

west of Asia which forms such a fascinating chapter in cultural history. These civilizations have left behind there abundant traces in the shape of remains of all kinds, which the aridity of the land has helped to preserve for us. The search for these remains of ancient civilization, together with the problems raised by the present physical conditions of the region, provided the strongest incentive for my explorations.

But from the modern point of view the economic and political importance of those lands in the heart of Asia is small, and smaller still the call of their natural attractions and resources. This makes it necessary in the first place to acquaint the reader with the general character of the region and thus to make it easier for him to understand the reasons which account for its importance in the past. I therefore propose in the introductory chapters to give a summary survey, a bird's-eye view as it were, of the whole of that region and then to sketch in broad outlines what we know of the history of which it has formed the scene.

That innermost portion of Asia with which my explorations were concerned may be roughly described as comprising those vast basins, elevated and drainageless, which extend from east to west almost half-way across the central belt of Asia. Their longitudinal rim is well defined in the north by the big rampart of the T'ien-shan, the 'Celestial Mountains', and in the south by the snowy K'un-lun ranges which divide those basins from Tibet. The eastern border of the region may be placed where the Nan-shan, itself a continuation of the K'un-lun, forms the watershed towards the drainage area of the Pacific Ocean. In the west it abuts on the mighty mountain mass of the Pamirs, the *Imaos* of