

route followed by the caravans which brought to the West the silk of far-off Serikê, the land of the Seres, *i.e.* China.

But Hun inroads and local revolts soon began to change the conditions favourable to peaceful intercourse. Imperial prestige gradually decayed in the Western Regions during the century of increasing internal weakness which preceded the final downfall of the dynasty, A.D. 220, while the silk trade to the Roman Empire took more and more to the sea route, which by then had been opened through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

The epoch of the 'Three Kingdoms' which followed this event saw China divided between rival dynasties. Effective Chinese control over the whole of the Tarim basin was not likely to be maintained in these troubled times. Yet there is evidence that those territories still continued to be open to trade and cultural influences both from the East and the West. The evidence I allude to is fortunately supplied by the abundant remains of two very interesting ruined sites I have been able to explore. I mean the ancient settlement brought to light in the desert sands beyond the termination of the Niya river, and the ruins at and around the ancient Chinese station of Lou-lan. In Chapters v, vi, viii I shall have occasion to deal at some length with the manifold interesting aspects of the conditions of life and administration which the abundant discoveries made there have revealed. At both sites we have conclusive evidence that occupation continued until about the close of the third century of our era and then completely ceased.

At the Niya site it is particularly easy to reconstruct the conditions of life once led there. The careful construction of the houses once tenanted by local officials or landholders