

## NOTE ON THE HEADWATERS OF THE YARKAND RIVER

MARGARET GREGSON

DURING the summer of 1927 my husband (Lieut.-Colonel G. K. Gregson, R.A.) and I made a deviation from the main trade route in the course of a journey from Srinagar to Yarkand. Following in the tracks of Colonel Wood, Major Kenneth Mason, and other explorers, we left the Karakoram Pass on our right and branched off to the north-west over an easy watershed to the valley called in earlier reports "Valley A," reaching thereby the country at the headwaters of the Yarkand River, usually known as the Amphitheatre. We were neither trained nor equipped to attempt any exploration of value, but possibly one or two of our observations may be of interest.

Leaving Chajos Jilga camping ground on the main trade route early in the morning of 14 July 1927, we reached a point at the upper or southern end of the Amphitheatre, near the confluence of stream A with the Yarkand River, on the same afternoon. The weather was warm and fine, and the stream rose considerably in the course of the afternoon, but presented no serious difficulty to our ponies. My husband shot some Imperial sand-grouse for our larder near the watershed, but we saw no other animal life except one female Tibetan antelope and her calf. The crows, vultures, and other birds of ill omen which haunt the trade route were left behind us, along with the corpses of pack-animals which decorate that "Via Dolorosa."

We rested for a day in our first Amphitheatre Camp, going for an easy morning walk up over the slopes of the hills overlooking the Yarkand River (valley B) towards its source. We took nine butterflies, eight closely resembling the *Baltia Butlerii* (which was taken by the Mount Everest Expedition) and one *Colias*. My husband, during the afternoon, saw many Tibetan antelope in the neighbourhood of Hayward's Lake—mostly females and young ones. Ibrahim, our Karakash, a young Argon from Shushot, who had been to this country with Major Mason's Expedition in 1926, said that the male antelope would be found lower down the Yarkand River. We found that he was right.

Travelling by easy marches down the Yarkand River we eventually reached the junction of the Lungmo Che (stream I of Colonel Wood's report of 1914) on July 19. We went up this valley about 6 or 7 miles to a camp on its left bank, in a small side valley where there was excellent grazing and plenty of burtsi for fuel. My husband and his Kashmiri Shikari, Muhammad Rattar, searched the hills for the herds of large bharal mentioned by Dr. Clifford in Major Mason's report, but without any success. Only one herd of nineteen ewes and lambs was seen, about 10 miles up the Lungmo Che valley. They continued the search with telescope and glasses to a distance of about 17 or 18 miles from the junction of this valley with that of Yarkand River. No other bharal were seen. It is a problem where they may hide themselves, as the southern side of the Lungmo Che is steep, stony, and interspersed with glaciers, and valley J adjoining is reported to be entirely barren. The Lungmo Che valley however affords good grazing in many places, and attracts many antelope, mostly wandering in pairs.

My husband obtained the photograph given of one of the glaciers coming

down into the Lungmo Che on the right bank of the stream. Many of the seracs are seen to be isolated, standing on earth and stones. This may be a sign that the glacier is receding. If it once blocked the valley this might account for the fact that traces of human passage were found in valley J adjoining while none have been found in the Lungmo Che, in spite of its better grazing and similar direction.

Up to July 20 our weather had been on the whole good, though we had suffered from some sleet showers, and one night of snow (on July 16) with an east wind. Winds were generally high after midday until towards midnight, and the sky a good deal overcast, except during the early hours. Our minimum temperature since leaving the trade route had been 15° F. on July 17; maximum 62° F. Although we had not hitherto had any serious difficulties with rivers, after reading Major Mason's report for 1926 we expected that we should have to retrace our steps and get back to the trade route north of the Karakoram Pass. Ibrahim, the Karakash, who had been with Major Mason, did not know of any way across the hills from the Yarkand River valley to the trade route north of the Karakoram Pass, until the Khuffelang-Aktagh track was reached. This was two days' march northwards, down the river, below the Lungmo Che junction. He did not think we should be able to make Khuffelang, owing to the difficulty of fording the stream in summer-time and the enclosed nature of the gorge above Khuffelang. However, as we had had a good deal of cold sunless weather and the snows were late in melting everywhere that year, we thought there could be no harm in sending two men down to have a look. Ibrahim and another young Argon pony-man named Ghulam Hassan undertook to go downstream and see what our chances were of getting a caravan through. We struck our Lungmo Che camp on July 21 and marched downstream to the junction in the afternoon. On the way we met Ibrahim and Ghulam Hassan returning from their reconnaissance, and to our surprise they reported favourably on the state of the river.

The march down to Khuffelang took us two days from the Lungmo Che junction. On the first day we forded the Yarkand River near the junction, from the left bank to the right, at about 9 a.m., without difficulty. We found it best, however, to carry over our goats and sheep on pony-back. We continued down the right bank and camped at the first good grazing-place, about 9 or 10 miles down—a pleasant sheltered camp under the cliffs and near good grass and water. Some small wild duck were seen, also some Brahmini geese.

On the second day we forded the river three times, all between about 8 a.m. and midday, when the water is at its lowest. It begins to rise after midday. One ford was rather deep, but not too swift, and the ponies all kept their feet and brought their loads safely over, including sheep and goats on the saddle animals. In the gorge just above Khuffelang, between the second and third fordings, we met a caravan of Yarkandis pitched for grazing. To avoid the gorge *below* Khuffelang they had made their way over the hills from Kulan Uldi, and we gathered, through Ibrahim interpreting, that they had had a bad time and were glad of the rest and grazing for their beasts on the brushwood flats just above Khuffelang before going on.

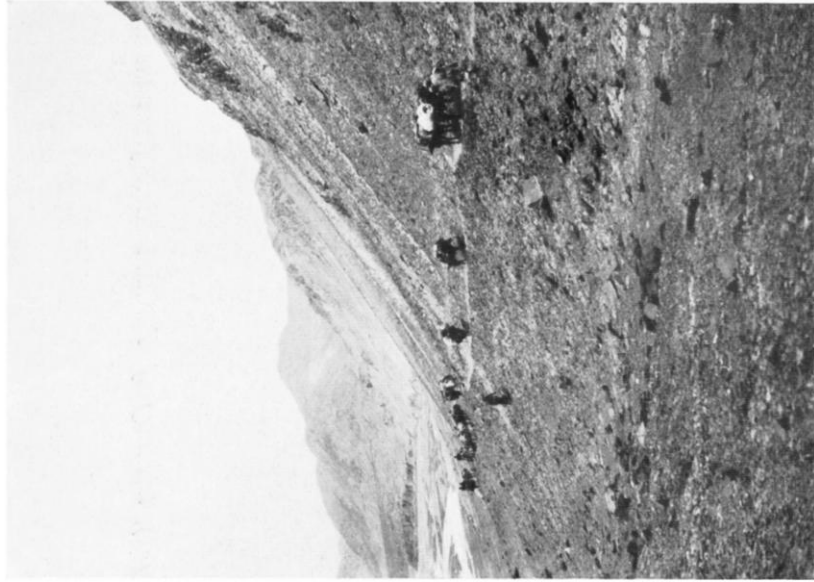
We reached Khuffelang on July 23 about midday, and camped a few miles



*Seracs of a glacier on south side of Lungmo Che (Valley I), tributary of Yarkand River from the west*



*Looking up Valley B towards source of Yarkand river*



*In the gorge above Khuffelang, Yarkand river*

beyond it on the road to Ak-Tagh, which we followed the next day to its junction with the trade route. In Colonel Wood's report of his expedition he writes that on July 20 the water in the Yarkand River was so great that he did not think it advisable to try and follow it down farther than the junction of I and J valleys. (I valley is now called the Lungmo Che since Major Mason's expedition of 1926.) Colonel Wood succeeded in traversing this piece of the river valley in September 1914, however. Major Mason and those with him did not take that way. Our Ladakhis and the Yarkand pony-men told us that it was not a route used by traders, and that the water in the Yarkand River was always expected to be a difficult proposition in the summer months, especially in the gorge just above Khuffelang, where, should a sudden flood occur, it might be hard to extricate a caravan without loss. It may therefore be of interest to travellers in these parts to know that we were able in 1927 (considered a late year) to get down the Yarkand River from the junction of stream A to Khuffelang without difficulty during the month of July. The length of the journey from Chajos Jilga on the trade route to Chibra, again on the trade route, is approximately 114 miles, going this way by the Yarkand River to Khuffelang and through Ak-Tagh. By the ordinary trade route it is about 61 miles, scarcely more than half the distance. Yet the longer route has some advantages, provided the water conditions allow it. Our ponies kept notably fat and fit during the whole time of our deviation from the trade route. In spite of the longer time taken they seemed to be the gainers in condition, owing to the good grazing to be had in the Yarkand River valley. We also enjoyed having plenty of fuel, and were able to replenish our larder with antelope and wild duck easily enough.

One other point of interest is that we found many traces of yak droppings in the Yarkand River valley far above Khuffelang, and my husband also saw a bovine skull up in the hills. Colonel Wood tells me that he had a mixed transport of coolies, camels, and ponies in this region in 1914, but does not include yaks on the list. We were told that Major Mason's expedition in 1926 took ponies and not yaks. Traders are said never to pass that way. Were these traces (quite unmistakably bovine) left by wild yaks at any time, or by some yak caravan which has visited the place and left no other trace?