

would be useless to conjecture the exact purpose. It may, however, be noted that the structure occupied the south-west edge of what looked like a completely decayed circumvallation in clay, measuring about 180 yards in circumference.

Ruins in
southern
portion
of site.

A short distance to the south of the caravan track, and close to where the walls of a rectangular structure about thirteen feet long emerged from the side of a tamarisk-cone, I found a double row of dead Tereks marking an ancient orchard (Fig. 85). About a mile to the south-south-west I was shown the comparatively well-preserved remains of a small dwelling, eighteen by twelve feet, with walls two feet thick, by the side of a tamarisk-cone. The top of the latter rose twelve feet above the floor, while the ground on the unprotected side of the structure had been lowered by wind-erosion to a depth of six feet below the original level. An approximately similar extent of erosion on the one hand and of growth of tamarisk-cones on the other was observed elsewhere near these ruins. Gauged by the standard of measurements at other sites of which the date is fixed, it serves to prove that the abandonment of the Vāsh-shahri Site must go back to a mediaeval period not very far removed from the twelfth century, to which the above-mentioned chronological evidence takes us.

Marks of
Chinese
influence.

Here I may note that the general impression left by my examination of the site and its relics was that of Chinese influence more direct than that observable in the ruins of the Khotan region. This has since received support from the fact that, as already stated, Mr. R. L. Hobson has recognized, among the pottery and stoneware fragments picked up at Vāsh-shahri, pieces of bowls which must have been originated at the Chün-chou factories of Ho-nan during Sung times. But it is impossible to say whether this increased Chinese influence was due to the presence at this point of a small Chinese colony, or resulted merely from a position so much further east on a once much-frequented trade route from China. That this route continued to be regularly used during Mongol domination in the second half of the thirteenth century, we know through Marco Polo. His narrative, in fact, seems to contain an allusion to Vāsh-shahri, though he does not name it distinctly as an inhabited place.

Marco
Polo's route
beyond
Charchan.

'Quitting Charchan,' so Marco tells us, 'you ride some five days through the sands, finding none but bad and bitter water, and then you come to a place where the water is sweet. And now I will tell you of a province called *Lop*, in which there is a city, also called *Lop*, which you come to at the end of those five days. It is at the entrance of the great Desert, and it is here that travellers repose before entering on the Desert.'^{7a} With regard to this itinerary east of Charchan two points must be clearly recognized. One is that the five days' ride through the sands, with none but brackish water, cannot refer to the usual route along the Charchan River, where good water is easily obtainable, but seems to point to a more direct track crossing the desert belt of sand and gravel which extends between the Charchan River and the route skirting the foot of the mountains from Charchan to Vāsh-shahri. A reference to the map shows that such an intermediate track would be considerably shorter than either of the two routes which we actually surveyed. That the ground offers no very serious obstacles to a march along such a line during the winter was clear from the information given by Ismail, who had often crossed this desert on his hunting expeditions after wild camels, &c.

Marco
Polo's road
reckoning
to *Lop*.

The other point is that a traveller following this line would reach Vāsh-shahri in five ordinary marches, and this would be for him the first 'place where the water is sweet'. Vāsh-shahri must have formed then as now the western limit of the 'province of Lop', represented by the present Charkhlik district, and it is quite in keeping with Marco Polo's usual reckoning that his five marches should be counted to the nearest place of 'the province', instead of to its chief place, the 'city' of Lop. That the latter must be located at the present oasis of Charkhlik is made certain by a number of

^{7a} See Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. p. 194.