

either to the present track from Tun-huang to Lop or to the ancient Lou-lan route, it is worth quoting here in full as reproduced by Sir Henry Yule on the basis of Visdelou's translation.¹⁰ 'The Chinese historian Ma Twan-lin informs us that there were two roads from China into the Uighúr country (towards Karashahr). The longest but easiest road was by Kamul. The other was much shorter, and apparently corresponded, as far as Lop, to that described in this chapter. "By this you have to cross a plain of sand, extending for more than 100 leagues. You see nothing in any direction but the sky and the sands, without the slightest trace of a road; and travellers find nothing to guide them but the bones of men and beasts and the droppings of camels. During the passage of this wilderness you hear sounds, sometimes of singing, sometimes of wailing; and it has often happened that travellers, going aside to see what those sounds might be, have strayed from their course and been entirely lost; for they were voices of spirits and goblins. 'Tis for these reasons that travellers and merchants often prefer the much longer route by Kamul.'"

The concluding remark of Ma Tuan-lin's extract has an interest of its own. It appropriately directs our attention to the reason which has at all times induced Chinese traffic to prefer the longer northern route, through Hāmi or Kumul and by the foot of the T'ien-shan, to the route through the Lop desert—if only the former could be followed in safety. There are fundamental features in the nation's character and policy which have always made the Chinese far more willing to encounter and overcome the difficulties of nature than to face the risks arising from human foes. It is to this deep-rooted preference that we must attribute in the main the first opening of the Lou-lan route, notwithstanding the formidable natural obstacles it must have presented even in ancient times, and its continued use for centuries. Though the relative shortness of this route was also, no doubt, duly appreciated, the real explanation lies in the fact that, as we shall see further on, it afforded practical immunity from the raids of the Huns and their immediate nomadic successors in the regions north of the T'ien-shan. Except during the short intervals of complete Chinese predominance, these raids were always a serious source of danger on the far easier route leading along the foot of the range.

Desert route safe from raids.

We can scarcely hope to ascertain the exact reasons which determined Marco Polo and his uncles to choose the route via Khotan and Lop for their journey to Cathay instead of the easier one in the north. In the heyday of Mongol dominion the protection of the 'Great Kaan' assured safety for travellers on all the main roads of Central-Asian trade. But it is certain that we owe our next western notice of the Lop desert route, which is of a date nearly one and a half centuries later, directly to the insecurity of the northern road. When, in A.D. 1420, the embassy dispatched by Shāh Rukh, the Mongol prince of Herāt, to the imperial court of China was proceeding from Samarkand to the frontier of China proper near Su-chou, it followed the road via Turfān and Su-chou.¹¹ But when the mission on its way back from Peking left Su-chou again in January, 1422, homeward bound, 'the troubles in Mongolia induced the ambassadors now to take the unfrequented southern route through the desert', or as Quatremère's translation of the original puts it:¹² 'La crainte de l'ennemi les décida à préférer la route du désert; le dix-huitième jour de rebi-awal, ils franchirent, avec de grandes fatigues, ces chemins non-frayés et dépourvus d'eau; le neuvième jour de djoumada second, ils arrivèrent à la ville de Khoten.'

Route used by Shāh Rukh's embassy.

¹⁰ See Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. p. 201 quoting Visdelou's *Supplement to D'Herbelot's Bibliothèque Orientale* (1780), p. 139.

¹¹ Cf. Sir Henry Yule's abstract of Quatremère's translation of the mission's Persian record, Yule, *Cathay*², i. pp. 271 sq.

¹² See *ibid.*, i. pp. 286 sq. Rehatsek's version (*Indian*

Antiquary, 1873, p. 83) quoted in M. Cordier's note reads: 'they left Qayl [i.e. the frontier station, *Karaul*, near Su-chou, corresponding to the present Chia-yü kuan] and selected the road through Chul [i.e. *chöl*, the Turkī term for desert] on account of the insecurity of the highways, and arrived after much trouble on the 9th of Jomády the first (May 1st) in the town of Khotán.'