

Ilek, and that a route which required guarding must have passed along it. The importance of this fact must be emphasized in view of the much-discussed theory, first set forth by Dr. Hedin, which assumes that the whole of the Tārīm drainage passed at that period through the Kuruk-daryā beds into an earlier Lop-nōr lying due south of the Lou-lan Site, and to which we have repeatedly had to refer above.⁷ It would be impossible to reconcile with this theory the detailed account which Li Tao-yüan's commentary gives us of the Tārīm's junction with the Charchan River and its subsequent course eastwards into the lake north of *Yü-ni*,⁸ and the definite chronological evidence afforded by the ruined fort of Merdek-tim saves us from making the attempt.

Evidence for desiccation.

It proves that while the Lou-lan Site was still occupied and the Kuruk-daryā still 'in being', a branch of the Tārīm ran southwards and met the Charchan River, as it does at the present time, before passing into that portion of the ancient Lop lake-bed which now holds the Kara-koshun marshes north of the Mīrān tract. Where the point of junction then lay, what relative volumes of water this southern branch of the Tārīm and the Kuruk-daryā then carried, and similar questions, we cannot hope ever to be able to answer, considering the scantiness of our records and archaeological data as well as the physical conditions of a flat, deltaic region where water, wind, and sand are ever at work effacing surface evidence. One inference, however, seems to me necessary: if at the period preceding the abandonment of the Lou-lan Site, to which Li Tao-yüan's information undoubtedly goes back, the drainage of the Tārīm Basin could fill both the Kuruk-daryā and a southern river branch, whereas at present it certainly would not suffice for both, we can scarcely go wrong in assuming that the intervening period of roughly fifteen centuries must have seen a diminution of the total water-supply, i.e. desiccation, whatever its cause and its progress.

Move down the Tārīm River.

On January 7 I left Merdek-tim in order to move south again by the Tārīm towards Charkhlik and Mīrān. Anxious as I was to start excavations at the latter place in full earnest, I could not forgo the chance of paying a visit *en route* to the ruined site which Captain Roborovsky's survey, as embodied in the Asiatic Trans-frontier Map of the Russian Topographical Department,⁹ marked under the name of 'Ketec-sher', i.e. *Kötek-shahri*, near the terminal course of the Charchan-daryā.¹⁰ The journey of six days which brought me to it has been described in my personal narrative.¹¹ There is the less need here for details regarding it because its first portion lay along a route which keeps close to the main course of the Tārīm, and is well known as it connects Charkhlik with Tikkenlik, Korla, and the other oases northward. The luxuriant growth of wild poplars, forming natural avenues, which we passed by the main bed of the river as far as Shirghechapkan, seemed like a vision of that distant age when the lines of fallen dead Toghraks we had so often crossed still flourished by the branches of the Kuruk-daryā.

Hamlet of Lop.

Doubly striking in contrast with it was the bareness of the steppe, covered with scanty reeds and tamarisks, over which the road led to the desolate station of Lop. Near it, in a network of lagoons and marshes, the present terminal course of the Charchan River loses itself, to effect its junction with the waters of the Tārīm. Thus surrounded, the fishermen's hamlet known as *Lop* seemed fit to represent all the typical features of this dreary Lop region. As far as I could gather, the restricted use of the ancient local name *Lop* for this particular place is not of recent date. Perhaps it may in some way be connected with the fact that this otherwise insignificant locality is

⁷ See above, pp. 359, 361 sq.

⁸ Cf. above, pp. 326 sq.

⁹ See Sheet XXI, scale 40 versts to 1 inch.

¹⁰ The term *Kötek-shahri*, literally meaning 'the town of dead trees', is widely applied in the Tārīm Basin to sites in and around the great drift-sand desert where remains, real or

imaginary, of ancient settlements exist. In the form [*Shahr-i-Katak*] it is found already in the *Tārīkh-i-Rashīdī*; see above, p. 320, note 12.

¹¹ See *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 427 sqq.; also Map No. 57 for the route followed.