

Excavations were carried on from the 18th to the 28th of December at the site of the ruined station of Lou-lan (L.A.), once guarding the ancient Chinese route to the Tārīm, and at other ruins to the north-west (marked L.B.) with important results.³¹ Constant supervision on my part and the surveyor's ailing condition precluded topographical reconnaissances beyond the immediate vicinity of the ruins, demanded by the interest of the ground both from geographical and archæological points of view. Thus the task of surveying the ancient delta of the Kuruk-daryā ('Dry River') which once had brought water to this now utterly desolate region, or of tracing the line of the ancient Chinese route where it passed across the great dried-up salt sea eastwards, remained for my third expedition.

Explorations at ancient Lou-lan.

On completion of such exploratory work as the condition of the hard-trying men and our limited store of ice permitted, I sent the main camp under the surveyor back to Abdal while I struck across the wholly unexplored desert to the south-east. Seven trying marches, almost wholly over bare dunes, heaped up at intervals into high ridges or 'Dawāns', brought me on January 3rd, 1907, to the line of lagoons formed by the Ilek branch of the Tārīm.³² By following them up to the small ruined site of Merdek-tim and subsequently proceeding down to Lop where the delta of the Charchan river joins the Tārīm at the final eastward bend of its course, a useful addition was made to our surveys of the terminal depression in which the united drainage of the Tārīm basin is lost.³³

Desert crossing to Tārīm.

From Charkhlik I returned to the ruins near Mīrān. Their exploration under very trying climatic conditions yielded abundant finds of interest and detained me till February 11th. Then after needful preparations at Abdal I set out with the surveyor for the desert journey of three weeks by the lonely track, once followed by Marco Polo but almost forgotten for centuries, and reached Tun-huang on the westernmost marches of China proper. This route, some 330 miles long, leads first by the southern shore of the great dried-up salt basin marking the pre-historic Lop sea, then up a wide desert valley by the foot of the southernmost Kuruk-tāgh range, and finally through the terminal basin, and along the lowermost course, of the Su-lo-ho river.³⁴ Its careful survey proved of very considerable geographical interest.

Marco Polo's route through Lop desert.

From this terminal basin onwards I traced important, and, owing to the extremely arid climate, in many parts remarkably well-preserved, remains of an ancient fortified border, a true *Limes*, which the Chinese Emperor Wu-ti, towards the end of the 2nd century B.C., had constructed for the protection of the earliest line of China's expansion into Central Asia. The exploration of this ancient *Limes* which was subsequently traced for a total distance of over 160 miles west of An-hsi, formed a fascinating and fruitful task for more than two months after my arrival at Tun-huang. The ground, almost all desert, over which the wall with its watch-towers and military posts had been built, was as interesting from a geographical point of view as the ruins in their archæological and historical aspect. Hence all the more care was bestowed upon an exact topographical survey of it.

Discovery of ancient Chinese *Limes*.

The work was started on the *Limes* portion extending to the north-east of the Tun-huang oasis³⁵ and subsequently after a visit to the outlying small oasis of Nan-hu, the ancient 'Yang barrier', continued along the whole length of the *Limes* westwards. This was found to run parallel to the Su-lo-ho bed from its outlet at the western end of the Khara-nōr lake and to extend to the southern extremity of the great marsh basin where the river terminates, fully a degree of

Explorations along ancient border line.

³¹ See *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 376-411; *Serindia*, Chap. XI. sec. i-xi.

³² See Sheets Nos. 29. B, C. 4.; 30. A. 1; *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 415 sqq.

³³ See Sheet No. 30. A. 1, 2; *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 424 sqq.

³⁴ See Sheets Nos. 30. B-C, 2, D. 1; 33. A-C. 1; 32.

D. 4; 35. A-D. 4; 38. A-B. 4. For a descriptive account of the route, cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 503 sqq.; ii. pp. 1 sqq. For an analysis of the geographical features met along it, see *Serindia*, Chap. XIV. sec. i, iv.

³⁵ See Sheet No. 38. C. 4; *Serindia*, Chap. XV. sec. ii-v; *Desert Cathay*, ii. pp. 44 sqq.