.

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(Illustration 6) *Sketch of a Holy Lance from the monastery of Geghard (Armenia), 1676*

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*the seraglio*, Made English by J. P. Added likewise, A Voyage into the Indies, &c. by an English traveller, never before printed: publish'd by Dr Daniel Cox, Printed by William Godbid, for Robert Littlebury at the King's Arms in Little Britain, and Moses Pitt at the Angel in St Paul's Church-yard, London.

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### **ВІРМЕНІЯ І ВІРМЕНИ НА ШОВКОВОМУ ШЛЯХУ У XVII СТОЛІТТІ (НА ОСНОВІ ЩОДЕННИКІВ ФРАНЦУЗЬКОГО ТОРГОВЦЯ ЖАНА-БАТИСТА ТАВЕРНЬЄ)**

*О. М. Шевченко*

У статті досліджується комерційна та релігійна діяльності вірмен у XVII столітті на територіях сучасних держав, зокрема, Вірменії, Туреччини, Грузії, Азербайджану та Ірану. Крім того, подається оцінка рівня залученості представників вірменського етносу у торгівлю між Сходом та Заходом, зокрема уздовж Великого шовкового шляху. У статті також робиться спроба визначити відповідність матеріалу у записках Жана-Батиста Таверньє реальним даним.

**Ключові слова:** Вірменія, Великий шовковий шлях, Жан-Батист Таверньє, “Один пояс, Один шлях”, торгівля, релігія, Персія, Близький Схід

### **АРМЕНИЯ И АРМЯНЕ НА ШЕЛКОВОМ ПУТИ В XVII СТОЛЕТИИ (НА ОСНОВЕ ДНЕВНИКОВ ФРАНЦУЗСКОГО КУПЦА ЖАНА-БАТИСТА ТАВЕРНЬЄ)**

*Е. Н. Шевченко*

В статье исследуется коммерческая и религиозная деятельность армян в XVII столетии на территориях современных государств, таких как Армения, Турция, Грузия, Азербайджан, Иран. Кроме того, подается оценка уровня вовлеченности представителей армянского народа в торговлю между Востоком и Западом, а именно – вдоль Великого шелкового пути. В статье также осуществляется попытка оценить соответствие материала записей Жана-Батиста Таверньє реальным данным.

**Ключевые слова:** Армения, Великий шелковый путь, Жан-Батист Таверньє, “Один пояс, Один путь”, торговля, религия, Персия, Ближний Восток

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