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The Pundits Beyond the Pamir

The Forsyth Missions of 1870 and 1873

(Plates 51–55)

Before the middle of the 19th century the mountain ranges north of the Pamir in Chinese (East) Turkestan and the western Kun Lun were virtually unknown, as was the southern part of the Silk Road that ran from Kashgar to Kashmir, with the only available information coming from Mediæval and Chinese sources. In 1812 Mir Izzet Ullah had visited Yarkand, whilst in 1852 Adolph Schlagintweit approached Yarkand but was murdered a few days later outside Kashgar. One of Montgomerie's pundits had managed, in 1866, to locate and place Yarkand on the map, but unfortunately he also was murdered whilst returning to Dehra Dun. Even the position of these two major Central Asian cities remained uncertain.

Then, in 1868, Yakub Beg (Athalik Ghazi), a Moslem usurper, drove the Chinese out of East Turkestan; but eight years later he became yet another murder victim, and the Chinese repossessed the country, renaming it Sinkiang (Xinjiang or New Province). The political position now resumed the status quo, but during his few years in power, Yakub Beg had allowed two missions of British and Indian explorers, soldiers, surveyors and traders to go to East Turkestan to explore, measure, map and trade. The aim of the British had been to make Yakub Beg an ally and his state a buffer against the Russians who were expanding south towards India.

The ignorance of the British Government in India about this immensely important strategic area of East Turkestan, the pivot of Asia, was profound, and the overthrow of the Chinese provided it with a window of political opportunity. In addition, the markets of Central Asia appeared to be there for the taking, particularly if it were possible to avoid the usual route from India using the Karakoram Pass and Leh, where the Maharajah of Kashmir's customs officers imposed heavy tariffs. A more eastern route across the Aksai Chin, connecting with Kulu and Lahul in British India, might be easier and also cheaper.

After Yakub Beg had driven out the Chinese in 1868, three separate individuals visited East Turkestan. Robert Shaw, a tea planter, went in search of Central Asian markets, George Hayward aimed to explore the Pamir and the ranges beyond, whilst the Mirza, one of Montgomerie's pundits, went to survey and obtain political and cultural information. All three were more successful geographically than as traders, and the Mirza was the first

to give an accurate account of crossing the Pamir. Tenuous relations were established with Yakub Beg whose potential alliance with Russia had failed to materialise, and all three travellers were allowed to leave unharmed.

In 1870, partly in response to a request from Yakub Beg, Lord Mayo, the Viceroy, despatched the first-ever British mission to Yarkand. Although ostensibly a friendly visit, its main purposes were to establish a political alliance, obtain information about the Russians and develop trading opportunities. Douglas Forsyth, the leader, was Commissioner for the Punjab and an expert on Central Asia. Some years previously he had been responsible for placing a British agent in Leh, a key town, where routes from West Tibet and East Turkestan joined. With Forsyth were Dr George Henderson and Robert Shaw. This mission never met Yakub Beg, who was away fighting insurgents, but their observations enabled them to lay the foundations for the Forsyth Mission of 1873, 'one of the best appointed missions to leave India'.

The 1873 mission was despatched by Lord Normanbrook, the new Viceroy, with Col T E Gordon as second in command. Other members were Dr H W Bellew, Captain Chapman, Captain Biddulph, Captain H Trotter of the Survey of India, and a scientist Dr F Stoliczka. Attached to the party at various times were the pundits Kishen Singh, Nain Singh, Kalian Singh and Abdul Salam, code-named 'the Munshi', who was not an 'official' pundit but a native surveyor who carried out important exploratory surveys during the mission. There was also an escort of 22 soldiers from the Guides, and the whole mission comprised 300 men and 400 pack animals.

This time Yakub Beg was in residence in Kashgar, and during a state visit in full regimental dress Forsyth personally delivered a letter from Queen Victoria. The effect of this impressive display on the court of Yakub Beg, his advisers and on the local population was profound.

Trotter wished to extend the survey to the Tien Shan range to the north, and south-west to the Pamir and the Oxus river. However, the most notable geographical prize was the unknown country to the east of Kashgar – to Aksu, a town on the northern edge of the Taklimakan desert and further east to the Lop Nor marshes and lake. The unknown Kun Lun range, too, extended for a thousand miles or more on the southern edge of the Taklimakan desert and delineated the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Although the pundits were not able to visit and map the whole of this vast area, they gained much valuable geographical information.

On its way from Leh across the Karakoram Pass to Yarkand, the mission split into two parties; the eastern party went by the Chang Chenmo valley and the western party via the Karakoram Pass. For much of their journey both parties were at altitudes of over 15,000 feet and the temperature at night reached minus 26°F. The Munshi (Abdul Salam) was sent to fix the position of several Karakoram peaks already surveyed by the Great Trigonometric Survey (GTS). However, as the days were short, cloudy and cold,

the survey yield was not as great as Trotter, a perfectionist, would have liked. On reaching Yarkand, the mission left all the pundits behind for political reasons, except for Kishen Singh, and arrived in Kashgar on 28 November 1873.

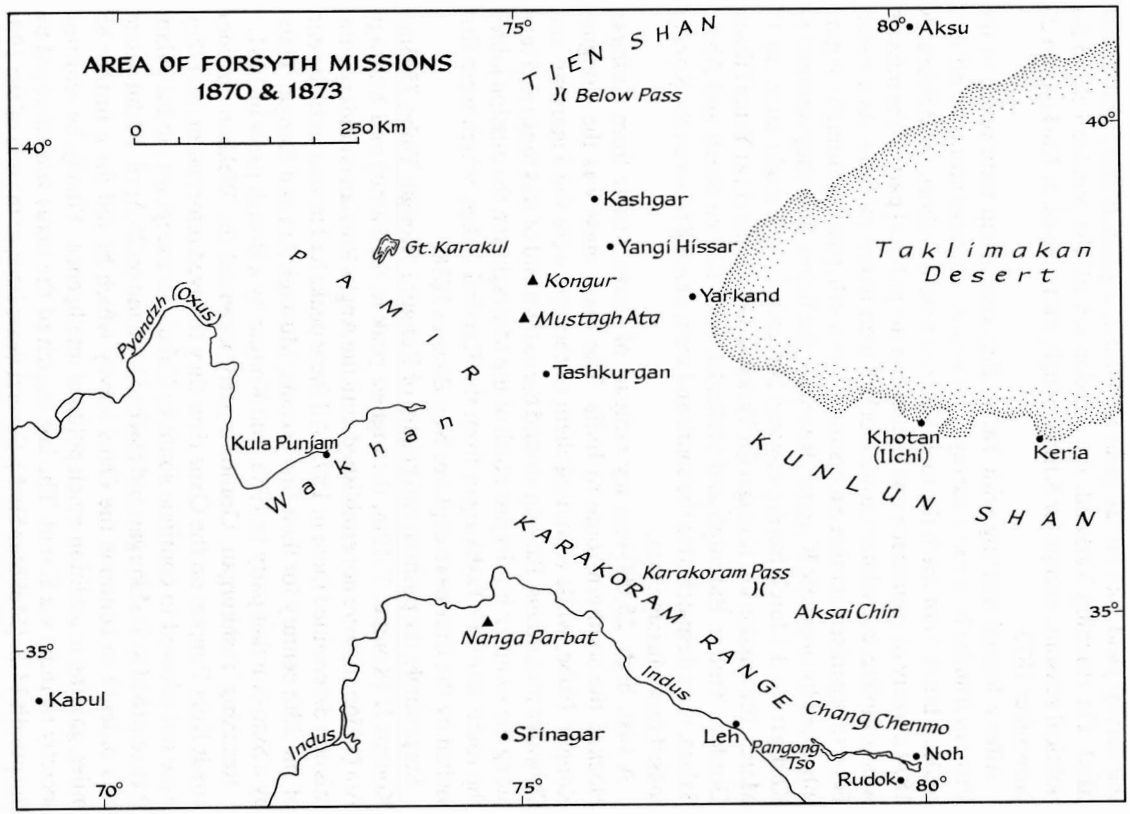
After a formal meeting with Yakub Beg, one group went north to the Russian frontier by a route surveyed by Trotter. Another group set off east to Aksu but did not reach the town because time was short. On 2 February 1874 a treaty of commerce was signed and the political part of the mission was complete, but winter snows blocked their return to India. As a result, Forsyth organised another excursion, to the north, passing through a region inhabited by nomadic Kyrgyz. Reaching the Below Pass they returned to Kashgar on 3 March having covered 340 miles. A fortnight later, on 17 March, the mission left Kashgar for Yarkand. On 21 March, at Yangi Hissar, Gordon, Trotter, Biddulph and Stoliczka, with Kishen Singh and Abdul Salam, were despatched to the south and west, passing between the Kongur massif and Mustagh Ata.

A vast, high, 25,000-foot icy rampart of peaks, visible from Kashgar, blocked the southern route to India. The main mass was the Kongur-Kongur Tiube, while adjoining them to the east were the Tigurman and Shiwatke mountains. Passing around the eastern end of this range and then along the southern border just north of the Mustagh Ata, the mission joined the route south to Tashkurgan from the Karakul Lakes, which were first visited by the European explorer Ney Elias in 1888.

Surprisingly, the position and heights of Kongur I (Kongur Tiube, 7595m), Kongur II (Kongur, 7719m, the highest peak in the Pamir) and Mustagh Ata (7456mm) were not established until the Anglo-Russian boundary commission determined them in 1895. All these peaks had to wait until the end of the 20th century for their first ascents, Mustagh Ata and Kongur Tiube by a Sino-Russian party in 1956, and Kongur by a British party in 1981.

Reaching Tashkurgan, Gordon's party traversed the Wakhan corridor but at Kula Punjam on the Oxus river they received information that they were not allowed to continue south to Kabul. So except for Abdul Salam they returned to Tashkurgan and reached Yarkand on 26 April. Abdul Salam was ordered to continue the Oxus survey which he did for a further 85 miles, gaining in addition much political intelligence. Finally, he returned secretly to India via Kabul. The last stretch of the Oxus was surveyed by the pundit M.S. (Mukhtar Shah). Several years later, at the end of the 19th century, George Curzon, later Viceroy of India, also travelled in the Pamir and investigated the source of the Oxus.

When Gordon returned to Yarkand, Forsyth had already left for Leh but by a more easterly route before joining the normal Karakoram Pass track. They arrived at Leh on 17 June 1874. Kishen Singh also undertook the other important exploration of the Mission, going east to Khotan. This oasis region lay on the south side of the Taklimakan between the desert and the Kun Lun range, and had first been visited by Johnson of the Survey



of India in 1865. Kishen Singh continued as far east as possible, passing through the main town of Ilchi (Khotan) and reaching Keria on 18 June. In a further three days he visited the Sorghak goldfields which were worked all the year round. Returning to Keria he turned south, crossing the Kun Lun by a route well to the east of the Karakoram Pass, and gained the Chang Tang (northern plateau of Tibet). This route had abundant grass and fuel despite their being no inhabited villages for 250 miles, and he passed no other travellers. Best of all, this route avoided the tariffs imposed by the Maharajah of Kashmir. Despite all these advantages, foreigners being rigorously excluded from Tibet, it was to be eleven years before Carey and Dalglish and Ney Elias travelled this route, though from south to north, using Kishen Singh's directions which they found outstandingly accurate. Approaching the village of Noh on the north bank of the Pangong Lake, and knowing that he would be searched, Kishen Singh buried all his instruments and notes. Unfortunately he was not allowed to continue to Rudok in western Tibet, so retrieving these he turned west to Leh which he reached at the end of July 1874.

Because of the excellent and accurate work of the pundits, the Survey had great confidence in the newly established positions of Kashgar and Yarkand, the Oxus, the main ranges of the Chinese Pamir, parts of the Tien Shan, the western end of the Taklimakan desert, the Kun Lun range, the southern part of the Silk Route and the route from Keria to Leh. Kishen Singh, in particular, was marked down for further exploration in Tibet, and his later outstanding work confirmed his position as one of the leading explorers of Central Asia.

The Forsyth missions of 1870 and 1873-74 were outstandingly successful geographically and the British made their presence felt in this vital border area. However, although there was an initial boost to trade, this later tailed off. As an increasing number of military operations took place in the north-west frontier region, the pundits' main efforts were switched to Tibet, the north-east frontier and the independent Himalayan Kingdoms of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal which, at the time, were still virtually unknown.

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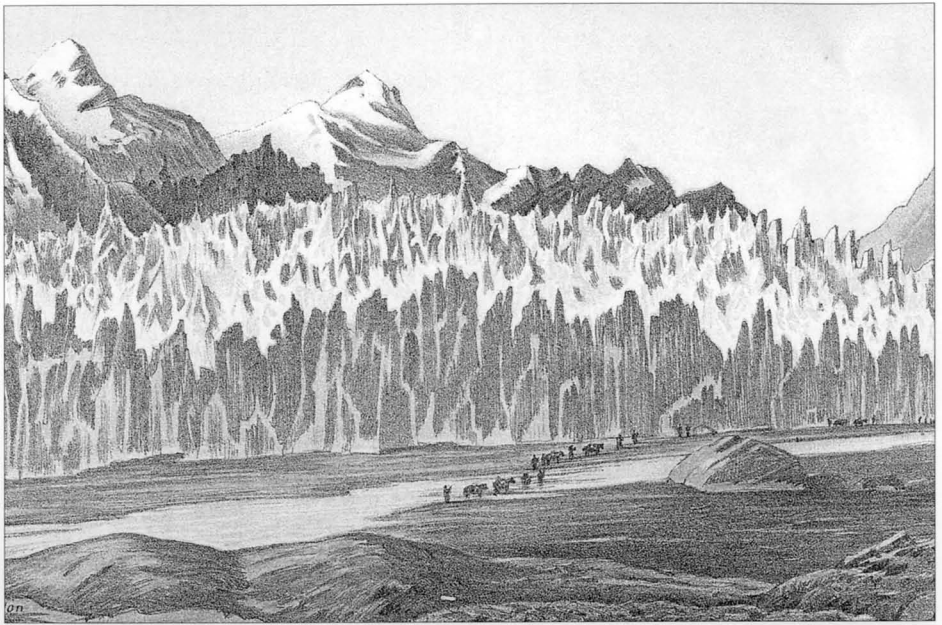
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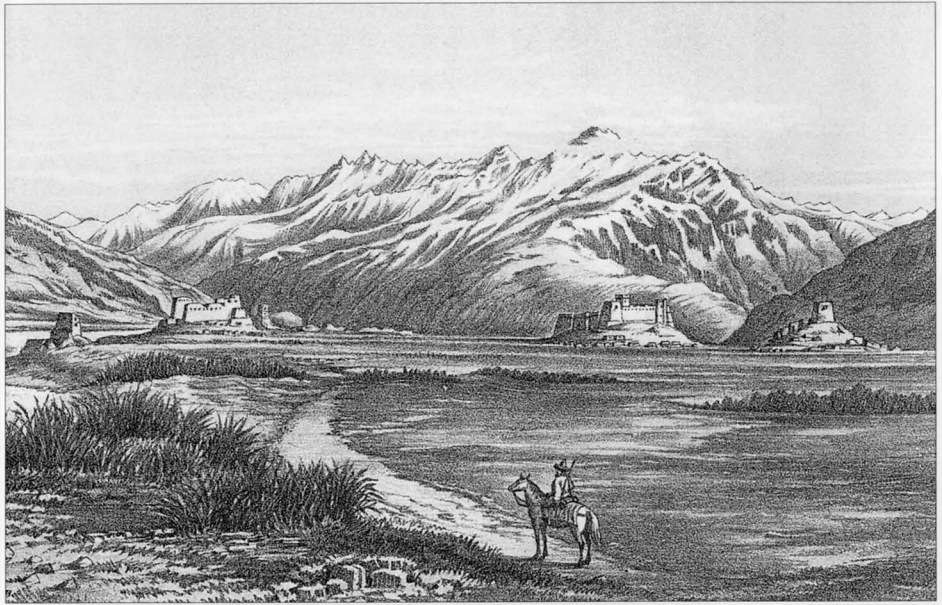
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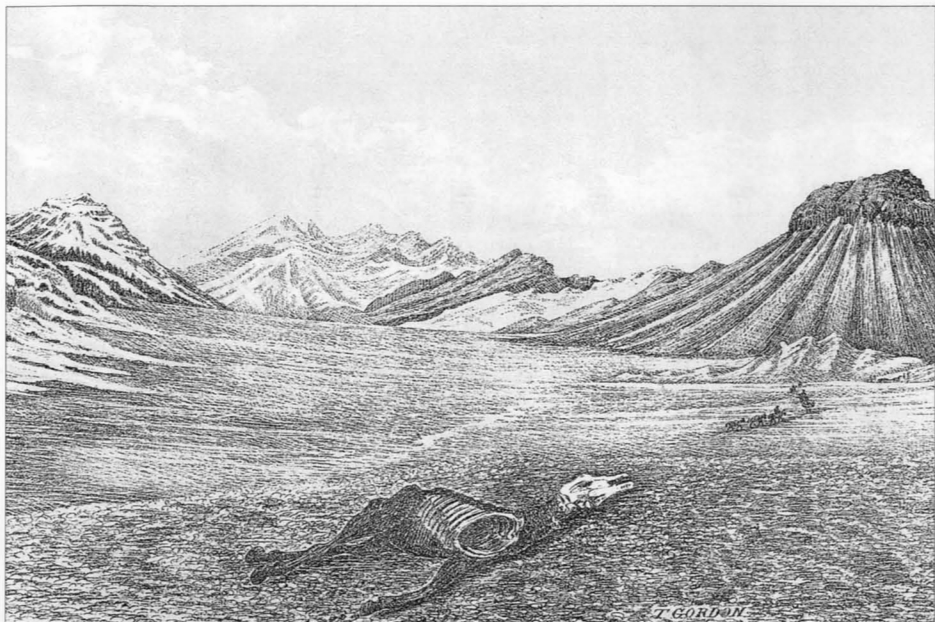
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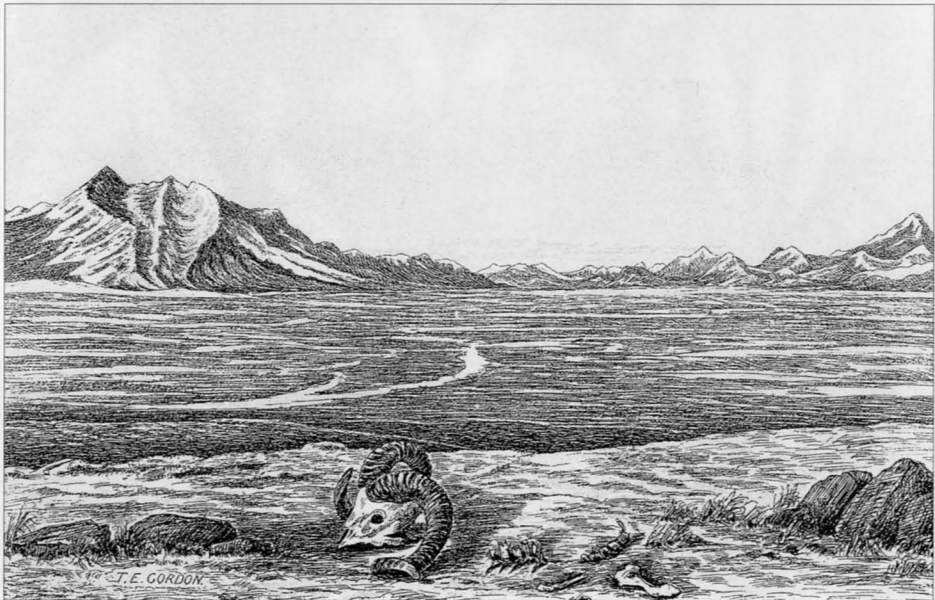
51. Lower Kumdan Glacier – Shyok. (T E Gordon, *The Roof of the World*, 1876) (p203)



52. Kila Panja on the Oxus – looking east. (T E Gordon, *The Roof of the World*, 1876) (p203)



53. The Karakoram Peak – from the southern side of the pass – looking NW.
(T E Gordon, *The Roof of the World*, 1876) (p203)



54. Aktash Valley – looking NW. (T E Gordon, *The Roof of the World*, 1876) (p203)



55. Andrew Dalglish and his Yarkand household including Abyssinian servant and Yarkandi wife. (John Keay, *When Men and Mountains Meet*, 1977) (p203)