

warning as to the limitation of the water-supply available elsewhere proved well founded at the great majority of the remaining stages. In view of what I have said above as to the number of stages, there is nothing to urge against Marco's estimate that 'in some 28 places altogether you will find good water'—provided that the term 'good' is not taken too literally!

M. Polo followed present route.

The adequate knowledge now gained of the main topographical features of the area intervening between the southern portion of the Lop tract and Tun-huang makes it perfectly certain that, in historical times, the direct desert route practicable for caravans passing between the two districts could have followed no other line but the one still used. Not only is this the shortest route leading to the terminal course of the Su-lo Ho, but it is also clear that neither in the salt-encrusted waste of the dried-up Lop sea-bed to the north, nor among the high sand ridges of the Kum-tāgh in the south, could a succession of stages with water and some grazing, such as Marco Polo's description implies, be supposed to exist. This plain topographical fact once established, it is needless for us to consider conjectural explanations proposed as to 'why Marco Polo never mentioned the Lop-nōr', a question by which it was sought to link up the old traveller's account with the long-drawn discussion of 'the Lop-nōr problem'.<sup>6</sup> Wonderful observer as he was of things which lay within 'the sphere of his interests', Ser Marco was not a geographer in the modern sense. His silence as to the marshes which he might have sighted in the distance from Donglik, and about the bare salt waste which he must have approached much closer later on, is scarcely more surprising than the total want of any reference on his part to the huge rampart of the snowy K'un-lun, the nearness of which he could not have failed to notice on his long journey from Yārkan to Charkhlik.

M. Polo's silence on Lop-nōr.

Extent of 'Gobi'.

There is no need either for us to discuss in detail what Marco states as to 'the length of this Desert' being 'so great that 'tis said it would take a year or more to ride from one end of it to the other'. We note that he is careful enough to qualify this estimate as related by others, and can realize without difficulty that his informants, Mongols or Turks as they are likely to have been, had in their mind the whole of the huge belt of ground without permanent agricultural settlements which extends right across from north-eastern Mongolia to western Tibet, just as modern Chinese would apply the term 'Gobi' (Ko Pi) in its widest sense.<sup>7</sup> The same remark applies also to what he tells us further on about the dangers of the desert crossing.

Evil spirits haunting desert.

It did not need my journey along his actual route, nor my daily contact with men still cherishing notions much like those of his Central-Asian fellow-travellers, to convince me that in his record of 'a marvellous thing related of this Desert' we have but a faithful reflex of old folk-lore beliefs that he must have heard on the spot. Sir Henry Yule has shown long ago in his comments on this passage that the dread of being led astray by evil spirits haunted the imagination of all early travellers who crossed the desert wastes between China and the oases westwards.<sup>8</sup> Fa-hsien's statement, quoted above, clearly alludes to this belief, and Hsüan-tsang distinctly attests it where he paints in graphic words the impressions left by his journey through the sands of the Taklamakān between Niya and Charchan.<sup>9</sup>

Ma Tuan-lin's notice of desert route.

Striking testimony to the prevalence and antiquity of this dread felt by travellers passing through the 'Desert of Lop' is given by a passage in Ma Tuan-lin's great compilation which describes the shortest route from China towards Kara-shahr, and which reads almost like a translation from Ser Marco's book. It must have been extracted from some earlier Chinese historical source, but I am unable at present to ascertain which it was. In any case, as it obviously refers

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the long note in the third edition of Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 199, with the reference there given to *Geogr. Journal*, June 1898, pp. 657 sq.

<sup>7</sup> See regarding the use of this general term for desert,

Richthofen, *China*, i. p. 24, note 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 201 sq.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Julien, *Mémoires*, ii. p. 246; Watters, *Yuan Chwang*, ii. pp. 303 sq.; *Ancient Khotan*, i. p. 435.