The Source of the Oxus

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CORRESPONDENCE.

The Source of the Oxus.

IN a paper in the *Geographical Journal* for January, entitled "The Proceedings of the Pamir Boundary Commission," whose excellent published narrative it reviews, there occurs a passage which should not, I think, be allowed to pass altogether without comment. The writer is speaking of the recorded observations of the English members of that commission in the neighbourhood of Lake Chakmaktin, on the Little Pamir. This is the lake from the eastern end of which flows the Aksu or Murghab branch of the Oxus; while from the low plateau at its western extremity a pretty rivulet, fed from a neighbouring ravine, flows down and joins the Wakhan-daria, or main stream of the Oxus, below Bozai Gumbaz. It was once reported that Lake Chakmaktin had both an easterly and a westerly outflow, but all recent explorers, from the time of Gordon in 1874 onwards, while noticing the exit of the Aksu, have failed to observe any similar phenomenon at the western extremity of the lake. The members of the Boundary Commission, however, in August, 1895, found that a stream which they call the Chilab stream, and which is the easternmost source of the Little Pamir or Sarhad branch of the Oxus, already spoken of, was divided near the lake into two channels, one of which discharged eastward into the lake, while the other flowed westward down the valley towards Bozai Gumbaz. As this Chilab stream rises in the mountain range separating the drainage of the Little Pamir from that of the Great Pamir; as from the other side of this watershed spring the feeders of Lake Victoria; as, according to the above observations, the Chilab feeds both the Little Pamir branch of the Oxus and Lake Chakmaktin; and as the latter is the admitted source of the Aksu, the writer of your article arrives at this conclusion: "Surely, then, the true source of the Oxus lies amid these glaciers, for no single affluent can compete with these three combined."

I am afraid that this ingenious edifice of inference will hardly stand the test of examination. For that the Chilab stream, which the commissioners found to be connected by a channel with Lake Chakmaktin, is ordinarily so connected, is disproved by the observations of all previous travellers. I made a most careful examination of the marshy ground and the low plateau at the west end of the lake when I was there in September, 1894; and not only can I aver that there was no water either flowing into or out of the lake at its western extremity, but there was not a drop of water in the Burgutai gorge itself, down which the Chilab stream flows from what is now called the Nicholas range. That stream is the uppermost affluent of the Little Pamir or Sarhad branch (a very insignificant one) of the Oxus. It is frequently empty itself. It can only be at times of exceptional water, then, that any portion of its contents overflows to the east and makes its way into the lake. To base upon this transient and accidental occurrence the contention that in the glacier sources of the Chilab, which are also on the different side of the watershed from those of the Lake Victoria or Pamir river drainage, lie the head springs of the Oxus, seems to me, I confess, a very disproportionate deduction from wholly inadequate premises. A source of a river can hardly be that which is ordinarily and habitually dry. That Lake Chakmaktin, and not the Chilab stream from the Nicholas glaciers, is the parent of the Aksu I hold, therefore, to be incontestable. Moreover, that the true source of the Oxus lies in the glacier springs of the Wakh-jir, below the Wakh-jir pass, has never, I believe, been doubted by any one who has visited that spot, and was, I think, sufficiently demonstrated in a monograph, entitled "The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus," which originally appeared in the pages of the *Geographical Journal* in 1896.

CURZON OF KEDLESTON.

Calcutta, March 1, 1899.