

## Description of Written Sources on The Trade and Economic Relations of Tokharistan

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes written sources related to the trade and economic relations of Tokharistan in the early medieval period from the perspective of source studies. The author examines various groups of sources that reflect the history and economic life of Tokharistan, including Chinese dynastic chronicles and Buddhist travel accounts, Arab-Persian historical and geographical works, local and regional written traditions (Sogdian, Turkic, Armenian, and Byzantine), as well as Indian and Tibetan sources.

The article provides a scholarly analysis of information contained in these sources regarding the geographical location of Tokharistan, its political structure, urban network, transit trade routes, and economic resources. Special attention is given to issues related to toponyms, ethnonyms, distance measurements, and problems of transcription found in historical texts.

The study concludes that during the early medieval period Tokharistan functioned as an important transit region located at the crossroads of international trade routes connecting Central Asia, India, and Iran. The author emphasizes that a comparative source-based analysis of different groups of sources is of significant scholarly importance for reconstructing the trade and economic relations of Tokharistan.

**Keywords:** - Tokharistan, Tukholo, Wei Shu, Xuanzang, Song Yun, Amu Darya, Chaghaniyan, Termez, "Iron Gates", Chinese dynastic chronicles, Arab-Persian historical sources, Buddhist travel records, Indian and Tibetan sources, transit trade routes, source-study analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

In Uzbekistan, during the period of independence, the need to re-examine national history objectively and on the basis of reliable sources has significantly increased. In this process, the role of source studies (source criticism) is particularly important, since the study of regional history requires not only a narrative description of events,

but also an analysis of written sources by taking into account their origin, purpose, nature of information, and degree of reliability. In this regard, in order to study the trade and economic relations of Tokharistan in the early Middle Ages, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive comparative analysis of sources created in different languages and traditions, particularly

through the example of regions that functioned as transit trade centers.

The history of Central Asia in the Early Middle Ages, particularly the economic relations within the system of oasis states (such as Chach–Ilaq, Fergana, Sogd, and others), represents one of the most complex and relatively understudied periods. During this time, Tokharistan stood out due to its geostrategic location, its position at the crossroads of major transit routes, and its developed urban culture. From a historical-geographical perspective, Tokharistan was situated along both banks of the Amu Darya and is described as a region bounded by the Hissar mountain range in the north, the Hindu Kush in the south, the Pamirs in the east, and the basins of the Murghab and Herirud rivers in the west.

Historically, the territory of Tokharistan encompassed present-day Southern Uzbekistan (including the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions), Southern Tajikistan, and Northern Afghanistan. In these processes, Tokharistan—particularly the areas located within the basin of the Amu Darya—played a significant role.

In the Early Middle Ages, Northern Tokharistan occupied an important place in the geopolitical life of Central Asia. This region was considered a strategic area where the interests of the Sasanian Empire, the Hephthalites, the Turkic Khaganate, and later the Arab Caliphate intersected and clashed. These historical and political processes are reflected in written sources in different ways.

The name Tokharistan is first recorded in scholarly literature in translation works dating back to 383 CE. In Chinese and early Arab sources, the region is described as a country situated along both banks of the Amu Darya and is also referred to as T'ou-ho-lo, Tou-ho-l-o, or Tou-hou-lo.

In scholarly literature, one widely held view links the term “Tokharistan” to the ethnonym “Tokhar,” referring to one of the nomadic tribes that ended the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom in the II century BCE.

The occurrence of the name Tokharistan in various source traditions is of significant importance for conducting a comparative analysis of information about the region. The name “Tukhāra” is recorded in Buddhist texts dating to the IV century CE, including the Vibhāsa-sastra. In Tibetan sources,

the region is referred to as Thod-kar or Tho-gar.

In Chinese sources, this ethnonym appears in various transcriptions. In Northern Wei period texts, it is recorded as Tukhara or Tuxuluo, while in Tang dynasty sources it appears as Tuhuoluo. Additionally, some sources note variants such as Doushaluo, Douquluo, or Duhuoluo. Other regional traditions also preserve different forms of the name. For example, in Khotanese sources it appears as Ttaugara, in Uighur sources as twghry, and in Armenian sources as T'ukri-k'. This evidence demonstrates that the name Tokharistan was widely disseminated across a broad geographical area and adapted to various linguistic contexts.

In the early centuries, Tokharistan geographically and historically formed part of the territories of the Kushan state. From the 1st to the 4th centuries CE, the Kushan Empire encompassed a large part of Central Asia, and its economic and cultural influence was clearly manifested in the region of Tokharistan.

From the 4th century onward, significant changes were observed in the political life of the region, as local property systems and forms of territorial administration began to take shape. Some researchers associate this process with the emergence of a multi-centered political governance system characteristic of the Early Middle Ages. This indicates that several local estates existed within the territory of Tokharistan.

From the Kushan period through the Early Middle Ages, Tokharistan played an important role in the history of Central Asian peoples as a key center for the dissemination of religious teachings such as Buddhism and Manichaeism. This, in turn, facilitated the region's integration into international trade networks. The population of Tokharistan was ethnically diverse, comprising settled agricultural communities, semi-nomadic groups, and nomadic tribes. This diversity was a significant factor in the region's economic life, particularly in the development of craftsmanship and trade relations.

During this period, the development of urban culture and property systems in Tokharistan is also confirmed by archaeological evidence. For example, certain archaeological sites identified in present-day southern Tajikistan indicate the

existence of palace gardens and administrative centers during the Kushan period. This, in turn, provides indirect evidence of urban economies and trade infrastructure in the region.

### **Groups of Sources and Their Informational Potential.**

Written sources illuminating the trade and economic relations of Tokharistan in the Early Middle Ages have been preserved in various languages and traditions:

1. Chinese dynastic chronicles and Buddhist travel accounts.
2. Arab–Persian historical and geographical works.
3. Local and regional written traditions (Sogdian, Turkic runic, Armenian, and partially Greek/Byzantine accounts).
4. Buddhist Indian and Tibetan traditions (used as auxiliary sources for interpreting ethnonyms and geographical names).

The majority of these sources do not directly describe the “history of trade”; rather, they provide information within the contexts of diplomacy, administrative records, travel routes, customs and traditions, and territorial classifications. Therefore, these sources acquire particular value for economic history as indirect sources of information—through references to resources, means of transport, transit points, networks of cities, and mechanisms of control.

#### **1) Chinese dynastic chronicles and Buddhist travel accounts:**

The earliest systematic information about Tokharistan has been preserved in Chinese dynastic chronicles. In these sources, references to Tuhuluo / Tuholo (Tokharistan) usually appear in the context of the arrival of envoys, the exchange of tribute and gifts, territorial descriptions, and administrative information. In the Wei shu chronicle, it is recorded that in the V century—specifically during the Heping era (464 CE)—an envoy from the kingdom of Tuhuluo arrived at the Wei court bearing gifts. Importantly, later sources do not mention other envoys from Tuhuluo visiting the Wei court. Therefore, the description of Tuhuluo in the Wei shu was largely formed on the

basis of information brought by this embassy of 464 CE, reflecting the political situation that developed after the fragmentation of the Great Yuezhi state.

The chronicle also mentions distances along various routes, a major city (Boti), a large river flowing westward (Hanlouhe), as well as agricultural products (various types of grain) and pastoral resources, including horses and camels.

These data are significant from a trade and economic perspective, as they indirectly indicate that urban centers and riverine infrastructure functioned as natural support points for caravan movement. They also suggest that resources such as grain products, horses, and camels participated in both internal and external exchange relations.

At the same time, when using the Wei shu data, it is necessary to take into account certain geographical and metrological inconsistencies. Distances recorded in the chronicle (for example, 12,000 li from Daida to Tuhuluo) can appear inconsistent when compared with other geographical points. Therefore, such information should be employed in comparative analyses alongside archaeological and toponymic evidence, taking into consideration the period-specific standards of the li unit, the circuitous nature of the routes, and transcription features.

By the 6th–8th centuries, information about Tokharistan expanded in chronicles such as the Bei shi, Sui shu, Tang shu, and Xin Tang shu. Scholars suggest that many of the reports in these chronicles may be linked to information obtained from a Tokharistan envoy who visited the Sui imperial court in 615 CE, together with envoys from other Central Asian states. These sources describe local customs, military strength, state organization, and certain ethnosocial characteristics (including references related to the Idan/Yada groups). For economic history, such information is important for understanding how the interaction between nomadic and sedentary communities shaped the production of goods (wool and cotton), means of transport (horses and camels), and the mechanisms of transit control (taxation and inspection points).

In the Bei shi, the capital of Tuholo is described as a small city with a circumference of 2 li (approximately 1 km), yet at the same time it is

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noted to have a select army of 100,000 soldiers, which creates an apparent contradiction. This inconsistency is likely explained by the merging of different layers of information within a single text, such as embassy reports, older data, or excerpts copied from other sources. This situation underscores the need for careful source criticism and comparative verification when using these chronicles.

One of the Chinese travelers of the late 5th to early 6th centuries, Song Yu (519 CE), left information not about Tokharistan itself, but about the adjacent mountainous region of Bo-ho (Wakhan). According to his account, this area was distinguished by high mountains, deep valleys, and harsh climatic conditions. These observations indicate that the natural environment in Tokharistan and the neighboring mountainous regions directly influenced the lifestyle of the population, economic activities, and the formation of communication routes. At the same time, this factor also affected the development of trade routes that passed through the mountain corridors.

In the 7th century, one of the most detailed sources on Tokharistan is the Buddhist traveler Xuanzang. According to his account, Tokharistan consisted of numerous local estates, which he described as a political-territorial space comprising approximately 27 estates. The country stretched roughly 1,000 li (350–500 km) from north to south and about 3,000 li (approximately 1,500 km) from west to east. Northern Tokharistan included regions such as Chinguyana (Chaghaniyan), Hwonlomo (Khawarman), Su-man (Shuman), Qiao-hu yenna (Khabadiyan), Hu-sha (Vakhsh), Ho-tolo (Khuttal), and Kumito (Kumed). Xuanzang also provided information on the scale of the country, linking its borders to the Pamirs–Hissar–Hindu Kush ranges and the Persian territories. In his description, the “Great River” (Amu Darya) holds a prominent place as the main transport-geographical axis that facilitated economic connections between cities and estates.

In his travel account, Xuanzang notes that he moved southward through Suye – Chach – Samarkand – Bukhara and entered Tokharistan via a strategic pass surrounded on both sides by high mountains, known as the Temir Darvaza. This strategic pass is referred to in Chinese sources as Tie-men, in Turkic sources as Temir Qapiq, and in Persian sources as Darband-i Ohani. All these

terms linguistically mean “Iron Gate.” Some researchers associate the Iron Gate with the Boysun mountain region. According to the sources, this pass was an important control point for trade caravans traveling from India and Iran to Central Asia. Xuanzang describes it as a narrow, well-guarded gate, fortified with iron, situated between the mountains:

The right and left sides of Tie-men (the Iron Gate) are connected to the mountains. The mountains are extremely high and consist of steep cliffs. Despite its narrowness, passage through this place is very difficult and dangerous. The cliffs on both sides have an iron-like color. A gate made of wood, reinforced with iron parts, is installed here. Bells hang above the gate. Due to the strong fortification and the difficulty of passage, it received this name.”

These details indicate that transit trade through mountain passes was under state control. At the same time, this information allows us to assess the strategic importance of international caravan routes that passed through Tokharistan in the Early Middle Ages.

According to Xuanzang, in the 7th century Tokharistan was under the influence of the Western Turkic Khaganate. The traveler notes that upon entering Tokharistan, he reached the city of Ho (Qunduz), where the headquarters of Tardu Shad was located, passing through estates such as Chieganna (Chaghaniyan), Tami (Termez), and others. According to the sources, Tun Yabghu Khagan appointed his son, Tardu Shad, as the governor of this region, and the Tokharistan Yabghus dynasty continued to rule until the mid-8th century. This indicates that Tokharistan was integrated into the political and economic system of the Western Turkic Khaganate.

Xuanzang’s accounts also specifically mention the city of Balkh, one of the major urban centers of Tokharistan. The source notes the presence of numerous temples and monks in the city. This indicates that Balkh functioned not only as a cultural center but also as a hub of economic activity.

Xuanzang also provided important information on the natural and economic conditions of Tokharistan. According to him, the country’s climate was hot and humid, and most of the population wore garments made from cotton

fabrics, while some used woolen products. These observations indicate that both agricultural production and specialized craftsmanship were developed in the region.

In the 8th century, information about Tokharistan also appears in the works of the Chinese Buddhist traveler Huichao (726 CE). According to him, at that time the country was under Arab control, and the population spoke several languages. Economically, livestock husbandry (camels, sheep, horses, and mules) and agriculture (particularly cotton cultivation), as well as viticulture, were noted. These observations indicate that Tokharistan had a strong internal economic base and possessed products suitable for external trade.

Information about Tokharistan is reflected not only in Chinese written sources but also in visual and illustrative materials. In particular, the Portraits of Sacrificial Envoys of the Liang dynasty (526–539 CE) depict envoys from Tokharistan. These images not only demonstrate Tokharistan's participation in international diplomatic relations but also provide indirect information about the region's cultural and ethnic characteristics through the envoys' clothing styles, appearance, and symbols of status. This, in turn, indirectly indicates the presence of diplomatic activity and external communication channels.

The following limitations should always be taken into account when using Chinese chronicles and travel accounts for the study of trade and economic history:

1. Units of distance (li) and their variations over time.
2. The Chinese transcription of toponyms and the challenges of correlating them with actual geography.

The diplomatic and informational nature of the data in the chronicles (often derived from envoy or travel reports).

**Arab–Persian sources:** From the 7th–8th centuries onward, information about Tokharistan began to be widely covered in Arab–Persian historical and geographical literature. In the works of Arab–Persian historians and geographers of the 9th–12th centuries, the term “Tokharistan” is primarily applied to events and realities of the 5th–

12th centuries.

Etymologically, the term is formed from the ethnonym “Tokhara” and the Persian suffix -stan (meaning “place” or “country”). Scholarly literature emphasizes that this term was used during the Early Middle Ages to refer to the continuation of the territory of ancient Bactria.

In medieval sources, the term “Tokharistan” was used in two senses:

In the narrow sense, Tokharistan was understood as the region located south of the Amu Darya, between Badakhshan and Balkh.

In the broad sense, Tokharistan refers to a large part of the historical Bactria–Tokharistan region, encompassing nearly the entire Amu Darya basin. This territory extended southward to the Hindu Kush mountains and northward to the Hissar mountain range. Ignoring this distinction increases the risk of misapplying economic data to the wrong geographic area.

Among modern scholars, Sh. S. Kamoliddinov emphasizes that the term Tu-holo in the Early Middle Ages was used as a continuation of the historical territories of Bactria–Tokharistan. V. V. Bartold, on the other hand, interprets Tokharistan in the broad sense as the complex of territories surrounding the Amu Darya and its upper basin. According to him, this region constituted an economic and cultural space shaped along the main trade and caravan routes.

In the Arab–Persian geographical tradition, the territory of Tokharistan was often described by dividing it into upper and lower regions. According to the sources, Upper Tokharistan included areas such as Bargar (Pargar), Shighnan, Badakhshan, Taloqan, Khuttal, Vakhsh, Khabadiyan, Khost, Andarab, Bamiyan, Baghlan, Warwālij, Rustaqbank, Termez, Saghaniyan, Zemm, and Tobushqan. Lower Tokharistan mainly comprised Khulm, Samangan, and, according to some sources, areas around Bamiyan.

Arab historians, including al-Baladhuri, provide information on the political situation of Tokharistan and Chaghaniyan during the period of Arab campaigns. For example, al-Baladhuri's works preserve details about the Arab military expeditions to Tokharistan in the second half of the

7th century. They note that Termez became a strategic stronghold for the Arabs and report on relations with local rulers as well as taxation arrangements. In the accounts of al-Tabari, al-Baladhuri, and other authors, information is provided on the military-political alliances of local dynasties with the Arabs, taxation relationships, and issues of territorial control. These accounts indicate that, alongside efforts to establish control over the region, there was also a significant emphasis on controlling trade routes and strategic points.

Arab–Persian historical and geographical literature preserves valuable information on the political-administrative and territorial organization of Tokharistan. For example, authors such as al-Tabari, al-Baladhuri, and Ibn Khordadbeh provide data in their works on Tokharistan’s geographical location and its administrative-territorial structure in the 7th–8th centuries. In particular, these sources mention territorial units such as Guftan (Kuftan), al-Binakan, al-Madajan, Aharun, al-Qast, Niham, Basara, and al-Washjird. These data indicate that a network of administrative districts and a system of cities and provinces had been established in Tokharistan.

From a source-critical perspective, these data are important for studying trade and economic relations, since administrative districts were typically directly linked to systems of tax collection, customs control, and the management of transit trade routes.

Geographers of the 9th–10th centuries, including Ibn Khordadbeh and other authors, provide information on the “country–province–city” structure, administrative districts, roads, and distances. Since these sources record the use of “Tokharistan” in both narrow and broad senses, this corpus is extremely valuable for reconstructing the network of cities, caravan routes, and trade relations within Tokharistan’s economic space. In this regard, V. V. Bartold considers the Arab–geographical tradition as one of the principal source corpora for the history of Central Asia.

In the Arab geographical tradition, the territorial boundaries of Tokharistan are relatively clearly described. According to Istakhri, Tokharistan was located east of Balkh, west of Badakhshan, south of

the Amu Darya, and north of the Hindu Kush mountains. These data indicate that in the Early Middle Ages, Tokharistan was primarily a geographic-political space associated with the southern part of the Amu Darya basin. From a source-critical perspective, Istakhri’s account is considered one of the most reliable descriptions within the Arab geographical tradition. According to him, the region lay east of Balkh, west of Badakhshan, south of the Amu Darya, and north of the Hissar-Hindu Kush mountain range.

Such geographical precision is also important for economic history, since this region functioned as a transit area located at the crossroads of trade routes connecting Bactria, India, and Iran.

A limitation of the Arab–Persian sources is that, having often been composed in later centuries, they tend to generalize events of earlier periods. Therefore, it is advisable to use them in comparison with Chinese sources and archaeological-numismatic evidence.

## **2) Local and regional written traditions (Sogdian, Turkic, Armenian, Byzantine).**

Local and regional written traditions also constitute an important auxiliary source corpus for studying the trade and economic life of Tokharistan and neighboring regions. Although they are not directly devoted to Tokharistan, they provide valuable information on the region’s trade environment, political stability, and transit communications.

Sogdian merchants played an important role in the trade system of Central Asia. For this reason, the Sogdian written heritage—including inscriptions and documents—serves as an auxiliary source for reconstructing trade practices, forms of commodity exchange, credit relations, and legal norms. Sogdian documents contain information on trade contracts, debt obligations, and commercial cooperation, indicating that the institutional foundations of the region’s economic relations were already established.

Turkic runic monuments are also important for understanding the economic geography of the region. They mention political territories, strategic border points, and communication routes. For example, the term “Temir Qapigh” indicates that mountain passes, which were crucial for trade and

military movements, were under state control. This, in turn, indirectly confirms the existence of transit trade security and customs control systems.

In Byzantine and Armenian written traditions, information about Tokharistan and its neighboring regions is primarily presented in the context of external political relations. For example, Byzantine authors, including Procopius, provide data on the interactions among the Hephthalites, Sassanids, and other regional political powers. Armenian sources also preserve information regarding the political situation of the region and the balance of military forces.

**Indian and Tibetan sources:** In Indian sources, terms such as “Tushara” or “Tukhara” provide important information on the history of the Tokharistan ethnonym and its geographical conceptualization. In some Indian sources, Tokharistan is associated with the Tushara kingdom located in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. In Sanskrit, the term “Tushara” means “snowy” or “cold,” and it was likely used to express ethno-geographical ideas related to the northern mountainous regions. Later, this term also appears in Sanskrit texts in the form Tuxāra.

In the Tibetan written tradition, similar forms of this ethnonym—such as Thodkar or Thogar—are also recorded. This indicates that the term Tokharistan was disseminated across the cultural space of Central and South Asia based on terminological continuity.

From a source-critical perspective, Indian and Tibetan sources are not considered primary for the direct reconstruction of economic history. However, they serve as auxiliary sources for understanding the formation of transit networks through the evolution of ethnonyms, cultural connections, and processes of inter-civilizational interaction.

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