

the Chinese as a safe line of passage for trade intercourse and political expansion westwards, if we are to understand the reasons which induced them to face and overcome the forbidding natural difficulties which beset access to it through the Lop desert. The explorations carried on during my winter campaigns of 1907 and 1914 enabled me to trace the route used for Wu-ti's enterprises over the formidable wastes of sand, bare gravel and salt which it crossed. In Chapters VIII, IX I shall give an account of these explorations and describe in some detail the interesting discoveries which attended them on that truly forbidding ground.

The intercourse thus established through Central Asia suffered its first interruption about the beginning of our era through the rapid decay of internal order which took place in China during the short-lived reigns of the last two Emperors of the Former Han dynasty (6 B.C.—A.D. 5). With the consequent weakening of Chinese control in the Tarim basin, "the principalities of the Western countries", we are told in Later Han Annals, "broke up and formed fifty-five territories". For some sixty years the Tarim basin was abandoned to the Huns until at last the need of effective protection of its north-western borders from Hun raids forced the Chinese Empire again to start upon a 'forward policy' in Central Asia.

The first move made in A.D. 73 under the Emperor Ming was aimed directly at the Huns by the taking of Hami. This strategically very important oasis was the key to that 'route of the north' which passed along the foot of the eastern T'ien-shan and through the Turfan depression. It was destined by Nature to serve as the easiest road into the Tarim basin, provided it could be protected against nomadic