

life. The Tajiks represent an older, settled population...

...The Arabs are unique in having entered Central Asia from the south. They are mainly settled, agrarian people who became nomadic as economic or political conditions demanded. They mostly live near major cities, and in the past have allied themselves with ruling elites. For this reason, one often finds throughout these countries a combination of these two traditions in housing, marriage customs, familial relationships and special ceremonies.

4. LIFE ALONG THE SILK ROAD

(Susan Whitfield, John Murray, *Life Along the Silk Road*, Albemarle Street, London, 1999. Permission pending.)

At this point, we are all aware that many exciting events were occurring in Central Asia while Europe was still poorly settled and primitive mud villages. However, it has taken historians a long time to bring together all the pieces of the stories from these areas. Much of the research has been done by European historians and art historians who have tried to reconstruct life in Central Asia. Susan Whitfield, the Director of The Silk Road Project as well as a leading art historian at the British Museum in London, has constructed the life of the people on the Silk Road during the 250 year period from 750 AD to 1000 AD. In many ways, these readings can be compared the Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

The Merchant's Tale : Nanaivandak, 730-751

Nanaivandak was from Samarkand, a city under the rule of the Baghdad Caliphate. It had taken him several months to travel from Samarkand to Chang'an. There were scores of caravanserai, providing shelter for itinerant merchants and warehouse space for their animals and goods. His dress and heavily bearded face distinguished him from the Chinese, Turks and Tibetans and his language was the *lingua franca* of the Silk Road.

Although Nanaivandak paid heavy bribes to customs officers at the Chinese frontier, his profits from

the sale of wool, jade and gems was considerable. In order to "bulk" up the weight of his wool, he made small slits in the bundles and allowed the sand of the journey to seep inside. He bought silk which was valued by his countrymen and by the Turks who lived on the northern borders of Sogdiana. Although silk was now made in Damascus by captured Chinese prisoners-of-war, the finest silks were still from China. When he was in Chang'an he purchased gifts for his family and then joined other merchants for an evening of entertainment by Sogdiana singers and dancers. The restaurants served on mats and low tables, Central Asian style and there was a ready flow of wine and dancing by young girls.

Nanaivanda's father took him on short trading trips when he was young and he immediately loved the journey itself, especially the mountains. He especially loved his visits to the Bactrian city of Balkh where the residents boasted that Alexander the Great had chosen a Bactrian bride and married her over 1000 years earlier. He remembered his first trip to China in 730 AD. They had traveled the northern route because of rumors of Tibetan troops along the southern route of Kashgar. They traded goods along the way but the brass, amber and coral were destined for Chang'an. The Chinese officials used the brass for ornaments for the girdles of officials and the Buddhists needed brass for statues. They brought golden ornaments worked by the artisans of Samarkand in the Persian style. It was a hard journey with freezing temperatures on the mountain passes. They had to be constantly watchful for bandits. By the summer they reached the region where the recently sheared sheep offered them another product for trade. The land was occupied by Turkic tribes, loosely confederated via a system of allegiance and marriage alliances. They lived in felt tents and the largest was richly decorated with silver and gold ornaments. The valley was festive; the horses were well-fed and sleek. The men spent the day hunting with their falcons and riding. The children held pony rides and the women packed for the move. When Nanaivandak and his uncle headed east, the tribes headed west.

They traveled along the western stretch of the Tarim Basin to China – a difficult route in winter and

dangerous in spring when the melting snows caused avalanches and ice falls. They collected fresh horses and yaks although they would change to camels when they reached the desert to the south. When they changed to the camels – an expensive fee since one camel could cost up to 14 bolts of silk – they were responsible for the injury or death of any camel during the period of hire. They had to also provide for food, fodder and fuel. The caravanserai owners were unhelpful and the road changed at every stage.

They stopped at Kucha, a thriving city-state and one of four Chinese garrison towns along the Silk Road. The town was protected by 30,000 troops, many of them Turks or local men. Then they settled into the long dull routine of desert travel – searing daytime heat, cold desert nights, dust storms or floods, the threat of bandits, sick camels. The inns were awful and often the only building in a deserted landscape. It was a relief to reach a large city with a good inn and fodder for their animals. The camels wore bells around their necks to warn people in the narrow streets of the towns and out in the desert the clinking could be heard far away. The camels traveled nose to tail with a string tying them together through wooden nose pegs. The cameleers were Chinese, Turks and Tibetans. Their shoes tied around their ankles to prevent sand from entering. The camels were two-humped Bactrians, renowned for their ability as storm-detectors and water-diviners. The Bactrian camel also grew long fur in the winter to protect them from the cold. The Chinese maintained an imperial herd of camels which they had exchanged for silk. Camels carried entertainers across the deserts and in the marketplaces of the Silk Road young boys would perform acrobatics on a camel's back or as many as eight musicians would be seated in a large wooden cradle atop a camel. In war, armies used up to 200 camels to carry their large guns into battle. Camels were also eaten.

Whenever possible, Nanaivandak and his uncle traveled with other merchants, usually on steppe ponies, tarpans. There were horror stories that circulated among the travelers – few wells, sudden winds sweeping down from the north, sandstorms. They would sometimes encounter the bones of small groups who had broken

away or decided to take less well trodden routes. The greatest risk was bandits. His uncle told of one experience when a small group of merchants had left the caravan early to try to get a head start on business in the next town. They were ambushed and killed by bandits on the road and all their goods were taken. Nanaivandak saw evidence along the route: ruined and abandoned towns, carcasses in varying stages of decay, petrified trees, human and animal bones. Travelers did learn some secrets of survival. When the water was brackish, dough strings were boiled in the water, absorbing much of the salt. And when they reached Chang'an where over 200 merchants' guilds were represented in the market area, there were willow trees, a lake and blossoming fruit trees. There were over 3,000 shops in the small lanes of the market 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 as well as the services of the printer, pawnshop, safe-deposit shop, moneylender, brothels, teahouses and restaurants. Anything could be had in Chang'an.

Twenty-one years after his first journey, Nanaivandak noted there were many changes along the Silk Road. The Umayyad Caliphate had fallen and the Abbassids moved the Arab capital from Damascus to Baghdad. The Western Turk confederation had been driven north and replaced by the Uighurs (another Turkic tribe). The Turghiz had signed a peace treaty with the Tibetans and combined to fight the Arabs. The Chinese continued to fight with the Tibetans for control of the Silk Road as well as the route across India into the Pamirs. The Tibetans were dominant in the west and every autumn raided the Chinese garrisons in the east, stealing the grain. Yet the Chinese empire remained pre-eminent because of excellent military leadership and some outstanding generals. Nanaivandak had been traveling for two decades and was accustomed to armies on the march. The armies usually left the merchants alone. Nanaivandak still loved the journey and the mountain landscapes as well as his zest for trade.