CARAVANEERS OF THE SILK ROAD

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Chinese Empire. After a perilous trek of some 11 000 kilometres across steppes, mountains and deserts, the caravans entered China through the Jade Gate. For seven hundred years, one particular tribe of caravaneers, the Sogdians, held the monopoly of crossing these hostile regions and became masters in the art of organising and leading caravans between East and West. They were among the best merchants the Silk Road had ever known.

Their ancestral trading tradition had been the result of Sogdiana's privileged geographical position: the only possible route for caravans from India to reach Russia, or for those from the Mediterranean to travel to China was to cross Sogdian territory. No other trading route in history has been used for so long and by so many. In the year 674, the Sogdian city states would be conquered by the Arabs from the Middle East. They allowed the defeated Sogdians to keep their own language, Persian, but they forced them to convert to Islam. Still - looking back in history - no other people without an empire or military might has contributed more to the cultural encounter between East and West than the Sogdians.

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