

along the terminal course of the Etsin-gol finds its direct continuation in an almost straight line across the Altai region towards Erdenitso, the site of Kara-korum, and thence towards Kiakhta, where it meets the great Siberian trade route from Peking. The traveller following this route to the site of Kara-korum would pass no cultivation. Thus Marco Polo's statement that no permanent 'habitation nor baiting place' is met with *en route* still holds good.

Marco
Polo on
desert
northward.

The description that he gives of this 'desert which extends for forty days' journey to the north' accords so closely with modern knowledge of this vast Altai region that it may well be quoted here as further proof of the exactness of Marco's information regarding the route that led through 'Etzina'. 'In the summer-time, indeed, you will fall in with people, but in the winter the cold is too great. You also meet with wild beasts (for there are some small pine-woods here and there), and with numbers of wild asses.' Taken in conjunction with the accuracy of all he tells us of the route to 'Etzina', these details and some others recorded of 'Caracoron' distinctly suggest that they had been gathered by personal observation. Considering that Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco Polo are stated by the text which Sir Henry Yule adopted to have dwelt a whole year at Kan-chou 'when on a mission',⁹ it appears to me likely that Ser Marco himself, in spite of the great distance, had found occasion and time for a visit to the old Mongol capital. Such a visit would best explain why Marco should have singled out for special mention a locality like 'Etzina', which in itself could never have claimed much importance.¹⁰

Abandon-
ment of
Khara-
khoto.

The question how long after Marco Polo's time occurred the abandonment of Khara-khoto, and of the settlement for which it doubtless served as a local centre of cult and defence, is one which the materials at present at my disposal do not permit definitely to answer. It is probable that the much ampler materials deposited at Petrograd may furnish data making it possible to fix with approximate accuracy the *terminus ad quem* for the continued occupation of the site. Meanwhile I must be content to indicate two possible causes which deserve to be taken into account in connexion with its abandonment. One is the state of insecurity to which this isolated settlement of peace-loving Chinese cultivators must have been exposed after the downfall of the Mongol or Yüan dynasty. When the Empire under Ming rule had established its system of rigid seclusion, such protection from raids and invasions as the Tangut kingdom, and later on Mongol power, had afforded to the Kan-su marches was no longer available for a colony occupying so far advanced a position as that of 'Etzina'. For the same reason the route leading along the Etsin-gol northward must have greatly lost in importance or been abandoned altogether, as was for centuries the route through the Lop Desert.

Story of
destruction
of Khara-
khoto.

Colonel Kozlov in the preliminary account of his journey, as translated in the *Geographical Journal*, reproduces at length a story current among the Etsin-gol Torguts about the siege and final destruction of Khara-khoto.¹¹ It bears in all respects the character of folk-lore legend, certain features of it, such as the final sortie of the beleaguered king through a cutting in the wall, the burying of his huge treasures in a well close by, &c., being clearly suggested by details of the ruins which would particularly strike popular imagination.¹² As the Torguts themselves state that on

⁹ Cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 220, 223, note 5.

¹⁰ Marco Polo's reference to Lop, i. e. Charkhlik, as 'a large town at the edge of the Desert', would seem to furnish a close parallel; cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. p. 196. This small oasis, which could not have comprised in his time more than a modest village or two, derived its importance solely from the fact that it was the only place where travellers from the Tārīm basin to China could provision themselves for the long and difficult journey through the Lop Desert

to Tun-huang; see *Serindia*, i. pp. 318 sq.

¹¹ See *Geogr. J.*, October, 1909, pp. 387 sq.

¹² See above, pp. 438 sq.

The name of the last king, *Khara-tsiun-tsiun*, who by aiming at the imperial throne is supposed to have brought about his destruction by a Chinese army, distinctly looks like that of an eponymous hero, being derived from the Mongol designation of *Khara-khoto* with the probable addition of the Chinese title *chiang chün* 將軍.