

Ancient route passing Marāl-bāshi.

In view of the old remains traced at and near the gap of Achal, it is, I think, safe to assume that the ancient route passed on from Lāl-tāgh to this defile, as did the modern route via Tumshuk until some forty years ago. But beyond it, topographical facts, combined with such archaeological indications as I have discussed above in connexion with my journey from Kāshgar, point to a bifurcation. On the one hand it is on general grounds highly probable that there was a southwestern continuation of the ancient route to the vicinity of the present Marāl-bāshi; for though the present town is of avowedly modern origin, and probably the surrounding oasis also,¹⁸ yet a look at the map shows that the branch of the road which forms the easiest and most direct connexion between Ak-su and Yārkand must always have passed the site in question. Whether there existed any large settlement during ancient times in a position corresponding to the present Marāl-bāshi is doubtful, seeing that the detailed accounts of the 'Western kingdoms' contained in the Han and T'ang Annals make no mention of a special territory or tract at this place.¹⁹

Inundations from Kāshgar R.

However this may be, it is clear that a route leading from the vicinity of Marāl-bāshi to Kāshgar along one side or another of the Kāshgar-daryā must always have served as a conveniently direct line of communication. But it is equally certain that the use of such a route, like that of the present cart road along this line, must have been much impeded by the annual inundations caused by the summer floods of the river.²⁰ These inundations are likely to have been even more troublesome then than now; for there is abundant and convergent antiquarian evidence that the rivers of the Tārīm basin carried a greater volume of water during the historical periods with which we are concerned than they do now.

Advantage of alternative route.

It is on this ground, I believe, that an alternative route, keeping close to the foot of the outermost hill range, such as I was able to follow beyond Kalta-yailak, must have been specially convenient in old times, at least for a portion of the year. This line could be reached with ease from the Achal defile by striking due west across an open steppe well removed from the risk of flooding. The traveller who had reached the foot of the hill chain somewhere near our Camp XVI (Map 8. A. 1) was assured of continuous easy progress beyond it until he reached the extreme north-eastern extension of the cultivated area of Kāshgar. Even at the present day, carts could easily follow this line right to Kāshgar town. The actual marching distance along it (assuming the direct road from Kalta-yailak to Kāshgar were followed as surveyed by Lāl Singh, Map No. 5. A, B. 1) would exceed that by the southern route along the river only by a few miles, if at all.

'Old road' along desert range W. of Marāl-bāshi.

The want of water that nowadays precludes the regular use of this northern route over a distance of three marches, or about fifty-five miles, cannot have existed in old times; for we have seen that water from the Kāshgar river must have reached the foot of the hills as far as Khitai-shahri, during the period when that site was occupied, and may probably have extended to a considerable distance farther east. I have also shown that, even where old remains of human occupation fail us, we can trace indications that the hill range itself may have received more moisture within the historical period. The occasional drainage which allowed rows of Toghraks to flourish along the small alluvial fans would certainly have sufficed to fill rock cisterns or artificial reservoirs near the mouths of the little valleys. I conclude therefore that the local belief, vague as it is in details, as to the 'old road' once leading along the foot of the desert range above Marāl-bāshi rests on a foundation of fact quite as solid as that which allows us to trace the ancient high road from Ak-su through the sites of Chong-tim, Lāl-tāgh and Achal.

¹⁸ Cf. *Serindia*, iii. p. 1310, note 2.

¹⁹ We may agree with M. Chavannes in placing somewhere in the Marāl-bāshi tract the *Wo-shê-tê* 握瑟德 mentioned in the account of Kao Hsien-chih's Pāmīr and

Yāsīn expedition as half-way between Ak-su and Kāshgar (cf. Chavannes, *Turcs occid.*, p. 152, note). But there is nothing to indicate the exact position of the locality. [For a T'ang itinerary past the Mazār-tāgh, cf. Chap. xxiv. sec. iii.]

²⁰ Cf. Hedin, *Reisen in Z.-A.*, p. 219.