

had started, no matter which of the lakes we had set out from, of those that hang like grapes, each on its stalk, along the right bank of the Tarim, we should still have found a string of bajirs to travel through. In fact the direction in which we were actually travelling was the only practicable route. Had we chosen to cross the desert in the opposite direction, we should have had an excessively toilsome march, because the steep leeward faces of the sandy thresholds would then have been against us, for, as I have more than once said, they all looked towards the south-south-west. It would indeed have been possible to travel westwards, but the difficulties would have been immense, for at each dune-accumulation we should have been forced to climb up 70 to 90 meters of sand, and the only help the bajirs would have been to us would have been when we crossed over them from side to side. To travel eastwards would under any circumstances have been practically impossible, and with camels quite out of the question.

Our day's march was greatly impeded by a strong southerly gale, which blew right in our teeth, and loaded the air with the dust and sand which it whirled up. Every dune-summit was crowned by upstanding »plumes» of sand, and the sharp edges of the steep faces which looked southwards were being planed down visibly before our eyes by the levelling power of the wind. The sand penetrated everywhere, even inside our clothes to the naked skin, and when we closed our teeth, it gritted between them. The north-south dunes running over the thresholds had both their eastern and their western slopes steep, and when such was the case we had to march along the crest, where the sand was to some extent hard. In the troughs between the sand-waves it was much too soft to bear the weight of the camels. All the same we frequently had to have recourse to our spades to make the road at all practicable.

Upon reaching the end of bajir No. 20, we discovered that it was bordered on the south by exceptionally high sand. This seemed to bode us no good. However we perceived two saddles or notches in the sand, the one on the left high and difficult, the one on the right somewhat lower and with a gentle ascent. Accordingly we chose the latter. On reaching the top we saw to the west-north-west a little naked bajir, and behind it a bigger one; but the bajir which lay directly ahead of us was completely choked with sand. Accordingly, at the risk of being taken too far to the left, we decided to keep on the top of the dunes themselves. We then had on our left a small oval-shaped bajir, free from sand, its relief being plainly and distinctly indicated by the series of concentric belts running round it, each indicating a different degree of moisture and each, though in diminishing ratio, reproducing the shape and outline of the bajir itself. Near its eastern edge they were crowded together, but on the opposite side they were separated by wide intervals, just like the isobaths in the lakes we sounded beside the river. The colour too varied from ring to ring, being lightest on the outside, while the ground inclosed by the innermost one was dark brown. This succession of belts or rings was exactly such as would be left by a temporary lake which had gradually dried up. I had observed similar belts around the Tschöl-köl, and had noticed them also in those desert lakes which are cut off from connection with the river. Had these belts been caused by heavy rains, we should have expected to find them in every bajir, or at all events