

## E. Boulangier. Voyage a Merv. 1888.

*French engineer from the famous «Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées».*

*His main interest in this journey is the Transcaspian railway. Boulangier does not dissimulate his ( deserved) admiration for the Russian management of this project and for its relatively low cost.*

*The speed with which the Turkmen changed their way of life amazes him, as it amazes many other visitors, including Alkhanof, the Russian governor of Merv.*

*Only four years after the surrender of Merv, the oasis is already exporting a high value of goods and the cotton boom is starting.*

*Boulangier travels in a comfortable train, and is warmly welcomed in a fully pacified country by the Russian authorities, His journey can't be compared with the highly risky adventures of Burnes', O'Donovan, Mouraviev', de Blocqueville's or Alikhanov.*

*Unfortunately he spent most of his time discussing with his fellow railway engineers, accepting invitations from Russian brass and from «russified» Turkmen elite, or visiting the ruins of old Merv.*

*He does not pay much attention to the ordinary local people and their civilization.*

*His well structured, intelligent report is surely interesting for specialists of railroads, geography, mineralogy, industrial- and military strategy, though.*

*He makes many pictures, mostly of the ruins of old Merv and of new Russian buildings, including railroad stations, but only few pictures of the outside of Turkmen yurts and none of the inside.*

*Little information of value for us ruggies, except the mention of carpet shops in both Merv and Bokhara where «...cheap stuff can be bought on the market of course, but one needs to be a connoisseur...».*

*Information confirmed by Monsieur de Cholet, a high-society, Champagne-guzzling snob, in his own report.*

*However, we can infer that In 1888, the **commercial** career of Turkmen rugs and textiles has been jump-started by the Russians!*

Page 72: One train per day on the Trans-Caspian railway in 1888.

Page 78: «...(Turkmen) covered with those plaids (?), dyed with beautiful natural dyes, which are fetching high prices in Paris....»

Page 81: Krasnovodsk still has an administrative function in 1888 and only 300 inhabitants.

A new and better port than Krasnovodsk and a new railway terminal station has been built at Uzun-Ada, two hours south of Krasnovodsk. Uzun-Ada («Long Island») is separated from the continent by a shallow and narrow (1200 m.) sound and features 20 wood-houses, a hotel, a railroad station, a dam to the coast for the railroad, all of it built in 3 months by general Annenkoff, an outstanding manager, the brain who created the 1000 km Trans-Caspian railroad.

Page 85: Tourism has already started in the area, even though still in its infancy: Several Russian officers including the head of the Uzun-ada railway station, informed by telegraph of the arrival of two tourists on board of the ship from Baku, are waiting for them and welcome them!

Page 91-97: Historical summary: After two battles lost by general Lomakin against the Akhal Tekes in 1877 and 1878, a third attempt was made in 1879 but the battle was inconclusive, the Tekes had more casualties than the Russians and left the battleground, but so did the Russians, short of ammunitions and food, with over 15% of the troop either dead or wounded.

In 1880, the new commander Skobelev, devised a prudent but intelligent strategy based on the construction and protection of a railway from the port of Mikhaïalovsk (south of Krasnovodsk) toward the stronghold of the Akhal Tekes, reaching Klzil-Arvat by end of this year, from where the final attack on Geok Tepe started. The railroad project, decided by the Tzar himself, against the advice of his brass (including Skobelev's), was brilliantly led by Skobelev's second-in-command, general Annenkoff.

The storming of Geok tepe in 1881 is summarized page 218, but anticipated here for a better understanding:

Excellent and competent description of the battle, with accounts directly from the horse's mouth, contradicting several third-hand absurdities on the battle and the days which followed it:

Geok tepe fortress: Walls were about 6000 m in length, 10-12m in height, made of clay and extremely thick. Contrary to romantic, but technically incompetent descriptions of the siege, Ing. Boulangier explained why (as stated by the Russian generals) the artillery was relatively inefficient against this soft, but very thick clay wall: The canon balls penetrated it deep «as into butter», but creating only «rat holes, which could still be seen», but without destroying it.

Despite the fire of 69 guns, it proved impossible to open any breach.

Skobelev was unable to fully surround the fortress and to blockade it, since his army of 12 000 men was too small for this task (and thin ranks were the main reason of previous Russian defeats against an enemy far superior in number and highly mobile thanks to their outstanding cavalry. He chose therefore to keep his units in compact formations, on one side of the fortress only and to dig a mine under the wall, which exploded on **January 12, 1881**, creating a huge breach, in which the Russian infantry and some guns opened a bloody way, despite a desperate defense. Then the resistance fully broke down and the Teke cavalry flew through the northern gate, leaving behind most women and children. While the Russian infantry massacred without mercy the panic-stricken Tekes remained inside the fortress, the Cossack- and Yomud cavalry went

after the runaways, killing at least 8000 more. The Russian losses were limited to 59 killed and less than 300 injured, but the total Akhal Tekes losses were huge: According to Skobelev, about 20 000 victims. According to the Akhal Teke leader, they lost about 10 000 souls. (See O'Donovan I. Page 67), including many women and children, despite the presence on the battle field of a Red Cross unit.

In 1882 Lieutenant Alikhanoff, a Moslem officer speaking djagatai, was sent disguised as a merchant to Merv, was successful in creating a «Russian party» in the oasis and convinced the Akhal Teke leader Mak-tum Kuli Khan, who had taken refuge in Merv with about 3000 warriors of his clan, to accept an invitation to the coronation ceremony of the Tzar. The Turkmen Khan returned to Merv deeply impressed and gave his full support to the local Russian party. When general Komarov moved toward Merv, only a small minority of the Tekes attempted a fight, were beaten and run away to seek a refuge in Persia or Afghanistan, most Merv Tekes accepted Russian rule without second thought.

Page 99: Only a handful of people visited Merv between 1830 and 1845: The clergyman Wolff (1831 and in 1845), Lieutenant Burnes (1832) and Major Abbott (1845).

The oasis was then settled by the -relatively civilized- Saryks. In 1856 the Saryks were thrown out of the oasis by the Tekes, the most dangerous desert robbers, making Merv too dangerous for any visitor. Vambery avoided the oasis in 1863. The first European to visit it, among much danger, was O' Donovan in 1881.

*(Note: Boulangier forgets to mention H. de Blocqueville who in 1860 spent in Merv 14 months, as a well-treated prisoner, even affected by a mild case of Stockholm Syndrome.)*

Page 107: Watching from the train an «aoul» of about 20-30 evs. In this area near the Caspian Sea there are about 50 000 souls, all nomads.

Page 108: On the left hand side of the train, the end of the Great Balkan range, on the right side, the hilly Little Balkan. This region is prone to extremely strong winds from northeast, even able to stop a train.

Page 112: Nice picture of a Turkmen ev.

Page 115: A few cats can be seen, but this animal does not appreciate very much the nomad way of life of the Turkmen. A good description of the fauna and flora of the Trans-Caspian steppe follows.

Page 116: At Kizil-Arvat: From there Skobelev's army moved onto Geok tepe.

Page 118: Quoting the M.D. and botanist Heydfelder (who participated to Skobelev's campaign): Even in Spring one could see no large tree in the four oases Akhal Teke, Tejen, Merv and Zarafchan (around Bokhara), but only more or less well tilled fields, small fruit-tree groves, vineyards, and pastures. Plants are well described. See O'Donovan for a similar description with Turkmen names.

Trees could only be found on the banks of some rivers. They are mostly poplars (*Populus diversifolia*).

Shrubs are mainly the Tamarix and the Saxaoul. On the southern Kopet-dagh mountains though, one encounters beautiful stately trees (*Juniperus excelsa*)

*(Note: Perhaps the «firs» identified by some experts on Turkmen rugs, especially Yomud's.)*

Page 120: Near Kodj-station and the village of Bami a large (Akhal Teke) aoul with large herds of camels. The number of aouls increases notably. Very large number of sheep.

Rare case of an Akhal Teke 'nouveau riche' who has built a stone house in a recently planted park.

« ...The Teke fortresses were built at well chosen places, easy to fortify, but served only in case of war, when the inhabitants moved their oys and herds inside them.... »

Page 136-137: Wrong explanation (again) for the little stone towers scattered in fields around Ashkabad.

*(Note: Boulangier and de Cholet make the same mistake and probably get the wrong information from the same (Russian?) source, when they attribute to the Turkmen the myriads of little stone towers with very narrow single entry, dispersed through the fields and pastures of the Akhal Teke territory, especially near Ashgabat. This city, and the fertile area around it, was occupied until 1810-1820 by settled Persians and settled Turkmen clients of Persia, until the Akhal Tekes completely destroyed it and sold the surviving population on the Khivan slave markets.*

*The little towers (described and correctly explained by O'Donovan, Steward etc.) were part of these Persian farmers' passive defensive system against Turkmen raiders. Also many of the fortresses (or rather fortified villages) mentioned by Boulangier, date back to these former Persian settlers.*

*Although both the Saryk- and the Teke Turkmen did build mud fortresses, in Merv and in Geok tepe for example, and although the Akhal Tekes indeed twice used their fortress against the Russians, their usual strategy of choice was always guerrilla and surprise attacks. Confronted with a strong party of enemies, they would rather pack their yurts on horses and take refuge in the desert, where no regular army would dare to follow them.)*

The Akhal Teke territory is mainly a 225 km-long and 5-15 km-wide collar, of small but very fertile oases, along the northern piedmont of the Kopet Dagh range.

Page: 145-146: The former leader of the Akhal Teke, now a major in the Russian army, is the governor of the Tejen oasis (also named Atek) in 1888. The oasis is formed by the «delta» of the Tejen river (or Heri rood, or Herat River), which disappears in irrigation channels and swamps in the desert.

A rather unhealthy mosquito paradise at the time.

At Sarakhs, up-river on the right bank of the Tejen River: a Russian town is being built (3000 inhabitants in 1888). The Tejen / Heri rood is a strategic valley leading to Meshed and especially a tempting route to Herat, then to Kandahar and British India. (See Marvin / Lessar)

Page 152: Arrival at the (two-month-old) railway-station of Merv. A service of (Persian) porters is already active. The new Russian town features six hotels, many trees have been planted, the military has built barracks and administrative buildings. The town is divided in three districts: administrative, commercial (settled by Jews, Bokharians, Armenians and Persians) and a high number of Turkmen yurt encampments.

Page 161: **An Ode to Alikhanoff** again:

Caucasian, (Khan of a Lesghi clan), sunni Moslem, colonel at age 28, degraded to private for challenging a superior in duel, promoted back to Lieutenant for outstanding bravery in battle, Alikhanov went under a merchant disguise to Merv, made friends with the widow of the late Khan Nour Verdy and with her son Yousoup Khan and created through his diplomacy a strong pro-Russian party, while Baba Khan, Yousoup's half brother and head of the family, led the pro-English party (See O' Donovan).

The vast majority of the Teke accepted without significant fight the Russian rule in 1884. All the major Khans of the Otamich, Tokhtamich and Akhal Tekes were promoted into the Russian army, even Baba Khan, who was named lieutenant and fought bravely at the battle of Pendj-deh against the Afghan army.

Page 177: In 1888, thanks to the new travel safety, the speed and the capacity of the trains, Merv already imports or exports 80 000 tons of goods from / to Bokhara and from / to the Caspian ports.

Mainly raw cotton, wool textiles, silk textiles.

The Merv market too, has much improved since O'Donovan's time: The Merv Tekes are discovering goods which are quickly becoming indispensable, and yes, there are carpet shops in the market now.

Surprisingly, this new carpet business is neglected by the Tekes, who prefer working in the fields, in railroad building (a job in which they perform better than the Persians) and, of course, in the military.

Page 186-187: Description of a wedding caravan.

Page 197-207: Detail description of the railroad building. The author is impressed by the much «*un-Russian speed*» of the project (over 4 km per day!) and credits general Annenkoff for it.

Page 210-213: History of Merv, with some minor factual errors.

Destruction of the third Merv city by the khan of Bokhara in 1784 and resettlement of its surviving population in Bokhara.

After having expelled the Saryks and Salors from Merv in 1857, the Merv Tekes, who had accepted the absolute rule of Kouchid Kuli Khan (and of his successor Nur Verdi Khan), inflicted disastrous defeats to both the Khivans, who hitherto controlled Merv (1856) and to the Persians (1860), who never again dared to attack the Merv Tekes.

*Note: A few minor factual errors of the author:*

- *The surviving Merv people which were forcibly resettled at Bokhara after the 1788 destruction of the city, were not Turkmen, as Boulangier believes, but a mix of settled, industrious Turkic- and Persian people, living in one of the largest and wealthiest city of the time and speaking Persian. In 1888 their descendants are still regrouped in a specific area of Bokhara.*

- *Ditto, the Merv Tekes are not exactly from the same clan as the Akhal Tekes who stopped a Russian column in front of Geok tepe in 1879.*

*The order of events is wrong too.*

*In fact:*

- *In 1855 the Sarakhs Teke rout the Khan of Khiva and kill him (sending his head to the Shah of Persia, as a (not too subtle) hint.*

- *In 1856 the Persians throw the Tekes out of Sarakhs.*

- *In 1857 the Tekes who had taken refuge in the unhealthy Atak / Tejen delta area, elect Kuchid Kuli Khan as their de- facto dictator. The 'Teke Buonaparte' then leads them to the Merv oasis and throws the Saryks and Salors out of it.*

- *In 1860 an emboldened Persian army attacks the Merv Tekes and is routed, Nearly all survivors end on the Khivan and Bockaran slave markets. A few officers are kept captive at Merv, waiting for ransom. Among them Monsieur de Blocqueville.*

Page 220-222: An interesting interview of general Annenkoff, who compares the approach of the two major imperialistic powers of the time : Russia and England.

*(Note: While it could hardly be expected that Annenkoff could judge the English approach superior, his praise of Russia was, in 1880-1890, largely deserved. Later on, corruption and bureaucracy wasted most of the good things done by a small number of exceptional administrators and soldiers.)*

Page 278-282: Significant vegetation (steppe pasture) appears only at about 7 km from the Amu darya River, followed by fields and orchards closer to the river.

At Charjew: About 30 000 inhabitants in 1888, on the left bank of the Amu darya, on Bokhara territory (Which was at the time a Russian protectorate). Mixed population, partly Ersari Turkmen, partly Bokharans

( Note: Thus a mix of Uzbek, of Tadjiks (who populated the city before the successive Turco-Mongol-Arabo-Uzbek conquests), of people of servile origin, of merchants of foreign origins (Armenians, Jews, Persians, Afghans etc...) and of course of Russians.

At Charjew, the Amu darya, is a rather violent and very muddy river, with an average width of 2 km, but during high-water periods, the river can reach a width of 6 km and deposits fertile soil on the banks. A wooden bridge is being built by the Russian.

Page 296: The Zарафшан oasis, around Bokhara is extremely fertile.

Page 302: The Merv Tekes are competent in building and repairing dams.

Page 317: Turkmen population in 1888, in Russian Turkmenistan, according to Boulangier's information based on Russian sources:

Along the shore of the Caspian sea: 50 000.

Akhal Teke oasis: 150 000

Tejen oasis (also called Atek-) (probably including Sarakhs (right bank): 50 000.

Merv oasis: 250 000

Pendj-deh (probably including Yolatan) 50 000).

(Note: Boulangier mentions only the Saryks and Salors of Pendj-deh. He does not identify the other tribes and indicates that these are the Turkmen living inside the Russian border.

One may therefore add to these numbers

- a) The Turkmen living South of the Atterek- and Giurgen rivers (Yomuds and Gökkan) staying on Persian territory,
- b) The Turkmen living on the territory of the Russian protectorate of Bokhara, mostly on both banks of the Amu-darya (Mainly Ersaris, but also Alielis, Salors, etc...) and East of the Amu darya, near Balkh)
- c) The Turkmen living on the territory of the Russian protectorate of Khiva (Mostly Yomuds, Chodors, Yemreli and Atas)
- d) The Turkmen living in the south of the Mangyshlak peninsula, mainly Chodors / Igdyrs forgotten by Boulangier, or perhaps administratively not being part of the Transcaspian province?
- e) The Turkmen living along the piedmont of the Afghan ranges, south- and southeast of the Amu darya, near Kunduz, Andkoy and Maimene. A limited number of mostly Ersaris and Alielis (mentioned by Vambery) and some Salors near Maimene (mentioned by Petrusevich & Lessar, quoted by Marvin).