

the historical topography of the Lop region.⁵ In view of the past importance of the site I could not help being particularly struck by the altered aspect of modern Mīrān since my last visit. As the conditions attending it have some geographical interest and may help to throw light also on the history of the locality, I will briefly refer to them before giving an account of the supplementary archaeological work that occupied me here for a fortnight.

Cultivation
at Mīrān.

In 1907 I had found cultivation at Mīrān confined to a narrow stretch of scattered and poorly tilled clearings. They extended for about two miles along, but at some distance from, the western bank of a shallow depression in which the main course of the Mīrān river, divided into several small branches, was flowing northward. Wheat and barley were grown there by the small colony of Lopliks, all fishermen, hunters, or herdsman, established at Abdal and Kum-chapgan, a day's march northward on the terminal course of the Tārīm; and the cultivation was carried on in that somewhat intermittent fashion which accorded with their traditional semi-nomadic mode of life. Though some of these Lopliks were said, in 1907, to visit Mīrān for a few months in the summer, when the plague of insects grew particularly troublesome on the marshy banks of the Tārīm, no permanent abode of any sort existed at Mīrān. The dense jungle of wild poplars and tamarisks immediately adjoining the northern edge of the cultivated area was evidently considered sufficient shelter by these hardy visitors. At Abdal itself, even well-to-do folk like Nūr Muḥammad, the Bēg of the settlement, and Mullah Shāh, my quondam guide to the Lou-lan site, were content to live and store their possessions in reed-huts.⁶

New Loplik
settlement
at Mīrān.

My surprise was therefore great when, returning now seven years later to the same place, I found a compact little village of more than a dozen large comfortable-looking homesteads established on the left bank of a well-marked broad river-bed and the area covered by continuous fields greatly extended. The houses, like those of Charkhlik, were all built with fairly substantial walls of mud-bricks; and timber from the dense Toghrak groves in the neighbourhood had been plentifully employed for posts and roofs (Fig. 126). There were plantations of young fruit trees behind most of the houses, and in the open central area of the little village there even stood an official rest-house (Fig. 124). With its single large room and walled-in court it afforded me comfortable shelter, doubly welcome against the icy blasts of the Lop winter. I had, in this thorough change, a striking illustration of the last phase in a process that during the last generation or two had been turning these semi-nomadic fishermen and hunters on the lower Tārīm into somewhat casual agriculturists. The final transfer of the settlement to Mīrān had taken place about 1911; it is strange that only two or three years before it occurred, regular brick-built dwellings had been constructed at Abdal, and these, on my subsequent passage through that place, I found deserted. In addition to the energetic colonizing activity of the last Amban, the one who had fallen a victim to the 'revolutionary' *coup* at Charkhlik, another influence that appears to have hastened the Lopliks' final migration to Mīrān was the fear of seeing the steady flow of immigrants into Charkhlik overflow before long into what they were anxious to claim as their own ancestral acres.

Irrigation
resources
at Mīrān.

That there was reason for this apprehension became clear when I learnt the amount of water available for irrigation from the river of Mīrān. Reliable information put its volume at fully 15 'Tāsh' or millstones at the time of the spring sowing. Though it would subsequently diminish until the melting of the high snows in the mountains began, the supply was said never to fall to less than three 'stones', while from June onwards the amount of *ak-su* was vastly in excess of what irrigation of the cultivable area could absorb. Notwithstanding the Lopliks' characteristic reserve it was acknowledged on all hands that the water-supply from the river of Mīrān was in excess of that available for the oasis of Charkhlik, and also that the present number of people holding land

⁵ Cf. *Serindia*, i. pp. 324 sqq., 343 sqq.

⁶ Cf. Hedin, *Reisen in Z.-A.*, pp. 106 sq.; also *Serindia*, i. Fig. 91.