

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SEARCH FOR HIUEN-TSIANG'S PI-MO

My eyes were now turned to the south again, where a number of archæological tasks still awaited me in the vicinity of the inhabited area. First among them was a search for the site of the ancient town of Pi-mo. Hiuen-Tsiang had visited it on his way from Khotan to Niya, and its probable mention also by Marco Polo under the name of 'Pein' made me all the more anxious to identify its position. The distance and direction which the Chinese pilgrim indicated for Pi-mo, viz., three hundred Li (or about sixty miles) to the east of the Khotan capital, had long before made me look out for the place somewhere to the north-west of Keriya. I was hence much pleased when, on my last visit to the latter place, I heard from the Amban himself of a 'Kone-shahr' said to exist in the desert beyond Gulakhma, an oasis on the Khotan road some thirty miles west of Keriya. Ram Singh, too, had heard about the ruins, and in order to save time I decided to reach them now by striking across the desert south-westwards.

Of the series of rapid marches by which I endeavoured to effect my object, the briefest account must suffice. During the four days which saw us returning along the Keriya Darya as fast as camels and ponies could move, I still looked in vain for any sign of approaching spring in the vegetation of the riverine jungle. Small wonder, considering that after the windy days of Karadong the temperature showed a marked fall, down to a minimum of 14° Fahr. of frost on the 19th of March.