

All day we had followed the ancient road, and it was for the most part easy to trace because of the numerous cairns of stones, often pretty big, built preferably on the high terraces and hills. Sometimes we counted as many as 18 separate tracks running side by side, showing that large caravans with a broad front had used to march that way. The very fact of the road being so broad seems to indicate that it was used by large herds of cattle, for those animals are wont to travel in dense masses. In this region too the road appeared to have been more diligently used than where we first came into contact with it. Probably it has split into one or more branches. One of my men, Tokta Ahun from Abdal, who had several times travelled to Anambaruin-gol, had almost always made use of a pass in the Astin-tagh called Kara-davan; this must be situated somewhere to the north or northwest of Camp CVIII. In the neighbourhood of that pass there are, he said, good grazing-grounds, numerous signs going to show that there the Mongols used formerly to pasture their flocks. There is also a story, though it sounds not very probable, that, in the time of Jakub Bek, Mongol shepherds from Särtäng and the Anambar district, whilst feeding their flocks at Kara-davan, were fallen upon and slain by hunters from Tschertschen, who seized their property, though it was again taken from them by Nias Hakim Bek of Chotan. This is however stated as the reason why the Mongols ceased to visit the region of Kara-davan, namely their fear of the Mussulmans. My informant even went so far as to say that the attack was made 26 years ago, or in 1874. If this story is true, the old road will have divided at the spring of Camp CVII, one branch proceeding thence north of the Akato-tagh to Usun-schor and another east of the Akato-tagh to the Ghas-köl and Tschimen. Another branch must have struck off at one of these two springs to make for Kara-davan; though it is not easy to form any definite opinion with regard to this. This old road may of course have been in use for centuries; the several tracks or deep hollows seem to point to a very considerable amount of traffic, and hollows such as these are would be preserved for a very long time in a country that is so poor in rainfall as this is. On the other hand the wind continues its planing and transporting activity year after year; which would seem to lend support to the view, that this route was in use for a period of not more than twenty or thirty years. It may of course be a pure accident, that the wall of the watch-house is in such a ruinous condition and wears such a look of antiquity. Nevertheless it is strange that the Mongols have not resumed their nomadic migrations to Kara-davan and Tschimen, now that the Chinese have again taken possession of East Turkestan, for under the ægis of the Celestial Empire they might reasonably feel themselves secure. For my own part it seems to me more probable that this means of communication was principally used during the time that the Mongols were settled beside the Kara-koschun and maintained touch with their race kindred farther to the east. And if we go a long way back in time, as far as the period when the old Lop-nor was in existence, this route by way of the mountains and the springs must have possessed a certain degree of importance, and travelling here stage by stage, from spring to spring, must have been preferable to journeying through the perfectly waterless desert regions, as they then were, to the north of the Astin-tagh.