

At all three, earlier settlements are attested by ruins. But closer examination shows that neither Vāsh-shahri nor Mīrān can lay claim to represent the Venetian's 'town of Lop'. His account states that travellers proposing to cross the desert used to halt here for a week 'to refresh themselves and their cattle'. 'On quitting this city they enter the Desert.' Now from what has been said above of the relative importance of the settlements actually extant at Vāsh-shahri and Charkhlik, and of the respective size of the rivers upon which their existence depends, it follows that Charkhlik, with its far more ample supply of water and much greater area of cultivation, could not possibly have been an abandoned waste at a period when Vāsh-shahri was still an oasis, as Marco's reference implies. The route from Charchan to Sha-chou or Tun-huang must always have passed through Charkhlik, and if the 'town of Lop' were to be placed at Vāsh-shahri, it would be impossible to explain why Marco Polo should have described it as the last halting-place of the caravans starting for the month's desert journey to Sha-chou.

Desert route beyond 'town of Lop'.

At first sight his description would seem to fit Mīrān far better; for it lies two marches beyond Charkhlik on the direct route towards Tun-huang and on the edge of absolutely bare gravel desert.<sup>7</sup> But here again identification with Marco's 'town of Lop' is precluded by the result of my excavations.<sup>8</sup> These have brought to light conclusive archaeological evidence showing that the ruins of Mīrān were abandoned centuries before the Mongol period. Even if we assume that some modest cultivation survived by the side of the Jahān-sai River, as it now exists at a distance from the ancient site, this could not have sufficed for a town, nor furnished the resources which caravans preparing there for a long desert journey would have regularly needed.

Mīrān abandoned before Marco Polo.

Thus we are forced to conclude that the place meant by Marco Polo's 'town of Lop' must be located at the Charkhlik oasis. With this conclusion the character and present appearance of the ruined circumvallation is in agreement.<sup>9</sup> How long after Ser Marco's passage the 'town' and oasis were abandoned we do not know. It is very unlikely that they retained their importance after the middle of the fourteenth century, when, with the downfall of the Mongol dynasty, China reverted to the old policy of seclusion, and free intercourse and trade with Central Asia ceased. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, as we know from a statement of Shāh Rukh's embassy, the southern route through the desert was unfrequented.<sup>10</sup>

Charkhlik since Marco Polo's passage.

About the same period Lop is mentioned among the waste places where Vais Khān, a Moghul chief, was believed to have hunted wild camels.<sup>11</sup> Mīrzā Haidar, who records this about the middle of the sixteenth century, knew Lob merely as the name of a ruined town situated somewhere in the south-eastern part of the Tārīm Basin. 'To the east and south of Kashghar and Khotan are deserts, which consist of nothing but heaps of shifting sands, impenetrable jungles, waste lands, and salt-deserts. In ancient times there were large towns in these [wastes], and the names of two of

Mīrzā Haidar's mention of Lop.

<sup>7</sup> See below, p. 346.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Henry Yule was guided by a just topographical sense when he conjectured (in a note contributed to Prejevalsky, *From Kulja to Lob-nor*, p. 77, note 4) that Marco Polo's city of Lop might be located at what Prejevalsky briefly mentions as the 'traces of a third very large city near Lob-nor, at a place called merely *Kunia-shari*, i.e. old town'. Prejevalsky's map shows that the Mīrān ruins are meant, and on the strength of Sir Henry Yule's conjecture our maps have since continued to show them as 'Ruins of old Lob'. It was reserved for the spade to prove that the main ruins of Mīrān must have been deserted for many centuries before Marco Polo's caravan passed them.

<sup>9</sup> That Marco Polo's town of Lop corresponds to the

present Charkhlik was first recognized by M. Grenard, who, though he did not visit the ground himself, has correctly emphasized the importance of Charkhlik as the only possible site for a larger settlement at the crossways of several great routes; cf. *Mission Dutreuil de Rhins*, iii. pp. 149 sq. There is much justice, too, in the remark that he adds: 'Il me paraît absolument certain que toutes ces anciennes villes entre Khotan et le Lob nor étaient de pauvres bourgades qui n'ont acquis quelque célébrité que parce qu'elles étaient pour les voyageurs des étapes obligées, clairsemées dans l'étendue déserte.'

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Yule, *Cathay*, i. p. cxxi; also cxxxiv; and below, chap. xiv, sec. iii.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Elias and Ross, *Tārīkh-i-Rashīdī*, p. 67.