

The same remark applies also to the southern branch of the route leading to Mīrān and Abdal, which could be made practicable for rough carts with no great trouble. Here, too, the difficulty about water is very serious on the western section of the route, since over a marching distance of about 94 miles, between Abdal and Lowaza, no drinkable water is obtainable except when the ice of the salt springs can be used, between December and April. We shall see that this difficulty must have already existed when Marco Polo passed here. It is possible, though there is no direct evidence to prove it, that water was more plentiful in Han times, progress of desiccation being responsible for the springs west of Lowaza turning salt. But, in any case, there is good reason to believe that in historical times the physical obstacles on this southern branch of the route could never have been quite so formidable as on the northern or Lou-lan one, some modest grazing and fuel being still obtainable at every stage, as Marco Polo duly noted. Hence I consider it highly probable that this southern branch route, leading straight to the old Shan-shan sites of Mīrān and Charkhlik, was used in the earliest period of Chinese intercourse with the Tārīm Basin, even though I cannot trace direct evidence for its use during Han times.¹⁰

Southern
branch
route to
Shan-shan.

The northern route leading to Lou-lan must have remained the main line of communication from Tun-huang westwards during the first centuries after Christ. But when the Later Han Annals mention the route leading to Shan-shan, they do not give any detail regarding it except that it started from the barrier of *Yü-mên*, the 'Jade Gate'.¹¹ Fortunately we fare better in the case of the record which the *Wei lio*, composed between A.D. 239-65, furnishes regarding the three routes used from Tun-huang to the 'Western Countries' during the 'Epoch of the Three Kingdoms'. I have already had occasion, when dealing with the historical topography of the Lou-lan Site, to discuss the interesting information which this text supplies, and which M. Chavannes' translation and full commentary have rendered conveniently accessible.¹² I have quoted there the whole of the important passage, and shown that the 'central route' of the *Wei lio* is identical with our Lou-lan route, passing from the Jade Gate through the Bēsh-toghruk valley to the ancient Lop lake-bed, and across it to the extreme north-east end of the once habitable Lou-lan area. But it still remains for us to fix the location in detail of such intermediate stages as the text names, in the light of the knowledge now gained of the actual ground which the route crossed. For convenience of reference, I may quote again that portion of the passage which concerns us here: 'The central route is the one which, starting from *Yü-mên kuan*, sets out on the west, leaves the well of the Protector-General, turns back at the northern extremity of the *San-lung* ('Three Ridges') [desert of] sand, passes the *Chü-lu* granary; then, on leaving from the *Sha-hsi* well, turns to the north-west, passes through the *Lung-tui* ('Dragon Mounds'), arrives at the ancient Lou-lan.'

Route to
Lou-lan
described in
Wei lio.

'Central
route' of
Wei lio.

It must be a matter for regret that the record of the *Wei lio* does not give the distances between the localities named. But even without their guidance the references to bearings, and the exact knowledge we now possess of the starting and terminal points, fortunately help us to identify the places meant with considerable probability. The location of *Yü-mên*, the 'Jade Gate', at the ruined fort T. XIV of the ancient Limes (Map No. 74. D. 3), for which the excavations to be described below supplied conclusive archaeological evidence,¹³ provides us with a sure point of departure. Of the 'well of the Protector-General' I shall have occasion to show below that it must, in all likelihood, be placed at the site by the extreme western end of the Limes wall, marked by the watch-towers T. IV. a, b.¹⁴ A clear indication is next supplied in the statement that the route 'turns back

Route starts
from *Yü-
mên*.

¹⁰ For a possible allusion to it in the Former Han Annals, see above, p. 340.

¹¹ Cf. Chavannes, *Les pays d'occident, T'oung-pao*, 1907, pp. 169 sq.

¹² Cf. above, pp. 417 sqq.; Chavannes, *Les pays d'occident d'après le Wei lio, T'oung-pao*, 1905, pp. 528 sqq.

¹³ See below, chap. XIX. sec. i, ii.

¹⁴ See below, chap. XVII. sec. i. As M. Chavannes has