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978-1-108-07754-5 - Ruins of Desert Cathay: Personal Narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China: Volume 2

M. Aurel Stein

Excerpt

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CHAPTER L

RUINS EN ROUTE TO TUN-HUANG

A NUMBER of archaeological indications rapidly gathered in the course of that first day convinced me that the ruins I had passed, and those to be expected in continuation eastwards, belonged to an early system of frontier defence corresponding in character to the extant 'Great Wall' on the Kan-su border. That I should have to return to them for thorough exploration as soon as men and animals had recovered from their fatigues by a short rest at Tun-huang was quite clear to me. Yet no chances of getting more familiar with details of the old *Limes* were to be forgone in the meantime.

So on the morning of March 9th, 1907, while the animals were allowed to enjoy grazing a little longer and the men to take it easy over packing, I retraced last night's route until I came again upon the line of the wall. It was now seen to turn off north, and to run straight down at right angles to the shore of the small lake near the end of which we had camped. I was able to trace the layers of clay and fascines, so impregnated with salt as to look quasi-petrified, to within twenty-five yards or less of the salt-encrusted lake shore. That the level of the latter lay only four or five feet below the exposed base of the wall was an important observation. The extent of local desiccation since the wall was built could not have been great here. It was still more interesting to note how the lake had been utilized as a substitute for the strange wall elsewhere guarding the line. It was evident that those who laid down the line were eager to make the most of natural obstacles and thus to save building labour.

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This conclusion was soon confirmed after we had started on the day's march. Having skirted the winding south shore of the lake for about a mile and a half, the track took us to the foot of a steep ridge which edged the lake on its east side. On the highest knoll overlooking the route there rose a massive square watch-tower, T. XI., surrounded by a crumbling wall of clay. The latter looked rough and of late origin. But a short scramble along the back of the ridge sufficed to reveal again the line of the old *Limes* wall with its characteristic reed fascines. It started from the lake shore opposite to the one where I had last traced it, and crossed the ridge down to another marsh basin.

As I noticed two more towers beyond the latter eastwards, I felt assured now that the line of the wall ran more or less parallel to the end of the Su-lo Ho drainage, and that the route we were following would keep within it and probably near it. The next tower was passed, indeed, after about five miles from camp near the southern end of that second basin; but the wall was not traceable there, evidently running farther north. For the rest of the day's march the succession of towers kept by our left above the grey horizon like a line of yellowish beacons. The stretch of scrubby desert or gravel Sai separating us from them was, however, too great to permit me to visit them without risk of losing touch with my caravan. Luckily the plane-table enabled us to fix their positions with precision from the route, showing that the distance from tower to tower averaged two to three miles.

At the end of close on ten miles by the side of a long-stretched depression full of luxuriant reed-beds and evidently containing springs, we came upon a small ruined fort of massive appearance, as seen in Fig. 154. Its walls, built of remarkably hard and well-laid strata of stamped clay, each about three inches thick, rose in very fair preservation to a height of nearly thirty feet. Fully fifteen feet thick at the base, they formed a solid square about ninety feet on each side. What splendid shelter they might give, not against human attack alone, but also against those cutting east winds, the very home of which

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we now seemed to approach! There was no trace of earlier quarters inside, and only scanty refuse from recent occupation by wayfarers. And yet, when I had climbed to the top by a rough staircase spared from the massive walls in a corner, and looked round over all this desolation, I felt sure that I stood on a structure which had braved man and nature for many centuries past.

The view enjoyed from the top was wide and impressive. To the south I could see the scrubby depression merging in a belt of Toghrak and tamarisk jungle. Beyond there rose an absolutely bare gravel glacis towards the equally barren foot-hills of a great range far away. To the north-east four towers lit up by the sun behind us could be made out echeloned in the distance, silent guardians of a wall line which I thought I could still recognize here and there in faint streaks of brown shown up by my glasses. What a fine position, I thought, this height of the fort wall must have been for a commandant to survey his line of watch-stations, and to look out for the signals they might send along it! But how long ago was that? Those sombre, barren hills of the Kuruk-tagh, now standing out clearly again on the northern horizon, had seen wall and towers first rise, and would see their ruins finally disappear before the blasts of the ages. But it would be like asking Death itself for an answer.

Somewhere between the foot of those hills and the line of towers the old drainage of the Su-lo Ho was bound to have cut its bed westwards. But even from that commanding position I tried vainly to locate it. And yet, as our march continued across a sterile gravel plateau till the evening, I could see that the route was drawing nearer and nearer to a wide marshy basin, stretching east to west and manifestly part of the main Su-lo Ho valley.

We had been skirting its steep clay bank for a mile or so, and were approaching a roughly built tower standing near it, when I saw in the twilight a huge structure rising before me from the low ground which fringed the basin. Hurrying to inspect it before it became quite dark, I found there three palace-like halls, with a total frontage of over 440 feet, and walls of great thickness rising to

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about twenty-five feet (Fig. 156). A natural clay terrace some fifteen feet high had been used as a base and added greatly to the appearance of height. There were remains of a massive walled enclosure with high towers jutting out at the four corners as if guarding a palace court. The sight of so imposing a building was doubly impressive for wanderers in the wilderness such as we had been for months, and the purpose of the grand ruin most puzzling. The position showed clearly that it could not have been intended as a fortified station. And what could have been the object of a palatial structure which comprised only three vast halls and seemed wholly to lack accessory habitations?

The problem was not solved that night. I found the men pitching camp near some springs about a mile farther east, close to some beds of dry reeds which seemed but to wait for a conflagration. After an incipient one had, luckily, been extinguished, a shift of camp became unavoidable. In the darkness it took time to find a spot where the bare saline soil would safeguard us from that danger. But the inevitable delay had manifestly affected the temper of the more excitable people in my party, already tried by the long desert marches, and a succession of squabbles and affrays between Ramzan, my worthless Kashmiri cook, Ahmad, the servant of Chiang, and, alas! honest Naik Ram Singh, too, kept matters lively till midnight. As an offset to these petty worries, Hassan Akhun, the ever wide-awake camel-man, was able to hand me two copper coins which he had picked up in the evening while searching around the foot of the great ruin. They proved to be of an early Han type, and thus furnished the first distinct indication as to the antiquity of the site.

Next morning in the bitter cold I examined the big ruin more closely, and soon ascertained all the main facts as to its plan and dimensions. But there was no clue to the real character of the imposing erection. The total absence of any other remains near by only added to the puzzle. Straight north there extended a wide salt marsh where there was neither need nor possibility of continuing the wall line. But both to west and east a succession of

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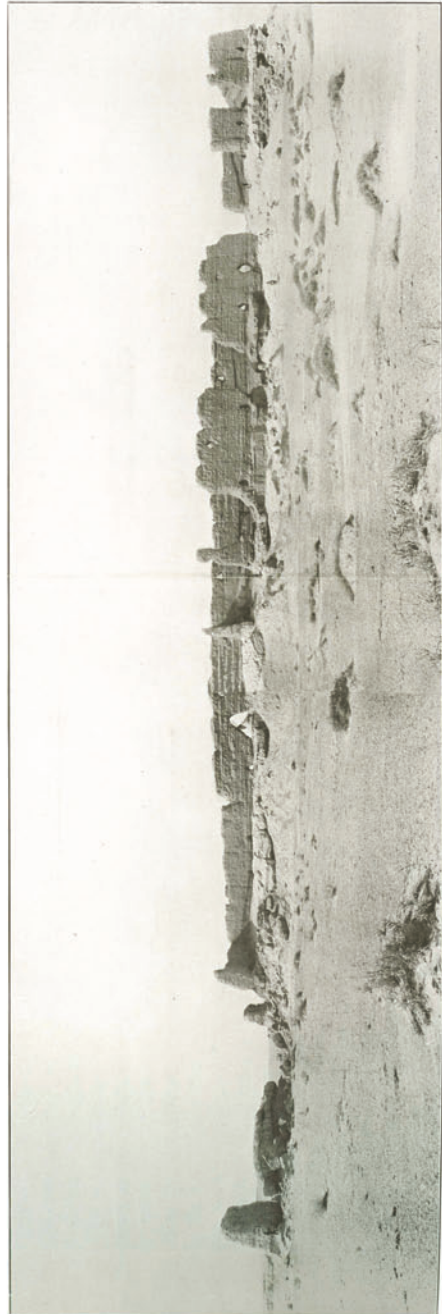
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155. SHAGOLIN-NAMJIL RANGE, NAN-SHAN, SEEN FROM CAMP CCXV., ACROSS BASIN OF SU-LO HO HEAD-WATERS.



156. RUINS OF ANCIENT CHINESE MAGAZINE T. XVIII., TUN-HUANG LIMES, SEEN FROM SOUTH.

The figures of men standing at different points of the structure serve to indicate its size.

The material originally positioned here is too large for reproduction in this issue. A PDF can be downloaded from the web address given on page iv of this book, by clicking on 'Resources Available'.

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towers was in view, clearly showing where ran the line which was to be guarded. Through my glasses I could see quite distinctly that the nearest towers were all built on small isolated clay ridges, such as rose in numbers from the flat of the marshy basin. Thus the constructors of the line had duly appreciated and used the advantages here offered for a widened outlook.

But to me it was even more curious to notice the striking resemblance which these clay ridges and terraces, generally ranged in rows running north to south, bore to the eroded formations I had met in the dried-up basin east of Besh-toghrak. I could not have wished for a more exact reproduction of the aspect which that old terminal lake bed, and in all probability also the end of the ancient Lop-nor bed about Achchik-kuduk, might have borne at some earlier period. Another interesting illustration of physical conditions long past elsewhere was afforded by the rows of Toghraks which closely lined the lagoons and water-channels visible from afar within the wide marshy area. I thought of the lines of dead Toghraks I had crossed so often in the desert north of the present Lop-nor, and rejoiced at seeing the picture of the physical conditions I had conjectured as prevailing there before desiccation, now so faithfully materialized before my eyes.

My examination of the ruin delayed me while the caravan moved ahead, and as, according to our guide, a long march was before us I had reluctantly to renounce for the time all reconnaissances off the route. This now took us for miles through belts of fine jungle and scrub, filling a succession of big bays which the marshy basin sent south. The track we were following had since the previous day shown numerous cart ruts, old and new, a clear indication that Chinese from Tun-huang were in the habit of using it. The grazing, too, looked inviting. I had been wondering for some time at the utter solitude when at last, after some nine miles of march, I noticed a little group of my men gathered on a reed-covered hillock round two strange-looking figures. These proved to be Chinese herdsmen from Tun-huang, clad in queer, heavily padded rags, looking after some cattle and horses.

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They were the first human beings we had seen for nearly three weeks past. Quaint specimens of humanity as they were, their appearance cheered up the spirits of my men greatly. I had never before had occasion to try my modicum of Chinese on people so humble in education and general intelligence, and that now, after repeated attempts, I succeeded in eliciting answers to some of my simple queries was felt by me no small encouragement. From them I learned that the place where we had met them was known as Shu-yu-t'ou, and that the cart tracks were those of people fetching timber and fuel to Tun-huang.

The route still continuing eastwards then crossed a succession of long-stretched gravel-strewn ridges, which from the glacia-like Sai on our right jutted out to the north like the fingers of a hand. The reed-filled depressions between them connected with a broad salt-covered basin north, manifestly containing a river course or lake bed, but too far off for close survey. After about six miles from Shu-yu-t'ou the narrow continuous ridges gave way to a wide bay bare of vegetation, and covered with rows of those characteristic clay terraces already familiar from the vicinity of lake basins dried up or undergoing desiccation. All the terraces had their long side stretching from north to south. There could be no possible doubt that they represented the remnants of earlier continuous ridges, such as we had just marched across, which the erosive force of the violent east winds and of the sand driven before them had slowly sawn through and broken up.

It was a very instructive illustration of a geological change still actually proceeding. The ridges themselves had evidently originated from the depressions between them having been scooped out by the drainage which during periods of much heavier precipitation came down from the foot of the mountains south, and cut up the clay sediments of a far more ancient lake bed. After another three miles of such ground we emerged on a level flat extending unbroken for three or four miles northward to the shore of a large sheet of dark blue water. At last we had come in sight of the Khara-nor lake, for which the map of Roborowsky and Kozloff had prepared us. But its

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extent was much larger than there shown, and the wide, salt-encrusted edges indicated that its level would at times rise still higher.

A number of small isolated clay terraces were seen scattered over the flat shore, manifestly the last survivals from terrace clusters and ridges which the relentless powers of erosion had long ago ground down and carried off. Two of them, not far from the present lake shore, could be seen crowned by watch-towers, for which they offered commanding positions. But it was getting too late to approach them. Perched at the end of a long ridge projecting into the plain from the south there rose another ruined tower overlooking the route; which at this point turned to the south-east. One more great bay was crossed, filled with a succession of eroded clay terraces. There in the twilight we met for the first time a caravan, a big convoy of Keriya camels which had passed us at Miran at the beginning of February carrying the goods of some Khotan traders (Fig. 137), and which were now returning safely from Tun-huang. We did not envy the men their second desert crossing. Then the route led up a gently sloping alluvial fan, and at last in the dark, after a total march of some twenty-six miles, we pitched camp at a spring which our Abdal guide called Yantak-kuduk.

The water of the spring-fed pool proved perfectly fresh, and far better than any we had tasted for a long time. The thorny scrub close by just sufficed for the animals, and as the oasis now lay within a day's march, the morning of March 12th saw the caravan start with unwonted alacrity. On a small knoll to the south where we fixed the plane-table I observed a novel sight, a miniature shrine built of clay and evidently cherished by Chinese wayfarers; for inside the tiny cella there lay votive offerings of papers and incense sticks. It served to remind me that we were approaching a region where Buddhism, or what figures as such in Chinese syncretistic belief, is still a religion in being.

Nothing else on that day's march indicated that we were moving towards a town of the living. For fully seventeen miles we rode over a waste of gravel with practically

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no vegetation. There was nothing to intercept the view on this sterile alluvial fan, and looking back we could see the expanse of Khara-nor and the sombre hills beyond it quite clearly. Twice we crossed ancient river beds deep-cut, yet quite dry, marking probably an earlier delta of the Tang Ho. The second showed some growth of reeds, and evidently received subsoil water. Just before reaching it I caught the first distant sight of a line of trees marking the Tun-huang oasis, and after marching four miles onwards we found ourselves almost suddenly stepping from the barren Sai across the edge of cultivation.

The fine arbours and well-tilled fields, by contrast with the wastes we had passed through, looked inviting and neat, even in their wintry bareness. Half a mile onwards we came upon what looked like a dilapidated small fort now serving for cultivators' quarters. The Chinese occupants, after some parley with Chiang-ssü-yeh, allowed us to pitch our tents on the clean threshing-ground outside their high clay walls. It was evident that strangers were indeed a novel sight to them; for all the time that camp was being pitched and for hours afterwards we were watched with the utmost curiosity by every able-bodied man in the place and swarms of lively children.

There was a display of good nature all round, which was pleasing; and when I had managed somehow to make myself understood on a few simple matters by the jovial unkempt rustics, all doubts about the first welcome which might await us on true Chinese soil passed off. My own tent, as always, was kept at a good distance from the noise of the general camp. Just in front of it rose a clump of elms, and under them a picturesque little Buddhist shrine adorned with good wood-carving and some bold frescoes representing the 'Guardian divinities of the Regions.' All the surroundings breathed a novel air of well-ordered civilization; and when the crowd of good-natured watchers had dispersed with the falling darkness, I had reason to feel gratified with my first place of rest within the purlieus of a celestial population.