

CHAPTER I

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF INNERMOST ASIA

THESE pages are meant to revive characteristic phases of those explorations which I had the good fortune to carry out under the orders of the Indian Government on three successive expeditions to the innermost portions of Asia. Those expeditions were started as long ago as 1900-1 and were continued from 1906 to 1908 and again from 1913 to 1916. They lasted altogether for close on seven years and allowed me by marches on horseback and on foot to cover distances aggregating to a total of some 25,000 miles.

Journeys carried out by such quasi-archaic methods of locomotion and over so great distances, so protracted in time and accompanied by systematic surveys, provided the right means of acquiring familiarity with a region vast in extent and presenting exceptional interest alike by its physical features and by the remains of its human history. It comprises Chinese Turkistan with its border-lands towards the Oxus in the west and China proper in the east. Though composed for the most part of desert ground, whether in the mountains or in its drainageless sand-covered plains, it has yet played a very important part in the records of the past. For centuries it served as the channel for that interchange of the early civilizations of India, China and the Hellenized