

There is, therefore, reason to believe that at one time the famous way from China to Bactria lay along the Alai valley and past Hissar, which city may have owed its importance to it. Moreover, there is a well-engineered trail from Hissar over the Mura Pass to Samarkand, and another one to Bokhara or Pai-kent, which would make at Hissar a point of intersection of three important routes. This would not interfere with the idea that direct communication between Bactra and Samarkand took place via the Iron Door. Perhaps it varied with the attitude of intervening people. And the Tash Kurgan route over the Southern Pamir may have been used for communication between Southern Bactria and China, while the more important trade of Bactra itself passed direct by way of the Alai valley.

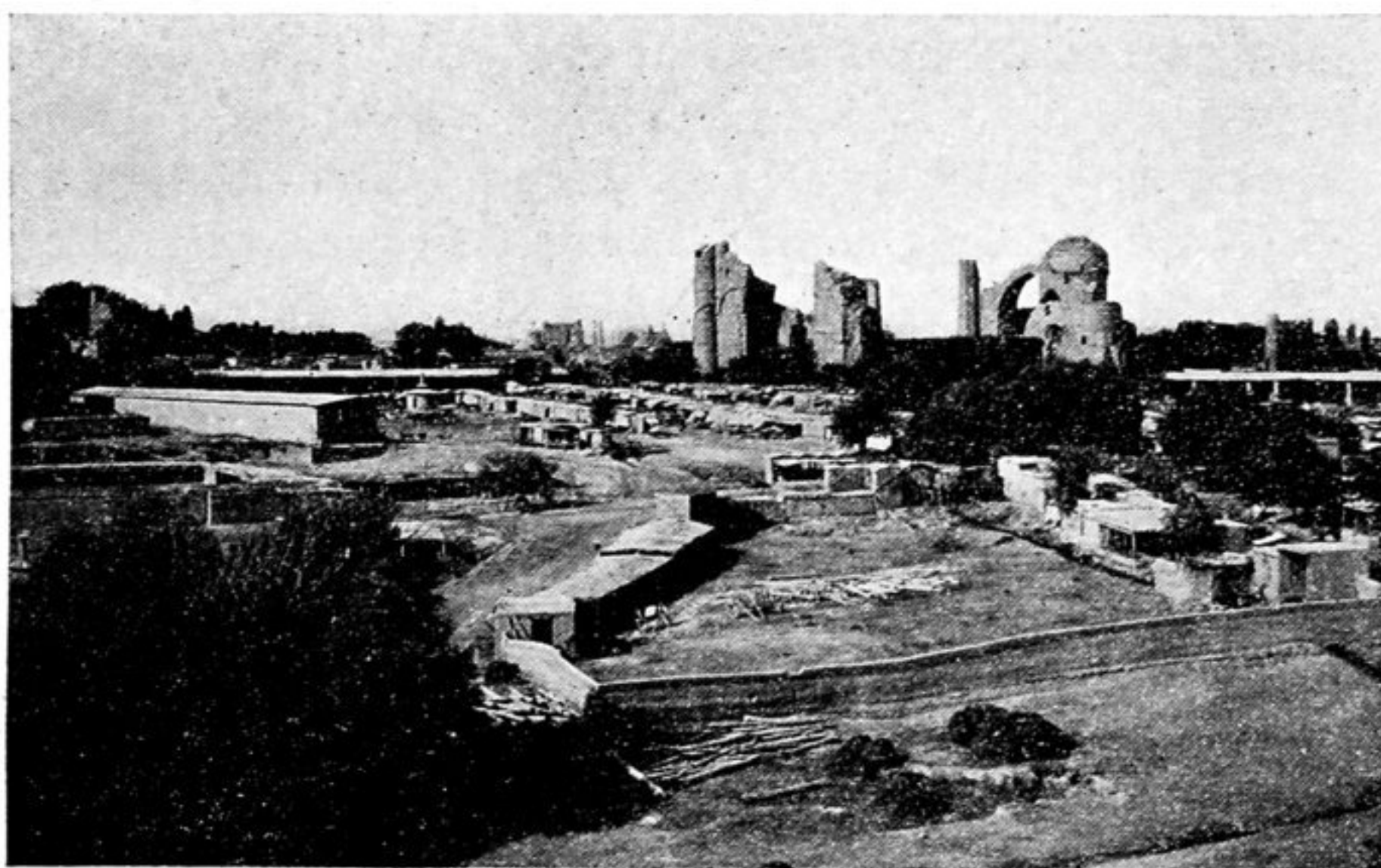


Fig. 472.—Ruins of the Tomb of Bibi Khanum (Samarkand).

OASES OF THE ZERAFSHAN.

RIVER-BANK (TYPE II) OASES OF THE LOWER ZERAFSHAN.

Having been a river fed almost exclusively by glaciers for all archeological time, the Zerafshan has necessarily given a fairly constant supply of water—that is, its oases were never affected by the sudden droughts and minor oscillations of precipitation that ever and anon wrought famine to oases depending on streams fed by unconsolidated snow or rain.

Everywhere along its lower course and beyond the limits of its now living oases, rise the mound remnants of past civilization. From Paikent to Samarkand is a land no less favored than the long stretch of the Jaxartes where there was an unbroken belt of gardens, of whose houses it is said the roofs were so joined through continuous villages of covered-over lanes that a cat might find his way throughout and never come to ground. Even now, for 200 miles along the Zerafshan it is mostly oasis, though crept upon by intervening deserts, and still stands unparalleled in Central Asia. Such a gifted land was naturally preyed upon by the plundering hordes that ranged the steppes of Asia from Manchuria to the Caspian, and enters history as a goal of conquering armies. Even now the story-tellers of