

Sera is at the southern foot of a mountain range. But the next passage is more important:¹

»Nell'altra montagna, sulla sommità di essa, che è a est del convento di Serà, vi è un convento di religiose. Tra la montagna, alle cui radici sta situato il convento di Serà, e l'altra montagna, sopra cui è il detto convento di monache, vi è uno stretto cammino, che va verso nord, e mena nel deserto dell'est, che guida alla Cina. Tale imboccatura è molto facile a difendersi contre qualunque esercito di nemici, che da quella banda vengano contro Lhasà; e con poco presidio, che quivi pongasi può essere inespugnabile.»

This narrow road which goes to the north and through the eastern desert to China, crosses the mountains north of Sera, a part of Transhimalaya. And finally he says:

»Uscendo dalla pianura di Lhasà per la banda di nord, per l'imboccatura che ho detto, che sta vicina al convento di Serà, s'entra nel gran deserto dell'est, che si stende per lo spazio di tre mesi di cammino, al termine, de'quali riesce a Sining, primo luogo della Cina, e posto in fine delle di lei famose muraglie. Il P. Atanasio Kircher tratta bastantemente di questo cammino, e suo viaggio, nella 'Cina illustrata' al cap. 3.º, § II; perciò altro non aggiungo.»

Here too he speaks of the great desert of northern Tibet, without mentioning the innumerable mountain ranges with which it is filled. And he shows the same reverence to Kircher as Grueber did. Grueber's respect may have been understood. But when Desideri began his journey in Tibet Kircher had been dead 35 years and his memory would not have suffered if Desideri had added some new particulars to the meagre description of the road to Sining as given in *China Illustrata*.

If everything is taken into consideration we must arrive at the conclusion that Desideri's narrative hardly contains anything which proves the existence of a mighty mountain system north of the Tsangpo. Did we not know the geography of these parts comparatively as well as we do now, Desideri's description would hardly help us to suspect the existence of such a system as the Transhimalaya. One would rather imagine a plateau-land, partly inhabited by Turkish tribes, partly a complete desert. On its southern edge one would imagine, in the west, a very high but somewhat lonely mountain, unless one suspected that the Father noticed it and paid it special attention only on account of its religious importance. In the east one would understand that Lhasa was bordered by high ranges in the north. But for the distance between Kailas and Lhasa one would not get any idea of the mountains.

And still Desideri's Tibetan geography remains for ever a classic work. It is the first reliable description of Tibet ever given by a European. In topographical detail the Lama surveyors who worked at the same time gave much more. But compare Desideri's general morphology, extension and climate of Tibet with the theories of some modern geographers of Rawlinson's time, and you will not hesitate a second as to whom the first prize is due.

¹ Op. cit., p. 66.