

expansion of Chinese political influence westwards, and remained in use through the whole period of the Han dynasty. But the indications available in those texts were by no means sufficient to determine its exact direction; and for the topographical and archaeological observations, which in the course of the winter and spring I was able to collect at what I believe to have been the starting-points of the route east and west of the absolute desert intervening, confirmation by documentary evidence was highly to be desired. So every scrap of information gleaned here from original local records acquires special importance.

There is abundant evidence in the Chinese Annals to prove that during successive periods of China's supremacy in the Tarim Basin it was always the great route leading along the southern foot of the T'ien-shan and through the string of big oases from Korla westwards to Kashgar, which claimed the chief attention of its soldiers and administrators. It was by this route that the bulk of the silk trade moved to Farghana and Samarkand, the ancient Sogdiana. The protection of it against the inroads of the Huns and other nomadic tribes north of the T'ien-shan was the main purpose for which the Tarim Basin was held. Now a glance at the map shows that the shortest way to reach that line of oases, the Pei-lu or 'Northern Road' of the Chinese Annals, from the westernmost parts of Kan-su and China proper, lay along the foot of the Kuruk-tagh just north of the Lop desert and past the ruined site I was engaged in exploring. Yet at the present time the total want of drinkable water along this route would make it impossible for any caravan traffic to cover the two hundred and forty odd miles of direct distance intervening between the Tarim and the nearest well on the Tun-huang-Charklik track.

Nowhere, perhaps, in Central Asia is the change in physical conditions so strikingly brought home to us, and our interest in determining the limits of time within which this took place must therefore be all the greater. Now among the records so far dealt with by M. Chavannes there are fifteen fully dated from years corresponding to