

The conditions brought about here by a succession of low-water seasons furnished a striking illustration of the appearance which the Lou-lan delta may have presented before the Kuruk-darya had finally dried up. Where river-beds lined by narrow belts of jungle had been left dry for long years we found many of the wild poplar trees already dead or dying. The wide stretches of ground separating the several beds showed but scanty scrub or else were absolutely bare. No wonder that we heard sad complaints in the scattered camps of the two hundred odd families of Torgut Mongols which are established in the Etsin-gol delta, about the increasing difficulties caused by inadequate grazing. Yet this extensive riverine tract, limited as are its resources, must always have been of importance for those, whether armed hosts or traders, who would make the long journey from the heart of Mongolia in the north to the oases of Kansu. The line of watch-towers of later construction met at intervals afforded proof that this route into Mongolia had been frequented and guarded during late mediaeval times.

The analogy thus presented with the ancient Lou-lan delta impressed me even more when I proceeded to examine the ruins of Khara-khoto, the 'Black Town', which Colonel Kozloff, the distinguished Russian explorer, had been the first to visit in 1908-9. There remained no doubt for me then that it was identical with Marco Polo's 'City of Etzina'. Of this we are told in the great Venetian traveller's narrative that it lay a twelve days' ride from the city of Kan-chou, "towards the north on the verge of the desert; it belongs to the Province of Tangut". All travellers bound for Kara-koram, the old capital of the Mongols, had here