

A woman with long braided hair, wearing a grey hooded cloak and a brown tunic, looking to the right. The background is dark.

CARAVAN TO PATALIPUTRA

BY
MICHEL POULIN

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HISTORICAL FICTION NOVEL

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS HISTORICAL FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF VIOLENCE AND WAR, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS SOME HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my earlier novel NAUCA – DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES and follows the adventures and travels of Nauca, a young Sarmatian woman who was born north of the Sea of Azov, in the Caucasus, in 80 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). Living first as a nomad with her family in the plains and forests east of the Borysthene (Dniepr) River, Nauca lost her family to a band of robbers at the age of twelve but got her revenge by hunting and killing those robbers before deciding to go to the Greek commercial outpost of Tanais, situated on the delta of the Tanais (Don) River. There, she was helped and supported by a Greek merchant and hunted and trapped furs for him during periodical expeditions out of Tanais. Seeing caravans from the distant East coming to and going from Tanais, Nauca decided to take to the roads with a caravan, in order to see more of the World. Going with her first caravan to the city of Samarkand, Nauca then joined another caravan and travelled all the way to China before returning to Samarkand. Now, Nauca is ready to travel again, this time to India and the city of Pataliputra.

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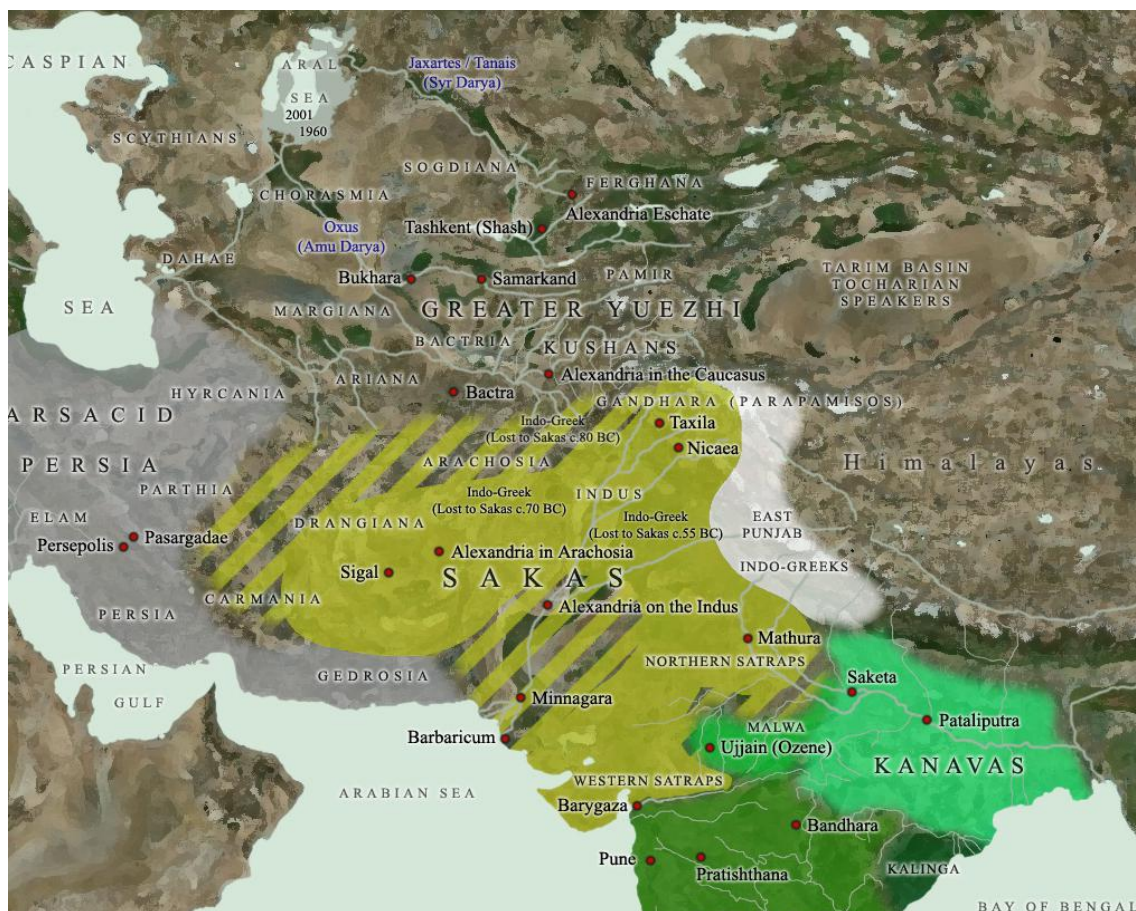
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Map of Sarmatia, 1st Century B.C.E. Red arrow: birthplace of Nauca. Yellow arrow: Tanais Emporium.



Map of Central Asia and India circa 50 B.C.E.

CHAPTER 1 – SAMARKAND



Ancient Samarkand (pre-Islamic).

09:18 (Central Asia Time)

Thursday, February 22, 61 B.C.E.

Family caravanserai of Hiram and Yurkan

City of Samarkand, Sogdiana

The secure deposits house in the family caravanserai belonging to Hiram and his brother Yurkan was, if anything, built even stronger than the storage building where the merchandises brought in by their caravans or bought in advance of another caravan trip were kept. For one thing, it was built with stones rather than with clay bricks. Also, the high but narrow windows of the deposits house, located at a height of two meters, were too narrow to let even a small child crawl through them, compensating their narrowness by their numbers in order to provide sufficient light inside. A thick, iron-reinforced wooden door guarded at all times by two armed men and locked with two locks completed the external protection of the building, itself situated at one end of the walled caravanserai's compound. However, even if thieves succeeded in entering it, they would then still not be able to take anything of value from it. In a system that Nauca thought of as brilliant, the caravan merchants associated with Hiram and Yurkan kept

their valuables, like gold, silver, gems, jewels and rare spices, in large individual chests made of thick wood reinforced with iron straps and locked by large key locks. What was brilliant about those secure chests was the fact that their bottom was lined with lead plates that made them extremely heavy, thus near impossible to be moved unless you could open them and take out those lead plates. As a good friend, employee and associate of both Hiram and Yurkan, Nauca had been using one of the secure chests to safeguard the valuables and money she had either earned or had received as gifts while traveling with the brothers' respective caravans. Nauca, a tall, 21-year-old Sarmatian girl with reddish-brown hair and brown eyes, led Hiram to the chest she used to safeguard her valuables and, extracting the key she always kept suspended from her neck by a chain, opened its big lock. With Hiram watching on, she then opened the cover of the chest and took a flat bronze box from inside it before opening it and presenting it to Hiram.



"This is what Emperor Xuan gave me as a gift in order to reward me for protecting Lady Zu and her daughter from that renegade Chinese general in Khotan." Hiram, a medium-sized man in his early thirties with a short black beard, opened his eyes wide at the sight of the magnificent tiara and matching set of jewels contained inside the bronze box.

"But...those would be worthy of a princess or even a queen, Nauca."

"I am a simple Sarmatian nomad girl in your employ, Hiram, and I don't intend to let this gift get to my head. I will now show you something else that is most precious to me, but you will have to promise me not to tell anybody about it, even to your brother or your wife."

"Uh, okay!" said Hiram after a short hesitation, intrigued by such mystery. Closing and putting back the bronze box inside the chest, Nauca then picked up another box and opened it, exposing a gold and jade cup inlaid with emeralds, rubies and turquoises, along with a full set of gem-inlaid jewels. Hiram's brain nearly boiled over as Nauca calmly spoke.

"This is another gift that is most dear to me and that I will never sell away. It was given to me by no other than King Mithridates after we met in the Taiga forest, near Tanais."

"King Mithridates? The King of Pontus, who fought the Romans and lost? Why did he give you such a fantastic gift?"

"Because I invited him to my campfire in the Taiga and sheltered him while he was traveling during the Winter months, even though he was for me at the time nothing more than a simple traveler who was part of a small troupe of travelers."

"So, King Mithridates would be still alive?" asked Hiram, overwhelmed by Nauca's revelation. She however shook her head slowly at that question.

"At the time of our meeting, many years ago, he was already a very old man and he probably has died since then. However, the fact that I met him in the Taiga must stay secret: if the wrong persons learn about this, they could then try to hunt him down and find him, in order to steal his gold. Those same persons would also probably have no compunction in torturing me to get me to tell them everything about our meeting."

"Then, why reveal this to me, Nauca?"

"For two reasons, Hiram: first, I respect you and have full confidence in you; second, this is one way to show you that, while I have become an associate merchant of you and your brother, it is not the desire to become rich that makes me travel with your caravans, but rather the desire to see the World and live adventures. By all common standards, I am already rich. While I will keep an occasional footing in your Samarkand's caravanserai, I will always stay a nomad woman at heart, and this to my dying day."

Giving a last look at the jeweled cup and set of jewels, Hiram then looked into Nauca's eyes, feeling renewed respect for her.

"If I ever needed a proof of your absolute honesty, then this is it, Nauca. You can count on my silence about this."

"Thank you, Hiram."

Letting her put her box back in the chest and then close and lock her chest, Hiram followed her out of the safe deposits house, then locked back its door before walking a short distance with her and stopping. His expression was both sober and serious as he pivoted to face her.

"Nauca, you may not be motivated by profit the way us Sogdian merchants are but you should strive to at least not get fleeced every time you will conclude deals or exchanges while traveling with our caravans. Yurkan told me that, while you have already learned quite a lot about the business of trading, you are still weak in the art of haggling. I intend to teach you more about that art, with the help of Xiao, my expert in

gem trading. I understand that you have been concentrating on the acquisition of gems, along with that of silk and spices, correct?”

“Correct! I prefer to deal with those kinds of merchandise because they are the lightest and thus easiest to transport, while they have very high values. That way, I can carry a lot of value while keeping light the loads on my two camels and my pack horse.”

“A most reasonable and logical strategy, I must say. Do you intend to sell here in Samarkand all of the merchandise you brought back from China?”

“All, except for a few select gems and small quantities of selected spices, which I intend to keep for my personal use. Since we will go next to India, there is no point for me to bring with me spices and gems that are found in abundance there. That would make no good commercial sense. In your opinion, what kind of merchandises would interest potential customers in India?”

Happy to see that she had already acquired a fair common sense concerning trading, Hiram thought for a few seconds before answering her.

“Good, strong horses are always in demand in the East, mostly because the eastern races of horses tend to be much smaller than the horses you raised in Sarmatia. That was one main reason why I went regularly to Tanais, to buy horses there. Another thing from the West that is in high demand in the East is slaves. However, like you, I dislike this slaving business and tend to avoid it. Unfortunately, slavery is a universal institution as far as I know and demands for good working slaves and for pretty slave girls never seems to go down.”

“And did you buy slaves during your last trip to Tanais, Hiram?”
Nauca’s pointed question made the caravan master hesitate before he answered her while averting her eyes.

“Yes, I did buy a few slaves in Tanais. The Romans who are now in Tanais have brought with them slaves of their own and also expanded the slave trade there. As you must know, Romans are big slave users, with most of the prisoners they take in their wars then turned into slaves. I sold on arrival in Samarkand nearly all the slaves I bought in Tanais, except for three girls, whom I was planning to pass on to Yurkan, so that he could bring them with him on his next trip to China.”

Nauca stared at him somberly for a moment, trying to decide how to react to this. Personally, she abhorred the institution of slavery and those who profited from it or abused slaves. For her, freedom was a sacred notion and she had vowed to kill herself rather than ever be enslaved. However, she realized that slavery was a reality in this

world, a sad and cruel one but still a reality that could not be denied or ignored. Nauca knew that Hiram was not a bad or cruel man: he was just a typical merchant of his time who traded what was considered to be legitimate merchandise everywhere. She finally patted his shoulder while speaking to him in a neutral tone.

"I understand that trading in slaves is a legitimate business and that you did not do this out of cruelty, Hiram. Could I see those three slave girls?"

Hiram snapped his head up in surprise at that question.

"You want to see those slaves? Why?"

"You will see. Just bring me to them."

"Er, okay!"

Hiram led Nauca to his family's house and entered it. Encountering his daughter Dinkha, he asked a question to her.

"Do you know where the three slave girls I brought from Tanais are, Dinkha?"

"Yes, Father: Mother told them to clean the camels' stalls."

"Thank you!" replied Hiram before leaving his house to walk towards the row of stalls where the camels used by his family were sheltered. Seeing three girls at work with pitchforks and shovels in one stall, he called up to them in Sogdian and signaled them to join him and Nauca. The latter eyed with a mix of curiosity and interest the three girls who then got out of the stall and lined up in front of Hiram. Due to the near freezing temperature of February they wore woolen capes, along with soft leather shoes, but were otherwise naked except for loincloths. Nauca was not surprised by that, as slaves were commonly kept nearly naked in order to save on their clothing. That however allowed her to more easily evaluate their physical state. The tallest girl, as tall or even a bit taller than Nauca in fact, also looked strong and fit and had to be around fifteen years old. She was very pretty and most feminine already, with blond hair and blue eyes. The second girl was slightly shorter but also looked fit and of about the same age as the first one, but wore brown hair and had gray eyes. The youngest one, which was also much smaller, was barely in her early teens and definitely had a Greek look to her and had long black hair and brown eyes. Hiram then pointed in turn at each of them while speaking to Nauca.

"The girl to the left is named Igrid. She is from the Germanic tribe of the Bastarnae and was captured by the Romans when her tribe and other people around Dacia and Macedonia recently revolted against the Romans but then lost their war."

“The Bastarnae? I heard about them before, when I was young and still living on the steppes: their tribe was our neighbor to the West, across the Borysthene River. They had a reputation of being fierce warriors.”

“That’s what I was told too about them. The girl in the middle is named Talya and is from Dacia, along the northwest coast of the Pontus Euxinus¹. The younger one is named Amara and is eleven-year-old. Both Talya and Amara were enslaved by the Romans after their people revolted against Roman rule.”

“And for how much were you planning to sell them, Hiram?”
Hiram was temporarily stunned by her question before he finally understood what were her intentions concerning the slave girls.

“You want to buy them in order to free them? But what would they do then, without money and not knowing the local language in a city that is totally foreign to them? They would quickly fall back into servitude...or prostitution.”

“Yes, I want to free them, but not to simply abandon them afterwards. I will take them as salaried employees and they will travel with me and with your caravan. I am sure that they can then prove themselves to be useful...without the threat of a whipping or maltreatment.”

The youngest girl, Amara, looked stunned on hearing Nauca, who had conversed in Greek with Hiram. Seeing that, Nauca approached her and gently caressed her head with one hand while smiling to her.

“Do not worry about me, young Amara: I only want to be good with you and the two other girls. Know that I am a Sarmatian from the tribe of the Roxolani and that I prize freedom above everything else. In fact, I hate slavery and am buying you only in order to free you and offer you a paying job.”

The Bastarnae girl named Igrid snapped her head towards Nauca when she heard the words ‘Roxolani’ and ‘Sarmatia’.

“Roxolani?” she said before saying a few words that Nauca could barely understand. Nauca then smiled to Igrid and nodded once her head, speaking in Sarmatian.

“Yes, I am from the Roxolani. I was born near the eastern shores of the Borysthene River, next to your tribe’s territory.”

¹ Pontus Euxinus : The ancient name of the Black Sea.

Igrid smiled in response, having visibly understood the words 'Borysthene River'. Turning towards Hiram, Nauca then repeated her question.

"So, how much for all three of them, Hiram? And give me a price similar to what you would ask from a Samarkand merchant."

"Uh, the tall one, Igrid, would be considered a prime slave, due to her strong body. The same could be said of Talya, while young Amara would fetch the standard price for a house servant. All in all, I would have asked for a total of 800 drachmas for these three girls."

"Then, I will pay you 800 drachmas for them. Could you prepare a contract and emancipation declarations for them while I go fetch some of my gold?"

"Sure! Give me a moment, please."

"Of course! I will be in my room with those three girls. Follow me, girls!"

With little Amara following her at once and with Talya and Igrid imitating the Greek girl, the four of them went into the caravanserai's inn and climbed the stairs to the upper floor, where Nauca had her room.

Once inside her room and with its door closed and locked, Nauca gently took off the capes worn by the three slave girls, so that she could examine their bodies for traces of past bad treatment. While little Amara had no visible scars or bruises on her young body, both Igrid and Talya bore old whip marks on their backs. Nauca sadly eyed the scars and pointed at them while saying a single word.

"Romans?"

Both girls nodded their heads in response. Nauca wanted to say more but didn't know how to be understood by Igrid and Talya. That was when the latter one surprised her by speaking in a broken but understandable Greek.

"I can speak Greek...little."

"You do? Great! That however leaves me with a problem about how to speak with Igrid."

"She speaks Dacian." replied Talya, smiling, making Nauca smile as well.

"Great! Cascade translation: from Greek to Dacian and back. Still, that could work, until you could all speak a proper Greek. Look, girls. I intend to travel soon to India as part of Hiram's caravan and I want to bring you with me on that trip, not as slaves but as paid employees and partners."

"Partners?" said Talya in a disbelieving tone. "To do what?"

“Well, it will mostly depend on what kind of skills you possess, each of you. Do you know how to use a weapon, Talya? And could you ask the same question to Igrid, please?”

The two older girls spoke together in Dacian for a moment before Talya looked back at Nauca.

“Igrid can shoot a bow, throw a javelin and fight with a knife. She also knows how to ride a horse and care for it and can also drive a chariot. As for me, I am good with a sling and a javelin and can ride a horse. Before being enslaved, I was a sheep shepherd.”

“That would certainly explain your level of fitness, Talya. This is actually better than I hoped for. Tell Igrid that I would like to hire her as part hunter and part camp guard during our trip to India. As for you, you can help care for my camels and horses.”

“What about me?” asked in Greek young Amara, making Nauca smile to her.

“And what can you do, young one?”

“My mother showed me how to cook, make bread and wash clothes.”

“That’s a good start, Amara. In turn, I can teach you how to use various spices in a range of recipes I tasted and learned to like during my travels. Well, with this said, we better go get you some new clothes: you can’t stay half-naked like this around a bunch of caravan men. As soon as I will have paid Hiram for your acquisition and will have your emancipation certificates, we will go together to the central market to buy things for you three.”

That declaration made little Amara come and hug her tightly, tears in her eyes. Both Talya and Igrid then joined the little Greek girl in hugging Nauca, who then held all three girls in her opened arms, more moved than she wanted to show.

About one hour later, with her debt to Hiram for the slaves paid and with their emancipation certificates made and signed on parchment, Nauca lent three of her wool undershirts to the ex-slave girls, so that they would not go around topless, and left with them the caravanserai to go to the city’s central market. There, Nauca spent over 500 drachmas to acquire a decent and practical travel wardrobe for her three new employees and for various travel items, like water flasks, haversacks, belts, purses and bedrolls. She also bought a good quality horse with a saddle and bridles for Igrid, so that she could more efficiently act as a guard and hunter. In a move that both stunned and greatly reassured the three girls, Nauca also acquired weapons for them, buying a bow

with arrows, two javelins, a battle-axe, a dagger and a small buckler shield for Igrid, a Chinese crossbow, a pair of javelins plus a dagger and a sling for Talya and a javelin and dagger for young Amara. The three ex-slaves had big smiles on their faces when they returned to the caravanserai after their shopping trip.

Their group dined together that evening in the inn of the caravanserai, surprising many of the caravan men and associates who had become Nauca's friends during the last two years, but also pleasing the wives of Hiram and Yurkan, who approved of her generosity and compassion. With all the rooms in the inn already taken, Nauca elected to keep all three girls with her in her room, which was thankfully one of the bigger ones of the inn. Like her, the three girls undressed before going to bed, keeping only their loincloths on, and with all four lying close to each other in order to share their body heat during the fresh night. However, that awakened in Nauca souvenirs about her past steamy nights spent with Artemisia during her time with her in Tanais. She was tempted for a moment to pass an arm over Talya's torso, in order to cup one of her breasts, but decided to leave her alone: this could have appeared to Talya as an attempt by her to profit from her status over her. She also didn't want Talya or the other two girls to have reasons to fear her or her motives towards them, for any reason. Keeping her hands to herself, Nauca then went to sleep in the dark room, hugged by the bodies of both Igrid and Talya and with little Amara sandwiched between her and Talya.

CHAPTER 2 – ON THE ROAD TO INDIA



India around 50 B.C.E. Red arrow points to the location of Samarkand.

07:23 (Central Asia Time)

Friday, March 29, 61 B.C.E.

Courtyard of the caravanserai belonging to Hiram and Yurkan

City of Samarkand, Sogdiana

It took long minutes before Hiram regretfully unglued himself from his wife Seda and from his children, Dinkha and Jakand, who had come out to say goodbye and wish him a good trip to India. With a last kiss to them, he then got on his horse and gave the signal to his fifteen associates/camel drivers/guards, plus the three ex-slave girls, to follow him. A total of 39 horses, ten of them mounting riders, and 23 camels filed out of the caravanserai, Hiram and Nauca at their head and with Timur and Gorudos guarding the tail end of the caravan. Igrid, mounted on her new horse and proudly carrying her weapons, trotted just ahead of the first camel, near the center of the caravan, while Talya and Amara rode on the two camels belonging to Nauca. The long procession,

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