

comes to an end. What he did see was therefore a portion of the lake-basin. What led him to interpret this desert as just the place for a darja was no doubt the information which he received from Abdu Rehim.

To travel from the region in which we then were first up to Altmisch-bulak and then back again across the desert would mean a serious loss of time, for it was a long way round; I hoped therefore that I should be able to proceed from the vicinity of this dried up lake-region direct to the Kara-koschun. But before we could venture to do that, it was imperative to augment our water-supply by digging a well. With the view of finding a likely place for this object, we directed our steps south-east across the jardangs. Before we got very far from the edge of the saj we came upon a dozen hard-baked earthenware cups and dishes, which my Mussulmans pronounced to be of Chinese manufacture. Two or three of these vessels were of very considerable size. On the border of one dish there was a simple ornament, consisting of an engraved wavy line. A small cup, one-half of which was unbroken, had the form shown in the annexed cut (fig. 58). At length we came also upon an edging of copper, with a horizontal flange, which in all probability had belonged to a large cooking-pot or sauce-pan, like those the Mongols boil their tea in. These discoveries are of great interest, for they prove that this region was once inhabited, and no doubt mark the site of a homestead or small village on the north shore of the former lake. It is not credible, that these fragments of pottery can have strayed here in any other way; for instance, it is not likely that they were flung away by travellers journeying from Jing-pen to Lâu-lan on the northern shore of Lop-nor. It is more reasonable to suppose that there were homesteads and stations along this road, at longer or shorter distances apart. But despite all our eager search from the tops of the highest jardangs and tamarisk-mounds, we failed to detect the smallest trace of either houses or timber that had been worked by human hands. If ever there were such here, they have been destroyed by the tempests.

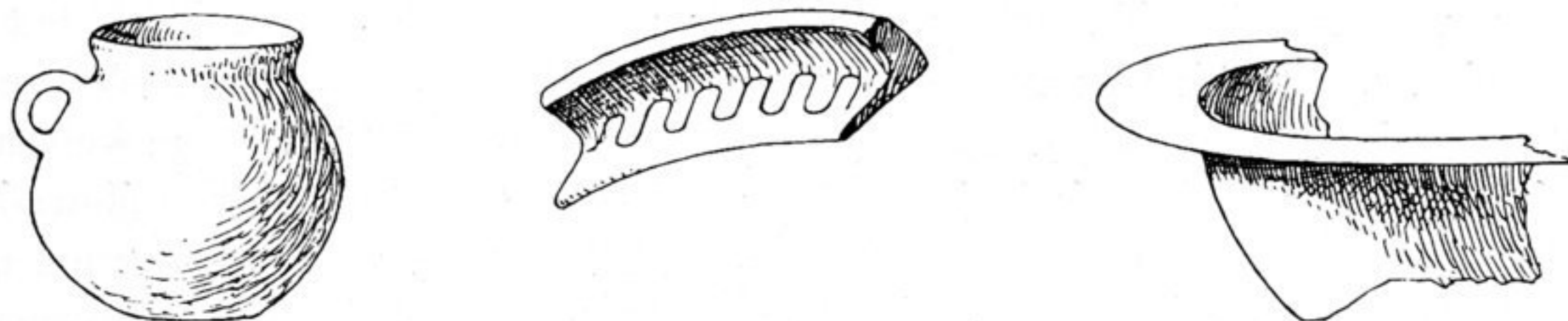


Fig. 58. VESSELS FOUND ON THE BANKS OF THE KURUK-DARJA.

In two or three places we perceived tamarisks with a spark of life still left in them; but it was easy to see that this was not the region in which to dig a well. Kötäk occurred here and there, and was only at all thick in a single spot, where it formed a continuous belt; several coarse tree-trunks lay prostrate on the ground. These must have been of an immense age, for they were as brittle as glass and of a light grey colour. Once however they must have formed quite a dense forest, although of limited extent. It is plain that this strip of forest formerly stood on the shore of the ancient lake. But all at once, about a couple of hundred meters away, the kôtäk came to an end, and there were no trees to be seen except a solitary