

CHAPTER X

DISCOVERY OF AN ANCIENT BORDER LINE

IT was on February 21, 1907, after I had completed my excavations at the Miran ruins and the safe packing of their archaeological yield, that I started on the long desert journey which was to take us from the dreary Lop-nor marshes right through to Tun-huang on the westernmost border of Kansu and China proper. It was the same route by which Marco Polo had travelled 'through the desert of Lop'. Six centuries before him it had seen a traveller scarcely less great, Hsüan-tsang, the pilgrim of pious memory, returning to China laden with Buddhist relics and sacred books after many years' wanderings in the 'Western Regions'.

Though less important and less direct than the ancient Lou-lan route, this desert track, close on 380 miles long leading south of Lop-nor, must have seen much caravan traffic during successive periods, only to be practically forgotten again when Chinese power westwards weakened or a policy of rigid seclusion strangled trade. Thus after the last Chinese reconquest of the Tarim basin it had to be re-discovered. Since then this route has been frequented again on occasion by traders from Khotan and Yarkand, but only during the winter months when the use of ice makes it