

CHRISTOPH BAUMER

TRACES IN THE DESERT

JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY
ACROSS CENTRAL ASIA



IB TAURIS

Foreword by John Hare

Traces in the Desert



PRAISE FOR CHRISTOPH BAUMER

‘This book is a revelation. Christoph Baumer unravels complex mysteries and shares with the reader his deep knowledge and understanding of living and lost cultures. It is also a tale of high adventure. Neither the seeker of true knowledge nor the merely inquisitive will experience disappointment. Their only regret will be when the last step is taken on Baumer’s quest and the final page is turned.’

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‘Baumer is a scholar to his fingertips...an inspired work of synthesis, containing much original research.’

Sir Harold Walker, President of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

T *races in the*
D *esert*



JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY
ACROSS CENTRAL ASIA

Christoph Baumer

I.B. TAURIS

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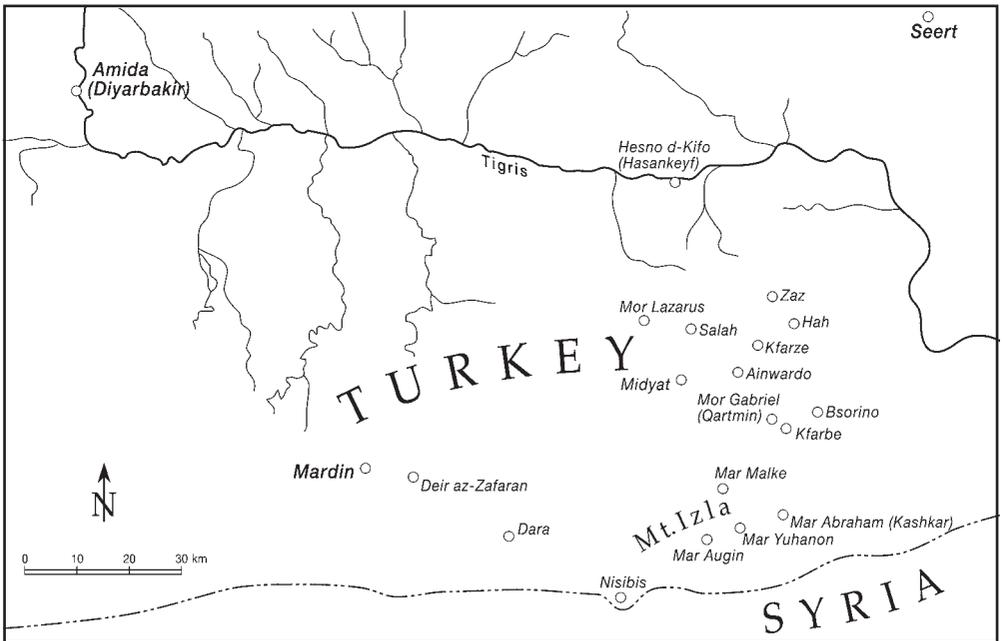
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Michael Henss:	Plate 28
Li Xueliang:	Plate 58
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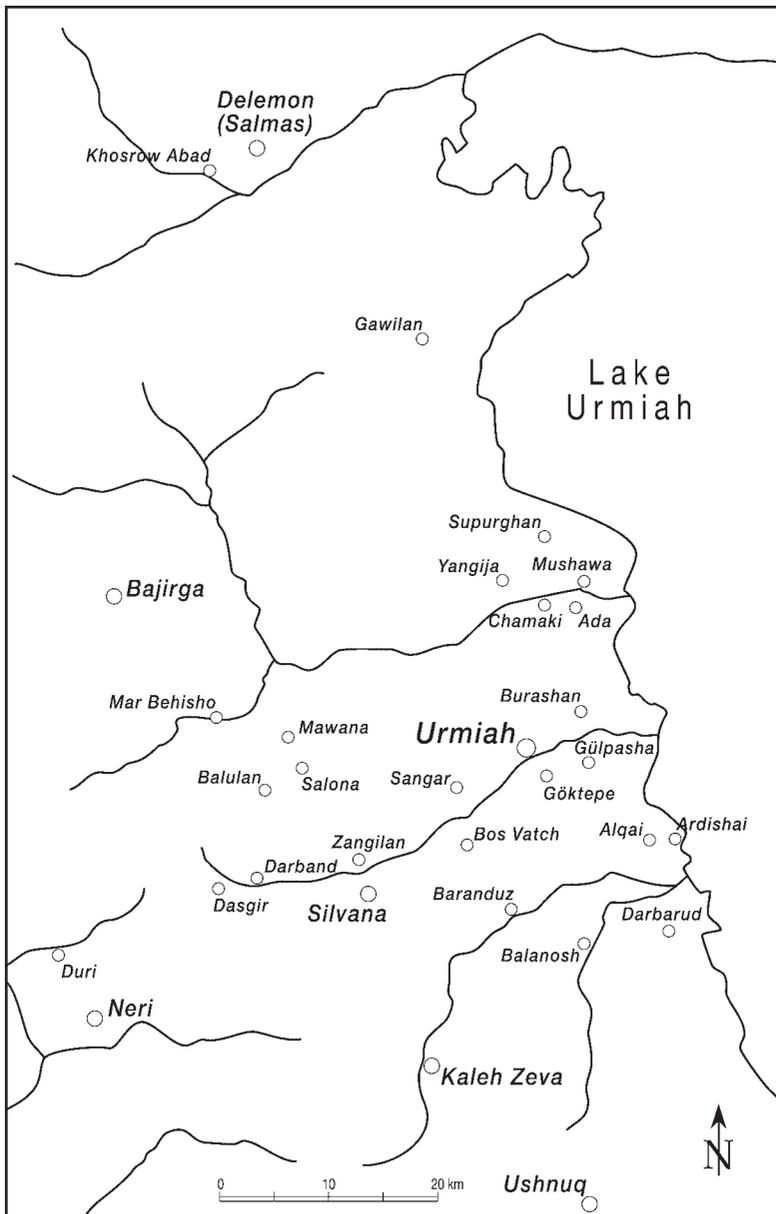
Maps

MAP 1
Christian archaeological sites in Tur Abdin, Turkey



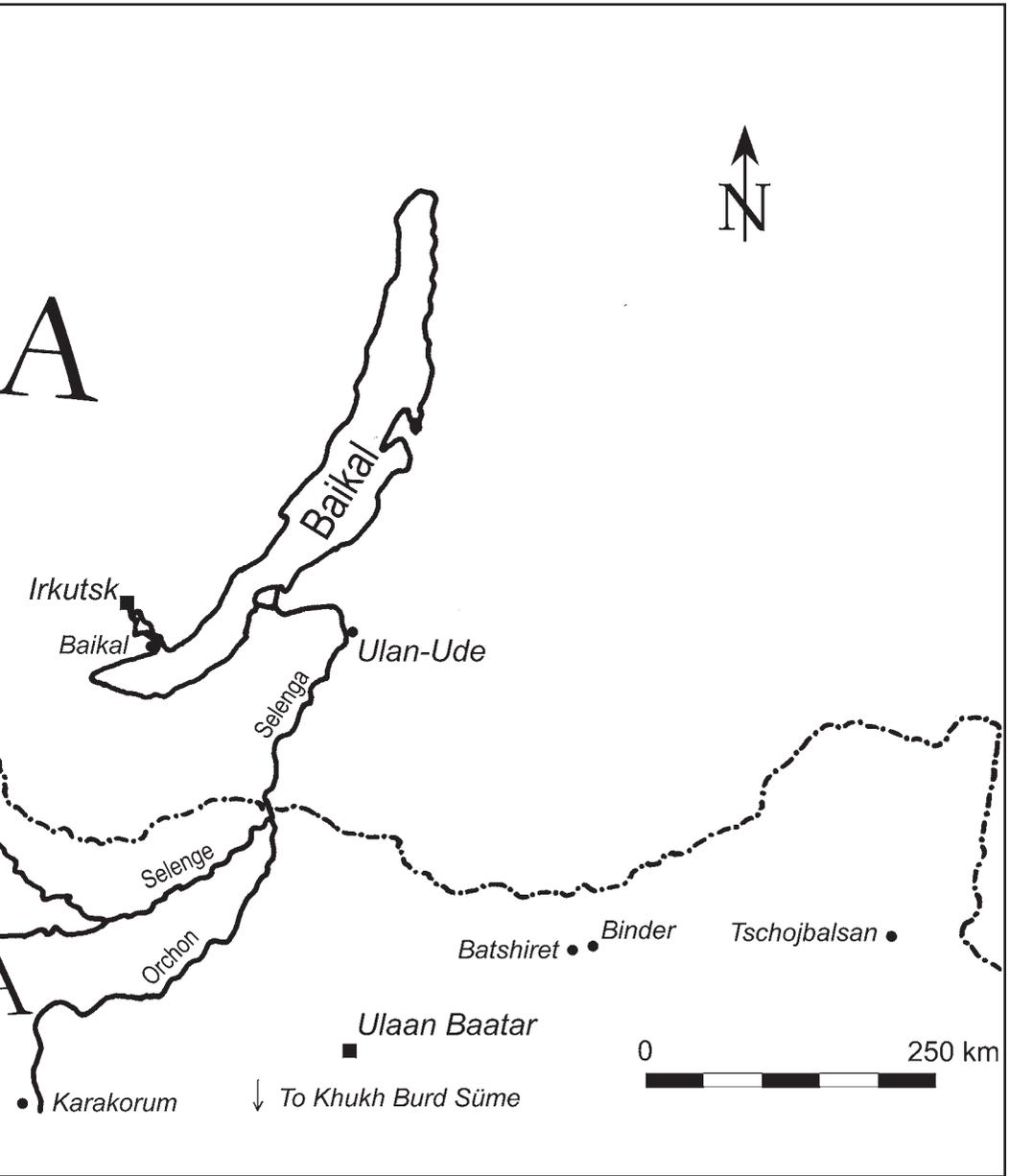
C. Baumer, *The Church of the East* (2006), p. 24.

MAP 2
Christian villages in Urmiah, Iran



MAP 3
Northern Mongolia and southern Siberia

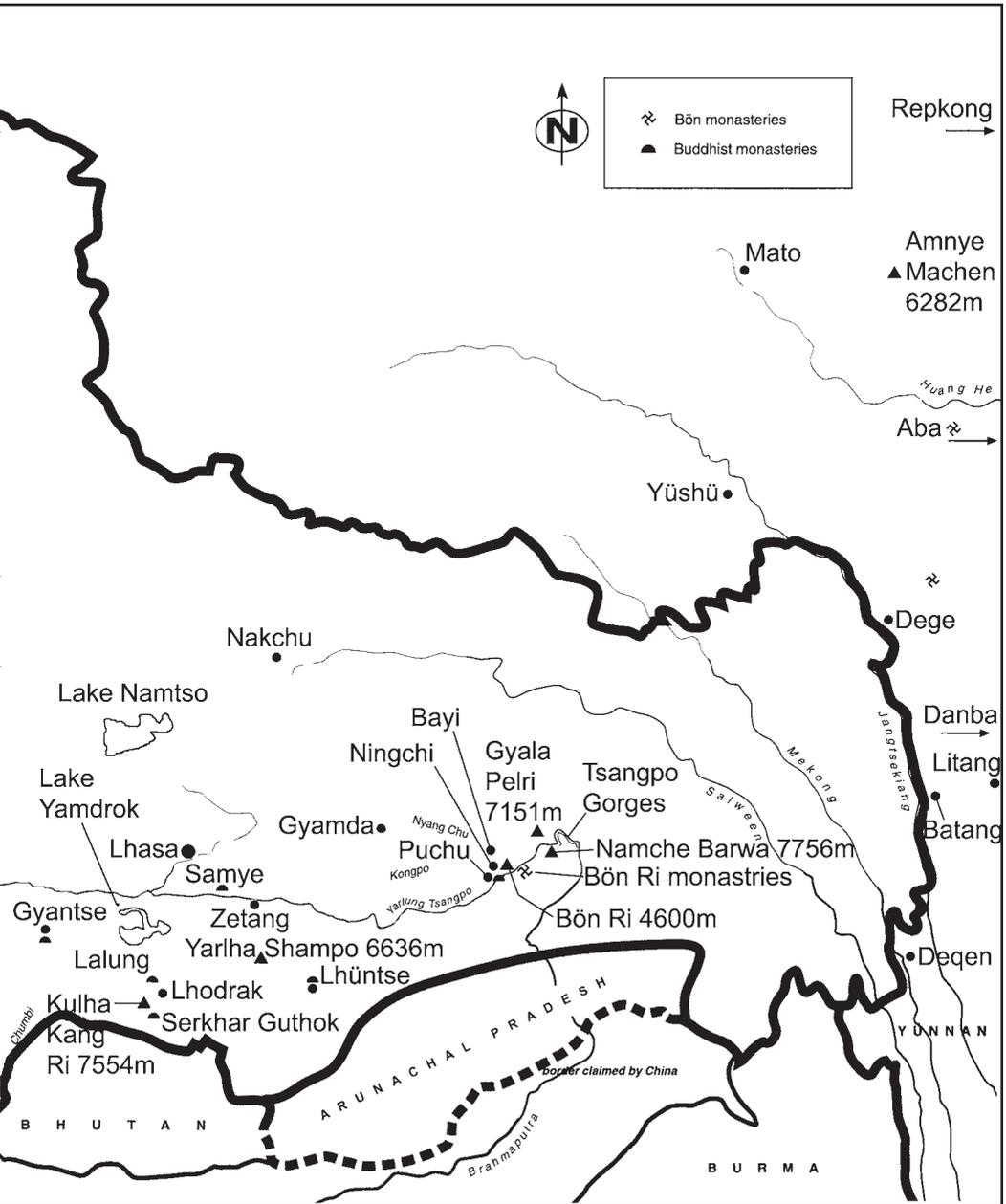




MAP 4

The Tibetan Autonomous Region

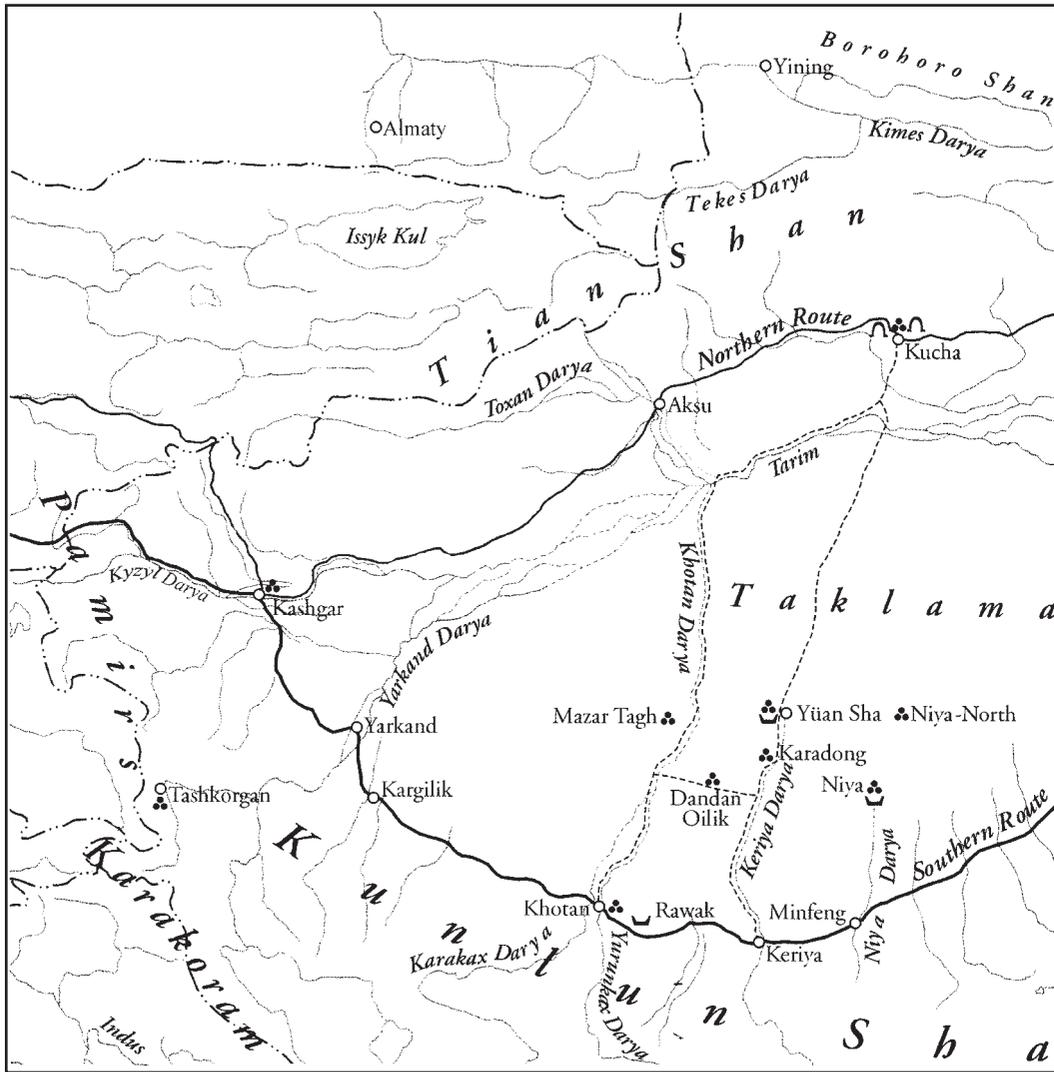


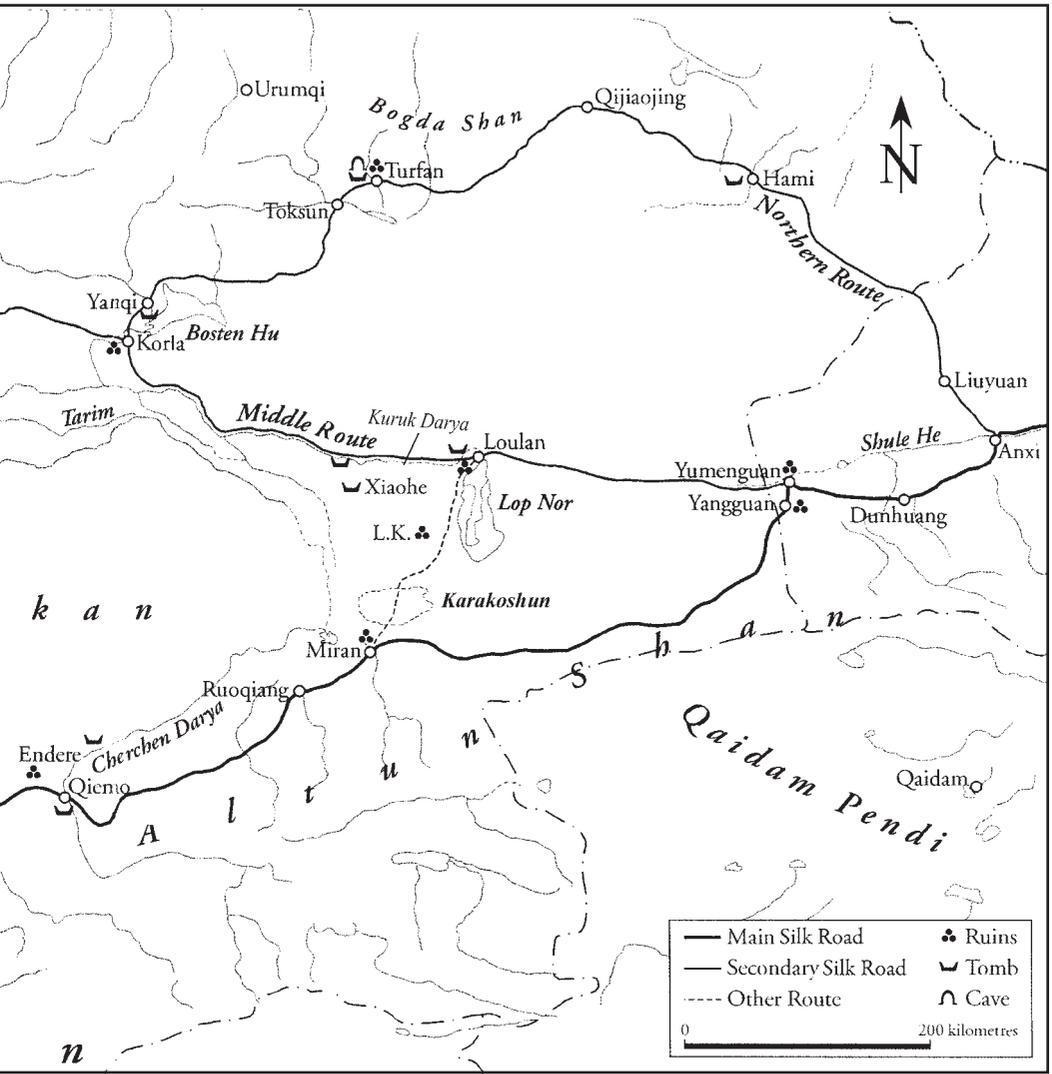


C. Baumer, *Tibet's Ancient Religion, Bön* (2002), pp. 12–13

MAP 5

Archaeological sites in the Tarim Basin, Xinjiang, China





C. Baumer, *Southern Silk Road* (2003), pp. 6–7

Acknowledgements

Without the help and cooperation of numerous people, the expeditions and travels described in this book would not have been possible. Since on most journeys the boundaries of travel permits and other regulations had to be stretched to the limit and even beyond, and since several people that I interviewed would be exposed to trouble should their identity become public, most of these generous individuals must remain anonymous. For these reasons, I can only thank collectively all the kind and helpful people I met in Tur Abdin, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Ladakh, Mongolia, Tuva, Tibet and China.

Outside the cultural realm of Central Asia I'm especially indebted to my father Werner Baumer, who planted in my mind the seeds of my eagerness to travel, explore and discover, my dear late mother Odette Baumer-Despeigne, who fed my hunger for books on history, geography and foreign cultures, Therese Weber, who has accompanied me with boundless enthusiasm and interest on many journeys through the whole of Central Asia, Maria-Antonia Fonseca who reviewed the German manuscript and Lore Burger who reviewed the English translation.

Foreword

This book is a revelation. The moment the first page is turned, the reader embarks on a compelling journey through the steppes and high mountain plateaux of the countries surrounding the hostile – and still not wholly explored – deserts of Taklamakan and Lop.

Whether tracking traces of Christian Nestorian worshippers, pre-Buddhist shamans or sifting through the remains of bulldozed and vandalised Tibetan or Mongolian monasteries, Christoph Baumer studiously unravels complex mysteries and shares with the reader his deep knowledge and historical understanding of living and lost cultures. However, there is much more to this book than cultural research. Consistently underpinning Baumer's writing is a deep sympathy for the Mongol, Tibetan, Kazakh, Uigur and other peoples he encounters on his travels. This enables the reader to share his acute anthropological and philosophical insights as well as his archaeological observations. His excavations and well-researched historical flashbacks are enlivened with true humanity.

These personal feelings result in writing that is sometimes tinged with sadness as he reveals how ancient ways of life and religious beliefs are constantly assaulted by the ugly uniformity of what our frenetic world calls 'development'. 'Development to what end?' Baumer ponders, as the tempo of modern life spins on to what he describes in a memorably quoted phrase 'a racing standstill'.

Later in the book he wonders what 'evidence of our civilisation archaeologists a thousand years from now will dig up? Fragments of motorways? Coca-cola bottles? Garbage from the entertainment industry? A rusty tank gun? And what kind of civilisation will they reconstruct from such finds?'

However, his story is not just a description of dying customs or the drawing back of a veil from antiquity. Nor is it merely a lament for cultures on the brink of extinction – it is also a tale of high adventure. In the wastelands of eastern Tibet, the author experiences more than one savage attack by bandits. In the vast reaches of the Taklamakan while on the trail to ancient cities, he encounters mechanical failure and water shortage. His discoveries are gained at the expense of both personal hardship and real danger.

Knowing the deserts of Lop and the Taklamakan, I can readily share the author's feeling of total abandonment when water supplies are nearly exhausted and when a vehicle is comprehensively immobilised in an area of unrelenting hostility. I fully understand Baumer when he writes, 'For all of us who dare to live out our dreams in the vast wilderness of these unyielding deserts, there are still blank spots on the map and they only have to be looked for in the right places.' These sentiments resonate with those of Baumer's hero, the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin. A century earlier Hedin had entered these same 'unyielding deserts,' suffered great hardships, lived out his dreams and subsequently written, 'Never before had a white man set foot on this part of the earth's surface. Every step was a new conquest for human knowledge.'

In a memorable paragraph, Baumer states that, 'cultural assets may, however, not just lie hidden in the ground. These remnants of ancient civilisations may stay out of sight and also beyond the compass of our knowledge. Ancient traditions and even valuable religions slip out of our consciousness, threatened by the slow death of forgetfulness.'

It is an urgent priority for Baumer to save from oblivion these assets of the world's spiritual and cultural heritage because, as he asserts, 'Archaeological finds, together with preserved philosophies and religions of the past, represent the memory of mankind.'

With the pace of change taking place at a frightening speed, human memory is constantly tested. The traditional towns and villages of Tibet, Mongolia and China are being relentlessly bulldozed and soulless, uniform concrete blocks are rising in their place. As Baumer notes, 'The unique and diverse cultural heritage of these Central Asian countries is being ruthlessly standardised and ancient religions and customs demoted to the status of folklore' – frequently for the sole benefit of tourists. He unpretentiously explains that by exploring these threatened cultures and recording their past and present riches, he is attempting to make a modest contribution to the preservation of their heritage. Nor does he end on a note of despair. He firmly believes that the strength, for

example, of the Tibetan character and their deeply held love and respect for their culture, country and religion will ensure that they survive as a separate and distinct people for centuries to come.

Christoph Baumer's contribution to the preservation of the cultural heritage of threatened peoples is far from modest. Every serious student of Central Asia should travel with him on his single-minded journey of discovery and I would urge the armchair traveller to accompany the student. Neither the seeker of true knowledge nor the merely inquisitive will experience disappointment. Their only regret will be when the last step is taken on Baumer's quest – and the final page is turned.

John Hare

'A settled life is to an explorer what a cage is to a bird.'

Pyotr Koslov



The author with a lathe-turned wooden column, Endere

Introduction

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity; but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.

T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*¹

I used to live as a dreamer, indulging my yearning for the unknown only by reading the books of great explorers of Central Asia such as Nikolai Przhevalsky, Sven Hedin or Sir Aurel Stein. Their accounts of their travels opened up to me the fascinating cultural landscape of Asia, and allowed my imagination to gain a sense of the excitement of exploring unknown places, discovering new things, and, above all, acquiring new knowledge. I admired not only the courage of these men in embarking for unknown, inhospitable and indeed dangerous regions, but also their single-minded thirst for discovery. Their books exuded a scent of the excitement of discovery, be it the source of a mighty river, unsurveyed mountain ranges or archaeological ruins that brought vanished civilisations and forgotten eras to life.

For years I believed that Central Asia would remain inaccessible to Western explorers for decades to come. I supposed I had simply been born a century too late, but I was wrong. Only a few years after the death of Mao in 1976, China gradually began to open up, and the Soviet colossus – from the ruins of which the Central Asian republics and Mongolia arose to new independence – imploded in 1990. My dreams of exploration were relegated to the night and to the compartment of my mind labelled ‘for later’, but my passion for and interest in Central Asia lingered in my subconscious.

Chiefly to blame for my addiction to Central Asia was my father Werner. In 1967 he gave me, then aged 15, Sven Hedin’s books *The Wandering Lake* and *Across the Gobi Desert*. It was love at first sight or, as the French have it, I

was 'struck by lightning'. I devoured these books not once but dozens of times. I was fascinated by Hedin's rafting trip of 1934 along the desert river Tarim, today dried up and swallowed by sand; his discovery in the desert of Lop Nor of mummies thousands of years old; and his fantastic-sounding theory of a lake that migrated with a pendulum-like movement. I felt sympathy for his camels: the drivers had to sew together pieces of leather and affix them to the animals' hooves, cut and made sore by the sharp salt crystals covering the floor of the Lop Nor desert. One thing was clear to me: that was where I wanted to go – no matter when or how. But at that time, the Cultural Revolution was raging in Mao's China; it seemed to me that travelling to the moon would be easier than getting to Lop Nor. I was a victim of the error, widespread among politicians, of projecting the present in a linear manner into the future. In fact, history can change its course and open up new and unexpected perspectives.

For my curiosity and longing for travel, I was indebted to my mother Odette, who was already able to look back on a richly varied life when she married my father. After a period in the diplomatic service in Bucharest, she worked in Finland as a war reporter for the French radio service HAVAS, covering the Finno-Russian winter war of 1939–40, after which her return to Brussels was initially prevented by the German invasion of Belgium and France. She owed this belated return to Sven Hedin. Hedin, whom she visited in Stockholm and asked for help, was acquainted with several leading Nazis; he interceded for her in Berlin and managed to get her a special permit.

Again and again I asked my mother to describe to me Hedin's large apartment, the tall rooms filled to the ceiling with books, and the desks on which more books were piled several feet high; also the signed photos of famous personalities that Hedin had met, among them the Finnish president Mannerheim, whom my mother had interviewed several times concerning the course of the war. I would have loved to have met Hedin personally. He died on 26 November 1952, when I was five months old, but I learned to know him indirectly through my mother.

For my ninth birthday, my mother gave me her 1937 Zeiss bellows camera. On the long holidays through Europe that my parents undertook with me each summer, I photographed every castle, cathedral and locomotive that came before my camera lens. Even then I already felt the pleasurable thrill of lying in wait for a subject – a train steaming towards me, or the sun bursting forth from behind the clouds – together with the corresponding satisfaction on releasing