

## CHAPTER VI

### THE KHOTAN OASIS: ITS GEOGRAPHY AND PEOPLE

#### SECTION I.—THE OASIS IN ITS GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

THE oasis of Khotan has from early times been the largest and most important cultivated territory in the south of the Tārīm Basin. To this fact we owe the ample information which the Chinese records furnish as to its ancient history. For the correct understanding of the antiquarian observations and finds which my explorations in this region have yielded, a preliminary review of the data available concerning the history of Khotan is essential. Before, however, we proceed to this it will be advisable to consider, if only in broadest outline, those factors to which may be ascribed a determining influence upon that history—the geography of the Khotan oasis, and the character and origin of its people.

The territory properly known as Khotan would form an admirable subject for a geographical monograph. It presents on the one hand most of the natural features typical of the oases which fringe the great desert of Chinese Turkestan, while on the other hand its position, size, and historical past invest it with an individuality of its own. Though the number of qualified observers who have visited Khotan since the time of Johnson (1865), and recorded the results of their inquiries and surveys, is not small, the time for such a monograph does not yet seem to have come. And even if the materials available were more complete and accurate than they are, the scope of the present work would not permit of an attempt to treat the subject on such lines. I shall, therefore, content myself with briefly indicating those main geographical features which determine the physical conditions of the oasis, and which must be steadily kept in view when studying its history and antiquities.

What illustrative details I was myself able to collect bearing on the topography of the oasis, its natural resources, cultivation, and general conditions of life, will be found recorded in my Personal Narrative<sup>1</sup>. Of earlier accounts by European travellers it may suffice to mention the two most notable. M. Grenard, who as companion of Dutreuil de Rhins had occasion to spend the greater part of two winter seasons (1891–3) in the town of Khotan, has given a valuable record of his own and his chief's observations, particularly detailed in all that relates to the resources of the oasis and the civilization, industries, &c., of its present inhabitants<sup>2</sup>. Dr. Sven Hedin, who made the town of Khotan his headquarters on two occasions in January and June of 1896, collected a mass of very useful data concerning the soil, products, and modern administration of the oasis and the great rivers which irrigate it<sup>3</sup>.

The Khotan oasis owes its natural wealth and its importance entirely to the advantages of its geographical position. The mighty terrace of fertile loess which it occupies extends for

Geographi-  
cal interest  
of Khotan.

Accounts of  
modern  
Khotan.

Geographi-  
cal advan-  
tages of  
Khotan.

<sup>1</sup> See *Ruins of Khotan*, pp. 196 sqq., 247 sqq., 482 sqq.

<sup>2</sup> See Grenard, *Mission D. de Rhins*, i. pp. 91 sqq.,

148 sqq.; ii. pp. 95 sqq. and chap. vi–x, passim; iii. pp. 325 sqq. (meteorology).

<sup>3</sup> Comp. Hedin, *Reisen in Z.-A.*, pp. 22 sqq., 202 sqq.