

the thorny scrub where it covered patches of gravel offered plenty of food for camels, and of these great strings were met. They were being taken by their Mao-mei owners to summer grazing in the hills of Kungurche north-eastwards.

Shortage  
of water in  
Etsin-gol.

Mālum, our Mongol interpreter, had made a prolonged stay on the Etsin-gol seven years before. The river-bed that he remembered to have seen holding water all through the year was now entirely dry. It was stated by the Mongols who accompanied us to have been so during the whole spring or even longer in the preceding three years. Serious apprehension was expressed by them and by all the other Torguts whom we met afterwards, from their chief downwards, as to the fate of their grazing grounds if this shortage of water in the spring should repeat itself. From Suslun-tora onwards water at our camping-places could be obtained only by digging in hollows scooped out by the preceding summer's flood below concave portions of the river bank.

Shortage of  
water.

The farther down we moved, the more did the scrubby vegetation, outside the narrow strips close to the river bank, seem to be affected by the shortage of water of recent years. It was easy to realize here the appearance that the branches of the Kuruk-daryā delta south of the Lou-lan station might have presented in the early centuries of our era during years when deficient floods in the river higher up left them dry for successive seasons. Near our camp at Borgasu rows of Toghraks in full leaf close to the river bank (Fig. 238) still gave grateful shade. But a short distance farther on the route led over absolutely bare Sai, where the dry roots of thorny bushes, long dead, lay exposed. Elsewhere the bigger scrub still survived in patches, where the smaller grassy growth lay all withered. Low sand-cones, only a foot or so high, were forming round such bushes as were still alive. In places the trunks of dead Toghraks lay in rows, parallel to the river-bed, but on ground that subsoil moisture had probably failed to reach for centuries.

Series of  
mounds.

It was near Borgasu (Map No. 45. c. 1) that I noticed the first of a series of mounds, shapeless but undoubtedly artificial and meant to take the place of watch-towers, extending from south to north and about half-way between the Ümne-gol and the bed, subsequently located, of the Nārin-gol. As the map shows, the intervals between these mounds were usually about two miles. They contained neither brickwork nor regular layers of stamped clay, but in some of them brushwood cropped out on the slope. The height of the mounds did not exceed 15 or 16 feet. The impression I received was that of rough signal-stations, suggesting a barbarian imitation of the watch-towers along the Han Limes. There was nothing to indicate their age, as not even potsherds were to be found at the mounds that I examined. According to local information, which, however, I was unable to test, this chain of mounds is reported to stretch southwards to the vicinity of Ekki-dur-wuljin.

Luxuriant  
jungle below  
Dzusulun-  
tsakha.

After a march of about seven miles from Borgasu, the strip of riverine vegetation widened out and assumed the appearance of a luxuriant Toghrak jungle such as I remembered along the lower course of the Keriya and Khotan rivers. At Dzusulun-tsakha we found a Mongol encampment with large flocks enjoying the plentiful grazing; and some six miles beyond, near our camp at Tāwun-tora (C. 147), we reached ground where the area of fertile soil, with large groves of Toghraks, reed-beds, and thickets of tamarisk and other scrub, assumed quite a park-like appearance (Fig. 236). As subsequent surveys showed, this ground marks the head of a subsidiary delta, formed by the Ümne-gol (or Ikhe-gol) branch of the river. This steadily widens out and stretches down to the terminal basin containing the lakes of Sokho-nōr and Gashun-nōr (Map No. 44. c. 4).

Halt at  
Tāwun-tora.

At Tāwun-tora I was obliged to make a two days' halt, May 24th to 25th, in order to receive and return the visit of the chief or 'Beili' of the Etsin-gol Torguts, encamped some eight miles to the north. We had also to make all arrangements at this place for the labour, water-supply, &c., required for our proposed work at the ruined site of Khara-khoto. The Mongol chief proved