



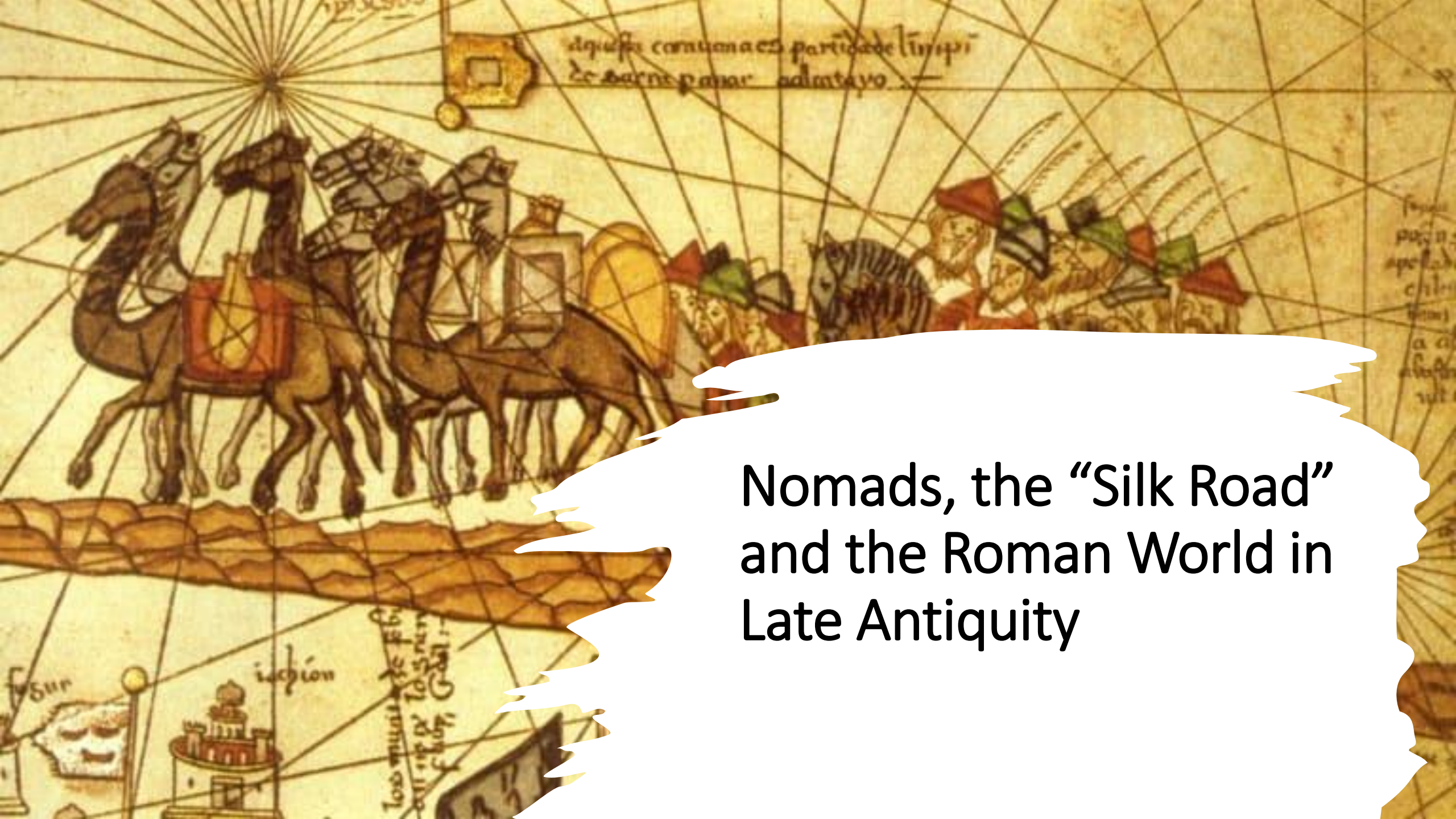
Rome Transformed: The World of Late Antiquity

Beyond the Frontiers (HPAH5079/6079)

Traditional narratives

- Emphasis on “barbarian” invasions common in earlier scholarship – Mediterranean as the centre.
- Better to view Roman and Sassanian worlds as part of a series of interlocking regions across Afro-Eurasia.
- Challenge of gaining a more varied perspective:
 - Limitations of our source material and need to examine a wider array of literature (Syriac, Chinese, etc.)
 - How much can one say about (ethnic) identity from material culture alone?





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Nomads, the “Silk Road”
and the Roman World in
Late Antiquity

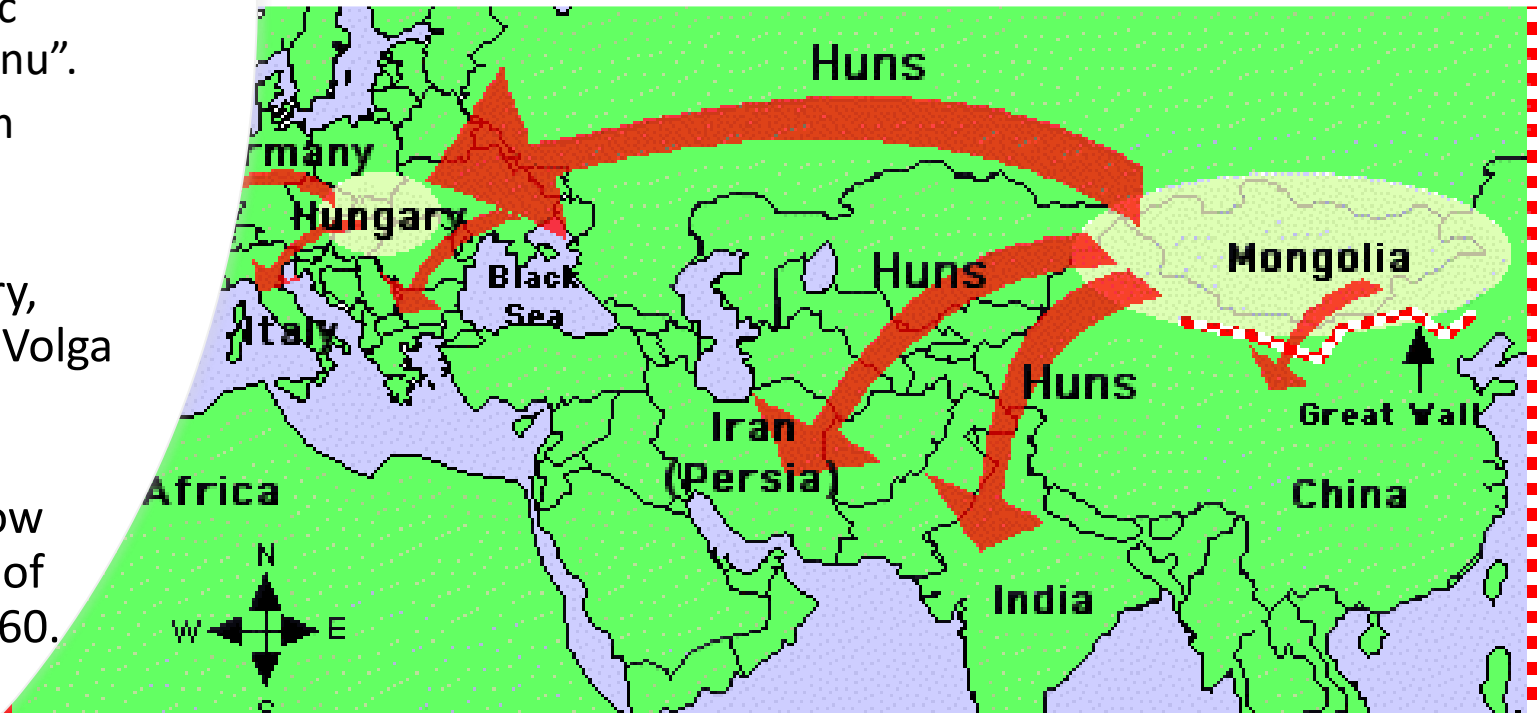
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Evidence for movements and conflict:

- Chinese texts: death of king of Samarkand from Xiongnu attacks.
- Ammianus (AD 356): Shapur II fighting against the Chionites (and then allied).
- Armenia sources note the routing of Sassanians between AD 368-379 by a “king of the Kushans” reigning in Balkh.
- No wars mentioned between nomads and Sassanians between AD 375-425.
- Several sources reporting attacks on Merv, ca. AD 420-438 (r. Vahram V).
- Defeat of the Kidarites by the Sassanian emperor Peroz in AD 468.
- Sassanians paying tribute to the Hephthalites – late 5th to early 6th century.
- White Huns controlling Tarim basin
 - Defeated by a Sassanian and Turkic alliance in AD 560.

The Huns

- Were the “Huns” the Xiongnu of Chinese sources?
 - AD 313, letter from Samarkand describes Xiongnu pillagers of northern China as Huns.
 - Bactrian monk translation of a Buddhist Indic sutra into Chinese renders “Huna” as “Xiongnu”.
 - Similarities between Xiongnu cauldrons from Mongolia and Hunnic ones from Hungary.
- Migration from the Altay Mtns (mid-4th century, some heading to W Central Asia, others to the Volga River).
- Chionite, Kidarite and Hephthalite invasions now generally potentially part of one large episode of mass migration starting from around AD 350-360.



A map of the Silk Road trade routes across Eurasia. Red lines represent the trade routes, connecting major cities and regions. Cities labeled include Rome, Byzantium, Alexandria, Petra, Samarkand, Khotan, Dunhuang, and Xi'an. Regions labeled include Sogdiana, Persians, Arabs, Indians, Chinese, and Egyptians. There are also several small icons: a blue horse, a red oval, a green globe, a purple figure, and a blue square. The title "The Impact on the Silk Road" is overlaid in white text.

The Impact on the Silk Road

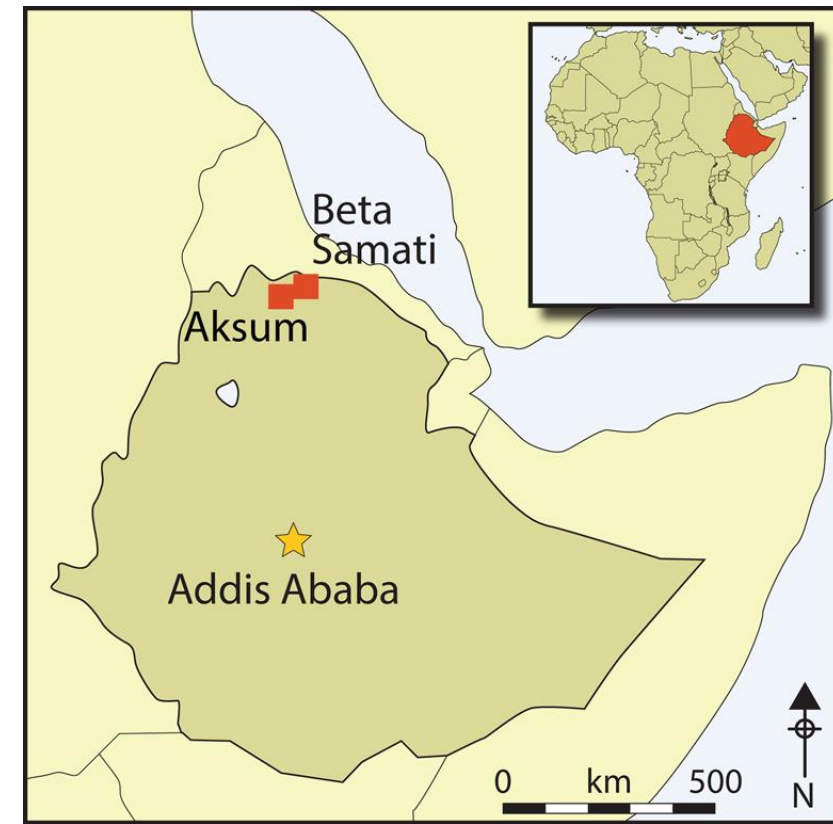
- Bactria region devastated by Sassanian and nomadic conflict, whereas Sogdiana was more easily integrated under nomadic control.
- Advancement of agriculture Sogdiana and appearance of castles of new sedentarized nomadic aristocracy.
- Shift northwards of silk routes.
 - Late Antique “Silk Road” – travel through E Central Asia and the Steppe to Sogdiana, and then to Sassanian Empire and Byzantium.
 - Distinct involvement of Sogdiana traders from 5th to 8th centuries, but with historic antecedents.
 - Antique “Silk Road” had been particularly Sino-Indic.

“For the country in question deflects considerably to the left, so that the loads of silk passing by land through one nation after another, reach Persia in a comparatively short time; whilst the route by sea to Persia is vastly greater. For just as great a distance as the Persian Gulf runs up into Persia, so great a distance and even a greater has one to run, who, being bound for Tzinitza, sails eastward from Taprobanê; while besides, the distances from the mouth of the Persian Gulf to Taprobanê; and the parts beyond through the whole width of the Indian sea are very considerable. He then who comes by land from Tzinitza to Persia shortens very considerably the length of the journey. This is why there is always to be found a great quantity of silk in Persia.” – **Cosmas Indicopleustes** *Christian Topography* 2.138.

“About the same time **there came from India certain monks**; and when **they had satisfied Justinian Augustus that the Romans no longer should buy silk from the Persians**, they promised the emperor in an meeting that they would deliver the materials for making silk... the monks replied that certain worms were manufacturers of silk, nature itself forcing them to keep always at work; the worms could certainly not be brought here alive, but they could be grown easily and without difficulty; the eggs of single hatchings are innumerable; as soon as they are laid men cover them with dung and keep them warm for as long as it is necessary so that they produce insects. ... , they returned to India. When they had brought the eggs to Byzantium, the method having been learned, as I have said, they changed them by metamorphosis into worms which feed on the leaves of mulberry. Thus began the art of making silk from that time on in the Roman Empire.” – **Procopius *Gothic Wars* 4.17.1.**

The spread of Christianity in the Red Sea and (western) Indian Ocean space

- Old Axumite church (4th century) identified at Beta Samati in Axum.
- St Thomas, St Bartholomew and Pantaenus.
 - “[Pantaenus] is said to have gone to India. It is reported that among persons there who knew of Christ, he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language, which they had preserved till that time.” – **Eusebius *Church History* 5.10.3.**
- Cosmas mentions seeing observes Christian worship across the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean.
 - Taprobanê (Sri Lanka), Malê (Malabar Coast), Island of Dioscoridês.
 - Also alludes to Bactrians, Huns and Persians.



A stone pendant with a cross and the term "venerable" in Ge'ez script (found outside the eastern basilica wall).

The harbour of Berenike

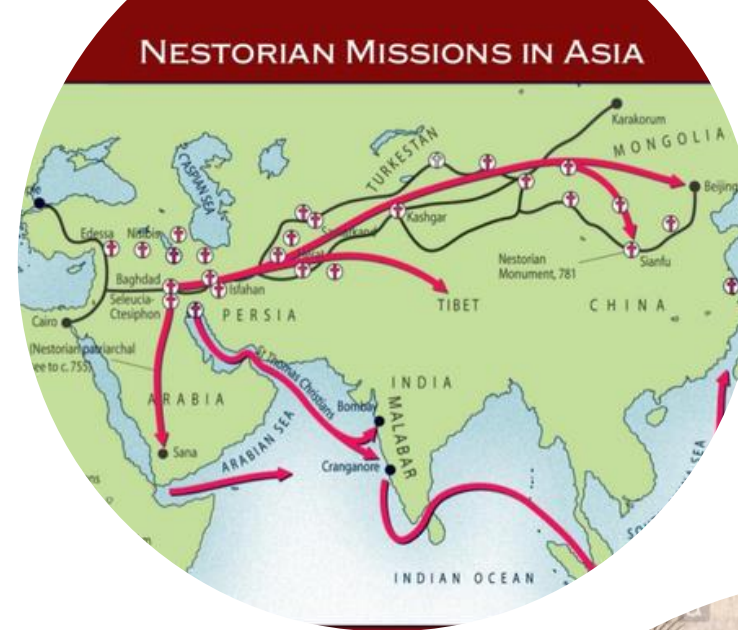
- Roman Imperial, and then latter Blemmyean control (as Foederati?).
- Multi-lingual, multi-ethnic site.
- Presence of travellers with diverse religious beliefs.

Sankarshana,
Ekanamsha and
Vasudeva – suggestion
by Shailendra Bhandare
(2023).



Silk Road Religious “exchange”?

- The “Church of the East” (Nestorianism) travelled eastward in this period.
 - In Merv by AD 424 and had reached Sogdiana in the 5th to 6th centuries. Appears in China as early as AD 635.
 - Nestorian Stele of Xi’an (AD 781).
- Manichaeism arriving in China earlier, ca. second half of 6th century (driven eastwards by Sassanian persecution)?



Decline of the Late Antique “Silk Road”



- The Central Asian long distance trade seems to come to an abrupt end around the mid-8th century. A number of potential factors:
 - Conflict and conquest in 8th century, Islamic conquest into Central Asia.
 - An Lushan, military governor in NE China (Sogdian father and Turkish mother), rebelled in AD 755 against the Tang dynasty.
 - Many texts show Sogdians supporting the rebellion.
 - But many Sogdians in China sided with the Tang.
 - Chinese troops pulled out of Central Asia.
 - Trade disrupted during 8th century and at a low level during 9th.
- Not until Mongol period that there was a major “reinvigoration” of the “Silk Road”.