

An area extending about 250 miles from east to west and over 120 miles across was ground in some ways as familiar to Abdurrahīm in its utter barrenness and uniform desolation, as an isolated alpine valley might be to a chamois hunter of the old days. Wherever his statements could be tested on the spot by Lāl Singh or myself, they proved invariably true and accurate. And this fact provides a special reason for recording here information, supplied by him on that first day, which has a quasi-historical interest in connexion with the remains of ancient Lou-lan. He had never before visited the portion of the Lop desert where these stand, except in March, 1900, when he had guided Dr. Hedin to Āltmish-bulak and had thence accompanied him to a point near the ruined dwellings marked by me L.B. iv, where the distinguished explorer had first come (on March 28, 1900) upon remains proving ancient occupation.⁹ From there he had returned, and had thus remained without knowledge of the ruins which Dr. Hedin subsequently explored in 1901. But he had heard in his youth stories of a *kötek-shahri* or 'old town', situated in the desert south of the Kuruk-daryā, from Rustam, an aged Loplik hunter on the Tārīm. These he had communicated to Dr. Hedin when he accompanied him on his first journey to the Kuruk-daryā and Āltmish-bulak.

Abdur-
rahīm first
learns of
Loulan
ruins.

Abdurrahīm's statement was of some interest to me. It showed that the first discovery of the Lou-lan site was not due altogether to mere chance. It also confirmed the information I had previously received quite independently from Tokhta Ākhūn on our march from Chainut-köl to the ruined fort L.K. Tokhta Ākhūn, as straightforward and reliable as Abdurrahīm, but being a Loplik less ready to talk, told me on that occasion that in his young days he had heard from Egir-ajan, an old Abdal hunter, that a road once led from the Tārīm to Tun-huang along the southern foot of the 'Kumbal-tāgh', or more correctly Kumul-tāgh, i. e. the Kuruk-tāgh. This 'road' was supposed to have lain north of the desert with which the hunters of Abdal were to some extent familiar. But Tokhta Ākhūn could not tell how Egir-ajan had come to know about it. He, however, thought it likely that the old man had visited Tikenlik, whence local hunters were accustomed to go to the Kuruk-tāgh after wild camels. Egir-ajan had died about 1895, having been killed by fugitive Tungans after the rebellion around Hsi-ning.

Story of
ancient
route to
Tun-huang.

The close agreement between the wholly independent accounts of Abdurrahīm and Tokhta Ākhūn leaves no doubt in my mind that some vague tale about the existence of ruins in the region of ancient Lou-lan was current among hunters visiting the springs along the foot of the Kuruk-tāgh to look for wild camels, before Dr. Hedin's discovery. It seems to me more difficult to determine whether the story that an ancient road once led that way from the Tārīm to Tun-huang can be accepted as indicating the survival of some genuine old tradition about the ancient 'route of the centre', or whether it was merely an inference drawn from, or an attempt to account for, the alleged existence of an 'old town' in the desert south of the foot of the Kuruk-tāgh. That the main ruins of the Lou-lan site had been visited at one time or another by adventurous hunters in search of treasure appears to me highly probable. The Stūpas of the L.A. station show clear evidence of treasure-seekers' operations,¹⁰ and if on the one hand it is impossible to say how soon or how long after the abandonment of the station these took place, it must be remembered on the other that traditional knowledge about 'old towns' in the desert dies hard among the people of the Tārīm basin, who have ever since ancient times taken a keen interest in buried treasure.¹¹

Hunters'
tales of
'old town'.

On the morning of February 19th I let Abdurrahīm, with all the camels and baggage, proceed east-by-north with orders to pitch our camp at the point where the route previously followed by him with Lāl Singh crossed the mouth of an open Nullah descending from the foot-hills of the Kuruk-

⁹ Cf. Hedin, *Central Asia and Tibet*, i. pp. 376 sqq.

¹⁰ Cf. *Serindia*, i. pp. 389, 391.

¹¹ See *Ancient Khotan*, i. pp. 236, 455 sq., &c.; *Serindia*, iii. p. 1234, 1301, &c.