

cogent considerations, geographical and archaeological, which I shall have occasion to discuss further on. Charkhlik itself certainly could not be reached by five marches from Charchan, my measured road distance being 198 miles. But everything in Marco's itinerary comes right if we take the words 'which you come to at the end of those five days' as referring to the 'province called Lop', and treat the words immediately preceding, 'in which there is a city, also called Lop', as a parenthetical remark prefatory to his subsequent notice of that town.

On leaving the site of Vāsh-shahri I was struck by the fact that the much-fissured trunks of dead fruit trees, willows, and poplars lay scattered, not merely within the somewhat narrow belt occupied by the remains of old homesteads, but also for a short distance over the bare gravel 'Sai' extending eastwards. An original top layer of fertile soil had evidently been carried away here altogether, and this accounted for the raised line of the canal still clearly traceable across the 'Sai'. But curiously enough this ground was said to be reached during the summer by shallow floods from the Vāsh-shahri River. Is it possible that inundation water has found its way here only after deflation had done its work? The canal, after skirting the old site, seemed to turn to the north-north-east, this being evidently the natural direction of the drainage, as shown by the summer flood-beds of the actual river which we began to cross amidst luxuriant Toghrak jungle some three and a half miles further east. After another two miles or so across a bare plain of fine gravel, we reached the new colony of Vāsh-shahri by the present main bed of the river. That the river bed, as assumed by Professor Huntington, formerly followed a more westerly course, and thus approached the old site much nearer than it does now,⁸ appears very probable. But I could not spare time to follow the line of the canal to its head, and in any case there never could be a question as to the main fact that the ruined settlement derived its water from this river, whatever variation its course may have since undergone.

Irrigation of
Vāsh-shahri
Site.

I have recorded elsewhere my impressions of the curious colonizing venture under official auspices to which the present hamlet of Vāsh-shahri owes its existence.⁹ The intermittent growth of the little oasis, on the one hand, shows that the importance of the ancient route connecting Charkhlik with Charchan and thence with Khotan has been fully recognized by the Chinese administration in our time also; on the other, it well illustrates the special difficulties which under existing conditions beset any attempt to facilitate and develop traffic along it by permanent settlements. The three sons of the original settler, who first took up land by the Vāsh-shahri River about thirty years before, had kept to their little colony and prospered. But the destitute agriculturists whom successive Ambans of Charkhlik, under higher official orders, had tried to attract to the small settlement from distant oases by advances of food, seed corn, &c., for some fifteen years past,¹⁰ had in almost all cases decamped whenever the harvest did not come up to their expectations, or the question of refunding advances arose.

Modern
settlement
of Vāsh-
shahri.

With the keen competition for agricultural labour going on along the widely scattered oases in the east of the Tārīm Basin, there was little chance of detaining such roving folk at an outlying place like Vāsh-shahri. A year or two before my visit the population was said to have thus dwindled down to only five households. But now some twenty families had been brought there by Rōze Bēg, who had last contracted for this official 'development scheme', and money had been spent on building a rest-house, granary, and Bāzār, all of which might serve as an effective 'eye-wash'. I, too, like Dr. Hedin, heard complaints about climatic drawbacks, apparently due to the vicinity of the main range and the force of sand-storms coming from the north-east, but none about deficiency of water. The supply in the river was declared to be adequate for cultivation by about

Difficulties
of agri-
cultural
develop-
ment.

⁸ See *Pulse of Asia*, p. 221.

⁹ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 334 sq.

¹⁰ Cf. Hedin, *Reisen in Z.-A.*, p. 171.