

The desert track was certainly not used then by traders, and there was nothing to attract them to Lop, since, owing to the absence of any agricultural settlements westwards to Keriya, the route along the southern edge of the Taklamakān was equally deserted by traffic during the early part of the last century. Yet, from the information which my guide Mullah Shāh and other old Lopliks supplied, I gathered that during pre-rebellion times Chinese camel-men from Tun-huang used occasionally to come by the desert route in the winter to bring away the loads of dried fish which the Lopliks could provide in abundance for barter against iron and the like.

Loplik tradition about route.

But even this occasional traffic ceased early in the sixties, when all intercourse with China was broken by the establishment of Yākūb Bēg's Muhammadan kingdom in the Tārīm Basin and through the Tungan rebels' devastations in Kan-su. Thus the old caravan track came to be wholly forgotten, except in tradition and Chinese historical record. When, about 1891, the re-established Chinese administration became anxious, for strategic and commercial reasons, to develop the southern oases and to open up the nearest connexion with China, the line followed by the ancient route had to be rediscovered. Mullah Shāh himself, my quaint, honest companion to Lou-lan, and another Loplik hunter, both familiar with the westernmost portions of the Kum-tāgh desert from expeditions after wild camels, were then chiefly instrumental in reopening the route.

Desert route rediscovered.

Engaged by a Chinese official, whom the Fu-t'ai, or Governor General, of Hsin-chiang had commissioned to explore and report, they succeeded, after a first expedition had failed, in guiding him and some Chinese sent from Tun-huang safely through to the terminal Su-lo Ho marshes. It was this plucky exploit which I had found duly recorded in a Chinese inscription on a wooden stêlê which had been set up near our camping place at Donglik, as related in my Personal Narrative.¹⁷ The date, there stated as the seventeenth year of Kuang Hsü, accurately coincided with the account I had heard from Mullah Shāh nearly three months earlier. According to the story of this reliable witness, the chief difficulties in tracing the route had been encountered on the marshy ground towards Achchik-kuduk, and again among the Mesas and dunes of the deceptive basin beyond Bēsh-toghrak.

Chinese inscription at Donglik.

Within two years of its rediscovery the ancient desert route was followed from Tun-huang by the ill-fated French traveller M. Joseph Martin, who subsequently died at Marghilān on his way homewards. He was the first European since Marco Polo known to have crossed the Lop desert. But he left no account of it beyond the few notes which M. Grenard was able to record from his mouth on his passage through Khotan.¹⁸ The first mapping of the route followed soon; for at the beginning of 1894 Captain (now Colonel) P. K. Kozloff, as a member of the late Captain V. I. Roborovsky's Central-Asian expedition, travelled from Abdal to Tun-huang and secured a route survey by the plane-table. This has been recorded in the Russian Asiatic Trans-frontier Map XXI, and for its final portion also on the larger scale of 1:840,000 in the map that illustrates the topographical results of that important expedition in the Tun-huang region and in the high mountains south of it.¹⁹ The special merit of Colonel Kozloff's survey lies in the fact that it first revealed the great eastward extension of the ancient dried-up Lop sea-bed, just as he was the first European to realize the existence of the ancient river-bed, the Kuruk-daryā, which once carried the waters of the Konche-daryā to Lou-lan and the north-western part of that huge basin. His mapping considerably

Journey of J. Martin.

Col. Kozloff's survey of route.

record on which the extract is based, the latter statement referred to the possible halting stages only.

¹⁷ See *Desert Cathay*, i. p. 504.

¹⁸ Cf. Grenard, *Mission D. de Rhins*, i. p. 46. The 'twelve days of desert, sandy only during the first two days, stony afterwards' (quoted in Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. p. 203 by M. Cordier), are evidently reckoned from the end of our second section, down to which M. Martin's Chinese companions

are likely to have known the ground as visited by woodcutters and graziers from Tun-huang. Even thus the description is not quite correct.

¹⁹ See *Report on the Imperial Russian Geographical Society's Central-Asian Expedition, 1893-95*, by Captain V. I. Roborovsky (Russian), vol. iii (Maps), 1899. Colonel Kozloff's journey took twenty-three days, including two halts.