

CHAPTER XIII

THE ETSIN-GOL DELTA AND THE RUINS OF KHARA-KHOTO

SECTION I.—THE LOWER ETSIN-GOL AND ITS TERMINAL BASIN

My journey down the Etsin-gol was prompted by a twofold interest, geographical and archaeological. The latter made me eager to visit the ruined site of Khara-khoto in the Etsin-gol delta, where Colonel Kozlov, the distinguished Russian explorer, had in 1908 been fortunate enough to make important finds of manuscripts and other remains. Available information indicated that these dated mainly from the period when this ground, together with the greater part of Kan-su, was included in the dominion which the Tangut, a race of Tibetan affinity, under a dynasty known to the Chinese by the name of Hsi-hsia,¹ maintained from the early eleventh century until the conquest of their territory by the Mongols two centuries later.

Interest of
Khara-
khoto
site.

But antiquarian interest attached to the Etsin-gol valley also on account of its earlier history. Considering its position and the facilities it must at all times have offered for nomadic inroads from the north, it can scarcely be doubted that just as Chingiz Khān's Mongols advanced by this route to the final conquest of the Tangut kingdom in A. D. 1225, so those earlier northern rulers of the Kan-su marches whom history knows—the Great Yüeh-chih, destined to become later the Indo-Scythian rulers of north-western India; the Hsiung-nu or Huns who drove them westwards in the early part of the second century B. C.; and the Uighur Turks who preceded the Tanguts—had all passed along this natural highway and held its grazing grounds, while their power lasted. We shall see farther on how this role of the Etsin-gol valley is duly reflected in the noteworthy record left by Marco Polo of the route leading past his 'City of Etzina', which has proved to be no other than Khara-khoto.²

Inroads
along Etsin-
gol valley.

Equally interesting to me were the geographical aspects of this region. The essential parallelism of the chief natural features led me to hope that the descent of the Etsin-gol to its delta might furnish useful observations for comparison on the one hand with the physical conditions presented by the lower course and terminal basin of the Su-lo-ho, and on the other with those which my explorations suggest as having once prevailed in the delta of the 'Dry River' of Lou-lan, when the ancient Chinese highway into the Tārīm basin still passed through it.

Geographic
interest
of lower
Etsin-gol.

It was this special geographical interest that my journey down the Etsin-gol allowed me first to satisfy. And as the observations then made will also help to throw light on certain questions arising in connexion with the remains of the Khara-khoto site and its neighbourhood, a brief record of them may suitably precede the account of the archaeological results there secured. In offering this record as a supplement to what can be gathered from Maps Nos. 44, 45 illustrating our surveys, I must express my regret that I have been unable to consult such descriptive materials as may be furnished by the Russian publications of the distinguished travellers who preceded me

¹ For a lucid and comprehensive account of the history of this dynasty, see Dr. Bushell's paper *The Hsi Hsia dynasty of Tangut, their money and peculiar script*, in the *Journal of the*

China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, vol. xxx, 1895-6.

² Cf. Yule-Cordier, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 223 sq.; below, pp. 456 sq.