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LIFE ALONG THE SILK ROAD

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Introduction

heights. From here it was a thousand miles south via Koko-nor to Lhasa, where more routes led in all directions – east to south China; south and south-west into India; west into Kashmir; and north to other points on the east-west road. West of Koko-nor lies the Tsaidam, another natural basin which, like Dzungaria, provided ideal conditions for grazing large herds of livestock and mounting armed raids across the Kunlun on the Silk Road towns.

These stories start with Nanaivandak, a Sogdian merchant from Samarkand and an experienced traveller. He has braved the Silk Road many times in his twenty years as a trader but, as he bargains with buyers in Chang'an's markets and toys with dancing girls in a city restaurant, he little realizes that this will be his last visit to China. It is the 750s and control of the Silk Road is about to change hands.

The Merchant's Tale

Nanaivandak, 730–751

The country of Samarkand is about 500 miles in circumference and broader from east to west than from north to south. The capital is six miles or so in circumference, completely enclosed by rugged land and very populous. The precious merchandise of many foreign countries is stored here. The soil is rich and productive and yields abundant harvests. The forest trees afford a thick vegetation and flowers and fruit are plentiful. *Shen* horses are bred here. The inhabitants' skill in the arts and trades exceeds that of other countries. The climate is agreeable and temperate and the people brave and energetic.

Xuanzang, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, AD 646

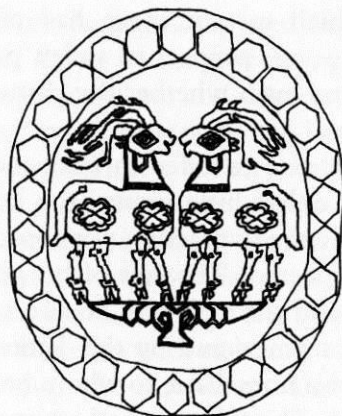
IT WAS THE year 751 in the Western calendar, 134 by Islamic reckoning, the second year of the reign of al-Saffah, the first of the Arabic Abbasid caliphs, and the ninth in the Tianbao (Heavenly Riches) reign period of the Tang dynasty emperor Xuanzong in China. The merchant Nanaivandak was from Samarkand, a city-state formerly independent but now, since the advance of the Arab-led armies east of the Oxus river (Amu Darya), under the rule of the Baghdad Caliphate. He had travelled for several months along the Silk Road from the great trading city of Samarkand, over the towering Pamirs and along the fringes of the Taklamakan desert to Chang'an, the capital of Tang dynasty China.

Nanaivandak's family hailed from the town of Panjikent, about forty miles east of Samarkand in the region known as Sogdiana. The Arab armies coming from the west referred to Sogdiana as

'the land beyond the Oxus,' or Transoxiana, but it was really a continuation of the great Eurasian steppe lands. Panjikent was at the easternmost edge, tucked in the Zerafshan valley between two fingers of mountains which extruded from the great Pamir ranges to the east. Panjikent, like all Sogdiana cities, was built with thick fortified walls on a small hill. The land sloped away on the western side of the city to the Zerafshan river, and the foothills of the Pamirs could be seen across the plain. On clear days at the height of summer their snow-capped peaks were also visible in the far distance.

The area enclosed within the walls was quite small, little more than thirty acres, and only the ruler, nobles, merchants and richer tradesmen had their houses there. Before Nanaivandak's time, people lived in large, two-storey apartment blocks, although each dwelling was spacious and had its own entrance. More recently the aristocracy and merchants had started to build individual, three-storey houses. Indeed, space had become so tight, that the second and third storeys were partially built over the maze of small lanes which ran between the houses, supported by stone arches. Small workshops occupied the ground floor facing the main street and these were rented out to shopkeepers and artisans. There was no space for courtyards, gardens or parks, and few trees grew within the walls, although the valley floor was criss-crossed with irrigation canals which fed the fields and numerous gardens. The small lanes of the city were crowded and dirty with refuse, and the smell was sometimes unbearable in the summer when the temperature soared to 80°F and the air was still. After a few days the heat of the unrelenting sun would even scorch the summer grass on the plain, but then after a few days of oppressive heat a northerly wind would herald a rainstorm, and the city lanes were washed clean.

The city did not stop at the walls. Next to the main gate leading west to Samarkand there were scores of caravanserai, stopping places for itinerant merchants, which provided lodgings for the merchants and their servants, warehouse space for their goods, and a courtyard for their animals. The bazaar was held here and the area was always bustling with people and animals. Ten or more languages might be heard at any one time, as people haggled over the silks, spices and other luxuries, which dazzled the senses with



Typical Sassanian design woven on silk found at Dunhuang, eighth century

their colours and smells. Beyond the caravanserai, smaller houses sprawled down the hill and over the valley floor.

Nanaivandak wore distinctive Sogdian clothes: a Phrygian hat, conical with the top turned forward; a knee-length, belted over-jacket of deep-blue silk brocade woven with decorative roundels enclosing two deer facing each other; and narrow trousers tucked into calf-length brocade boots with leather soles. His dress and heavily bearded face distinguished him from the Chinese, Turks and Tibetans in Chang'an's Western Market, but he was not the sole representative of his community in the Chinese capital. The Sogdians were the recognized traders of the Silk Road: their language was its *lingua franca* and there had been Sogdian communities in all its sizeable towns for several centuries.

Nanaivandak profited handsomely from the sale of his cargo of wool, jade, and gems in Chang'an, despite having to pay a considerable bribe to customs officers at the Chinese frontier. During the long journey he had opened gaps in several of the large bales of wool in order to allow the desert sand to seep in, thus increasing their weight. It was a risk – an experienced buyer would spot the trick immediately – and he had therefore avoided the stalls run by his fellow countrymen. Since sellers always lied, buyers would demand to feel the wool for themselves, smelling and kneading a handful torn from the bale. He knew that, like him, some could

tell immediately which sort of sheep had produced the wool, where they grazed – on steppes, in valley pastures or on high mountain passes – and even whether the pastures lay on a north- or south-facing slope.

Nanaivandak took care to offer an unopened bale for testing. The others weighed only a little more – too little to arouse suspicion – but by the time the transaction was complete he had made a larger profit than expected. The rest of his goods he sold to his agent in the capital and through him he also bought the fine silk beloved by his countrymen and by the Turks who lived on the northern borders of his homeland, to whom he would sell it on his return to Samarkand. The Chinese had retained the secret of silk production for many centuries before the west finally mastered the technique of delicately unwinding the gossamer-fine thread from cocoons produced by silkworms reared on the tender, young leaves of the white mulberry tree. By Nanaivandak's time, silk was being made in Sogdiana and exported west to Europe, but a market still persisted for the finer and more varied Chinese silks. While Nanaivandak was in Chang'an, Chinese prisoners-of-war captured after a recent clash between the Arabs and the Chinese were being escorted east to Damascus, the site of Arab silk production. There their silk-weaving skills would be exploited. Prisoners from the same battle with paper-making skills were sent to Samarkand, providing the impetus for the transformation of the Arab book, long written on parchment or papyrus.

In Chang'an, Nanaivandak also bought ornaments, jewellery and drugs to trade on his return journey. Finally he organized presents for his wife and grandchild. He had brought with him a piece of unworked lapis lazuli from Bactria which he now took to a jeweller to be fashioned into an ornament for his wife. For his young grandson he went to a tailor to have a traditional Sogdian suit made, a short jacket with narrow sleeves, a mandarin collar and front, central fastening, flared slightly from the waist. The outer silk, which he had brought with him from Sogdiana, was woven in blue, yellow, green, red and white with a pattern of paired facing ducks inside roundels, a typical Sogdian pattern, while he chose a brown Chinese damask with a large-scale floral pattern for the jacket lining and trousers. He also ordered a pair of

matching boots. Then, having completed his business, he joined his agent and others for an evening of dining and entertainment: there were many Sogdian singers and dancers in the hostelrys and wineshops of Chang'an. Nanaivandak had been travelling the Silk Road for twenty years and knew the city well.

They went to one of the many restaurants lining the 500-foot-wide avenue leading south from the imperial city. After some discussion about what sort of food they wanted, they chose a place renowned for its spicy noodles, mare's teat grape wine and dancers. Three girls, heavily made-up with elaborate coiffures and smelling of jasmine, leaned over the first-floor balustrade and beckoned them in. The men removed their shoes and were shown upstairs to the most expensive part of the restaurant which was divided into compartmentalized seating areas. The floor was covered with reed matting and they sat on low benches, another Central Asian import to China, at a lacquered table. Waiters appeared with silver trays bearing the delicacies of the house, and the wine was served in a Sogdian-style silver jug decorated with an elaborate pattern of a winged camel.

Mare's teat grapes were grown in Kocho and made into the finest wine. Both the wine and grapes were imported into China, the grapes packed with ice into thick, leaden containers to keep them fresh. The wine was expensive, but Nanaivandak and his fellow merchants had no trouble affording it with the profits from their trade. Drinking was an accepted part of social life in both Samarkand and Chang'an, and it was not unusual to see parties of drunken men and their attendant courtesans staggering out of the wineshops and restaurants late at night.

After they had eaten their fill they called for dancers, and two girls, sixteen or seventeen years old, appeared to the rapid beating of the musicians' drums; left hands on hips and their bodies bent slightly like lotus stems, they twirled around, keeping their left legs almost straight and their eyes firmly fixed on the men. They wore tight-sleeved blouses of fine silk and long, gauze flowing skirts, embroidered in many colours and held at their waists with broad, silver belts, and peaked hats decorated with golden bells whose jingling provided a contrast to the rhythmic, deep drum beat. The men shouted encouragement and clapped in time with the music



*Sogdian silver wine jug showing a winged camel,
late seventh – early eighth century*

and the girls' red-slippered feet moved more and more quickly. Suddenly the drummers stopped, the girls stood still facing Nanaivandak's table and both pulled down their blouses to reveal their small, bare breasts. After this one of the girls sat on Nanaivandak's lap and persuaded him to order more wine, which he drank while fondling her breasts. She was from Chach (present-day Tashkent) and they spoke together in Sogdian, but he was soon too drunk to remember much.

Nanaivandak was a Manichean, a follower of Mani, although he did not always strictly adhere to the prohibition on alcohol. Though the Manicheans had once formed a strong community in Sogdiana there were now few of them left in Samarkand and Panjikent. Nanaivandak had been brought up as a Zoroastrian but had been converted to Manicheism by his uncle, who had learned

about the religion during his trading trips to Balkh, a thriving centre of Manicheism south of Samarkand. Apart from the Zoroastrian and Manichean communities, there were also Buddhists, Jews and Nestorian Christians in Panjikent and Samarkand but, since the Arab conquest of Sogdiana, Islam had become dominant and many of Nanaivandak's countrymen had already chosen to be converted.

Before the advent of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad in 750 the Arabs had been ruled by the Umayyad Caliphate, their capital the city of Damascus. Their armies had crossed the Oxus river as early as the 680s, but it was not until the first decades of the eighth century, after a long period of internecine strife, that Arab leaders turned their attention seriously to the east. Thereafter their armies moved steadily eastwards, exploiting rivalries among the kings of the semi-independent city-states to turn their enemies into allies. They reached Samarkand in 712 and besieged the city for a month, until the residents were forced to surrender and agree to a peace treaty. Then they continued their eastward invasion, reaching Chach and Ferghana, the lands to the north-east of Samarkand, in 713 and 714.

The nomadic Arab nobles were then encouraged to settle in these lands and promote Islam. The rewards for conversion were not only spiritual: converts were exempted from the poll tax. This inducement proved so tempting that large numbers of Sogdians converted, thereby drastically reducing the tax revenue. In consequence, the exemption was withdrawn, and a new law stipulated that converts also had to be circumcised and were expected to be familiar with Islamic scriptural texts. These changes provoked anger among a population already resentful of their Arab rulers and convinced that the Umayyads protected only the interests of their own aristocratic elite. Between 720 and 722 there were several serious rebellions in Sogdiana.

Nanaivandak's father and uncle were among the rebels. With the help of their northern neighbours, the Turghiz, the Sogdians succeeded in destroying the Samarkand garrison and driving the Arabs out of the city. The defeated Arab governor, unable to regain control, was replaced by a man infamous for his complaints about the leniency with which his Arab countrymen had treated

their Sogdian subjects. Determined to retake the rebel cities, the new governor advanced from the west with a large army and, realizing that they would probably not be able to hold out, the rebels retreated. Nanaivandak's uncle and his fellow rebels from Samarkand negotiated refuge in the valleys of Ferghana to the east, unaware that the Ferghanan king had already betrayed them. There they were forced to surrender to the Arab army, and most of the nobles and thousands of commoners were executed. A few nobles escaped and fled north to Chach, where they established themselves as an elite corps in the Turghiz army. Otherwise only four hundred merchants, among them Nanaivandak's uncle, survived, spared because of their great wealth which their captors hoped to exploit. Indeed, loans from Sogdian merchants to the Arabs had made earlier Transoxanian campaigns possible.

Nanaivandak's father had fought with a second band of rebels under the ruler of Panjikent, Devashtich. This group took refuge in the fortress of Mount Mug, in the mountains to the south-east of Panjikent and, in the same year, 721, the Panjikent Sogdians advanced to meet the Arab army at a nearby gorge, hoping that geographical advantage would give them victory. But they were heavily defeated and their ruler killed. Nanaivandak's father did not return from the battle.

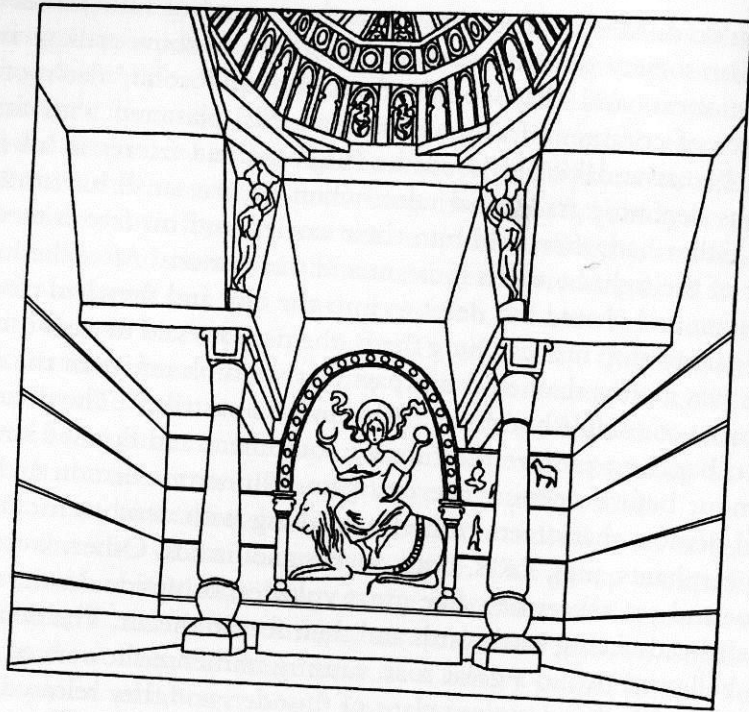
Nanaivandak and his mother hoped that perhaps his father had survived and had joined his countrymen among the Turghiz forces to the north. The Turghiz had originally ruled a kingdom stretching from Chach along the northern fringes of the Tianshan – the Heavenly Mountains – as far as Dzungaria, the southern edge of present-day Mongolia. Already under threat from their northern and eastern neighbours when the Arab armies started to push at their southern boundaries, they were determined to repel any full-scale Arab invasion, and therefore welcomed the escaped Sogdian rebels into their ranks. Thereafter the Sogdian corps took every opportunity to seek battle with the Arab army in revenge for the earlier slaughter, and their exploits were spoken of in the market-places at Samarkand – though not within hearing of the Arabs.

On his return from battle, Nanaivandak's uncle adopted Nanaivandak, and the boy and his mother moved from their large, three-storeyed house in Panjikent to the uncle's house in

Samarkand. Merchants belonged to the second of four classes in Sogdian society, directly below the nobility and above artisans and commoners, and they could afford to build solid, flat-roofed houses of compressed clay and mud bricks, plastered with finer clay. Nanaivandak's old house in Panjikent had friezes in all the rooms depicting traditional tales: when he was small his mother and father had often told him their stories, and his favourite was that of the fight between Rustam and the demons. After the hero Rustam had chased the demons into the city and they had closed the gate to stop him catching them, the demons said to each other: "It was a great shame on our part that we took refuge in the city because of a single horseman. Why do we not strike?" The demons then began to prepare their heavy equipment and donned strong armour before opening the city gate. Numerous demon archers and demon charioteers rushed out, along with demons mounted on elephants, pigs, foxes, dogs, snakes and lizards. Others were on foot and yet others flew like great vultures, or upside down, with their heads facing earthwards and their feet in the air. The demons all bellowed out in a great roar, causing immense showers of rain, snow and hail and violent claps of thunder, and they released fire, flame and smoke from their mouths . . . Rustam's horse came to wake him from his sleep and he quickly donned his leopard-skin robe, tied on his quiver and hastened towards the demons.'

The paintings depicting this story were in two registers along the side walls of the main ceremonial hall of the house. Covering the wall at the end, behind the altar, was a large painting of the patron goddess of their home, the four-armed Nana, astride a lion. Nanaivandak was named after his life-giving mother-goddess, Nanaivandak meaning 'slave of Nana'. The hall had a high, vaulted brick ceiling lined with plaster, with carved wooden pillars. Here Nanaivandak's extended family performed religious rites, held meetings to discuss family business and hosted large banquets on holidays and festivals. The family were very wealthy. They owned land in the valley which was worked by serfs and which produced a sizeable income, and they also received a share of the tolls on the bridge across the river and income from water mills on their land.

Nanaivandak's uncle's house in Samarkand was just as large but



Four-armed Nana on a lion in a Panjikent house, seventh century

less richly decorated than the Panjikent home. Samarkand was a large city on a low hill further down the Zerafshan valley than Panjikent, but just as heavily fortified, with eight miles of 50-foot-high walls punctuated by bastions and barbicans. The streets were no less crowded and, in addition to hundreds of caravanserai, large garrisons of Arab soldiers lay just outside the city walls. It was usual for Sogdian boys to be educated from the age of five, and so Nanaivandak had little time to enjoy the city, as he was soon being tutored each day in the ways of trade and the languages he would need as a merchant – Arabic, Chinese and some Turkic and Tibetan. It was now that he was taught to be a follower of Mani, a departure from the Zoroastrian faith of his parents with its fire worship and numerous deities. His uncle tried to convert Nanaivandak's mother too, arguing that Mani had proclaimed a religion to supersede all earlier religions, but she continued to

attend a Zoroastrian temple in the city with its eternally burning fire. Zoroastrianism had been dying out, however, since the arrival of Manicheism in Sogdiana. Not long after the Arab invasions its priests fled persecution in Sogdiana and established thriving communities in India, now known as the Parsees. Manichean texts were written in a different script from official documents, and Nanaivandak had to learn this as well, so that he could copy religious texts for his uncle and read to him.

As he grew up Nanaivandak accompanied his uncle on short trading trips to Merv to the south-west, Chach to the north-east and Balkh to the south whenever the political and military situation allowed. Unlike his uncle, who travelled simply to make money, Nanaivandak loved the journeys themselves. He found the mountain scenery endlessly fascinating, and his uncle would often come across him in the morning sitting outside as the dawn light suffused the great hulks of the distant Pamirs with a pink glow, or in the evening, when he should have been helping to supervise the unloading of the camels, staring into the distance as dusk fell across the great plains and the mountains turned purple before disappearing into the shadows of the night. This love of travel never left Nanaivandak and sometimes he even prolonged his journey in order to linger among his beloved mountains.

He especially enjoyed his visits to Balkh, the main Bactrian city situated on a tributary of the Oxus at the head of the route south to India. The residents were proud of their city's history, insisting that it was the real birthplace of Zoroaster (not everyone agreed) and boasting how Alexander the Great had chosen a Bactrian bride and married her in the city over a thousand years before. Nanaivandak's uncle was among a group of merchants from Samarkand who had established caravanserai in the major market cities in Transoxania and Bactria for themselves and their fellow countrymen, and the largest establishment was at Balkh. There were thousands of caravanserai in and around the city, many managed by such groups of merchants who were thereby assured of home comforts when on a trading mission.

In 728 there was another rebellion against the Arabs among the citizens of Samarkand and other Sogdian cities, after the rules on conversion to Islam had once more been changed. This time, both

the Turghiz to the north and the Tibetans to the south sent forces to help the rebels and almost succeeded in driving the Arabs out of Sogdiana. Many Sogdians who had escaped the Ferghana massacre and joined the Turghiz now returned, but Nanaivandak's father was not among them.

Even after Arab forces regained Samarkand and, in 732, finally defeated the Turghiz, there were frequent uprisings. From time to time the Sogdians would drive the Arab forces out of one or another city, but the armies of the Caliphate would always regroup and retake it. Sogdiana was traditionally a land of city-states and its forces were rarely united.

In the late summer of 751, as Nanaivandak rode around the now familiar streets of Chang'an, he recalled his first visit to the Chinese capital. It was 730 and his uncle had decided that he was old enough to accompany him to China on a trading mission. There were reports of Tibetan incursions into the nominally Chinese-controlled Pamir kingdoms to the south and his uncle therefore decided to take the north-eastern route, past Lake Issuk-kul, rather than the southern route via Kashgar, enabling them to avoid the Tibetan armies. Most of the goods they carried would be traded at markets on the way, but some items, such as brass, amber and coral, were destined specifically for Chang'an. Brass was used by Chinese court artisans to ornament the girdles of officials of the two lowest grades of the civil service, and the Buddhists also used it to make statues of Buddha and would buy any excess at a good price. Amber from the shores of the Baltic and red coral brought from the Mediterranean were likewise highly prized in China. In Samarkand they also bought gold and lapis lazuli, both much sought after by the Tibetans, Turks and Chinese, and they would trade some further east for the wool which was to be their main cargo. Much of the gold was already beaten and worked into filigree ornaments in Persian style by artisans in Samarkand. Turkic men commonly wore golden belts, often decorated with animal motifs, and in Tibet skilled artisans worked the metal into mechanical toys and ornaments: many of these were presented as gifts to the Chinese emperor.

Preparations for the journey were elaborate and meticulously planned. It was over 3,000 miles to Chang'an. Nanaivandak and his uncle would have to pass through Turghiz and Chinese territory, as well as the *de facto* independent city-states in the Tarim basin. On the mountain passes they would encounter freezing temperatures, in the desert searing heat. Special footwear and warm furs were required for the former, and head and face coverings for the latter. They carried a variety of currencies, some of which might be needed to hand out as bribes to border guards, and they were also armed: bandits preyed on rich travellers.

The road from Samarkand led east, following the Zerafshan river before veering north to cross the easternmost stretch of the Red Sandy Wastes to the Jaxartes, or Syr Darya, river. The land of Chach, the summer home of the ruling Turghiz chief – the kaghan – started on the far bank. The kaghan and his army had assisted several rebellions by the residents of Samarkand and other cities in Sogdiana and relations between their peoples were friendly. The city of Chach was not as large as Samarkand but nevertheless considerable in size, supported by farming in the temperate valleys and stockbreeding in the mountains. Like Samarkand it had a citadel, a large palace for the kaghan and temples of several religions as well as numerous houses, shops and workshops. Nanaivandak and his uncle stayed in their usual lodgings run by their countrymen and prayed four times a day, facing the sun during daylight and the moon in the evening, at the main Manichean temple within the city walls. They also presented alms to the clergy.

They did not linger in Chach for they had to reach the winter pastures of the kaghan before he returned to the city, so that they could purchase the newly shorn sheep-wool, and the pastures were still several weeks' journey away. But they had time to listen to a storyteller in the marketplace. Though they both knew the tale – it was the epic of Rustam – they still enjoyed the telling, which was accompanied by colourful paintings as a backdrop.

From the city of Chach they took the road east, along the valley of the Talas river into Tianshan, leaving behind the familiar Transoxanian plains. Then there was a long but easy trek through low mountain valleys and passes to Issuk-kul, the warm lake. As its name suggests, owing to its brackish waters and sheltered position

between the Tianshan and Altai mountains it never froze, even in the coldest winters, and there were tales of great monsters which lived in its deeps. Each winter the kaghan moved his court, his army and his herds here for the winter so the pastures on either side of the road were filled with tens of thousands of horses, sheep, cattle and camels.

Nanaivandak and his uncle had set out at the start of spring and it was now almost summer. Having just finished shearing, the kaghan and his army were preparing to leave for their summer residence at Chach, along the road which Nanaivandak and his uncle had just taken. There was plenty of wool for sale, but his uncle was interested only in the wool from the fat-tailed dumba sheep, not found further east. He also brought skins from lambs slaughtered when fourteen days old, known as astrakhan, which he intended to trade at a specialist market in a town further east.

The land to the north and north-east of Sogdiana was occupied by various Turkic tribes, who fell in and out of alliances. One such alliance was known as the Western Turks, because the region to their east was originally controlled by another alliance of Turks, named the Eastern Turks. In the seventh century the Eastern Turks had been defeated by the Chinese and hundreds of thousands of them had resettled in the Chinese capital. The Western Turk alliance had then spread both eastwards, into the land thus left unoccupied, and westwards into Chach. The Turghiz had only driven them out of Chach and the rich pastureland surrounding Issuk-kul three decades previously. The Turghiz leader then assumed the title Kaghan of the Ten Arrows and, like the Western Turkic kaghan, established twenty tribal leaders called tutuks, to rule over the areas that owed him allegiance. Each tutuk could muster 5,000 warriors, mounted and armed. This army was essential, for the Turghiz were constantly fending off attacks from the west by the Arabs, from the south by Tibetans, and from their east by pretenders to their throne from other Turkic tribes, supported by Chinese troops. The Turghiz kaghan had fought many battles, and had conducted a successful siege and attack on Kucha to the south a few years before, but he also made use of more peaceable solutions, marrying daughters of both the Western Turkic kaghan and the Tibetan emperor to prevent further attacks from these old foes.

The Turghiz kaghan's winter camp on the northern banks of the lake consisted of hundreds of white felt tents, distinctive against the green of the valley floor. That of the kaghan himself was the largest, adorned with rich silks and brocades. When Nanaivandak and his uncle went to pay their respects they were dazzled by the gold and silver ornaments covering its walls and roof. The kaghan's officials sat in rows on either side of him dressed in embroidered silk robes, their hair worn in long plaits. The soldiers wore coarser clothes of felt and carried bows and other weapons. All the men also wore daggers at their belts. The kaghan was in a long, green robe of the finest silk, slit up the sides. His long hair lay loose down his back and a broad silk ribbon, tied around his head, reached down his back to his waist.

The mood in the valley was festive. The shearing had been successful and everyone was glad to be going back to Chach where they could trade their wool for the many luxuries in the city's bazaars. The horses were sleek and fat from the new grass and the men spent their last few days hunting with their falcons and dogs in the mountains, galloping back every evening across the valley in a great swoop of noise and colour with their kills. During the day the valley was full of noise and laughter as the children held pony races and the women packed for the move, and in the evenings the sound of drunken singing echoed among the flickering lights of the numerous campfires. Then the tents were loaded on to wooden carts so large that it took several rows of yaks to pull them and the encampment started its long journey back west.

Nanaivandak and his uncle were headed east, but from Issuk-kul they had a choice of routes to Chang'an. The northern route – skirting the northern edge of the Tianshan rather than crossing them, and passing through the Turghiz pasturelands – was the easiest but also the least populated, and inaccessible to many of the goods found in the markets beyond the mountains. Instead Nanaivandak's uncle had decided he wanted to visit the markets along the western stretch of the Tarim basin route to China. It had been several years since he had last travelled that way, and he was eager to meet old acquaintances and to see what was for sale. Accordingly, they now had to head south and negotiate the road through the Tianshan. The route was barely passable in winter and

was extremely dangerous in spring when melting snow caused great avalanches and ice falls. But Nanaivandak and his uncle met travellers who had just come from the south and who assured them that the worst of the spring thaw was over and that the road south was clear. They stayed for several more days in the valley to rest their animals, then made arrangements for the next leg of their journey, hiring yaks and more horses to carry the large bales of wool. The animal keepers would be paid off when they reached the desert to the south, and there camels would be hired as replacements. Camels were slower but more reliable desert travellers.

The road south followed one of the river valleys up into the mountains. There were four passes to negotiate before they reached the watershed, and the journey, if all went well, usually took two weeks. The glacial peak of Khan-Tengri, over 22,000 feet high, towered to the east, but after a couple of stages the view was obscured by the encroaching valley walls. The mountain peak would become a familiar sight on Nanaivandak's later journeys along the Silk Road.

Nanaivandak's uncle was used to high mountain passes. Samarkand was divided from the trading markets to the east and south by some of the highest ranges in the world – the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush – and the routes across them demanded considerable endurance from travellers. The Tibetans and the peoples who lived in the kingdoms of the Pamirs between Samarkand and Kashmir were acclimatized from birth to high altitudes, but in battle many of the recruits from the desert towns experienced shortness of breath and headaches: the Tibetan army even had a special corps devoted to the treatment of altitude sickness among its soldiers. The Tianshan were not so huge as the Pamirs, but even so, the final pass on the road south, just west of the headwaters of the Bedal river, lay at almost 14,000 feet. On reaching its flat, snow-covered saddle, the weather cleared and they were offered a spectacular view of the Bedal valley and, in the distance, the start of the great sand-filled depression of the Tarim basin.

Nanaivandak and his uncle negotiated the descent through the melting snow cover and down into the valley. The track ran along the eastern bank of the river, perched high above its boulder-strewn waters. After travelling for three more days along

a gradually widening valley they reached the caravan town at the valley's mouth. Here they stopped to pay off their yak drivers and horsemen who soon found other customers wanting to travel back across the pass. Nanaivandak's uncle then negotiated the hire of camels for their cargo. Camels were expensive – an animal in its prime might cost fourteen bolts of silk – and the hirers were responsible for the injury or death of any camel during its period of hire.

The caravanserai did not provide food, fuel or fodder: the purchase of these was negotiated separately with provisioners in the town. The inn itself was a crude affair to Nanaivandak's eyes compared with the well-kept structures in Transoxania. The walls surrounding the large open courtyard where the animals were housed and the single-storey rooms to the side were made of tamped earth without any plaster or decoration, and the open windows allowed in all the dirt and dust of the desert. Moreover, the innkeeper was surly and unhelpful, and they pressed on as soon as the camels were ready.

Nanaivandak remembered learning from his uncle on this first journey the unfamiliar names of the Silk Road oases. The stages led first to Aksu, a smallish town compared to Samarkand but important because of its position at the crossroad of the north-south road between the Bedal pass and Khotan, and the east-west road from Kashgar to Chang'an. The road changed at every stage, and even during a single stage. Some of the most difficult stretches occurred when the route traversed marshy ground, but then suddenly the surface would change to gravel glacia and, a few miles further on, to bare rock. The snow-covered peak of Khan-Tengri to the north, however, was a constant companion, while to the south lay an expanse of grey-yellow sand.

Their next major stop was Kucha, a thriving city-state. The last couple of stages before they entered the triple walls of the city passed through fertile and well-farmed country, and the road was lined with poplar trees and fringed with fruit orchards, apricot, pear, pomegranate and peach all growing in abundance. The river running to the south of the city plain acted as a natural barrier against the drifting desert sand, providing a welcome relief from the dustiness of the previous stages. Nanaivandak had heard that

the dancing girls in Kucha were almost as good as those in Samarkand. The country was ruled by a king who lived in a palace decorated with gold from mines in the Tianshan to the north and jade from the river beds in Khotan to the south. He and his queen were both Buddhists and their patronage of their religion was much in evidence: the streets were full of monks and nuns with their begging bowls, a large monastery abutted the main market square, and stupas, it seemed, stood at every corner. Several of the stalls in the market were run by monks. Apart from scriptures, prayers and charms, they also sold drugs and told fortunes. Nanaivandak heard many languages, including Turkic, Chinese – a language he could recognize though not yet really speak – and something else which his uncle told him was Kuchean.

Kucha was one of four Chinese garrison towns along the Silk Road. For years the Tibetans and the Chinese had fought for control of this vital corridor of land and, not long before, the Chinese had gained the upper hand. Now their garrisons were manned by 30,000 troops, many of them Turks or local men. At Kucha Nanaivandak and his uncle heard of the recent peace treaty signed between the Tibetans and the Chinese, its terms inscribed in both Tibetan and Chinese on a stone stele in Tibet to symbolize its permanence. Nanaivandak's uncle hoped that the peace would last: the past years of conflict had not been good for trade. The Turghiz had also negotiated peace with the Chinese, which meant that the southern route through Khotan and Kashgar would be safe, and Nanaivandak's uncle decided to travel back that way, as both towns had Chinese garrisons and were lively, independent cities. Most important for his uncle, Khotan was famous for its jade and jewel markets and attracted merchants from the routes south into India. It would also be an opportunity for Nanaivandak to see these towns for the first time and to be introduced to the resident Sogdian agents.

By this point in their journey the caravan had settled into the dull routine of desert travel: long, hot stages through a featureless landscape with an indifferent inn at the day's end if they were lucky; problems with sick camels; cold desert nights; searing daytime heat; dust storms and floods that arose without warning; and the continuing threat of bandits. Staging-posts were vital and

during the period of Chinese control care was taken to keep them open. Some nights found Nanaivandak and his uncle lodging in an inn which was the only building left occupied in an otherwise deserted hamlet. The innkeeper and his wife, often colonists from distant Chinese lands, had stayed on because they were paid and given free supplies by the government. At other halts there was only a well and perhaps a few trees to give shelter from the sun. And occasionally there was no water at all, because the surveyors who had built the road were unable to find a source at the end of a single stage. Then Nanaivandak and his uncle would set out before dawn or even late at night to try to complete a double stage, but it was wearing on both animals and men. When the heat became unbearable they started to travel at night.

It was always a relief to reach one of the larger towns where they could be sure of a good inn and fodder for their animals. Summer nights in the walled towns were punctuated by the rumble of caravan trains embarking on the next stage of their long journey. The dull clang of the bells around the camels' necks warned pedestrians to get out of the way, since the narrow streets were barely wide enough to accommodate a loaded camel. In the desert the bells alerted caravans coming in the opposite direction. When they met, the lead camel-drivers would stop briefly to exchange a few words about their destination and conditions on the road, the state of the wells, or the presence of robbers. Then they would press on: they might have a thirty-mile stage to complete before dawn.

The camels travelled nose to tail in a long line. A large caravan would consist of hundreds of camels, with each string of between five and fifteen beasts tied together by a rope looped through wooden nose pegs. The cameleers, usually Chinese, Turks and Tibetans, wore shoes made of felt or thick wool stitched with a scale design, the toes and heels reinforced with leather and turned up to reduce friction with the ground. The soles were sometimes lined with several sheets of paper – a precious commodity – and a drawstring pulled the shoe tight around the ankles to prevent sand entering. The insides were lined with soft red cloth.

The cameleers carried water flasks fashioned from hollowed-out gourds, light in weight but thick enough to prevent too much evaporation. If their supply of water ran out or a well was

dry they used the camels to help them find water. The two-humped Bactrian camel is not renowned for its speed – it travels at about two and a half miles an hour – but its life-saving skills as storm-detector and water-diviner are famous, as a fifth-century chronicler noted:

Occasionally the old camels would roar, huddle together in a group and bury their noses in the sand. This gave warning of fierce, sudden winds which were dreaded along the northern route. They would whip up the sands and, although over in a matter of minutes, those without protection over their faces might be left for dead.

At the site of underground water the older camels would stop and paw the ground, a skill inherited from their wild cousins who still roamed the desert in large herds. The wild camels were generally smaller and difficult to train, so working camels were bred rather than caught. The Bactrian camel is better suited to the extremes of temperature found in the deserts and mountains of the eastern Silk Road than its single-humped Arabian cousin, for although both have double-lidded eyes and the ability to close their nostrils against the sand, the Bactrian camel is short and stocky and grows long, thick fur in the winter. The Chinese imperial herds which grazed on the steppes to the north numbered hundreds of thousands, many having been received in exchange for silk. There was even a special government department devoted to their care and breeding, and cameleers were paid well for their expertise with clothing and grain. In China the fastest camels were reserved for the 'Bright Camel Envoys' who were dispatched if there was a military crisis on the frontier.

The camel had many other uses for travellers and residents of the Silk Road. A Chinese general marching into battle used one to carry a large tank of fresh water filled with fish to keep him supplied during the campaign: only a camel had the strength and steadiness for the task. And these same qualities were put to use by entertainers. In the marketplaces of the Silk Road young boys would perform acrobatics on a camel's back, while princes and the nobility were often accompanied on their travels by a troop of

musicians, all eight of them seated on a large, wooden cradle atop a camel. In war, armies used up to two hundred camels to carry their heavy whirlwind guns into battle. Mounted on a wooden frame, the guns revolved, able to shoot in all directions in rapid succession. Camels were also eaten, the hump being considered the choicest cut.

Apart from wild camels, Nanaivandak saw wolves, wild horses and herds of asses, antelope and gazelle on his first and subsequent desert journeys, as well as gerbils and lizards. Like present-day travellers, he also came across the ruins of long-abandoned towns. There had been people living in the oases fringing the Tarim basin for two millennia, but invasions and changes in the water table or the course of rivers meant that settlements sometimes died. Once the exodus had started, there was soon not enough manpower to maintain the complex irrigation systems, and over even just one or two generations the area of cultivable land might shrink so much that it was no longer sufficient to support the remaining population. The town would then be left, to be reclaimed by the constantly drifting desert sands.

Whenever possible, Nanaivandak and his uncle travelled with other merchants. Sometimes they were passed by small groups of travellers on donkeys which were both faster and cheaper than camels. The aristocracy and high officials preferred to ride horses, especially Ferghanan horses. Their qualities had been recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus, and the Chinese believed them to be part-dragon. But these animals were in short supply and Turkic horses, although less prized, were more frequently seen. It was these that Nanaivandak and his uncle rode. The breed's Arab ancestry had given it two thick bands of muscle on either side of the spine which made bare-backed riding more comfortable, although Nanaivandak and his uncle used saddles. But by far the most common horse, especially along the northern Silk Road, was the steppe pony, the tarpan.

The horror stories which circulated among travellers about the desert stages were not false, although they were sometimes exaggerated, and Nanaivandak's uncle taught him about the stages renowned for their ferocity. The northern route between Anxi and Hami, for example, had few wells and was prone to sudden winds

which would sweep down from the north. Nanaivandak's uncle described it as a stretch with no landmarks other than the bones of travellers and their camels. He also warned Nanaivandak never to be tempted to take a short-cut or travel along lesser-used ways, for by doing so he would put himself at the mercy of the desert. Sometimes a small family group, unable to keep up with a large caravan, would branch off on to a seemingly well-trodden camel path. Then the path would peter out or a sandstorm would blow up. In either case the inexperienced would become hopelessly lost and might wander around for days until, weakened by hunger and thirst, they were unable to go any further and would simply lie down and die. Soon only their bones would be left, scoured by the wind and sand, and bleached by the sun. Nanaivandak's uncle also told him of the whistling wind that sounded like the fabled desert sirens who lured men to their death.

Though the dangers of the desert were real enough, Nanaivandak and his uncle were more at risk from robbers than from thirst, being otherwise well equipped and using the main routes. On one journey Nanaivandak's uncle had been travelling with a group of merchants. When he woke in the morning he found that several of the group had set out secretly before dawn, hoping to reach the next town ahead of the others and thus secure the best prices for their goods. Nanaivandak's uncle and the remainder of the party came across the bodies of their former travelling companions two hours later at a narrow defile. They had been ambushed and killed, and all their goods taken.

Nanaivandak saw plenty of evidence of death on this first journey: ruined and abandoned towns, carcasses in varying states of decay, petrified trees, and old human and animal bones. Flash floods were another hazard of desert travel: they would rise in spring and summer without warning and sweep everything away, dashing the unwary against boulders. But of the thousands of travellers who made their way along the Silk Road each year most survived.

On this first journey Nanaivandak and his uncle stopped over for several days at the city of Kocho, east of Kucha. This was the centre of their church and his uncle wanted to introduce him to the community, to worship, to make confession and to offer alms

to the Elect. The last was easily achieved, a donation of newly ripened melons, silk and other goods being distributed to the several monasteries. The city itself was situated in the Turfan basin, smaller in size but much deeper than the Tarim basin, in parts lying almost 1,000 feet below sea level. It was now summer and the heat was so intense that the wealthiest residents had retreated to special apartments, built in the basements of their houses. The nomads who camped on the plain during the summer had moved into the mountains to the north, and everyone else tried to avoid any exertion, sitting next to the irrigation canals where the shade of the trees and the constantly flowing spring water offered some respite. Nanaivandak soon saw why the route here was called the 'road through the willows'.

The travellers had now left the Taklamakan desert but had to cross the end of the Gobi before reaching the haven of the Gansu corridor. Up to Hami there were numerous wells, but then after a couple more stages the road left the protection of the northern mountains and veered south-east towards Anxi. Nanaivandak soon understood why this tract of the route was spoken of with such dread: though their camels were well fed, they were still exhausted when only half-way into each stage, and there was no chance of respite. The bleached animal bones along the path were a constant reminder of what happened to those who had to be left behind. Moreover, all the well water along this stretch of the route was brackish and only induced a greater thirst, but Nanaivandak's uncle had brought along a sack of dough-strings which, when boiled in the water, absorbed much of the salt, making the water more palatable. They had also purchased extra gourds for carrying fresh spring water from Hami.

The next few stages took them through granite hills riddled with holes left by gold prospectors. The road's surface was a mixture of huge boulders and granite grit whose myriad colours were echoed by the skin of the small desert lizards. Five days on from Hami they reached a narrow ravine, where a well whose water was purer than the rest on this route supplied a small village; but they did not linger. They had another six days to Anxi across the 'Black Gobi', so called because the constant winds had swept away any covering of sand and left a surface of grey grit, mixed

with small, black pebbles. Their most difficult day was the third, when the desert was covered with a thick, salt crust. The camels hated this soft, spongy surface and were constantly stopping and spitting when the cameleer tried to get them to move on, and the sun was already high in the sky before they reached the inn at the end of the stage. When they caught sight of the Chinese defensive walls north-west of Anxi, two days later, they were all extremely relieved – even Nanaivandak, who normally relished the hardships of travel. They were now less than two months away from the great city of Chang'an, their destination, along a road protected from bandits by the wall and its garrisons of Chinese soldiers, from thirst by the streams flowing from the Nanshan – the southern mountains, and from the sand-filled desert winds by the Beishan – the northern hills. The landscape became greener and they gradually left the sere-yellow earth behind.

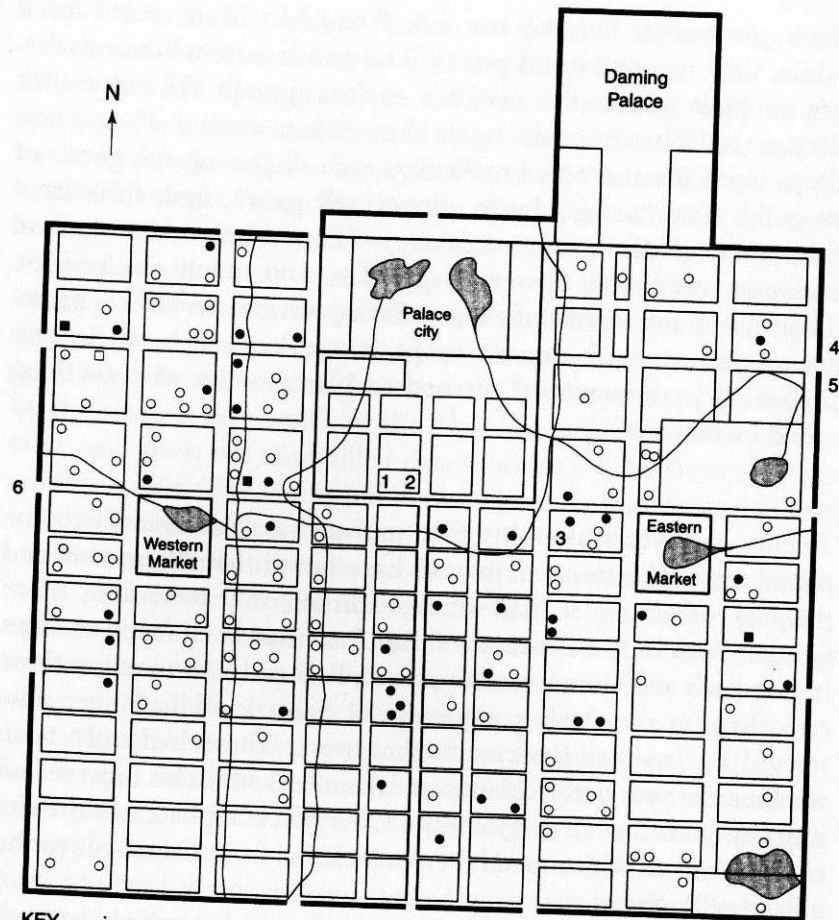
The main Chinese border post was at Liangzhou, another cross-roads, with routes leading north to the Ordos and steppes beyond, and south to Koko-nor and the Tibetan plateau. After showing their papers and paying the necessary customs duty on their goods, along with a little extra to facilitate the paperwork, they found a caravanserai in the town and traded the astrakhan lamb skins they had bought from the Turghiz at Issuk-kul. They then entered the great plains of the Yellow river, winding its loess-laden, sluggish course from its source in Tibet, far to the south. The countryside here was well cultivated and dotted with farms and villages, and there was plenty to divert Nanaivandak on the last few stages to Chang'an. After crossing the final mountain pass, only 9,000 feet and well guarded by Chinese soldiers, they passed through the deeply ravined loess typical of north-western China and then, finally, descended into the plain of Chang'an with its groves of persimmon and fields of summer wheat.

They entered the Chinese capital through the western gate from which the road led directly to the Western Market, where most of the merchants from Central Asia conducted their trade. Over two hundred merchants' guilds were represented in the vast, walled market area and there was even a lake under the walls in the north-eastern corner, fringed with willows and blossoming fruit trees. His uncle had an agent in Chang'an who arranged for the sale of

their goods and, because the Silk Road had been closed for a while, they received good prices. The goods were taken to warehouses built against the market's enclosing walls. The day after their arrival Nanaivandak's uncle showed him around. Over 3,000 shops lined the market's small lanes, each displaying the goods of its guild: silver and goldware, ginger, silk gauze, fresh fish, dried fish, crabs, goldfish, sugared cakes, saddlery, ironwork, scales and measures, medicine, flowers, vegetables, and much else besides. There were also streets of shops offering various services – printers, pawnshops, safe-deposit shops, moneylenders, brothels, tea-houses and restaurants. It seemed to Nanaivandak that anything could be had in Chang'an.

Twenty-one years after his first journey, as Nanaivandak completed his transactions, he would have noted that the market and the city of Chang'an had changed little, only becoming more familiar with long acquaintance. But there had been many changes in Sogdiana and elsewhere along the Silk Road. For much of these two decades the Arab conquerers of Samarkand had been distracted by internal rivalries further west. These had only been resolved the year before Nanaivandak embarked on his most recent journey, with the fall in 750 of the Umayyad Caliphate and the rise of the Abassids who moved the Arab capital from Damascus to the village of Baghdad.

Along the land north of the Silk Road, too, things had changed. By 750 the Western Turk confederation had broken up and had been driven out of the steppes north of the Silk Road (in what is now Mongolia). It was replaced by another confederation of Turkic tribes, the Uighurs, who were to rule for almost a century. The Turghiz, after signing a peace treaty with the Chinese to protect their eastern flank, had formed an alliance with the Tibetans – sealed with a marriage between a Tibetan princess and the Turghiz kaghan in 734 – and combined to fight the Arabs on their western flank. The peace with the Chinese did not last long, however. After the execution of one of their envoys by the Chinese, the Turghiz besieged the Silk Road garrisons in 735. Twice heavily defeated, they again sought peace with the Chinese



KEY

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| Wards of city | Buddhist monastery or nunnery | 1. Guest house for foreign envoys |
| Watercourses | Daoist monastery or nunnery | 2. Court for receiving foreign envoys |
| Lake | Manichean or Zoroastrian temple | 3. The Courtesans' Quarter |
| | 'Persian' temple | 4. Tonghua Gate |
| | | 5. Zhangjing Temple (outside the gate) |
| | | 6. To the Silk Road |

Plan of eighth-century Chang'an

and it was accepted in 736. They were more successful against the Arab armies, inflicting heavy defeats in Transoxania throughout the 730s, until rivalry between two Turghiz chiefs put an end to their unity and power.

The Chinese-Tibetan peace treaty, signed in 730 during Nanaivandak's first visit to Chang'an, lasted seven years but was followed by decades of bloody battles between these two old foes. They fought for control of the Silk Road and of the route into India across the Pamirs. In the eastern arena – the Gansu corridor – the Chinese usually had the upper hand in summer, but the Tibetans would raid the Chinese army camps every autumn just after the harvest and steal the grain, so that the land became known as the 'Tibetan grain estates'. The Tibetans were dominant in the western arena – the Pamirs; but by the late 740s the Chinese emperor Xuanzong, at the height of his power and determined to inflict defeat on the Tibetans, was finally successful in both arenas. The last Chinese counter-attack in the Pamirs took place in 747. The Chinese routed the Tibetan forces and the successful general – a Korean called Gao – was nicknamed Lord of the Mountains of China. In the east the Chinese armies also started to gain the upper hand under the leadership of a half-Turkic general who, Nanaivandak had heard, had Sogdian blood. There was certainly another Sogdian-Turkic general in the Chinese forces called Rokhshan and word had it that he was in favour with the emperor despite his recent defeat on China's northern frontier. By 751, therefore, the Chinese empire seemed pre-eminent, though it was soon to become clear that it had reached the limits of its expansion and power.

On his journey to Chang'an in 751 Nanaivandak had encountered a Chinese army on its way to meet the Arab forces north-east of Sogdiana. They were led by the famous General Gao who, after his success in the Pamirs, had inflicted a heavy defeat on Turghiz and other forces in Sogdiana. Now the Arabs were threatening to conquer the Chinese Silk Road garrisons and so Gao was sent west again to confront them. The two forces met at the Talas river to the north-west of the Tianshan, on the fault-line of Chinese and Arab power. The battle lasted five days and was only decided when one of the tribal armies supporting the Chinese changed its allegiance. The

The Merchant's Tale

Chinese fled in disarray but, as has been seen, many were captured and sent either to Samarkand or Damascus. One of their number, Du Huan, returned to China in 762 and wrote an account of his travels to the heartland of the Arab Caliphate. Sadly, it is no longer extant.

Nanaivandak had been travelling for two decades and was accustomed to armies on the march. They usually left merchants and other travellers alone, though their requisitions from the local community sometimes meant that it was difficult to find supplies. He had travelled alone after his uncle's death. The journey to China was always long and arduous but he had retained his love of the mountain landscapes and his zest for trade: the markets in the Silk Road towns and especially in Chang'an still fascinated him. He was fortunate to live in a period of relative stability on the Silk Road and at a time when China still welcomed foreigners. He did not imagine then that the journey of 751 would be the last he would make to China.

The Soldier's Tale

Seg Lhaton, 747-790

The Tibetan men and horses all wear chain mail armour of extremely fine workmanship. It envelops them completely leaving openings for only the eyes so that strong bows and sharp swords cannot injure them. When they do battle they must dismount and array themselves in ranks. When one dies another takes his place. To the end they are not willing to retreat. Their lances are long and thinner than those in China and their archery is weak. Even when not in battle the men carry swords.

Du Yu, *Tongdian*, AD 801

IN THE 780s Seg Lhaton, a Tibetan soldier, was quartered in a fort near Miran on the southern branch of the Silk Road, over a thousand miles from his home. His countrymen had retaken Miran and many other towns and army garrisons from the Chinese over the past two decades, and they now controlled the route between Sogdiana and China, blocking trade and diplomatic missions between Samarkand and Chang'an and thereby stopping one source of China's wealth and power. A few merchants had recently managed to get through by going north of the Tianshan, but this was Uighur-held territory and the merchants had had to pay a toll for safe passage. Most did not attempt the route: even Nanaivandak, a consummate traveller and trader, had had to rest content with making deals closer to Samarkand. His 751 trip to Chang'an had been his last to the Chinese capital.

The vassal tribes under the Uighurs in the north resented their rulers, and the Tibetans were currently debating whether to send