

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE REGION OF THE UPPER OXUS

SECTION I.—OLD REMAINS IN WAKHĀN

IT was a great satisfaction for me to find myself once again on the Āb-i-Panja, the main branch of the Oxus. In 1906 I had been able to follow only the uppermost course of the river between Sarhad and its source at the glaciers of the Wakhjir, and access to the main portion of Wakhān was then barred to me on either side of the river. In Chapter III of *Serindia* I have already indicated the special historical and geographical interest that Wakhān, remote as it is and poor in climate, population, and resources, may claim as the most direct thoroughfare from the fertile regions of ancient Bactria to the line of oases along the southern rim of the Tārīm basin.¹ I have fully discussed in the same chapter the comparatively abundant early notices of Wakhān which the records of Chinese Annalists and travellers as well as of Marco Polo have preserved for us. In modern times Wakhān has, since Captain John Wood's pioneer journey in 1838, been repeatedly visited and described by qualified European observers, and the graphic account contained in the classical narrative of that journey still holds good as regards the general character of the valley, its people, and their conditions of life.² I may therefore restrict myself here mainly to a description of the ruined sites that I was able to examine on my passage along the northern bank of the river, and to a brief record of such local observations as have a direct bearing on the ethnic and historical past of the territory.

Historical
interest of
Wakhān.

A day's halt at Langar-kisht, made pleasant by the sight once more, after so long an interval, of trees, ripening crops, and green meadows, was employed in collecting anthropometrical materials. In the course of this work, continued elsewhere in Wakhān, I was struck again by the prevalence of those characteristic features of the *Homo Alpinus* type which I had noticed among the Wakhīs examined on my second expedition, and which had caused Mr. Joyce to recognize in them the nearest congeners of the Iranian Galchas or hill Tājiks.³ Starting on September 1st we approached, at a distance of a mile and a half, the junction of the two branches of the Oxus coming from the Great Pāmīr and Sarhad (Fig. 393), near the little hamlet of Hissār. Close to the east of it there rises an isolated rocky ridge to a height of about 90 feet above the level of the fields, bearing on its narrow top the massive walls of the ruined fort (Fig. 396) to which the hamlet owes its name.^{3a}

Homo
Alpinus
type among
Wakhīs.

As the sketch-plan, Pl. 45, shows, the approach to the fort leads up from the south-west, the cliffs elsewhere being very precipitous and in some places unscalable, which accounts for the north-western face of the hill-top being left without walls. The protected area is about 140 yards long, with a maximum width of about 75 yards. At one point the approach passes through a large mass of rock split through in the middle, and over this natural gate I noticed remains of a horizontal

Ruined fort
of Hissār.

¹ See *Serindia*, i. pp. 60 sqq.

² To the accounts in English quoted in *Serindia*, i. p. 61, note, should be added Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs* (London, 1904), with useful contents mainly ethnographical; Schultz, *Forschungen im Pamir*, pp. 139 sqq.

³ Cf. *Serindia*, iii. p. 1360; below, Mr. Joyce's App. C.

^{3a} A somewhat highly coloured description of the Hissār fort (called there 'Zengi-bār') is given in Olufsen, *loc. cit.*, pp. 176 sqq. The measurements of the ground-plan cannot be reconciled with our survey.