

40 minutes at a walking pace and you enter a very large plain with fairly firm sandy ground to begin with. We travelled SE. The morning was chilly and there was a kind of haze in the air that curtailed the view extremely. I could only distinguish the outlines of a high chain of mountains very indistinctly to the south. To the east I thought I saw the outlines of a small oasis. The road soon turns and proceeds in a more easterly direction (ESE) in which it continues on the whole during the entire journey. The plain goes in soft, long waves or hills and slopes. The sand, fairly firm at first, becomes looser by degrees and the journey harder for the horses. A few miles from Pialma at Tashtavarlik we crossed a gully with a gradual slope up and down and at Aq langar a similar one. At the fifth paotai we passed a wretched clay shelter and barely half-an-hour later a solitary house. At the seventh paotai there was a sarai of baked bricks, Aq langar. Between the ninth and tenth paotai the traveller encounters a cloud of tame doves. Slightly to the left of the road lies the Imam Shakir's tomb, decorated with staves, yaks' tails, horns, skulls, hides etc. in large numbers. Quite close to it is a large clay building, erected for the sole purpose of housing the doves and their keepers. Almost everyone who passes carries a small supply of corn for the beautiful occupants of the dovecote, who always fly a good distance to meet the traveller. The legend says that they are descended from a pair of doves that sprang from the heart of the Imam Shakir Padshah, who was killed here in a bloody battle against the infidel »Buddhists» in Khotan. The battle had been bloody and the losses on both sides so heavy that it was impossible to distinguish the corpses of the faithful from those of the infidels. However, a higher power distinguished them and the doves came and pointed out the corpses of the fallen true believers. In memory of this deed the population supports this dovecote by its voluntary contributions.

Shortly before reaching this spot the sand becomes very fine-grained and, under the influence of the wind, has formed high dunes over which, or rather through which (as the wheels sank so deep into the sand), the horses had great difficulty in dragging my arbah. About one paotai further on the dunes sink and you cross a damp place with a little standing water. Vegetation reappears and you roll along a good road to the boundary of the oasis of Khotan.

On the edge of the oasis I was met by a Sart in Chinese official garb, who welcomed me with tea. Here the traveller's papers are examined (except Chinese who are allowed to travel without a passport) and a register of arrivals is kept. If the documents are not in order, entrance to the oasis is prohibited. I was not required to produce any papers, however, and the honest official mounted his horse and accompanied me to Zawa, where I spent the night in a very neat and comfortable Chinese sarai. Zawa is not a village, but a bazaar street for the surrounding district. — My cook's none too reliable health does not seem able to endure the hardships of a journey. He complains of feeling ill. It will be an irreparable loss if he has to be replaced, as all of us are spoilt by his delicious and nourishing soups. — During the day we met about 50 asses with sheepskin and felt and about a dozen with silk thread, raisins and sheepskin from Khotan to Yarkand.