

A striking contrast was presented by the barren southern slopes of the same range, over which we reached, on November 17th, the desolate town of Rūi-khāf. The deserted interior of its crumbling circumvallation of mud walls curiously recalled some of those ruinous 'towns' to be found along the Chinese high road leading through the Su-lo-ho valley. The scanty stream of Rūi-khāf drains into the northernmost of those wide desert depressions, holding salt lakes or marshes, which stretch in a line from north to south and divide the hills and plateaus of Khorāsān from the foot of the Afghān uplands eastward. Prepared thus by Rūi-khāf for a succession of marches across dreary wastes, I appreciated all the more the surprise that awaited me at the little oasis of Khargird only three miles beyond. There, near an old fort and a cluster of vaulted mud houses representing the village, rises the ruin of a beautiful Madrasah built by the Timuride Shāh Rukh, A. D. 1444. The plan of this finely proportioned structure, a noble quadrangle (Fig. 453) surrounded by double stories of arched quarters and entered from the east through a grand vaulted gateway, conforms closely to that of most of the college buildings of the same period at Samarkand and Bokhāra. No detailed description is needed here, since the ruin was carefully studied by Dr. E. Diez a few years before the war² and at a time when its chief glory, the exquisitely coloured tilework that adorns the façade and the walls facing the quadrangle, had suffered less destruction.

To Rūi-khāf and Khargird.

The excellent masonry of hard burned bricks had withstood the ravages of time very well in most places; so had also the enamelled tiles, which cover most of the wall spaces with graceful floral designs or arabesque tracery in harmonious colours. But unfortunately this beautiful decorative display had attracted the attention of those who endeavour to minister to the greed of Western collectors. Owing to the great hardness of the brickwork and the brittleness of the enamelled tiles set in it, it was inevitable that the damage done in attempts to remove portions of the decorated surface should be lamentably great. I found the whole of the ground within the quadrangle strewn with the debris of brick fragments still retaining their brilliantly coloured glaze. From among them were picked up the specimens illustrated in Pl. XVIII and others. Local information ascribed much of the damage to officers of Cossack posts stationed at the village of Barābād and elsewhere on the Russian cordon line towards the Afghān border, operating through their men. In the two domed halls rising on either side of the high vaulted gateway, the walls and niches were richly decorated with painted stucco (Fig. 470). Here the delicate tracery designs executed over low relief in pale blue and gilding had suffered less from vandal treatment. Set against a background of utterly barren foot-hills, by the side of a little green oasis, this noble edifice with its glow of colours seemed to symbolize in exquisite concentration the finest features of Persian art and culture. I much regretted that time did not permit me to visit the village of Zūzan, some twenty-four miles away to the SW., with ruins comprising another Madrasah of Shāh Rukh.

Ruined Madrasah of Shāh Rukh.

At Rūi-khāf we had entered a zone where cultivation depends almost exclusively on Kārēz irrigation. What the industry of Persian peasants can achieve with its help in the midst of otherwise arid wastes was shown by the pretty villages of Barābād and Sangān, which were passed on our way down into the Namak-sar basin. At both places plantations of fine cedars were a striking feature. They are maintained with great care in order to afford protection against the violent winds that here sweep down from the north-east and would otherwise injure crops and other vegetation. 'Aspiration' caused by the low-lying desert basin is the obvious explanation of the direction and violence of these winds. This and the bare gravel plain and the brackishness of its scanty surface water all helped to carry my thoughts back to the desolate glacis south of Lop-nōr.

Approach to Namak-sar basin.

Nor did this setting lack its appropriate accessory of an abandoned site. On approaching the poor cluster of mud hovels round the small dilapidated fort of Mujnābād, we passed a debris area

Abandoned site near Mujnābād.

² See *ibid.*, pp. 70 sqq.