

In its general aspect this division partakes of the characters of the two others between which it forms the connecting medium—of the hills on one side and of the desert on the other. Near the former it presents an uneven surface on which are prolonged the subsiding terminal offshoots of spurs from the mountain boundaries till they merge into the general level of the plain. Whilst towards the latter it rapidly expands into an undulating plain which insensibly sinks and becomes continuous with the desert.

The soil everywhere is characterized by its aridity and barrenness. Contiguous to the hills it consists of stony detritus intermixed with rolled boulders; further off it becomes coarse gravel; and finally, on the verge of the desert it assumes the form of pure sand. Everywhere it is more or less highly charged with salines which in the depressions of the undulating surface form sheets of white efflorescence, or spongy encrustations on which flourish a variety of saltworts. In many places these salines retain sufficient moisture to form mud bogs and marshes on which grow coarse reeds and dwarf tamarisks.

But the peculiar features of this tract are the numerous rivers which traverse its surface to their point of ultimate junction with the main stream—the Tárím River—which is the great drainage channel for the whole country. They are the seats of the fixed population and the entire productive industry of the country. Their number and names are many as they issue from the mountains on three sides of the basin, but they all converge at different points to form four principal rivers which are named after the settlements founded upon them. They are the Khutan, Yárkand, Káshghar, and Aksú Rivers; and they all converge and unite far out on the desert to the south of Aksú to form the Tárím River, which afterwards receives as tributaries the Kúchá and Káidú Rivers and thus completes the drainage of the valley.

These streams in their passage across this tract mostly flow in wide channels between low banks of sand. The larger ones flow upon firm pebbly bottoms, and the smaller ones in a bed of sand. The volume of their streams varies according to the seasons. Thus in winter even the largest of them are so much shrunk as to be crossed dry footed by stepping from stone to stone; whilst the smaller ones, which are mostly bridged, are at this season generally frozen over. In summer on the contrary they are all so swollen by the melting snows, that they fill the whole of their wide channels and, as in the case of the Yárkand River, form a stream nearly a mile broad and only passable by boat.

None of these rivers is navigable, but they are otherwise profitably utilized for purposes of irrigation. Numerous canals are drawn off from them to the lands on each side, and thus convert considerable tracts of what would otherwise be desert waste into fertile and populous settlements. The extent of these is at present limited, but were the means existing fully developed a much wider area might be settled and brought under cultivation.

All these rivers contain fish, and in the case of the larger streams they are a source of food to the inhabitants on their banks. Some of them, as the rivers of Khutan, yield the jade stone which in the time of the Chinese proved a source of considerable wealth to the country. And others, as the Yárkand or Zarafshán—"Gold disperser," yield gold. Under the Chinese rule its sands were washed for the precious metal; but now this industry in common with others has quite died out.

*Desert.*—This division occupies the whole of the Káshghar basin beyond the lowland belt skirting the mountains, and as the two insensibly merge a line of demarcation is not easily recognized. In general aspect it presents a vast undulating plain of sand which slopes gently to the eastward. Its elevation is estimated to vary between 2,500 feet at Lob Nor and 4,000 feet on the Yárkand border. Its surface is traversed by the four rivers which go to form the Tárím, and by that stream itself. The banks of these rivers are fringed by broader or narrower belts of forest composed mainly of poplar, willow and tamarisk, amongst which is an impenetrable growth of tall reeds. In the covert of these thickets lurk the tiger, leopard, lynx, and wolf, together with the wild pig; and a species of stag—called *bocá* or *búghá* for the male, and *marál* for the female—pastures on their skirts.

Further out in the desert towards the east, the high banks and sand dunes which break the uniformity of its level towards the west and south either disappear or greatly diminish