

greatest of mediaeval travellers, Marco Polo. I have already in *Ancient Khotan* discussed the portion of his itinerary which deals with the journey across the Pāmīrs to 'the kingdom of Cascar' or Kāshgar,²⁷ and it only remains here to note briefly what he tells us of the route by which he approached them from Badakhshān.²⁸ 'In leaving Badashan you ride twelve days between east and north-east, ascending a river that runs through land belonging to a brother of the Prince of Badashan, and containing a good many towns and villages and scattered habitations. The people are Mahommetans, and valiant in war. At the end of those twelve days you come to a province of no great size, extending, indeed no more than three days' journey in any direction, and this is called VOKHAN. The people worship Mahommet, and they have a peculiar language. They are gallant soldiers, and they have a chief whom they call NONE, which is as much as to say *Count*, and they are liegemen of the Prince of Badashan.'

Sir Henry Yule was certainly right in assuming that 'the river along which Marco travels from Badakhshan is no doubt the upper stream of the Oxus, known locally as the Panja. . . . It is true that the river is reached from Badakhshan proper by ascending another river (the Vardoj) and crossing the Pass of Ishkāshm, but in the brief style of our narrative we must expect such condensation.'²⁹ Marco's great commentator was guided by equally true judgement when he recognized in the indications of this passage the same system of government that prevailed in the Oxus valleys until modern times. Under it most of the hill tracts dependent on Badakhshān, including Ishkāshim and Wakhān, were ruled not direct by the Mīr, but by relations of his or hereditary chiefs who held their districts on a feudal tenure. The twelve days' journey which Marco records between Badashan and 'Vokhan' are, I think, easily accounted for if it is assumed that the distance from capital to capital is meant; for twelve marches are still allowed for the distance from Bahārak, the old Badakhshān capital on the Vardōj, to Kila Panja.

That Kila Panja was in Marco's days, as at present, the chief place of Wakhān is indicated also by his narrative of the next stage of his journey. 'And when you leave this little country, and ride three days north-east, always among mountains, you get to such a height that 'tis said to be the highest place in the world! And when you have got to this height you find a great lake between two mountains, and out of it a fine river running through a plain. . . . The plain is called PAMIER.' The bearing and descriptive details here given point clearly to the plain of the Great Pāmīr and Victoria Lake, its characteristic feature. About sixty-two miles are reckoned from Langar-kisht, the last village on the northern branch of the Āb-i-Panja and some six miles above Kila Panja, to Mazār-tapa where the plain of the Great Pāmīr may be said to begin, and this distance agrees remarkably well with the three marches mentioned by Marco.

His description of Wakhān as 'a province of no great size, extending indeed no more than three days' journey in any direction' suggests that a portion of the valley must then have formed part of the chiefship of Ishkāshim or Zebak over which we may suppose 'the brother of the Prince of Badashan' to have ruled. Such fluctuations in the extent of Wakhān territory are remembered also in modern times. Thus Colonel Trotter who visited Wakhān with a section of the Yārkand Mission in 1874, distinctly notes that 'Wakhān formerly contained three "Sads" or hundreds, i. e. districts, containing a hundred houses each' (viz. Sad-i-Sar-hadd, Sad Sipanj, Sad Khandūt).³⁰ To these Sad Ishtragh, the tract extending from Dīgargand to Ishkāshim, is declared to have been added in recent times, having formerly been an independent principality. It only remains to note that Marco was right, too, in his reference to the peculiar language of Wakhān; for Wakhī—which is spoken not only by the people of Wakhān but also by the numerous Wakhī colonists spread

Marco
Polo's route
across
Pāmīrs.

Subdivi-
sions of
Wakhān.

²⁷ See *Ancient Khotan*, i. pp. 41 sq.

²⁸ Cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 170 sq.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁰ See *Yarkand Mission Report*, p. 276.