Life along the Silk Road

SECOND EDITION

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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 finest trees afford thick vegetation and flowers and fruit are plentiful. Sheu 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.

IT WAS THE YEAR 751 by the western calendar, 134 by Islamic reckoning, the second year of the reign of al-Saffah, the first of the Arabic Abbassid caliphs and the Byzantine Carolingian emperors, 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 Amu Darya (Oxus river), under the rule of the caliphate. He had traveled for nearly a year from Samarkand, over the towering Pamir mountains, 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 Panjikant, about forty miles east of Samarkand in the region known as Sogdia. The Arab armies coming from the west referred to Sogdia as “the land beyond the Oxus,” or Transoxania. Panjikant was at the easternmost edge, tucked in the Zerafshan valley between two fingers of mountains that protruded from the great Pamir ranges to the east. Panjikant was on a small hill and, like all Sogdian cities, was built with thick fortified walls. The land sloped away on the western side of the city to the Zerafshan river, and the snow-capped peaks of the Pamir dominated the southeastern horizon.

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. By Nanaivandak’s time, the merchants and landowners lived in large two-story houses, crowded together with vaulted alleys in between. A large double-height audience hall on the ground floor of each house was decorated with murals and woodcarvings and illuminated by a skylight. A staircase led to the living quarters on the second floor. The houses also had a room containing a Zoroastrian fire altar. 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, though the valley floor was criss-crossed with irrigation canals that 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 could soar to over 100°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, and everyone would long for a rare rainstorm to wash clean the city lanes.

The city did not stop at the walls. A bazaar was held outside the main gate leading west to Samarkand, and the area was always bustling with people and animals. Many languages might be heard at any time, haggling over the silks, spices, stones, and other luxuries that dazzled the senses with their colors and smells. 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, a Sasanian design (see figure 3); 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 Changan’s Western Market, but he was not the sole representative of his community in the Chinese capital. The Sogdians were recognized traders of the eastern Silk Road, and Sogdian communities had existed in all its sizeable towns for several centuries.

Nanaivandak profited handsomely from the sale of his cargo of musk, silverware, and gems in Changan, despite having had to pay a considerable bribe to customs officers at the Chinese frontier. Samarkand was a center for trading in gems—rubies, emeralds, and lapis—many of them mined in the mountains to
the south, and he was an expert in these. He had traded some of the gems on route for sal ammoniac, manufactured from animal dung, and musk, from the glands of deer in Tibet, and both were in demand in China. He had not intended to carry the bulky silverware but heard from a countryman that there was demand for finely made wares by the Turkic-Sogdian general Bokshan, who was defending China’s northeastern border, and so he added a few fine pieces, including a gift silver ewer with a relief of a Bactrian camel (see figure 4). 

Nanaivandak sold these pieces to his agent in the capital, who had already made contact with one of the general’s buyers to the northeast. Through his agent, Nanaivandak also bought the fine silk beloved of his countrymen and of the Turks who lived on the northern borders of his homeland to whom he would sell it on his return to Samarkand. Some silk would go to the Byzantine court to the west. (The Chinese had been producing silk for many millennia before their neighbors 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 by China’s neighbors and exported west, but a market still persisted for the 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, where 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.
Nanaivandak had brought with him a piece of unworked lapis lazuli from Bactria that he now took to a Tibetan silversmith to be mounted into a necklace for his wife. Then, having completed his business, he joined his agent and others for an evening of dining and entertainment; there were many fine Sogdian singers and dancers in the restaurants and wineshops of Chang'an. Nanaivandak had been traveling 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, maret-teat grape wine, and dancers. Three girls, heavily made-up with elaborate coiffures and smelling of jasmine, leaned over the second-floor balustrade and beckoned them in. Nanaivandak's group removed their shoes and were shown upstairs to the most expensive area of the restaurant. It 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 lacquered tables. Waiters appeared with silver trays bearing wine and the delicacies of the house.

Maret-teat grapes were grown in Kocho and made into the finest wine. Both the wine and the 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 attendants courtesans staggering out of the wineshops and restaurants late at night.

After they had eaten their fill, they called for dancers. Two girls appeared to the rapid beating of the musicians' drums and, left hands on hips and their bodies bent slightly like loris 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 flowing skirts of gauze, embroidered in many colors and held at their waists with broad silver belts, and peaked hats decorated with golden bells whose jingling provided a counter to the rhythmic, deep drum beat. The men shouted encouragement and clapped in time with the music, and the girls' red-slipped feet moved more and more quickly. Suddenly the drummers stopped, the girls stood still facing Nanaivandak's table, and both pulled down their blouses from their shoulders to reveal their small 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, and they spoke together in Sogdian, but he was soon too drunk to remember much.

Nanaivandak was a Manichaean, a follower of Mani, the third-century prophet from Babylon, though he did not always strictly adhere to the prohibitions on alcohol. The Manichaeans had once formed a strong community in Sogdia and broke ties with the mother church in Babylonia, later turning their attention to evangelism farther east. They considered Mar Ammon, the disciple of Mani who had brought the faith to Transoxania, as the founder of their sect, and they called themselves "the Pure Ones." By the eighth century, the center of this eastern diocese was Kocho in the northern Tarim, and Manichaean monasteries could be found all the way from Samarkand to Chang'an. The schism with the mother church was healed in the eighth century, and the notaries of the eastern diocese recognized the jurisdiction of Mihr, head of the Babylonian community.

However, by Nanaivandak's time, few of his faith resided in Samarkand and Panjikant. Nanaivandak was brought up as a Zoroastrian but had been converted to Manichaeism by his uncle, who learned about the religion from followers who had fled east to escape persecution in their homeland. Apart from the Zoroastrian and Manichaean communities, there were also communities of Buddhists, Jews, and Nestorian Christians in Panjikant and Samarkand. One of his uncle's friends was a devout Buddhist, though he had brought his faith from India when he settled in Samarkand with the Sogdian wife. However, this friend had since died, and his son, Anshahavaz, had left for China where, the uncle heard, he had become famous as a Buddhist master in the Chinese court. Nanaivandak's uncle was glad the son had left because, since the Arab conquest of Sogdia, Islam had become dominant, and many of his countrymen had already chosen to convert.

Before the advent of the Abbasid caliphate in 750, the Arabs had been ruled by the Umayyad caliphate, their capital the city of Damascus. Their armies had crossed the Amu Darya as early as the 670s, but it was not until the first decades of the eighth century, after a long period of intermittent strife, that Arab leaders turned their attention seriously to the east. Thereafter, their armies moved steadily eastward, exploiting rivalries among the kings of the semi-independent city-states to turn their enemies into allies. They reached Samarkand in 711 and besieged the city for a month until the residents were forced to surrender and agree to a peace treaty. Then the Arab armies continued their eastward invasion, reaching Chach and Ferghana, the lands to the northeast of Samarkand, in 713 and 714, respectively.
The land to the north and northeast of Sogdia had long been ruled by alliances of Turkic tribes, sometimes with the support of the Chinese or the Tibetans. In the western part, bordering Sogdia, the Türgesh had taken control at the start of the eighth century and established twenty tribal leaders, called totoks, to rule over the areas that owed allegiance. Their lands extended from Chash eastward along the lands north of the Tian Shan mountains into the Dunhuang basin, the southern edge of present-day Mongolia. Each totok could muster several thousand warriors, mounted and armed, and, at the height of their rule in the 720s, the Türgesh could raise 200,000 troops through their totoks. This army was essential for the Türgesh, who were constantly fending off attacks from the west by the Arabs, from the south by Tibetans, and from the east by pretenders to their throne from other Turkic tribes, supported by Chinese troops. Other groups of Turkic tribes had already migrated westward by this time, escaping conflict, and had formed the Khazar and Bulgar states around the Volga river.

When the nomadic Arab nobles reached Transoxania, they were encouraged to settle in these lands and promote Islam. The rewards for conversion were not just 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. The 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, several major rebellions took place in Sogdia.

Nanaivandak’s father and uncle were among the rebels. With the help of their northern neighbors, the Türgesh, the Sogdians succeeded in driving 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 Ferghana 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 Türgesh army. Otherwise, only 400 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 Davaishir, the ruler ofPanjikant. This group took refuge in the fortress of Mount Mug in the mountains to the southeast of Panjikant and, in the same year, 722, the Panjikant 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 was 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 Türgesh forces to the north. Already under threat from their northern and eastern neighbors when the Arab armies started to push at their southern boundaries, they were determined to repel any full-scale Arab invasion and so 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 marketplaces at Samarkand—though not within earshot of the Arabs.

On his return from battle, Nanaivandak’s uncle adopted Nanaivandak. The boy and his mother moved from Panjikant 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 Panjikant 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 favorite was that of the fight between Rustam and 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, seated on a lion (see figure ). Nanaivandak was named after this life-giving mother goddess: Nanaivandak meaning “slave of Nana.” The hall had a high, vaulted brick ceiling lined with plaster with a skylight and carved wooden pillars. Here Nanaivandak’s extended family performed religious rites, held meetings to discuss family business,
hosted large banquets on holidays and festivals. The family had been wealthy. They owned land in the valley worked by serfs that 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 less richly decorated than the Panjikant home. Samarkand was a large city on a low hill farther down the Zerafshan valley than Panjikant, but it was just as heavily fortified with eight miles of fifty-foot-high walls punctuated with bastions and barbicans. The streets were no less crowded, and large garrisons of Arab soldiers had taken residence in the upper town, having expelled the residents there. Nanaivandak had little time to explore the city, however, because he was soon busy each day being tutored in the ways of trade and the languages he would need as a merchant—Arabic, Chinese, and some Turkic and Tibetan. (It was usual for Sogdian boys to be educated from the age of five.) It was in Samarkand that he was taught to be a follower of Mani, departing 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 Manichaeism in Sogdia. Not long after the Arab invasions of Sasanian Iran, many Zoroastrians fled persecution and established thriving communities in India, now known as the Parsis. The last Sasanian ruler had gained refuge in the Chinese court. Manichaean 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 trading trips to Merv to the southwest, Chach to the northeast, and Balkh to the south whenever the political and military situation allowed. In previous times, his people had gone to the Indus valley to trade with merchants coming up from Barbarikon on the sea, carving their signatures into the rocks along the valley, leaving evidence of centuries of Sogdian trade (see figure 6). One of these inscriptions was by an earlier Nanaivandak, who wished for good luck on his journey to see his brother in Tashkurgan. His uncle also traded northward with the Turks through the steppes and followed routes westward to the Byzantine empire through the Caucasus, so avoiding the caliphate. Unlike his uncle, who traveled simply to make money, Nanaivandak loved the journeys themselves. He found the mountain scenery compelling, and his uncle would often find him in the morning sitting outside as the dawn light suffused the great hulks of the distant Pamir 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 the evening shadows 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 Amu Darya at the head of the route south to India. The residents were proud of their city’s history, arguing that it was the real birthplace of Zoroaster and boasting how Alexander the Great had chosen a Bactrian bride and married her in the city over a thousand years before.
In 718, another rebellion arose against the Arabs among the citizens of Samarkand and other Sogdian cities after the rules on conversion to Islam had been changed once more. This time, both the Turgesh to the north and the Tibetans to the south sent forces to help the rebels and almost succeeded in driving the Arabs out of Sogdia. Many Sogdians who had escaped the Ferghana massacre and joined the Turgesh now returned, but Nanaivandak's father was not among them.

In the late summer of 731, 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 Nanaivandak was old enough to accompany him to China on a trading mission. There were reports of Tibetan invasions into the nominally Chinese-controlled Pamir kingdoms to the south, and his uncle therefore decided to take the northeastern route, past Lake Issyk-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 the gold and gemstones, were destined specifically for Chang'an. 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 Turgesh and Chinese territory as well as the kingdoms of 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 traveled with servants and his uncle's young female slave, who served them both en route. They were armed; bandits preyed on rich travelers.

The road from Samarkand led to the neighboring kingdom to the northeast, Ustrushana, and thence to Khujand on the Syr Darya, or Astaras river. The land of Chach, now under Turgesh rule, started on the far bank. The Turgesh rules, or khagan, and his army had assisted several rebellions by the residents of Samarkand and other cities in Sogdia, 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, temples of several religions, and numerous houses, shops, and workshops. Previous khagans had built a large palace, but the current Türgesh khagan, Suluk (r. 716–38), had his capital farther east at Suyab nearer his homeland in the northern Tian Shan. Nanaivandak and his uncle 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.

From Chach, they took the road east to the valley of the Talas river into the mountains, leaving behind the familiar Transoxanian plains. Then there was a long but easy trek through low mountain valleys and passes to Suyab. The city was relatively quiet because the ruler and his court were at Issyk-kul, the warm lake. As its name suggests, owing to its brackish waters and sheltered position between the Tian Shan and Altai mountains, the lake never froze, even in the coldest winters, and tales were told of great monsters living in its depths. Each winter, the Türgesh khagan moved his court, his army, and his herds there 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 followed the same route to Issyk-kul. They had set out in early spring, and it was almost summer when they arrived. The khagan and his army were preparing to return to Suyab, having just finished shearing. There was plenty of wool for sale, but his uncle was interested only in the wool from the fat-tailed sheep, which were not found farther east. He also bought skins from their stillborn lambs, known as karakul. He intended to trade both en route.

The khagan’s winter camp on the banks of the lake consisted of hundreds of white felt tents, distinctive against the green of the valley floor. That of the khagan 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 the tent’s walls and roof. The khagan’s officials sat in rows on either side of him, dressed in embroidered silk robes, their hair worn in long plaits. Nanaivandak noticed the military men sitting in ranks near the khagan. The soldiers wore coarse clothes of felt and carried bows and other weapons. All the men also wore daggers at their belts. The khagan 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 returning home. 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 color with their kills. During the day, the valley was full of the sound of laughter and noise as the children held pony races and the women packed for the move, and the evenings were no less tranquil, the sound of drunken singing echoing among the flickering light of numerous campfires. Then the tents were loaded onto wooden carts so large that it took several cows of yaks to pull them, and the encampment started its journey back west.

Nanaivandak and his uncle were headed east, but from Issyk-kul they had a choice of routes to Chang’an. The northern route—skirting the northern edge of the Tian Shan along the Ili valley and passing through the Türgesh pasturelands—was the easiest but also the least populated, and many of the goods found in the markers beyond the mountains did not reach there. Instead, Nanaivandak’s uncle decided he wanted to visit the markets along the northwestern stretch of the Tarim route to China. It had been several years since he last traveled that way, and he was eager to meet old acquaintances and to see what was for sale. This meant they now had to head south and negotiate the road through the Tian Shan. 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 travelers 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 Issyk-kul valley to rest their animals, then made arrangements for the next leg of their journey, hiring yaks and more pack 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 travelers over the treacherous Taklamakan.

The road south followed one of the river valleys up into the mountains. Four passes had to be negotiated before Nanaivandak’s group 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 west, but, as they drew closer, the view was obscured by the encroaching valley walls. The mountain peak would become a familiar sight on Nanaivandak’s later journeys.

Nanaivandak’s uncle was used to high mountain passes. Samarkand was separated from the trading markets to the east and south by some of the
highest ranges in the world—the Pamir and the Hindu Kush—and the routes across them demanded considerable endurance from travelers. The Tibetans and the peoples who lived in the Pamir kingdoms 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 Tian Shan were not so high as the Pamir, 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.

Nanaiwandak 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 traveling for three more days along a gradually widening valley, they reached the caravan town at the valley's mouth. There they stopped to pay off their yak drivers and horsemen, who soon found others customers wanting to travel back across the pass. Nanaiwandak’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 hirees were responsible for the injury or death of any camel during its period of hire. 44

Nanaiwandak remembered learning from his uncle the unfamiliar names of the Tarim oases. The first stages of the journey led to Alsu, a smallish town compared to Samarkand but important because of its position at the intersection of the north-south road between the Bedal pass and Khozan and the east-west road from Kashgar to Khocho. The road changed daily and even during a day's travel, or stage, from one stopping point to the next. Some of the most difficult stretches occurred when the route traversed marshy ground but then the surface would suddenly become gravel glacial, and a few miles farther on, 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. Over the last couple of days before they entered the triple walls of the city, they had 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. 45 The forest-lined 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. Nanaiwandak 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 Tian Shan 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 that 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, who, in addition to scriptures, prayers, and charms, sold drugs and told fortunes. Nanaiwandak heard many languages, including Turkic, Chinese—a language he could recognize though not yet really speak—and another tongue that his uncle told him was Kuchean. 46

Kucha was one of four Chinese garrison towns along the Silk Road, but was ruled by the local Bai family, with the support variously of the Turks, Chinese, and Tibetans. In the seventh century, Tibetans and Chinese had fought for control of this vital corridor of land, and, in 692, the Chinese had the advantage. 47 In Kucha, Nanaiwandak 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. 48 Nanaiwandak’s uncle hoped that the peace would last; the past years of conflict had not been good for trade. The Turgesh had also negotiated peace with the Chinese. The peace meant that the southern route through Khotan and Kashgar would be safe, and Nanaiwandak’s uncle decided to travel back that way, since both towns had Sogdian communities 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 Nanaiwandak to see these towns for the first time and to be introduced to the Sogdian agents there. 49

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 a poor inn at the day’s end if they were lucky; problems with sick camels; cold desert nights; scaring daytime heat; dust storms and floods that arose without warning; and the continuing threat of bandits. Stopover places were vital and during the period of Chinese control, care was taken to keep them open. Some nights found Nanaiwandak and his uncle lodged in an inn that was the only building left occupied in an otherwise deserted hamlet. The innkeeper and his wife, often colonists from distant Chinese lands, stayed on because they were paid and given free supplies by the government. 50 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 day’s 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 bells around the camel’s 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 twenty-mile stage to complete before dawn.

The camels traveled nose to tail in a long line, with each string of between five and fifteen beasts tied together by a rope looped through wooden nose pegs. The camelers, usually Chinese, Turks, or 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 cloths.

The camelers carried water flasks (fashioned from hollowed-out gourds, light but thick enough to reduce 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, dreaded along the northern route. They would whirp up the sands and, although over in a matter of minutes, those without protection over their faces might be left for dead.

At sites 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 more 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 though 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 grazing 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 cameliers 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 travelers 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, young boys would perform acrobatics on a camel’s back, and 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 whirwind guns into battle. Mounted on a wooden frame, the guns revolved, able to shoot their projectiles 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 as well as gerbils and lizards on his first and subsequent desert journeys. Like present-day travelers, he also came across the ruins of long-abandoned towns. People had lived in the oases fringing the Tarim basin for over two millennia, but invasions and changes in the water table or the course of rivers meant that settlements sometimes died. Once the easiest 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 abandoned to the constantly shifting desert sands.

Whenever possible, Nanaivandak and his uncle traveled with other merchants. Sometimes they were passed by small groups of travelers on donkeys.
and mules, faster and cheaper than camels. The aristocracy and high officials preferred to ride horses, especially those bred in the region from Nisa to the Ferghana valley. The qualities of Nisan horses are recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus, and the Chinese believed them to be part-dragon. However, these animals were in short supply, and Turkish horses, though less prized, were more frequently seen. Those were the horses that Nanaiwadak and his uncle rode.

The horror stories circulating among travelers about the desert stages of the Silk Road were not false, though they were sometimes exaggerated, and Nanaiwadak’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 sweeping down from the north. Nanaiwadak’s uncle described it as a stretch without any landmarks other than the bones of travelers and their camels. He also warned Nanaiwadak never to be tempted to take a shortcut or travel along lesser-used ways, for by doing so he would put himself at the mercy of the desert itself. Sometimes a small family group, unable to keep up with a large caravan, would branch off onto a seemingly well trodden camel path. Then the path would peter out or a sandstorm would blow up. In either case, the inexperienced travelers would become hopelessly lost and might wander 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. Nanaiwadak’s uncle also told him of the whistling wind that sounded like the fabled desert sirens who lured men to their death.

Although the dangers of the desert were real enough, Nanaiwadak and his uncle were more at risk from robbers than from thirst, being otherwise well-equipped and using the main routes. On one journey, Nanaiwadak’s uncle had been traveling 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 first and thus secure the best prices for their goods. Nanaiwadak’s uncle and the remainder of the party came across the bodies of their former traveling companions two hours later at a narrow defile. They had been ambushed and killed, and all their goods taken.

Nanaiwadak 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 rose in spring and summer without warning and swept everything away, dashing the unwary against boulders.

On this first journey, Nanaiwadak and his uncle broke their journey for several days at the city of Kocho, east of Kucha. They first had to pass the Chinese custom post at Iron Gate on the southwest approach to Kocho and get their permits for travel in China. Kocho was the center of their church, and his uncle wanted to introduce him to the community, to worship, to make confession, and to offer alms. 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 Tarim basin, smaller in size but much deeper than the Turfan basin, with parts lying over 500 feet below sea level. It was now winter, 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 winter had moved into the mountains to the north, and everyone else tried to do as little as possible and sit near the irrigation canals where the shade of the trees and the constantly flowing spring water offered some respite.

The travelers now left the Taklamakan desert but had to cross the end of the Gobi desert before reaching the haven of the Hexi corridor (a passage between a mountain range and a desert). On the route to Hami were numerous wells, but then, after a couple more stages, the road left the protection of the northern mountains and veered southeast toward Anxi. Nanaiwadak soon understood why this tract of the route was spoken of with such dread. Their camels were well fed, but they were still exhausted when only halfway into each day’s stage. There was no chance of respite; the energy produced by the last meal soon ebbed, and 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 Nanaiwadak’s uncle had purchased extra gourds for carrying fresh spring water from Hami.

The first few stages took them through granite hills. The surface of the road was composed of huge boulders alternating with multi-colored granite grit, and the skin of the small desert lizard, usually grey, had here taken on many hues so that it blended into the surrounding ground. Five days from Hami, they reached a narrow ravine in which a well with water less brackish 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
its soft, spongy surface and were constantly stopping and spitting when the camels tried to get them to move on. The sun was already high in the sky before they reached the inn at the end of the stage. Two days later, when they caught sight of the Chinese defensive walls northwest of Anxi, they were all extremely relieved—even Nanaivandak, who normally relished the hardships of travel. A journey of less than two months would take them to 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 Beizhan (the northern hills). The landscape became greener, and they gradually left the grey-yellow desert behind.

The main Chinese border post was at Winwei, another crossroads with routes leading north to the Ordos region and steppes beyond, and south to Koko Lake (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, Nanaivandak and his uncle found an inn in the town and traded the karakul lambskins they had brought from the Turgesh at Eysyk-kul to some of their resident countrymen. After leaving the town, they crossed the Yellow river winding its loess-laden, sluggish course from its source in Tibet to the south. The countryside now was well cultivated and dotted with farms and villages, and there was plenty to divert Nanaivandak on the last stages to Chang'an. After crossing the final mountain pass, only 9,000 feet in elevation and well guarded by Chinese soldiers, they passed through the deeply ravined loess landscape typical of northwestern China and then finally descended into the plain of Chang'an with its groves of persimmons 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 (see figure 7). Over two hundred merchants' guilds were represented in the vast walled market area, and there was even a lake under the walls in the northeastern 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 trade routes had been closed for a while, they received high 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: gold and silver wares, ginger, silk gauze, fresh fish, dried fish, crabs, goldfish, sugared cakes,
saddlery, ironwork, scales and measures, medicine, flowers, vegetables, and much else. There were also streets of shops offering various services: printers, pawnshops, safe-deposit shops, moneylenders, brothels, teahouses, and restaurants. It seemed to Nanaivandak that anything could be had in Chang'an.

In 751, twenty-one years after this first journey, Nanaivandak 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 Sogdia and elsewhere along the Silk Road. For much of these two decades, the Arab conquerors of Samarkand had been distracted by internal rivalries farther west. These had only been resolved the year before Nanaivandak embarked on his most recent journey, with the fall of the Umayyad caliphate and the rise of the Abbasids in 750. Along the land north of the Silk Road, things had changed too. By 750, the Eastern Turk confederation had broken up and been driven out of the steppes north of the Tarim. It was replaced by another confederation of Turkic tribes, the Uyghurs, who were to rule for almost a century. In the west, the Türgesh, 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 Türgesh khan in 744—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 Türgesh besieged the Silk Road garrisons in 751. Twice heavily defeated, they again sought peace with the Chinese, and it was accepted in 756. They were more successful against the Arab armies, inflicting heavy defeats in Transoxania throughout the 750s until rivalry between two Türgesh chiefs put an end to their unity and power.

The Chinese-Tibetan peace treaty, signed in 750 during Nanaivandak's first visit to Chang'an, lasted five years but was followed by decades of bloody battles between these two old foes. They fought for control of the Tarim routes and then into India across the Pamir. In the eastern arena, the Chinese usually had the upper hand in summertime, 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 Pamir. But, by the late 740s, the Chinese emperor Xianzong, at the height of his power and determined to inflict defeat on the Tibetans, was finally successful in both arenas. The last Chinese counterattack in the Pamir took place in 747: The Chinese routed the Tibetan forces, and the successful general—a Korean called Ko

Sonji—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 heard, had Sogdian blood. There was another Turkic-Sogdian general in the Chinese forces called Rokshan, and word had it that he was in favor with the emperor despite his recent defeat on China's northern frontier. By 751, therefore, the Chinese empire seemed preeminent, 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 northeast of Sogdia. They were led by Ko Sonji, who, after his success in the Pamir, had inflicted a heavy defeat on the Türgesh and other forces in Sogdia. Now the Arabs were threatening to conquer the Chinese garrisons in the Tarim, and so General Ko was sent west again to confront them. The two forces met at the Talas river to the northwest 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 Chinese fled in disarray, but, as mentioned above, many were captured and sent to Samarkand or to Damascus. One captive, Du Huan, returned to China in 762 and wrote an account of his travels to the heartland of the Arab caliphate and Africa.

Nanaivandak had been traveling for two decades and was accustomed to armies on the march. They usually left merchants and other travelers alone, though their requisitions from the local community sometimes meant that it was difficult to find supplies. He had traveled alone after his uncle's death. Most of his countrymen did not make the long and arduous journey all the way to China, 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.