

CARAVAN TRAILS BETWEEN EUROPE AND ASIA

K. A. BAIRD

ABOUT a century after Caesar visited Britain, a Chinese merchant sold some silk of fine, gauze-like quality to the leader of a great caravan, who traded with the Far West. Wearily through the Gobi desert, and oases south of the terrible Tallaman desert, the caravan travelled to Khotan, a city depending for existence on a glacier-fed river, and irrigation ditches connected therewith. There the silk was bought by a local merchant, who carried it through Yarkand and Kashgar to the Stone Tower (now Sarikol), where it again changed hands. A Damascus merchant transported it through the passes to the Kashmir valley, then his caravan went westward through Khyber pass, skirted Afghanistan and the Caspian Sea, paused to rest in Tehran and Bagdad, and divided just before reaching Jerusalem. Part went south towards Petra, en route to Egypt. But the silk went to a city on the shore of the Mediterranean. Here, some three years after it left the producer in China, it was purchased by a Roman officer, waiting as St. Paul did in the same decade, for ship to Rome.

In Rome the silk became a garment for the officer's lady. So diaphanous was it that Pliny after describing its origin and travels concludes: "So have the ends of the earth to be traversed, and all that a Roman dame may exhibit her charms in transparent gauze."

Early Contacts Between Europe and Asia.

Western civilization was shut off from that developed in Asia by natural barriers. North of the Caspian were great rivers, mountains, swamps, and a bitter winter. There were high mountain ranges between Black and Caspian Seas, as well as across the northern half of Afghanistan, south through Baluchistan to the Arabian Sea, and eastward across the north of India. To reach China from India requires a very long sea journey, or else to pass the highest mountain ranges in the world, on into and through the great Taklaman desert of Chinese Turkestan, one of the lowest depressions in the interior of any continent.

In spite of driest deserts and highest mountains, however, something in the heart of man has maintained more or less traffic between Europe and Asia since very early times. The early home of the Chinese may have been in Turkestan or around the Caspian Sea. In early centuries whole tribes travelled through the high passes, driven to seek new homes by stronger tribes, or reports of more fertile land, or mere wanderlust. Such events have occurred, we know, in historic times. Sometimes the trade routes have been interrupted for decades by war and banditry.

Early Chinese histories hint at trade with Syria from earliest times. Long before Alexander the Great, Indian wares came over the pass of the Hindu Kush, through Bactria, past the Black Sea, into the Greek colonies, and so to Europe. One reason for Alexander's Indian campaign was his wish to make these rich territories more accessible to the West. Going through the Khaibar pass, he conquered several kingdoms along the Indus, went down river to its mouth, and found a sea route back along the coast. Following this, many secondary centres of Grecian civilization and culture developed as far east as India itself. For example, mention is made of a town on the caravan route to Central Asia, in the middle of forest country, where Hellenic farmers and trappers lived. Greek influence spread beyond the Indo-Bactrian Empire, even into what is now Chinese Turkestan. The huge gold coins of King Eucratides are described by Chinese records of the first century, B.C. In 101, B.C., a Chinese general, Li Kuang Li, occupied the Bactrian province of Ferghana. The Chinese imported noble Turkoman blood-horses from his district.

Chang K'ien, an envoy of Wu Ti, started in 139 B.C. with one hundred followers to go to the Indo-Scythians, but was captured by the Hiung-Nu (known later to Europe as Huns) and detained for many years. Finally escaping, he persisted in going forward with his emperor's mission. Returning *via* Khotan and Lobnor, he was again captured by the Hiung-Nu, again escaped, and returned to China in 126, with only one of his original followers, but with a Turkish wife and much knowledge of foreign countries. He introduced the grape, pomegranate, and lucerne to China, first mentioned Buddhism in India, and noticed that products of Yu Nan and Szech'wan were reaching Syria through India and Afghanistan. A later mission by the same traveller helped to develop regular intercourse between China and Central Asia by 115, B.C.

In those times and long afterward the Chinese called the Roman Empire Ta T'sin or Great China, they themselves being the T'sin. The Romans knew China as the land of the Seres. The people on the coasts of further Asia reached by navigators were known, however, as Sinae. Only late in the Christian era were Seres and Sinae proved to be one and the same. For example, Ptolemy distinguished between the two.

Chinese art, which stood still since the second millennium B. C., had a sudden renaissance due to Graeco-Bactrian influences which went *via* Kashgar, Yarkand, and Khotan.

The Caravan Trails During Early Christian Centuries.

In seeking to find a southern route to the West which would avoid the Hiung Nu country, the Chinese captured Tong King and made it the terminus of a sea route. From the second to the sixth centuries, however, the Turkestan route was preferred, and there was much coming and going between China and India, as shown by the following scraps of history:—

Buddhism was introduced into China early in the Christian era.

As late as 713 the King of Kashmir sent tribute to the King of China and wanted aid against Thibetan raiders.

In 166 A.D. an embassy from An Tun, King of Ta T'sin, came to China. This was probably from Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, but it probably came by sea.

Constantinople is described by Chinese writers, corresponding to descriptions of the times from western sources, and they show knowledge of the obscure fact that in A.D. 671-678 the Mohammedans besieged Constantinople but failed to take it, agreeing finally to pay the Byzantines a yearly tribute of gold and silk.

Armenians knew about China from early times, and had silk garments in common use. Moses of Chorene (about 440 A.D.) mentions several bodies of foreign settlers, including Chinese, being placed in Kurdish Armenia for the defence of the country. Several great Armenian families claim Chinese descent—one from a son of the King of China, who had fled to Persia and then to Armenia. On the other hand, Suren, a brother of St. Gregory of Armenia, took refuge in China.

In 620 Simocattes drew an able sketch of China, and spoke enthusiastically of Chinese law.

King Alfred of England sent an embassy to Syrian Christians of India.

The alphabets of Manchu Uigurians and Mongols are both derived from Syrian script.

Embassies went from Persia to the kingdom of Wei in 461 and in 518.

In 642 the Persian king was driven by Saracens into Turkestan. His son was a petty ruler there, subordinate to the Chinese Emperor, and when hard pressed by Saracens in 673 took refuge in the latter's court, as did his son in 707. Embassies from districts of Persia still unconquered by the Arabs were frequent in China between 713 and 755. One Persian ruler's son attained high military rank in China, and a Chinese priest, writing in 748, mentions a large Persian village in the island of Hainan.

Chinese junks coasted as far as the Euphrates during the seventh and eighth centuries, and Arabs had a factory in Canton, but they also carried their conquests into Turkestan, and knew the Seres and Sinae to do the same. Arab troops, who helped the Chinese Emperor to put down a rebellion, later sacked Loyang, Honan, in 757, travelled to Canton which they pillaged and burned in 758. Then they fled *in the Arab ships which were in port*.

About 878 Hang Chau was captured by a rebel army and the number of foreigners (Musulman, Jew, Christian, etc.) who perished was reported at 120,000.

It is interesting to note that after nearly 1300 years official relations between Persia and China were resumed in 1934.

The Mongol Dynasty and the Polos.

During the years 1206 to 1264 Mongol tribes conquered North China. In the latter year Kublai Khan moved his capital from Karakorum to Peking, gaining increased contact with the superior civilization of the Chinese. Conquering the Sung Dynasty in the South, he captured Hangchow by 1276, and established himself as first member of the Yuan Dynasty. During his time Marco Polo travelled throughout the Empire (1275-1292). The great days of caravan travel ceased when in 1368 the Mongols were overcome, and the native Ming Dynasty closed China to western immigration.

But during the days of Mongol rule Alans and Kipchak soldiers fought in Tong King, Chinese engineers were on the banks of the Tigris, Chinese astronomers, physicians, and theologians could be consulted at Tabriz, Mongol missions went as far as Madagascar, and a German engineer was associated with the Polos in construction of mechanical artillery for the Great Khan. It is a loss to literature and history, as to lovers of adventure stories, that Master Marco Polo did not keep a diary all his life with some of the meticulous care of the estimable Pepys, instead of writing merely a short book of memoirs.

His uncle and his father were delayed in Bactria by wars of the Mongols, so spent their time learning the Mongol language. Later they were persuaded by a Mongol prince to go with him

to the court of Cublai Can, which they did, along with certain other Christians of Venice. The Great Can was much impressed with their account of countries of the West and of Christianity. He sent one of his barons back with them to ask the Pope for 100 wise men to introduce Christianity into China, it being superior to the Tartar Gods. The baron fell sick, and could not go on with them. They were three years reaching Armenia. In 1269 they came to Acre, and heard Pope Clement IV was dead. They had left Europe nineteen years before.

A year or two later, with twenty-year old Marco, letters from Pope Gregory, two preaching friars, and presents for the Khan, they started for China. The friars deserted, but the traders travelled on, reaching China in about three and a half years. How young Marco's gift with languages and his ability to tell stories of customs, people, and scenery of lands through which he travelled won him high place and honor with the Khan during twenty six years residence and travel throughout China; how the three Polos attempted the land route to India, escorting a Mongol bride for an Indian king, but being hindered by wars returned after three years; how they later travelled by sea, passing through many perils, finding the king was dead but delivering the young woman to his son; how they went on to Persia, heard Kublai Khan was dead, so travelled home to Venice, laden with riches; these all constitute a story, details of which cannot be told here, but which you can read for yourself in a good translation of Marco's own book, written while he was a prisoner in Genoa.

This book shows he was a keen observer. He mentions such diversified things as the laxative properties of certain saline waters in the Persian desert, the great prosperity of the Khotan district, and existence of Nestorian Christians in Kashgar and Samarkand. Of the latter place he says, "Many have a great Weene or Bunch in the throat by reason of the waters which they drink" (doubtless goitre). His description of Cambalu can be recognized as the Peking of to-day, he tells how old Kublai Khan seems to have used paper (*fiat*) money quite successfully throughout his entire realm, and notes that the best carpenters were Nestorian Christians.

Christians on the Caravan Trails.

Christianity undoubtedly made progress eastward as well as westward, during the early centuries A.D., and after Nestorius was banished because of his theology, in 431, his opinions spread

over Persia, even long after his death. This Persian Church was strongly missionary in the 7th and 8th centuries, and established Metropolitan Sees as far away as China. The Arab, Abu Said, mentions a large foreign population in Khanfu in 878, including Christians. The ordinary Westerner has but little conception of the extent to which Nestorian Christianity penetrated China during the early centuries, and again in the time of the Mongols.

A monument dug up in 1625 at Sianfu, the old capital of China, commemorated introduction and propagation of Christianity. It was erected in 781, when there were sixty-seven Nestorian priests there. In 845 the emperor, Wu Tsung, ordered Buddhist and Christian priests to return to temporal occupations. There were said to be 3,000 Christian priests at that time, and it was probably then that the monument was buried.

New waves of missionary effort and of conversion occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Many Turkish and Mongolian tribes were Christianized, and this may account for the persistent stories of Prester John,—an eastern Christian potentate.

In 1247, envoys of the pope reached Khan Kuyuk, grandson of Chingis Khan and predecessor of Kublai Khan (the Great!). This man was the son of a Nestorian Christian woman, and many practising Christians were in his court. In 1248, Louis IX of France, while on a crusade, received in Cyprus ambassadors from a Mongol prince, offering alliance against the Mohammedans and saying himself and the Great Khan Kuyuk had become Christians. Louis sent Dominicans *via* the Persia and the usual caravan route. They found Kuyuk had died. In 1253, other ambassadors went *via* the steppes between the Don and Dneiper to the court of Mangu, brother and predecessor of Kublai, where they found many Nestorian priests who had been given precedence over the Mohammedans. In 1289 a Franciscan monk started for Peking, arriving in 1292. He was appointed Archbishop of Peking in 1297. During that era China enjoyed full religious liberty.

While Marco Polo travelled in China, a Christian native of Peking was travelling in Europe. Rabban Sauma and Rabban Mark went west to worship at the tombs of martyrs and patriarchs and at Jerusalem. Much wearied by their journey across the Taklamakan desert, they stayed six months in Khotan to recuperate before proceeding to Kashgar, and on along the caravan route towards the Caspian Sea, finally reaching Bagdad and the

Nestorian Patriarch. That was about 1280. Some years after, Mark became Pope Jabalah III, because he knew the manners and customs of the Mongols who were then in power,—A Chinese Nestorian Pope or Patriarch, in the church of Mar Koka, near Bagdad! Sauma was sent by the ruler of Persia to Europe. The Pope at Rome was dead, but he visited the Kings of France and England.

Friar Odoric went to China by sea in 1316, returning by the land route in 1330. He described cormorants fishing exactly as the writer has seen it done in Honan. His description of the Coal Hill and Pei Hai in Peiping also sounds very familiar, though the friar was there almost exactly 600 years before the present writer. He describes the country of Prester John, fifty days west from Cathay, whose ruler always married a daughter of the Great Khan. He also visited Thibet, describing tents of black felt, and the black and white walls of Lhasa.

John of Monte Corvina went to Khahbaliq in 1294, travelling by ship, and either meeting Marco Polo in India or passing him at sea. He converted King George, of Prester John's lineage, from Nestorianism to Roman Catholicism, and spent forty years trying to reunite Nestorians and Roman Catholics. He sought for other missionaries to join him, saying the way was open across Central Asia and they should reach China in five or six months. Only three reached him. He died in 1329 as Archbishop of China, when over eighty, mourned by Christians and pagans alike. His mission, as well as the Nestorian Church, perished when the Mongol dynasty fell.

The instruments now at the old observatory in Peiping were cast with the help of Father Verbiest of the Jesuit mission founded in 1691, as were also some of the Emperor's cannon. Religious dissensions and political influence led to suppression of this mission.

Sand Buried Towns On the Caravan Trails.

Interesting discoveries have been made in Turkestan in the last part of last century and early in this one. The chief explorers have been Sven Hedin, and Sir M. Aurel Stein.

Hedin found at Yarkand the same superstition which Marco Polo mentioned; viz., that travellers in the great desert hear voices calling them to death in the sands. He made a 200 mile journey across the desert, was misled by a guide, nearly perished, lost several camels and at least one member of his caravan. He found the town of Niya, which Marco Polo did not. It was

mentioned by a Chinese writer about 400, A.D., who also described an ancient kingdom of Tu Ho Lo which, *a long time before*, had become desert and its towns ruins. This was probably Taklaman—a buried town, found by Hedin, over two miles in diameter, built of poplar wood, and washed by the Keriya Daria. Here he found an ancient medal, badge of some Roman Catholic monastic order, a gold angel, a copper cross, and Byzantine gold coins. Preserved in the dry sand were woods, apricot trees, gardens, millstones six feet in diameter, the axle of a spinning wheel, earthenware, a wooden helix, etc. He found the forest shepherds on the Keriya Daria, who pray to Moses but do not know the days of the month or week. The Keriya is one of the glacial rivers which finally die away into the sands of the desert. Hedin thinks wild camels of the desert to be descendants of wanderers from herds of dwellers in the ancient cities. He says; "If I may judge from the collection of terra cotta camels which I discovered at Borasan, and which are probably 2,000 years old, the camel was even then regarded as the chief domestic animal of the country, and what is more reasonable than that the buried towns of the Taklaman Desert maintained communication with China and India by means of them."

Hedin found old mile posts and two forts in the desert on a road from Korla, which ended in desert, but once doubtless went on to Lop-nor before the lake dried up in its old bed. The Lop-nor (lake) is very interesting in that it had changed, a few years before Hedin was there, to a new location. The old lake had been salt,—the new was fresh water! The gigantic river system which drains the vast central basin of the interior of Asia (one has a volume of 5330 cu. ft. per sec and another of 2490) is not wet enough to maintain a permanent lake at the end. The explorer journeyed down the Tarim river several months in a rebuilt ferry boat, to the amazement of the natives. He found old Lopmen still preserve the tradition that the great highway to Peking ran through their country to Sa Chow:

In writing of the forest belt along the Tarim River Sven Hedin says: "The Lailik boatmen had never seen any forest like it, its autumnal splendors drew from them repeated exclamations of astonishment and delight. They called it 'The orchard beside the canal', the general name for irrigated parks and gardens of East Turkestan oases.

"Solemnly and in deep and seried phalanx stood the poplars, as they have stood for hundreds of years, guarding the borders

of the river, and mirroring their crowns of autumnal gold in the life-giving stream.

"... Their one and only object in existence seemed to be to pay homage to the wonderful river, which not only brought the life-sustaining moisture to their roots, but saves the whole of East Turkestan from becoming one of the most desolate and barren regions on the face of the earth.

"Thus we glided on through the heart of Central Asia, beside one of the greatest deserts of the earth, as though we were floating down the avenue of a park, a canopy of green leaves above our heads and a mantle of refreshing shade wrapped about our shoulders—Truly a wonderful journey!"

In 1897 M. Aurel Stein, a member of the British services in India, explored some of the sand buried ruins of Chinese Turkestan in considerable detail. He wrote, "The remarkable diversity of the cultural influences which met and mingled at Khotan during the third century, A.D., is forcibly brought home to us by the records from a remote Central Asian settlement, inscribed on wooden tablets in an Indian language, written and issued by officials with strangely un-Indian titles, whose seals carry us to a classical world far away in the West."

This explorer found many dried up rivers, which had once been the water supplies of considerable towns. He found many areas covered with pottery, Chinese coins up to the Tang dynasty, jade, etc. Digging for old gold became a regular industry on the part of certain natives there about 1870. The chief structural remains he found were in the town of Dandan-Uioiq. While he was encamped there, dead trees of ancient orchards supplied his caravan with fuel. The buildings were not large, but very ancient. They were of hard plaster on a framework of wood and reeds. There were many temples and figures of Buddha, with painted tablets evidently in original positions where deposited at the foot of the sacred images. There were even brooms of grass nearby, showing how the attendants had tried to keep down the dust and sand which had finally preserved images and brooms alike. There were paintings, some of verve and grace. Stein mentions one in particular of a nude woman bathing, which had "an elaborate vine leaf where post-classical convention would place its fig leaf." Many documents were found, some dated between 781 and 787, both personal and official. This was about the time of abandonment of the town, which like that of Li-tsa and others was due to the difficulty of maintaining effective irrigation. It is a question whether this was due to neglect

following political troubles and depopulation, or to a change in the state of the rivers.

One of the things found by Stein was an old ice storehouse, with logs and poplar leaves to keep the ice insulated from the ground, just as is done in some places nearby today. This was in a particularly ancient city on the Niya River. In another house he found pieces of felt and colored cloth (cotton), pieces of a delicately worked rug, small pieces of carved ivory, a bow of tamarisk wood still crisp and capable of use, carefully turned shafts of poplar wood, broken but over six feet long (spear shafts), a piece of a shield of willow, three feet by six feet, wooden spindles, a stout walking stick of apple wood, parts of an elaborately carved chair, coins of the second Han dynasty which ended about 220, A.D., wooden pens, chop sticks, sleeping mats, blank writing tablets, the upper part of a guitar with a bit of string retained. One garden arrangement could still be traced, resembling that of modern gardens of Kashgar. Stein writes; "It was with a strange feeling, obliterating almost the sense of time, that I walked between two parallel fences of rushes that still form a little country land just as over 1600 years ago."

The wooden tablets which Sir Aurel Stein found in abundance had the ink well preserved owing to the wooden cover, and the seals showed Grecian influence. Some were double. One seal had Chinese characters, and a portrait after the western model. One small tablet was precisely dated, corresponding to 269 A.D., being in Chinese. He found wheat straw with some grains perfectly preserved. "Where will it be next," he exclaims, "that I can walk amidst poplars and fruit trees planted when the Caesars still ruled in Rome and the knowledge of Greek writing had barely vanished on the Indus?"

If your interest has been stirred by this brief sketch, find yourself copies of the writings of Hedin and Stein, and learn from them some of the romantic details of life along the old caravan trails. If you wish to read of modern expeditions along those trails, search in copies of the *National Geographic Magazine* June, 1929; Oct., 1931; March, 1932. But if you want to be very modern, follow the news from China, India, and Burma, and you may realize that the caravan trails to Asia are still there, ready to play their part in the history of the human race, as they have done for many thousands of years.