

In my Personal Narrative I have related at length how much I owed to the energetic and willing assistance rendered by the late Liao Ta-lao-yeh, the cultured Chinese magistrate of the Charkhlik district, in overcoming all the difficulties of these preparations.¹ A recommendation from my old friend and patron P'an Ta-jên, now Tao-t'ai at Ak-su, whose control extended as far south as Charkhlik, had been helpful in enlisting the scholarly Amban's eager co-operation, apart from his own genuine interest in the objects of my journey. It needed all his authority to secure me an adequate posse of labourers for my proposed excavations. Whether they were descendants of colonists brought from Keriya and the northern oases, or of Lop fishermen who had taken to agriculture, all the villagers alike were thoroughly frightened by the prospect of having to leave their homes in the depth of winter for a distant and wholly unknown journey in the waterless desert north-eastward.

Help of
Chinese
magistrate.

Foreseeing the hardships which awaited us in that desolate region and the risks which might have to be faced from want of water in certain contingencies, I was doubly anxious to enlist only men of thoroughly sound physique and to make sure of their starting fully equipped and with ample supplies. The difficulties arising over the selection of suitable men would have been greater still had not help opportunely arrived on the second day in the persons of two hardy hunters from Abdal. Old Mullah and Tokhta Ākhūn had in 1900-1 seen service with Dr. Hedin around Lop-nōr. In compliance with a request sent ahead from Vāsh-shahri they arrived, after a hard ride from their home at Abdal, quite ready to take their places by my side. Neither of them had ever approached the ruins by the direct route from Abdal, and therefore they could not be expected to act as guides beyond the point where we should have to leave the Lop marshes. But they knew well the nature of the ground to be traversed, and were inured to hardships by their life as hunters. So their prompt appearance on the scene and calm willingness to share our fortunes in the desert helped greatly to allay the worst fears of the men I was obliged to levy as labourers. The assurance of generous pay and a promise from the Amban of exemption from the usual corvée did the rest to make the victims acquiesce in their fate with some outward show of composure.

Lop hunters
engaged for
guidance.

The preparations which thus kept me engrossed day and night while at Charkhlik were singularly fitted to draw my attention to antiquarian interests close at hand. A number of considerations convinced me that the oasis of Charkhlik was the chief place of this whole region near Lop-nōr in old times as it is now. The river to which it owes its existence is the largest descending to the Lop-nōr depression from the K'un-lun east of Charchan. The facilities for irrigation it offers on its alluvial fan are far more assured than any which could possibly be derived in this region from the terminal course of the Tārīm itself, winding in low and ever-shifting beds through alluvial flats salt-impregnated for ages past. For any one studying local conditions on the ground, the geographical facts could leave no doubt that the present Charkhlik marks the position of Marco Polo's *Lop*, 'a large town at the edge of the Desert', where 'travellers repose before entering on the Desert' on their way to Sha-chou and China proper.

The oasis of
Charkhlik.

Before discussing the evidence which supports this location and enables us, I believe, to trace back the history of the Charkhlik oasis to much earlier times, it will be convenient to mention here the essential facts about the present oasis and such ancient remains as I succeeded in tracing within its limits. The local information I was able to gather seems to show that the present settlement has developed in the course of the last century in much the same manner as Charchan. The Chinese always recognized the commercial and strategic importance of the route leading direct from Khotan to Kan-su by the southern edge of the Taklamakān and Lop-nōr, and from about the first third of the nineteenth century onwards they endeavoured to facilitate traffic along it by the creation of an

Growth
of present
settlement.

¹ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 338 sqq.