

CHAPTER VII

THE RUINS OF MIRAN

By the beginning of December 1906 I found myself at the small oasis of Charkhlik. Though now merely a modest village, it represents the chief place and official headquarters of a district then extending over more than five degrees of longitude from east to west. That the whole of the district does not count more than about five hundred households, including the semi-nomadic herdsmen and fishermen known as Loplik, sufficiently indicates the desert character of the whole territory. To the east it comprises the forbidding expanse of the dried-up salt sea-bed to which I referred in the first chapter, and the Lop-nor marshes which form the last remnant of that prehistoric sea. They receive the water of the dying Tarim river, and with it all that is left of the drainage of the huge basin called after it.

The territory is now known as Lop, just as it was when Marco Polo passed here, towards the close of the thirteenth century, before crossing the 'great desert of Lop', as he calls it, on his way to Cathay or westernmost China. Very poor as its economic resources must always have been—for the ground capable of cultivation is extremely limited—yet this territory was very important to the Chinese in ancient times as the land of passage through which led the line of their