CHAPTER 16

A Journey to Tsetan and Samye

Samye Monastery. The oldest monastery in Tibet, founded in the mid-ninth century AD, served as the site of Tibet’s monetary reserve.

Photo: Tsybikov, courtesy Russian Geographical Society, St. Petersburg

Samye Monastery, the main temple.

Photo: Tsybikov, courtesy Russian Geographical Society, St. Petersburg
In order to acquaint myself with the historical sites of Tibet I decided to visit two ancient monasteries—Tsetan and Samye—which are situated on the River Tsanpo-chu below its confluence with the Ü. The places lying to the east and south of this confluence are customarily called Lho-kha. Local (leather) boats go there from Lhasa fairly frequently and I also used them to make the journey. These boats have a frame of bent sticks, over which are stretched four yak skins sewn together. The seams are smeared from within with wheat flour mixed with pig's blood. A boat of this kind is about one and a half sazhens in length, about two and a half arshins wide at the stern, and a little narrower at the prow. The baggage and passengers are accommodated on the bottom in the stern while the oarsman, one for each boat, sits in the prow and rows with two oars facing towards the stern. We hired places in one of these boats at a cost of three coins per person as far as Tsetan. I took two companions with me—a translator and a Mongol who was to perform services on the journey and to carry the baggage on the way back.

19th April 1901. We boarded the boat near Lhasa and floated off down the Ü-chu. The boat moved very quietly although the hard-working Tibetan rowed continuously, intoning a mournful song. We were moving, apparently, at about four versts an hour. That is how we traveled all the time, day and night, stopping only to go onto the bank to drink tea, have meals, and to perform other