

Marco Polo at the beginning of the next chapter follows up this description by the statement: 'After you have travelled thirty days through the Desert, as I have described, you come to a city called SACHIU, lying between north-east and east; it belongs to the Great Kaan, and is in a province called TANGUT.'³

It will be easier to demonstrate the remarkably close agreement between Marco Polo's account of his journey through the 'Desert of Lop' and the route we have described above, if we examine first the matter-of-fact details which the opening portion of his chapter records. During my first stay at Charkhlik in December, 1906, when collecting information about the Tun-huang route, I ascertained that traders from Khotan and Keriya who are accustomed to follow it ordinarily reckon the journey to take a whole month with fully-laden animals. In the course of this they adhere to the practice, imposed by due regard for their camels or donkeys—these alone can be used for loads—, of making rather short daily stages along those portions of the route where, as between Kum-kuduk and Bēsh-toghrak (Maps Nos. 67, 70) and my Camps 155 and 176 (Maps Nos. 74, 78), water and grazing of some sort can be secured at no long intervals. Or else, if the condition of their animals would make this preferable, they will halt for a couple of days in a suitable place and then double short stages. Our subsequent journey fully confirmed the correctness of the traders' usual estimate, and with equal clearness proved the substantial accuracy of the statements recorded by Marco Polo. Modern traders' journeys.

Including the marches from Charkhlik to Mīrān (whence Donglik is about as distant as from Abdal), our plane-table survey, as finally checked and revised, showed a distance of about 397 miles from Charkhlik, Marco Polo's 'town of Lop', to his 'city called Sachiu', i.e. Sha-chou or Tun-huang. If we allow thirty days for the whole journey, as Marco Polo does at the beginning of his next chapter, the average for a day's march on the basis of this reckoning works out at 13 miles. Considering the trying nature of the ground over considerable portions of the route, this daily average must appear very reasonable to any one familiar with camel traffic in this region of Central Asia. It is true that by special exertions, amounting practically to a succession of forced marches, we managed to cover the distance from Abdal to Tun-huang town in nineteen days, including two days of halt, to which three days would ordinarily have to be added for the journey from Charkhlik. But I had taken special care to allow our own animals some six weeks' preparatory rest and to lighten loads as much as possible by the use of additional donkey transport. Even thus, some of the donkeys broke down, and I much doubt whether any large caravan could do the journey in less than a month without risking a disaster from serious loss of animals.⁴ Estimate of one month's travel.

A reference to the brief account given above of the first two sections of the route, and to the ampler details contained in Chapters XLV–XLVIII of *Desert Cathay*, will suffice to prove how correctly Marco Polo describes the physical conditions actually met with on this desert route as regards water, grazing, and other features likely to impress a traveller. In the 'hills and valleys of sand' we easily recognize the impression left by the huge ridges of dunes which the route closely skirts along the whole length of its second section. Experience showed that the number of stages where water was either unobtainable or too salt for drinking was four, exactly corresponding to that of the places of which Ser Marco notes that 'you will find brackish water'.⁵ In the same way, his Physical conditions described.

³ Cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. p. 203.

⁴ This risk is well illustrated by the experiences with which Col. Bruce's party met on its journey to Tun-huang in the winter of 1906; cf. Bruce, *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo*, pp. 182 sqq.

⁵ We found three of these stages between Abdal and Lowaza (Camps 142–144, Map No. 61), the fourth at our Camp

153 (Map No. 74). At the last-named camp, and probably also near our Camp 143 (Map No. 61. B. 2), water might be reached even now by well-sinking; but it would be found very brackish. Of course, the possibility must be kept in view that desiccation or some other process has effected changes in such details of the subsoil drainage, and that Marco Polo's four stages with brackish water may have to be located at other points.