

They had been placed on gravel-covered terraces of the Kuruk-tāgh glacis and had thus escaped wind-erosion. There, too, the corpses were bandaged in closely wound rags of old clothing, no longer serviceable to the living. This custom was demonstrated with equal clearness by the numerous examples of complete Chinese burials which I had previously examined in the clay-cut tombs of Astāna, in the Turfān basin.⁹ These belong to the early T'ang period and are thus centuries later than the remains with which we are here concerned. But all observations at that place showed that Chinese burial customs had not changed in essentials during the interval.

From the evidence thus briefly summarized it may be concluded that the *disjecta membra* of burials collected into the pits of L.C. had originally been sheltered by graves which occupied ground in the vicinity safe from moisture by inundation or irrigation. But this necessarily meant leaving the coffins and other deposits exposed in course of time to the destructive forces of ceaseless erosion by wind-driven sand; for these forces must have been already at work here in ancient times on all ground not protected by vegetation, such as moisture alone can support in this region. My observations at the ruins of the Lou-lan Site and elsewhere prove that the unprotected surface level was here liable to be lowered by wind-erosion by more than a foot per century. Hence the contents of originally shallow graves, dating, say, from the first century before or after Christ, would here frequently be threatened with complete destruction by the latter half of the third century A.D. It is from such graves that pious hands must be assumed to have gathered the mixed remains for which the top of the Mesa L.C., owing to its elevation above the sand-swept plain, offered what has proved a safe last resting-place. The selection of the Mesa for this purpose would suggest itself all the more readily that it was of all such terraces the nearest to the once occupied area around the Lou-lan station. It was also, no doubt, a conspicuous landmark on what we shall have occasion to prove presently was the line of the ancient high road from China.

Reason for
re-burying
on top of
Mesa.

The above conclusion has a special archaeological importance; for it obviously shifts back the date of the relics recovered from the grave-pits of L.C., and in particular that of the many interesting specimens of ancient textile art to be discussed below, to a period which must be considerably earlier than the *terminus ad quem* fixed for the abandonment of Lou-lan, viz. the second quarter or thereabout of the fourth century A.D.¹⁰ At what epoch the re-burial of the cemetery deposits at L.C. took place we cannot at present indicate with any certainty. If from the few fragmentary Chinese documents found among them and still under examination by M. Maspero any chronological evidence is derivable it would, no doubt, greatly help towards a closer determination. Meanwhile I must content myself with pointing to the fact that, judging from the dated Chinese documents recovered at L.A., the years A.D. 263-70 were the period when the ancient desert route and its western terminal station saw for the last time abundant traffic and activity.¹¹

Approximate date
of re-burial.

It appears still more difficult to indicate, with any approach to chronological accuracy, the period when the original burials took place. It is obvious that these may have been separated by considerable intervals of time, and in view of the utter confusion in which their remains had been thrown together into the pits of L.C., no attempt could possibly be made to estimate these intervals, even approximately, by the comparative degree of decay exhibited by the relics. In this respect it will suffice to mention that as far as could be inferred from a rapid inspection of such remains at L.H. as still occupied their original position, the state of decay displayed there by the exposed bones, their rag bandages, &c., did not differ strikingly from that in which the remains at L.C. must have been when they were gathered into their final resting-place. It is clear that the destructive effect of wind-erosion may have differed greatly in its rate of progress according to the varying position and construction of the original graves.

Dating of
original
burials.

⁹ See below, Chap. XIX, sec. i-iv.

¹⁰ Cf. *Serindia*, i. p. 426.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, i. p. 408.