

at Mīrān was quite unequal to making full use of this water. Indeed Ibrāhīm Bēg, who from his prolonged experience as Mīrāb-bēg or 'canal superintendent' of the Chīra oasis and other places was a very competent authority on such matters, concluded from the data he had been able to gather that, given conditions of labour similar to those at Chīra, the irrigation supply obtainable from the Mīrān river would suffice for the maintenance of about 500 families. Yet the actual number of those cultivating at Mīrān at the time of my visit was put at 30 families, a figure that, even allowing for men absent with their flocks or on hunting trips, seemed, if anything, over-estimated.

These facts will help us to understand better the importance that attaches to the ruined site to the east, in view of the surviving remains and of the Chinese historical notices relating to it. They give additional support to the identification of the site with *Yü-ni*, 扞泥, the capital of Lop region in Han times,⁷ and at the same time supply us with a modern illustration of the successive periods of abandonment and reoccupation that the archaeological evidence obtained in the course of my explorations of 1907 had led me to assume.⁸ These *peripeteias* of the old capital of 'Lou-lan or Shan-shan' have their exact parallel in those I have had occasion to discuss when treating in *Serindia* the history of the existing oases of Charchan, Vāsh-shahri and Charkhlik farther west. It was therefore a source of special satisfaction to me that my renewed visit to Mīrān allowed me to witness in person this process of resuscitation in the vicinity of that most remote of ancient sites along the old 'southern route' from Khotan to China.

Reoccupa-
tion of site
of *Yü-ni*.

What had irresistibly drawn me back to the ruins of Mīrān ever since I had left them to their solitude seven years earlier, was the thought of the fine paintings I had then been obliged to leave behind on the inner passage walls of the shrine M. v. The full description given of them in *Serindia*, together with the photographs reproduced there,⁹ will explain the exceptional interest attaching to these remains of quasi-Hellenistic pictorial art discovered in a Buddhist shrine on the very confines of China. I have given an account, in the same work, of the serious technical difficulties that made it impossible for me on my first visit, with the means and time then at my disposal, to attempt their removal as a whole.¹⁰ The subsequent effort in the spring of 1908 to save the mural paintings, which had been carefully re-buried, by sending Naik Rām Singh to remove them, was frustrated by the tragic fate which struck that faithful and capable assistant with blindness at this very place, while he was preparing for his task.¹¹

Wall-
paintings
of shrine
M. v.

According to the concordant statements of the Naik and Ibrāhīm Bēg, the painted wall surfaces had been found by them in 1908 exactly as when first brought to light, and had, before they left, been protected afresh by the complete filling in of the interior of the temple, as previously effected under my personal supervision. Unfortunately this safeguard, as I discovered at once on my renewed visit on January 17th, had failed to secure its object. In the southern hemicycle of the rotunda passage I found that the outer wall which had shown the fine fresco frieze with the representation of the Vessantara Jātaka story and, below it, the fascinating cycle of portraits set between festoon-carrying *amorini*, had been laid bare and the once painted plaster surface, where not broken off, had been completely effaced through exposure. The Lopliks of Mīrān asserted that this was the result of the operations carried out three years earlier by a Japanese traveller (obviously Mr. Tachibana), who coming from the direction of Turfān had spent a few days at the site and carried away with him to Tun-huang what fragments of painted plaster he succeeded in detaching. Judging from the large pieces of plaster still adhering to the wall but no longer retaining any traces of their

Damage
done since
first visit
to site.

⁷ See *Serindia*, i. pp. 326 sq., 333 sq.

⁸ See *ibid.*, i. p. 538.

⁹ See *ibid.*, i. pp. 516-29, Figs. 134-43.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, i. pp. 532 sq.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, iii. p. 1317.