

PART II.

THE LOP-NOR REGION IN HISTORICAL TIME

I. HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

The first mention of Central Asia, and probably also the Tarim Basin, is a very brief notice in the fifth chapter of *Shih-chi*, referring to the year 623 B. C. (de Groot 1921, p. 21). It seems that twelve western kingdoms were conquered at that time by MU of Ts'in. This political domination may have resulted in some cultural relations in one direction or other, but it is hardly likely that any transcontinental trade developed. At the time when the Chinese records begin to shed some light on the north-western part of the present Kansu province we find the Yüeh-chih living in the Kansu corridor. This people may have traded with Chinese goods, bringing them into the Tarim Basin. The Yüeh-chih, or Tokharians or Indo-Scythians as they are called later on in more westerly regions, seem to have been a people of certain qualities, and why not able traders.

So far we have no definite proofs of such possible relations. When the Hsiung-nu under MAO TUN had the whole Tarim Basin and the Yüeh-chih country under their sway, every kind of intercourse was cut off, and at that time, between 174 and 160 B. C. the main part of the Yüeh-chih tribe was chased out of their pastures in Kansu. There is thus no traceable Chinese influence in the Tarim Basin previous to the end of the second century B. C., when the big Chinese expansion began into Central Asia.

When in B. C. 140 Emperor WU of Han¹ ascended the throne, China's northern frontier region was being harassed by frequent raids of the Hsiung-nu or Huns. Perceiving the grave frontier situation, the Emperor dispatched CHANG CH' IEN on an embassy to the Yüeh-chih tribe, at this time living to the west of the Pamirs, hoping to stir up their old hatred towards the Hsiung-nu and to induce them to start hostilities with the common enemy. CHANG CH' IEN failed in this undertaking, but his journey to the western countries resulted in the discovery of Central Asia, of which the Chinese had until then had very vague or no knowledge. We will mention this in the following.

Failing in his bid for assistance from the Yüeh-chih, Emperor WU had to rely on his own resources. Luckily for the Emperor, a man of unique abilities placed his

¹ The Han dynasty: 206 B.C.—221 A.D.