

Abandonment of Lou-lan route.

It is not necessary for us to follow the *Wei lió's* account of the Lou-lan route further; for we have had occasion before fully to discuss and to locate its remaining stages, the *Lung-tui*, 'Dragon Mounds', identical with the 'White Dragon Mounds' of the Former Han Annals, and 'ancient Lou-lan', represented by the remains of the Lou-lan Site.<sup>21</sup> We have also seen how, within a century after the record of that itinerary, the tract of Lou-lan was finally abandoned to the desert. With the disappearance of water and cultivation there, the ancient Lou-lan route must have become impracticable for traffic within the first half of the fourth century A.D. Since it was opened by the great Han emperor Wu-ti for Chinese expansion westwards it had remained in use for about four hundred and fifty years. But with the opening of the easier route to the eastern T'ien-shan, which the *Wei lió* calls the 'new route of the north', and which probably led near Hāmi, at the beginning of the Christian era,<sup>22</sup> its importance must have considerably diminished. Even before it became finally closed, China's intercourse with the West had greatly declined, and its political hold on the Tārīm Basin become interrupted or altogether lost.

Accounts of Chinese pilgrims.

This prolonged eclipse of Chinese influence in Central Asia, which extended from the period of the Eastern Chin Dynasty (A.D. 317-419) to the advent of the T'angs in the early seventh century, is reflected by the total absence in the intervening dynastic records of accounts of the routes connecting China with the 'Western Regions'. Fortunately we have now the itineraries of Buddhist pilgrims from China to India helping to some extent to bridge the gap, and to one of the earliest known among them, Fa-hsien, we owe a graphic, if brief, description of the desert track from Tun-huang to Shan-shan or Lop. Though it has already been necessary to consider it in connexion with the history of the Lop region, I may conveniently again quote the passage here.<sup>23</sup>

Fa-hsien's desert crossing from Tun-huang.

Fa-hsien with a company of monks, fellow pilgrims, had reached Tun-huang in the autumn of A.D. 400. It is interesting to find the district described as 'the frontier territory of defence extending for about 80 li from east to west, and about 40 from north to south.' This shows that the area of cultivation in the main oasis could not then have been much in excess of what it was in recent times (see Map No. 78). It also suggests that the stations along the ancient Chinese border wall extending far to the west must have already been abandoned, a conclusion fully supported by the archaeological evidence of my explorations. After a stay of a little more than a month, Fa-hsien and four other monks started 'in the suite of an envoy'. The prefect of Tun-huang, a man of learning, 'had supplied them with the means of crossing the desert [before them], in which there are many evil demons and hot winds. [Travellers] who encounter them perish all to a man. There is not a bird to be seen in the air above, nor an animal on the ground below. Though you look round most earnestly where you can cross, you know not where to make your choice, the only mark and indication being the dry bones of the dead [left upon the sand]. After travelling for seventeen days, a distance, we may calculate, of about 1,500 li, [the pilgrims] reached the kingdom of Shan-shan.'

Fa-hsien's route to Charkhlik.

As the tract of ancient Lou-lan was by that time already abandoned, it appears to me quite clear that the pilgrims' route must have taken them towards Mīrān and Charkhlik. The description of it leaves no doubt that it led, not along the track high up in the Āltin-tāgh, but through the desert depression between Tun-huang and Lop. And there, as my preceding topographical account

sand'. The place mentioned in the text is certainly the last westwards to which the light drift-sand covering the bottom of the Bēsh-toghruk valley extends. Beyond it no drift-sand is met with now on the ancient route until the vicinity of the Lou-lan Site is reached.

<sup>21</sup> See above, pp. 341 sq., 419 sqq.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. above, pp. 419 sq., and below, chap. XIX. sec. vi; Chavannes, *T'oung-pao*, 1905, p. 533, note 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Legge, *Fa-hien*, pp. 11 sq.; also above, pp. 323 sq. I have adapted the transcription of Chinese names to the Wade system.