

the start to extend my third expedition across the Pamirs and the adjacent mountain tracts on the Russian side of the Oxus was the hope that I might thus be able to study on the spot questions bearing on the ancient routes along which the earliest intercourse between China and Western Asia had been carried on. Experience gathered elsewhere in the East had long before taught me the advantages of such study on the ground itself where questions of historical geography were concerned. This explains the special satisfaction I felt when I started to travel down the whole length of that great Alai valley. Fourteen years before, on my return from my first expedition, I had been able to see only its head on my way from Irkesh-tam to the foot of the Taldik pass.

Topographical facts, climatic conditions and local resources all support the conclusion that along the great natural thoroughfare of the Alai trough, which skirts the high northern rim of the Pamirs from east to west and is continued lower down by the fertile valley of the Kizil-su or Surkh-āb, 'the Red River', there once passed the route which the ancient silk-traders coming from China and the Tarim basin followed down to the middle Oxus. Of this route Ptolemy, the great geographer of the second century A.D., has preserved for us an important and much-discussed record of Marinus of Tyre, his famous predecessor. This describes the progress made in the opposite direction by the trading agents of 'Maës the Macedonian also called Titianus' as they travelled from Baktra, the present Balkh, to the 'country of the Seres' or China for the sake of their silk.

There is no need here to discuss the details which this record indicates as to the direction followed by the route.