



## chapter three

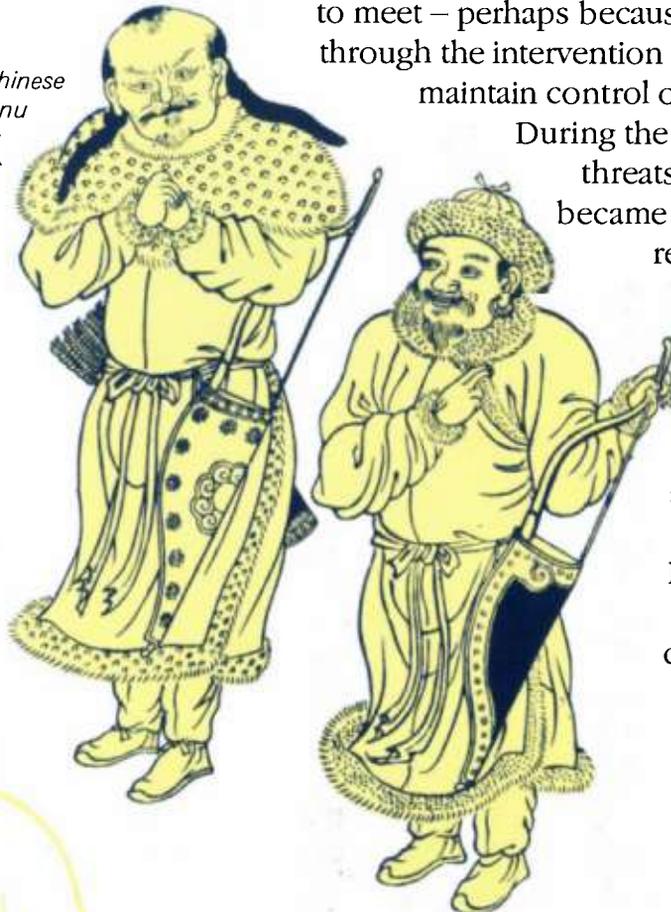
### *Controlling the Silk Route*

# Collapse of the Old Empires



▲ *A view of modern-day Istanbul, formerly Constantinople. The Roman Emperor Constantine gave the city his name when he made it his capital in 330 CE.*

► *An 18th Century Chinese drawing of two Xiongnu warriors. The Xiongnu were a constant threat to Chinese control of the Tarim Basin throughout the period of the Han Dynasty.*



Vast empires such as Rome and Han China possessed are hard to maintain. Through the whole of the Roman-Han period, the stability that allowed the trade routes to prosper was constantly under threat and would occasionally break down altogether.

The Han Dynasty's official history records the exploits of a general called Ban Chao. In 73 CE he took an army into the Tarim Basin, where the constant raids of the Xiongnu (Huns) had dislodged Chinese power and upset Silk Route trade. It was a successful campaign and led to increased contact between China and the Kushan and Parthian Empires. But Rome and Han China were never to meet – perhaps because of sheer distance or perhaps through the intervention of the middle empires, keen to maintain control of the lucrative East-West trade.

During the Third Century CE, the constant threats to Han China's stability finally became irresistible. Floods and famine resulted in a series of rebellions throughout the empire, seriously weakening the power of the Han. Warlords seized control of provincial cities and the Xiongnu once again attacked from the North. With the death of the last Han Emperor in 220 CE, the dynasty came to an end and China divided into a series of smaller, unstable kingdoms.

The Roman Empire, too, was beginning to crumble. The cost of eastern luxuries and maintaining large armies had drained its economy, leaving it almost bankrupt. Recovery was hampered by internal revolts and the barbarian invasions from northern Europe and Asia. In 330 CE, the Emperor Constantine selected Constantinople, at the mouth of the Black Sea, as his new capital, reflecting the gradual shift eastwards of Roman interests. Over the next few centuries, the empire was to lose control of its western European and north African territories. The remaining lands became known as the Byzantine Empire (taking its name from Constantinople's old name, Byzantium).



The Romans' old adversaries, the Parthians, had also been having problems maintaining their empire. In 224 CE, they were finally ousted by a powerful and militaristic tribe from southern Iran – the Sasanians. Not content with the lands of Mesopotamia and Iran, the Sasanians swept down the Indian Grand Road to take on the Kushans. From the middle of the Third Century CE, they completely dominated the Silk Route territories between the Pamirs and the Euphrates.

During all this upheaval, overland trade inevitably declined but it did not cease altogether. The Byzantines still bought silk in large quantities and the Chinese, despite their internal problems, still contrived to send the material eastwards to meet this demand, by land and increasingly by sea. The Sasanians, like the Parthians before them, swiftly took on the profitable role of middlemen.



▲ The marble head of the Roman Emperor Constantine who ruled from 306 to 363 CE. This was part of a colossal sculpture that stood over 15 metres high.

◀ An excavation of a Silk Route town on the southern edge of the Taklamakan conducted by Sir Aurel Stein in 1901. The wooden carvings on the site date from around 200 CE and reveal how the inhabitants were much influenced by styles from northern India and Iran. Stein also found evidence that the settlement was abandoned about 270 CE and concluded that this was probably a result of the breakdown of Chinese power in the Tarim Basin which followed the end of the Han Dynasty.



# Sasanians and Sogdians



▲ *A Sasanian glass bottle dating from 5-6th Century CE. Sasanian glass such as this has been found as far east as Japan.*

▼ *A present day Kyrgyz caravan of Bactrian camels passing through the Pamirs, just as the Sogdian caravans did centuries before.*

The Silk and Spice Routes flourished under the Sasanians. Their government maintained a rigid control of the trade and imposed heavy taxes on all goods passing between their lands and the Byzantine Empire. This was made possible by the network of forts that lined the Sasanian-Byzantine borders – the only official route that was open to trade passed between the heavily fortified border cities of Nisibis and Dara. It is still possible to trace this part of the Silk Route in northern Mesopotamia as frequent traffic has left a heavily worn track crossing the landscape.

Further east, the Sasanians shared the role of middlemen with the Sogdians. A tribe from the Samarkand region, the Sogdians had first risen to prominence on the Silk Route under the Kushans. They took caravans over the Pamirs and around the Tarim Basin, sometimes as far as Dunhuang. Alongside the Sasanians, the Sogdians developed



their reputation as the merchants of Central Asia still further. They established several communities along the northern edge of the Tarim Basin, helped by their knowledge of sophisticated irrigation techniques.

No longer protected by the Han, the techniques of sericulture and silk weaving had slowly spread westwards, although China continued to produce the best quality silken twine and material. Using Chinese thread, Sasanian and Sogdian silk weaving industries flourished from Central Asia to Mesopotamia. Few examples of these silks still survive but some made their way to Europe, where they have been found wrapped around sacred relics, while other fragments have been discovered at Buddhist cave sites in the Tarim Basin. Their motifs and style heavily influenced the later designs of Chinese, Byzantine and Muslim cloth.



▲ This Sasanian gold plate with silver relief shows the 4th Century King Shapur II hunting.



Sasanian and Sogdian decorated metal bowls and jugs were also highly prized. Other vessels made from thick clear glass with elaborate cut decoration are typical Sasanian products and were traded as far as Japan where they were used by the imperial family. Objects like these provide definite evidence that the Silk Route was still functioning.

It is very unlikely that any merchants took part in direct long-distance trade. Instead, the exact size and composition of a given caravan must have changed with every stop and supply of fresh pack animals. In addition, one-humped camels (dromedaries or cross-breeds) and mules were used for the western parts of the Silk Route, whereas, in the east, only the shaggy haired, two-humped, Bactrian camels were capable of crossing the cold and hot extremes of the Pamir mountains and the Taklamakan desert.

▲ Two Sasanian iron swords, one with a finely worked gold scabbard, both dating from 6-7th Century CE.



▲ A map of the Sasanian Empire in 531 CE when it was at its greatest extent.