

But direct historical or archaeological evidence to prove this there is none. Topographical indications that the waters of the Keriya River once reached or closely approached the Tārīm there are, as already mentioned.⁸ But I can see no means for fixing the chronological limits of the change even approximately. Mirzā Haidar's statement about the Keriya River being among the rivers which empty their waters into the great lake in the desert eastwards is not likely to be based on actual observation, direct or indirect, but reflects only popular belief, which in matters of Turkestan hydrography is usually of the vaguest.⁹

What, however, I feel now firmly convinced of from personal knowledge of the ground is the probability that this short line through the desert has served since early times for occasional communication in case of special needs. That the hunters and shepherds visiting the terminal course of the Keriya River at present know of its practicability as an *oghre-yal*, 'thieves' track', is certain. It was this knowledge which induced my faithful old 'treasure-seeking' guide Turdi to aid, about 1903, the attempt of a Khotan Bēg who tried to escape from trouble with the local Chinese administration by crossing the desert from the river's end to Shahyār—an adventure that ended badly for the Bēg as well as for honest Turdi.¹⁰ For exploits of this shady kind, for the expeditions of robbers and others who had reason to avoid the highways, etc., this 'short cut' through the Taklamakān is always likely to have been a temptation. It is in this sense, I believe, that we have to interpret the popular tradition recorded in an old Turkī legendary, or *Tadhkira*, which pretends to describe the surprise attack made upon the infidels about Keriya by a band of Muslim warriors who came from the Tārīm by the route of the Keriya River.¹¹

Physical conditions in earlier periods.

'Thieves' track' through Taklamakān.

After revisiting Tonguz-baste on the bed of 1901, now wholly abandoned by the river, and securing guides and additional labourers among the shepherds encountered, I proceeded once more to the ruined site of Kara-dong (Map No. 30. D. 2). I found that the report about additional ruins having come to light from among the dunes since my visit of 1901 was true, though their number and extent proved scanty. Little had changed at the great ruined quadrangle (Fig. 302), of which the portions not completely smothered by high sands had already been explored then.¹² But elsewhere, to the south and south-east where the ground was more open and the dunes less high, the latter had shifted their position to an extent which disclosed ruined dwellings not previously noticed. As the site-plan, Plate 55, shows, the area over which these remains could now be traced stretches from south to north for a distance of close on a mile, with a width of about one-third of a mile. Bare patches of eroded ground within this area showed plentiful pottery debris, and this was traceable also more thinly for about half a mile further south. Of special interest was the discovery, immediately on my return to the site, of two small irrigation canals found now cropping out from among the dunes. Each was traced at a number of points with a bearing from south to north and a clear width of 1½ feet at the bottom. In conjunction with another new discovery, that

Return to Kara-dong Site.

⁸ See above, p. 1239.

⁹ Cf. Elias-Ross, *Tārīkh-i-Rashīdī*, p. 406. It is significant that he calls the lake *Kuk Naur*, i.e. Koko-nōr, and elsewhere reproduces the ancient Chinese fiction about the Huang Ho issuing from the same lake.

¹⁰ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. p. 175.

¹¹ Cf. Grenard, *Mission Dutreuil de Rhins*, iii. p. 44.

I have thought at times that it might have been by some track leading to the terminal Keriya River and thence, perhaps, via Dandān-oilik that Fa-hsien and his companions starting from Kara-shahr or Korla 'managed to go straight forward in a south-west direction'; and 'in the course of

a month and five days they succeeded in reaching Yü-t'ien (Khotan)'; cf. Legge, *Travels of Fa-hien*, pp. 15 sq. 'They found the country uninhabited as they went along. The difficulties which they encountered in crossing the streams and on their route, and the sufferings which they endured, were unparalleled in human experience.'

The time recorded for the journey is remarkably short, and the description suggests the use of a very direct but exceptionally trying route. This would point to a track as above indicated after crossing the Inchike and Tārīm rivers. But in the absence of details the question cannot be settled.

¹² See *Ancient Khotan*, i. pp. 446 sqq.