

Routes from
Tun-huang
to Lop after
T'ang rule.

Mirān proves that the importance of the routes leading from Tun-huang to the Lop region still continued after Chinese political influence in the Tārīm Basin had disappeared towards the close of the eighth century.³⁰ The numerous embassies from Khotan to the imperial court of China which are mentioned in the Annals from the accession of the Posterior Chin to the end of the Sung Dynasty (A.D. 936-1126), and to which I have already had occasion to refer,³¹ make it appear highly probable that the direct routes between Lop and Tun-huang continued to be used, at least intermittently, after the final downfall of the T'angs. But only in one instance do we find the route specified, and in that it is the one leading along the high slopes of the Āltin-tāgh.³²

SECTION III.—MARCO POLO AND LATER TRAVELLERS ON THE LOP DESERT ROUTE

Marco
Polo's
passage
to *Sachiu*.

We must let another century and a half pass by before we meet with a distinct record of the use of the desert route. We owe it to Marco Polo's passage about A.D. 1273 from the 'town of Lop' to the 'City of Sachiu', and there is much in his graphic description of the route to claim our special interest. We have already followed the great Venetian traveller to the 'town of Lop' and have shown that it must be located at the present Charkhlik.¹ This is what his immortal book tells us of the journey through the desert: ² 'Now, such persons as propose to cross the Desert take a week's rest in this town to refresh themselves and their cattle; and then they make ready for the journey, taking with them a month's supply for man and beast. On quitting this City they enter the Desert.

Description
of desert
route.

'The length of this Desert is so great that 'tis said it would take a year and more to ride from one end of it to the other. And here, where its breadth is least, it takes a month to cross it. 'Tis all composed of hills and valleys of sand, and not a thing to eat is to be found on it. But after riding for a day and a night you find fresh water, enough mayhap for some 50 or 100 persons with their beasts, but not for more. And all across the Desert you will find water in like manner, that is to say, in some 28 places altogether you will find good water, but in no great quantity; and in four places also you will find brackish water.

M. Polo on
spirits of
deserts.

'Beasts there are none; for there is nought for them to eat. But there is a marvellous thing related of this Desert, which is that when travellers are on the move by night, and one of them chances to lag behind or fall asleep or the like, when he tries to gain his company again he will hear spirits talking, and will suppose them to be his comrades. Sometimes the spirits will call him by name; and thus shall a traveller oftentimes be led astray so that he never finds his party. And in this way many have perished. [Sometimes the stray travellers will hear as it were the tramp and hum of a great cavalcade of people away from the real line of road, and taking this to be their own company they will follow the sound; and when day breaks they find that a cheat has been put on them and that they are in an ill plight.] Even in the daytime one hears those spirits talking. And sometimes you shall hear the sound of a variety of musical instruments, and still more commonly the sound of drums. [Hence in making this journey 'tis customary for travellers to keep close together. All the animals, too, have bells at their necks, so that they cannot easily get astray. And at sleeping-time a signal is put up to show the direction of the next march.] So thus it is that the Desert is crossed.'

³⁰ Cf. above, p. 475.

³¹ See above, p. 320.

³² Cf. Rémusat, *Ville de Khotan*, pp. 74 sqq.; *Ancient*

Khotan, i. p. 178.

¹ See above, pp. 318 sq.

² Cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 196 sqq.