

## **AKSARAY SULTANHAN CARAVANSERAI: A STUDY OF CULTURAL INTERACTIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY ALONG THE SILK ROAD**

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### **Introduction**

As one of the most important trade routes in history, the Silk Road connected the East and West in many ways: economically, socially, culturally and demographically. Societies along the Silk Road not only transmitted their language, traditions, belief systems, arts and artifacts to others, they in turn took elements of those cultures as well. Trade and commerce have been key drivers in these exchanges. As distances were vast, and means of transport were limited to draft animals (mostly camels), trade and travel between cities, regions and territories along the Silk Road could not have been accomplished without the Caravanserais, which acted as resting places for both travelers and their animals. Caravanserais, in other words, were akin to today's hotels and motels, providing secure venues for accommodation, food, bathing and rest. But they also provided something beyond, and more important, than these: a platform for social and cultural interaction and exchange amongst travelers that happened to be there. Travelers often took time to rest, talk to, and listen to the news and stories of other travelers.

This study will examine the role of the Aksaray Sultanhan Caravanserai in this continuous cultural exchange, with a view of its contribution to the transmission of values, traditions, language, arts, know-how and other elements of culture. It will be shown that, Sultanhan Caravanserai, like others along the Silk Road, had a vital role in the sustainability of trade and cultural interactions, hence a vital contribution to the progress of societies through history.

### **Material**

The main subject of this study is the Aksaray Sultanhan Caravanserai, which was built by the Seljuk Sultan Alaaddin Keykubad I in 1229 (Fig. 1-2). It takes its name from the town of Sultanhan, located on the Konya-Aksaray road, about 40km from Aksaray. It holds an important place in the history of Seljuk architecture. The building has an arcaded courtyard, majestic twin portals, and a covered section in the entry vestibule. The vaulting system is supported by pillars. A free-standing kiosk mosque rises on four pillars in the middle of the courtyard (Fig. 3-4). The stone decoration of the mosque and the portals is noteworthy for its elegance and artistic mastery. Total external area is 4,500 square meters, excluding the towers and portals (Fig. 7-8).

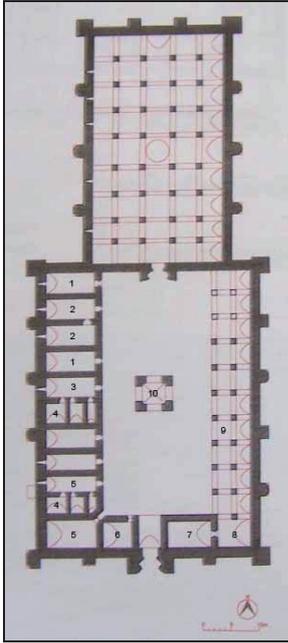


Fig. 1: Aksaray Sultanhan Caravanserai plan (1: Lodging, 2: Refectory and kitchen, 3: Women's bath, 4: Bath's furnace, 5: Men's bath, 6: Guards room, 7: Treasury, 8: Latrines, 9: Open cells, 10: Kiosk Mosque) [1] [2]

Fig. 2: Aksaray Sultanhan Caravanserai elevation.



Fig. 3: Courtyard



Fig. 4: Open cells in the courtyard

This study will examine not only the structural characteristics of the Caravanserai, but also how the structure lent itself to facilitate social interactions? Where, and how, did the travelers eat, bath and sleep? How long they stayed? What role did the courtyard play? What were the praying arrangements for people of different religions, etc? These aspects will be studied from traveler diaries and other records kept at the Caravanserai.



Fig. 5: Covered space for traveler  
Fig. 6: Stone decoration on the entry vestibule

## Methods

- Investigation of the Sultanhan Caravanserai's drawings and photos
- Analysis of the Caravanserai's space organization
- Study of Caravanserai's official records and travelers diaries

## Conclusion

Even though cultures emerged in different parts of the world, they often interacted with each other for commercial and other imperatives throughout history, In the Middle Ages, the Silk Road was a powerful phenomenon that connected Europe and Western Asia with Central and Eastern Asia, all the way to Japan. Of the many elements that made this process possible, caravanserais were perhaps the most important link, which provided accommodation, safety and social interaction to travelers. In this regard, it is clear that Caravanserais, including the Sultan Han, were instrumental in the sustainability of the Silk Road, and hence, cultures, for many centuries.

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