

of Chü-mo is a clear indication that the ground traversed by the route between Charchan and the Endere Site had still remained without permanent habitations after the establishment of Chinese control, but, as now, offered water in wells dug at regular halting stages. In the absence of direct evidence, such as distance estimates would supply, conjectural identifications of the stages recorded in the T'ang itineraries would serve no useful purpose. So much, however, is clear that by the *Wu-chê* River 勿遮水 either the Kara-muran or Mölcha River must be meant, the beds of which, dry except during the summer floods, are passed near the halting-places of Chingelik and Shūdan-öghil respectively (see Map No. 43).

Marco
Polo's
description
of route.

Marco Polo's description of this route is somewhat fuller than Hsüan-tsang's, and brings out more clearly the distinctive features of its main stages.⁵ In his account of the 'Province of Charchan', to which we shall have to return presently, he tells us: 'The whole of the Province is sandy, and so is the road all the way from Pein, and much of the water that you find is bitter and bad. However, at some places you do find fresh and sweet water. When an army passes through the land, the people escape with their wives, children, and cattle a distance of two or three days' journey into the sandy waste; and knowing the spots where water is to be had, they are able to live there, and to keep their cattle alive, whilst it is impossible to discover them; for the wind immediately blows the sand over their track.'

Desert route
between
Niya and
Charchan.

It is easy to recognize here a faithful recollection of the route as it still presents itself to the traveller between the oases of Niya and Charchan.⁶ Whereas fresh water is obtainable on the Yār-tungaz and Endere Rivers and at the usual halting-places as far as the Yār-tungaz, the water at the wells beyond is throughout brackish, and at some points so salt as to be scarcely fit for drinking. This, coupled with the great summer heat, the mosquitoes then bred in the flood-beds, and the serious risks arising from 'Burāns' or sand-storms, practically closes the direct route through the desert from May till September. It is equally certain that at that season the terminal forest-belts of the rivers and the extensive areas of sandy scrub and jungle, which spread out northward near the lakes of Bileklik and Sizütke and for two marches east of the Endere River, would provide safe places of refuge for the flocks and the families of the shepherds who subsist on these dreary pastures.

Oasis of
Charchan.

Though the combined claims of practical travel arrangements and archaeological remains did not suffice to detain me at Charchan for more than two busy days, November 21 and 22, yet there was much to interest me in this small and flourishing oasis both from the geographical and from the antiquarian point of view. Already on the march I had gathered information which showed that Charchan was no longer the wretched collection of hovels such as it was described some thirty years earlier, but a steadily growing oasis.⁷ From a dreaded place of exile, used by the Chinese in pre-rebellion days as a settlement for malefactors from Khotan, it had gradually developed into a lively oasis quite as large as, if not larger than, Niya. Referring for details of local observations to my personal narrative,⁸ I may content myself here with a rapid survey of the factors which have had a manifest bearing on the history of the place.

Abundant
water-
supply in
Charchan R.

Brief as my stay at Charchan was, it amply sufficed to impress me with the advantages which physical conditions here offer for the growth of a large and important settlement. Chief among them is the abundant water-supply assured by the Charchan River. This drains a series of high snowy ranges to the south beyond the outermost chain of the K'un-lun, and brings down thence so

⁵ Cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. p. 194.

⁶ Cf. for the route between Niya and Endere as seen by me in 1901, *Ruins of Khotan*, pp. 423 sqq.; *Ancient Khotan*, i. pp. 443 sq.

⁷ Cf. Prejevalsky, *From Kulja to Lob-nor*, p. 76, note 2; Forsyth, *Yarkand Mission Report*, p. 34.

⁸ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 321 sqq.