

CHAPTER XXIX

RUINED SITES WITHIN THE OASIS OF PERSIAN SĪSTĀN

SECTION I.—REMAINS AT AND NEAR SHAHRISTĀN

Site of
Shahristān.

FROM the shore of the Hāmūn we may conveniently turn to the opposite, eastern extremity of the present cultivated area of Persian Sīstān. There patches of ground rising above the level flat, irrigated or liable to inundation from the Helmand, have allowed a group of ruins to survive for which antiquity can be claimed. The oldest among them are probably the remains of the site known as Shahristān. They occupy the top of a detached ridge of clay which rises boldly above the alluvial plain close to where several of the principal canals of the Persian portion of the delta take off from the Rūd-i-Sīstān, the present southern branch of the Helmand. The ridge is the northernmost outlier of the gravel-covered plateau or *Dasht* which stretches for a considerable distance south along the left bank of the Helmand, and separates the river from the alluvial plain extending from the Hāmūn to the terminal depression of the Gaud-i-Zirrah. The top of the ridge commands a splendidly open view of the head of the Helmand delta, extending from the great 'Band-i-Sīstān' over the whole region comprised between the Rūd-i-Sīstān and the Nād-'Alī branch of the river.

Remains of
fortification.

The ridge of Shahristān extends for a distance of about a mile from north to south and at its highest point rises about 80 feet above the bank of the canal that passes along its foot on the east (Fig. 477). Its southern half, separated from the rest by an eroded dip, is occupied, as the sketch-plan, Pl. 55, shows, by the remains of an ancient circumvallation. On the other portion are found some small modern structures, such as a few sepulchral domes by the side of Muhammadan graveyards. Beyond this again the ridge has its continuation in a low and narrow plateau tongue cut off by a small Nullah. The fortified area in the south measures about 800 yards in length and is about 250 yards across at its northern end where it is widest. The enclosing walls, built of sun-dried bricks and originally very massive, are much decayed. As the photograph, Fig. 478, shows, they are, with the towers and bastions which strengthened them, for the most part reduced to the condition of more or less shapeless mounds. At the northern end where the slope is easiest, facilitating attack, two lines of wall are traceable; both survive only in fragments. Towards the south where the ridge attains its greatest elevation, rise the ruins of what was obviously a fortified palace or citadel, forming a quadrilateral block of about 140 yards by 80 (Fig. 478). At the north-east corner of this, some of the masonry was still distinguishable on the surface, and here bricks of two sizes, 18"×16"×4" and 16"×11"×4", could be measured.

Evidence of
antiquity.

The far-advanced decay of this inner stronghold, notwithstanding the very massive walls, like that of the outer circumvallation, clearly pointed to the site being very ancient. This indication seemed to me to deserve all the more attention in view of the protection afforded to the ruins by their position on ground secure both from subsoil moisture and from wind-erosion. The same conclusion was forced upon me by what I observed of the character of the pottery debris which abundantly covered the whole area, and Mr. Andrews' detailed examination of the ornamented specimens brought away has fully confirmed it. With regard to this evidence, account must necessarily be taken of what has been learnt from experience at other sites in Sīstān.