

off to the north-east marked a bight of the coast-line, at a point seventeen miles from camp. This strange well-trodden track cropped up again towards the end of the march, and beyond it also. It puzzled us greatly at first until the increasing number of camels' footprints running along it farther on convinced both Tokhta Ākhūn and myself that it must have been trodden by wild camels moving along this line for a long time past. It pointed to visits paid by them to the eastern Kuruk-tāgh from their present haunts along the terminal Su-lo-ho and in the Bēsh-toghrak valley.

Tokhta Ākhūn however declared that he had never seen such a regular track used by wild camels except where it leads close to water, and from that we were still far away. I well remember how the ancient track left in the gravel by the movements of Chinese patrols along the wall of the Tun-huang Limes has remained traceable to the present day.² I have accordingly wondered at times whether the wild camels' use of a regular track here, on ground where the nearest open water is fully sixty miles away, may not have been induced in the first instance by the convenience which a path made by man afforded, and been subsequently continued through the ages. Such an explanation must, of course, remain purely conjectural. I may, however, mention that Abdurrahīm, who had also noticed the old well-marked track where he and Lāl Singh's party reached the northern edge of the great bay, put upon it the same interpretation quite independently, when I questioned him on the subject after our reunion at Kum-kuduk.

Possible
explanation
of track.

But a still more curious observation awaited us. I realized, on sighting a promontory far ahead to the east, that following the shore of the bight above mentioned would involve a considerable detour. So I decided to steer straight for a hillock rising within the bight of hard *shōr* half a mile farther on and in the direct line of that promontory. My hope of finding a better surface beyond it was disappointed. But when I had ascended with Afrāz-gul and Tokhta Ākhūn the salt-encrusted hillock, about twenty feet high, my eye was caught at once by a broad and absolutely straight line running across the hard salt surface from the western end of the bay towards the previously sighted headland. My companions, too, clearly recognized the line which passed close to the south of the hillock. It was obviously the line of the ancient Han road cutting off the detour round the bay, and its trace was as clear as only this peculiar ground could preserve it.

Trace of
ancient
route
recognized.

Tokhta Ākhūn was sent back to take the camels round by the shore, and then, having fixed our position on the plane-table, I followed the ancient track with ease as the depression of the surface marked it clearly. It at once brought back to my mind the appearance of the present caravan track towards Tun-huang, where it cuts across the big bight on the southern shore of the Lop Sea beyond Chindailik.³ Together with Afrāz-gul I repeatedly measured the track and found that it showed a fairly uniform width of twenty or twenty-one feet. Its surface was sunk about a foot below the average level of the adjoining crumpled-up salt-cakes and offered tolerably good going; for within the track the salt-cakes were either much worn down or were covered with a layer of soft *shōr*. This smoother state of the surface must have resulted in the main from the grinding effect of heavy traffic, much of it probably in carts. But comparison with the surface noticed in shallow drainage channels passing into the *shōr* from the hill-side at other points of this coast-line suggested another explanation: an occasional accumulation of flood water in the worn-down track, rare as it must be, may have contributed to produce its present appearance.

Ancient
track
followed.

We were able to follow the straight track of the ancient route, thus fortunately traced here, without a break for two miles to where it met the clay promontory already referred to, at the eastern end of the bay. This headland, on close approach, proved to be broken up into a series of wind-eroded terraces, much after the fashion observed at the end of the Sai tongues projecting into the

Straightness
of ancient
track.

² Cf. *Serindia*, ii. pp. 656 sq., 682.

³ See *ibid.*, ii. pp. 549 sq.; *Desert Cathay*, i. p. 507.