

much more open and allowed us once again to take the direction N. 55° E. To the northward, only small Yārdang-like ridges could be seen, while to the north-east rows of reddish tower-like Mesas showed in striking contrast above them. They seemed far away and probably only their tops were visible; but the distance could not be determined as farther on we lost sight of them. It has occurred to me since that these far-off Mesas were probably identical with the belt of eroded terraces on somewhat higher ground which Lāl Singh's survey shows to the west of his camp C. 89 (Map. No. 32. B. 2).⁷ As we proceeded the Yārdangs sank away rapidly, and soon only light swellings of the ground, in which abundant gypsum flakes were mingled with decomposed clay, remained to suggest the former existence of such formations.

After covering about ten and a half miles from the Mesa where the coins were found, we reached perfectly level ground of the same kind, slightly salt-encrusted and showing a thin layer of coarse drift-sand. From a small isolated hillock rising two miles farther on above this plain, I sighted to the east a continuous line of the familiar white salt-coated ridges. It could be seen stretching far away to the north-east, and is, I think, probably connected with the Yārdang belt which Lāl Singh's plane-table records about five miles to the south-east of his camp C. 89. The view obtained here decided me to abandon our north-easterly course and to steer due eastwards for the point where the fence of salt-encrusted ridges seemed thinnest. For another mile or so we still had the benefit of an easy surface of decomposed clay. Then followed what seemed a shallow depression covered with rows of low salt-encrusted hillocks, with flat beds of hard *shōr* between them. Fortunately the winds had driven a thin coating of coarse dark gravel across these, thereby making the ground less trying.

The direction of the rows of salt-covered Yārdangs was here, too, from N. 20° E. to S. 20° W. Their lines after about a mile thinned out, and when we arrived in the evening near the eastern edge of this Yārdang belt I had at last the perfectly open view before me of a vast salt-encrusted plain. It was the true bed of the ancient sea, which I knew that the old Chinese route to Lou-lan must have crossed, and which we had to face on the morrow. With its trials before us, I was glad to find a spot near the edge of the Yārdang belt where the salty ground, hard indeed but fairly smooth, allowed men and camels to lie down without discomfort, after the day's total march of close on twenty-one miles. But it was only with great difficulty that the iron tent-pegs could be driven into the surface of salt.

Much of the night had to be spent by the men in 're-soling' those camels which had again become footsore on the hard *shōr* between the Yārdangs. After that dismal ground, it was almost with a sense of relief that in the light of the early morning of March 1st we beheld from the last Yārdang ridge the bed of the ancient sea stretching away to the east and south-east as a perfectly level plain. Only a few isolated knolls rose island-like slightly above it far away in the distance. Through powerful glasses it was just possible to make sure that these were the tops of hills, manifestly those with which the low desert ranges of the westernmost Pei-shan abutted on the huge dried-up basin. It was encouraging to point to them as affording assurance that 'land' was in sight, however long the difficult crossing before us might prove. To the north and north-east a continuous fringe of low hills showed above the horizon, very distant also, yet confirming my belief that the ancient route—which from evidence discussed below I knew to have crossed the sea-bed—could not be sought for much farther to the north than the point where we stood. On ground like this it seemed useless to search for direct evidence of the line actually followed by the route, even if considerations of safety had allowed time for the purpose.

⁷ The Yārdang symbol was used by Lāl Singh without distinction for all formations due to wind-erosion, and has

been retained in the map in the absence of further evidence.