

passes into fertile country with many villages.* Then there comes a boundless dreary steppe to the south. At the village Seng-i-kal-i-deh you enter an undulating country with immense flocks of sheep. 'The first stretch of the road between Shurab and Nishapur led us through perfect desert . . . ; but the landscape soon changed its aspect; the desert passed by degrees into cultivated lands, and we rode past several villages surrounded by fields and gardens. . . . We here entered the most fertile and densely peopled region in Khorasan, in the midst of which the town of Nishapur is situated.' Of the tract to the east of Nishapur I say: 'Here are found innumerable villages. The plain and slopes are dotted with them. This district is extraordinarily densely inhabited and well cultivated.' But then all this magnificence comes to an end, and of the last day's journey between Kademgah and Meshed I write: 'The country rose and we entered a maze of low intricate hillocks. . . . The country was exceedingly dreary and bare. Some flocks of sheep were seen, however, but what the fat and sleek sheep lived on was a puzzle to me. . . . This dismal landscape was more and more enlivened by travellers. . . . To the east stretched an undulating steppe up to the frontier of Aghanistan.'

"The road between Sebsevar and Meshed is, in short, of such a character that it can hardly fit in with Marco Polo's enthusiastic description of the six days. And as these came just before Sapurgan, one cannot either identify the desert regions named with the deserts about the middle course of the Murgab which extend between Meshed and Shibirkhan. He must have crossed desert first, and it may be identified with the nemek-sar or salt desert east of Tun and Kain. The six days must have been passed in the ranges Paropamisus, Firuz-kuh, and Bend-i-Turkestan. Marco Polo is not usually wont to scare his readers by descriptions of mountainous regions, but at this place he speaks of mountains and valleys and rich pastures. As it was, of course, his intention to travel on into the heart of Asia, to make a détour through Sebsevar was unnecessary and out of his way. If he had travelled to Sebsevar, Nishapur, and Meshed, he would scarcely call the province of Tun-o-Kain the extremity of Persia towards the north, even as the political boundaries were then situated.

"From Balkh his wonderful journey proceeded further eastwards, and therefore we take leave of him. Precisely in Eastern Persia his descriptions are so brief that they leave free room for

* *Genom Khorasan och Turkestan*, I., pp. 123 seq.