

stream at an elevation of about 9,000 feet, where Kirghiz grazing higher up had pitched felt tents for our reception. Fig. 382 shows the Trans-Alai range as seen from here next morning across the wide valley.

We had scarcely started from this camping-place, when I noticed signs of old cultivation and soon came upon oat fields extending over terraced bays between the foot spurs. Patches of cultivation were met with again and again in similar sheltered positions, as well as walled enclosures, serving as shelters during the winter for felt tents and flocks. Beyond the scrub-covered 'Sai' of Kawuk the road keeps close to rocky ridges until, at the mouth of the Kizil-eshma Jilga, we found mud-built huts scattered among fields and marking permanent habitations. Here was also to be seen the ruin of a walled rectangular enclosure measuring about 120 yards by 100, known as the 'old Kurghān', and about a furlong to the NW. of it a small circular mound which showed signs of having been recently dug into. Some tombs and half-destroyed 'Gumbaz' not far off to the west were declared to be old beyond Kirghiz recollection.

Old and new cultivation.

We had marched about 24 miles when the route passed among numerous mounds scattered over the wide partially cultivated plain above the right bank of the river. These mounds, of varying size up to 20 yards or more in diameter, were manifestly the remains of structures of unhewn stone which had suffered complete decay. Their character and position suggested that this site had once been occupied by a settlement more important than the scattered Kirghiz huts met with farther up. From here the terraced cultivation and scattered rubble-built homesteads of Daraut-kurghān came into view, and after proceeding another three miles we reached its old fort and modern Russian 'Picket'. These guard the entrance to the picturesque defile leading from the Alai valley to the Tengiz-bai pass, over which lies a direct and much-frequented route to Margilān and the rest of Farghāna.

Approach to Daraut-kurghān.

The reasons that suggest the vicinity of Daraut-kurghān as a very likely location for the famous 'Stone Tower' of the ancient silk trade route will best be considered in connexion with our remarks on Ptolemy's notice of the latter. Before this, however, a brief synopsis may be useful of those physical features which make the Alai valley particularly suited to serve as a natural highway from the Middle Oxus to the Tārīm basin. The Alai valley stretches unbroken by any defile for a distance of close on 90 miles from the Taun-murun saddle above Irkesh-tam to near Kara-muk below Daraut-kurghān. From the point where it is crossed by the road between Pōr-döbe and the Taldik pass to below Daraut-kurghān the width of its floor or 'thalweg' is nowhere less than six miles and in places as much as eleven or twelve. In general physical character it may well be reckoned as a Pāmīr.<sup>3</sup> Yet climatic conditions, determined partly by lesser altitude and partly by geographical position, introduce an important difference. On the one hand the average height of the Alai valley is considerably lower than that of the recognized Pāmīrs, ascending from about 8,000 feet at Daraut-kurghān to not more than 11,200 feet at the Taun-murun saddle itself. On the other hand precipitation, mainly in the form of snow, is far greater in the Alai valley than on the Pāmīrs, of which extreme aridity is a striking feature.<sup>4</sup> The result is that the Alai valley has a steppe vegetation far more ample than that of the Pāmīrs. At the same time it does not lend itself to grazing all the year round as do the high valleys of the Pāmīrs; for the snow from November till the early part of May lies in the upper portion of the Alai valley deep enough to prevent herds and flocks from finding nourishment.

The Alai valley as a natural highway.

This accounts for two interesting facts. While the upper portion of the valley is occupied by the truly nomadic Kara-Kirghiz coming up from the plains of Farghāna only for some four months

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rickmers, *Duab of Turkestan*, p. 378.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 494.