

## CHAPTER X

### THROUGH THE LOP DESERT

#### SECTION I.—FIRST VISIT TO MĪRĀN

Start from  
Charkhlik.

AFTER three days of continuous efforts I completed at Charkhlik the preparations for my desert expedition. On the morning of December 6, 1906, I was able to start my column, which comprised fifty labourers for the proposed excavations and twenty-one camels. The latter were to carry five weeks' supplies for us all and the ice which would be needed to provide us with water while away in the Lop desert. My first goal was the 'site of Lou-lan', over a hundred miles to the north-east of the fishing hamlet of Abdal, the nearest inhabited place, and quite seventy miles from the nearest point where drinkable water could be found. The necessity of husbanding time was obvious in view of the other difficult tasks before me which were only practicable during the cold of the winter. I was obliged, therefore, to take to that distant site as many diggers as I could possibly keep supplied with water. The problem which the latter consideration involved was much complicated by the uncertainty as to whether ice would already have formed at the salt springs of Āltmish-bulak and by the limitation of the available camel transport. In spite of all local efforts, the resources of Charkhlik proved insufficient to add more than seven weakly animals to the eight of my own caravan and six that I had hired from Charchan.

Route via  
Mīrān.

Anxious as I was, for reasons of transport and supplies, to reach the 'Lou-lan Site' as early as possible, I should not in any case have forgone the chance of paying on my way a preliminary visit to the ruins of Mīrān, which our maps have shown ever since Prejevalsky's journey of 1876.<sup>1</sup> Abdal, near the commencement of the Kara-koshun marshes, was to be the true base for our march through the Lop desert north-eastwards, and the route leading to it via Mīrān was only some seven or eight miles longer than the usual one past the Kara-buran lagoons and the terminal Tārīm (see Map No. 57). But a special reason for an early visit to Mīrān was supplied by a fragmentary leaf of paper with Tibetan writing which had been brought to me by Tokhta Ākhūn, the Abdal hunter, when he joined me at Charkhlik. He declared that he had found it early in the year, while scraping what he described as the roof of a sand-filled dwelling within a ruined fort at Mīrān. The 'find' looked undoubtedly old, and, in connexion with what Tokhta Ākhūn could relate about remains of 'Būts' at other ruins, it determined me to spare a couple of days for a preliminary survey of the site.

Cultivation  
at Mīrān.

The two fairly long marches which brought me to Mīrān have been briefly described in my personal narrative.<sup>2</sup> The first, to the wells of Yandash-kāk, lay almost due east, skirting on the left an extensive area of low tamarisk-cones with patches of other desert vegetation; on the south there extended an absolutely bare glacis of Piedmont gravel to the foot of the outermost Āltin-tāgh range. On the following day, for some twenty-seven miles, we crossed a bare gravel Sai, entirely devoid of vegetation, until we came to the broad flood-bed of the Jahān-sai; beyond it we encamped in the belt of comparatively luxuriant vegetation which flanks the branch known as the stream of

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 319, note 8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 348 sqq.