

CHAPTER XVII

THE TURFĀN TERRITORY: SOME ASPECTS OF ITS GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

SECTION I.—THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION OF TURFĀN AND THE EARLIEST HISTORICAL NOTICES

My arrival, on October 25th, 1914, close to the town of Turfān marked the beginning of the season that I proposed to devote to archaeological and geographical labours in the Turfān basin. The extent and variety of the interests presented by this region both to the antiquarian and geographical student are so great that the time, just over three months, which I was able to spend there would certainly have appeared altogether inadequate if a systematic survey of all its ancient remains and its physical features had been called for. In neither direction was there room or need for so wide a programme.

Abundance
of ancient
remains.

As regards the ancient remains of the Turfān basin, Dr. Klementz's reconnaissance visit, carried out in 1897 under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences, first showed not only how great was the number of pre-Muhammadan ruins but also how easy they were of access; since then the search among them for antiques had proceeded for a considerable number of years and on an extensive scale. Between the years 1902 and 1907 fully equipped parties of German archaeologists under the leadership of such distinguished scholars as Professors A. Grünwedel and Von Lecoq had been at work at Turfān sites for periods nearly ten times as long in the aggregate as that which I was able to devote to this area. Their extensive operations, rewarded by rich results, and also the facilities for the ready sale of antiques offered by the vicinity of Urumchi and by the position on a great trade route, had stimulated the ruthless exploitation of the ruins by the local population. Much destruction had been caused for a long time past through the constant digging for manuring earth among the ruins of the ancient capitals, Yār-khoto and Kara-khōja, and this process was being accelerated by the increasing extent of cultivation around those two important sites. Mr. Tachibana, the Japanese traveller, too, had spent several months for archaeological purposes in the Turfān district in 1910 and again in 1911. Hence it was clear to me from the start that it would be necessary, as an essential preliminary to useful work, to ascertain by reconnaissances which sites were still comparatively undisturbed or contained remains, such as wall-paintings, that deserved to be saved from further risks by careful removal.

Detailed
survey of
Turfān
depression.

The reconnaissances were also to familiarize me with the typical features of the Turfān depression, and thus to enable me to direct and check more closely that detailed survey of its topography which the geographical interest attaching to it made me anxious to secure. This survey, on the comparatively large scale of one inch to the mile, was to be carried out by Surveyor Muḥammad Yāqūb; he had been carrying a plane-table traverse across the waterless desert between the terminal basin of the Hāmi drainage and the eastern border of the Turfān district, and I expected him shortly to rejoin me. The experience I had gained in the course of previous travel of the young surveyor's qualifications made me wish to keep within easy reach of him in order to exercise supervision and control.

R. B. Lāl Singh, with his much greater experience and energy, could be trusted to make the fullest use of such opportunities for fresh surveys on unexplored or as yet very imperfectly