

Agricultural colony placed at Tun-huang or Nan-hu.

We are thus forcibly led to conclude, as the only acceptable explanation of that record, that the new agricultural colony prescribed by the imperial edict must have either been created by an extension of the cultivated area of the main Tun-huang oasis or else established at what is now the small oasis of Nan-hu. It is at least certain that only in these two areas could fresh land be brought under cultivation yielding the produce needed by the two thousand odd military settlers who were to guard the newly advanced Limes. We have no means of definitely deciding at which of the two oases the new 'agricultural colony' was actually settled. But the close connexion which historical texts attest between the Yang barrier placed at Nan-hu and that of the Jade Gate, as well as the fact that Nan-hu was certainly a much nearer base of supply for the Jade Gate and the westernmost section of the Limes than Tun-huang, points to the probability of the former locality being intended. We have seen that the water-supply available for the Nan-hu oasis is likely to have been once considerably greater than it now is.⁷ In any case there is the significant fact that the distance from the ancient granary of the Limes, T. XVIII,⁸ to the northernmost point of Nan-hu cultivation, as it existed in recent times, is only about half of that to the nearest point of the Tun-huang oasis.

Soldier colonies at some distance from wall.

The main conclusion which results from our examination of the imperial decree is important in several ways. The fact that the defence of the Limes beyond Tun-huang was provided for by a colony of soldier cultivators settled on land at some distance from the line of the wall helps, as we shall see further on, to explain certain statements in the documents which we might otherwise have found difficult to reconcile with the archaeological indications furnished by the actual remains of the Limes. It makes it in particular much easier for us to understand how it was possible to maintain a permanent organization during more than two centuries for the watching and, whenever needed, the active defence of a border line which was extended for so considerable a distance through absolute desert bare of all resources. The small pickets which in ordinary times kept watch and guard at the towers on the Limes, and which alone the much-confined quarters actually traceable could possibly have accommodated, would in times of danger be strengthened and supported by the larger bodies of military colonists from which they had been detached, as it were, on outpost duty.

Limitations of produce in Su-lo Ho basin.

The evidence concerning details of the organization here assumed that is obtainable from other records of the Limes will best be discussed later on. Here it will suffice if I draw attention to two important facts which at the outset hold out strong support for the general view just set forth. In the first place, we must keep in mind what has been explained in a previous chapter about the physical conditions of the Su-lo Ho basin and the strict limitation of its resources,⁹ and remember that the same applies also in the main to the narrow belt of cultivable tracts eastwards along the foot of the Nan-shan. The difficulties thus caused for the maintenance of troops must have made themselves felt quite as much in ancient as they certainly have in modern times.¹⁰ No system could have been better adapted to overcome them than one combining the provision of a permanent local force for the Limes with the production of the food supplies which it needed. It is obvious that such a system was workable only on a basis which would allow the bulk of the soldier colonists to remain near their lands except in times of emergency, while the actual guard and signal service along the desert Limes were carried on by small detachments in turn. This convenient distribution of the

⁷ Cf. above, pp. 614 sq., 627 sq.

⁸ See above, pp. 714 sq.

⁹ Cf. above, pp. 579 sqq.

¹⁰ When Tso Tsung-t'ang's and Liu Chin-tang's forces after 1873 slowly made their way through Western Kan-su for the reconquest of the 'New Dominion', the chief obstacle to their advance was the want of sufficient supplies from the oases along the great route skirting the north foot of the

Nan-shan, where the Tungan inroads had greatly reduced or practically exterminated the population. The story, often repeated, that the reconquering Chinese army had to halt for a year at each of the chief stages in order to sow and reap the corn which it needed for its further advance specifically applies to its progress along what once was the north-west extension of the 'Great Wall'.