

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE DESERT DELTA OF SĪSTĀN

SECTION I.—RUINS ANCIENT AND MODERN

THE southern delta of the Helmand, to the remains of which, so far as they lie within Persian territory, we now turn, is at present wholly desert ground. Ruins and other relics of widely different periods mark its intermittent occupation since prehistoric times, and the desert conditions that now prevail make it possible to trace these periods with comparative clearness by archaeological evidence. On the topographical side, inquiry into the past of this area is facilitated by physical features better defined than those to be reckoned with in respect of the wide expanse of alluvial plain and shifting Hāmūn marshes that constitute the much greater northern delta. The division between the two deltas is formed by a well-marked gravel-covered plateau. It is a north-western extension of the 'Dasht' barrier along the left bank of the present Helmand course, and stretches right up to the edge of the southern portion of the Hāmūn near the village of Warmāl.

Dasht
plateau
dividing
N. and S.
deltas.

From the southern scarp of this plateau, rising here about 50 feet above the level of the ground liable to inundation from the Hāmūn, an alluvial plain extends to the deep-cut channel of the Shelāgh, a distance of about 30 miles. The latter, in years of exceptionally high floods from the Helmand, such as recur at intervals, carries water from the Hāmūn into the terminal depression of the Gaud-i-Zirrah. The above-mentioned plain, all fertile silt, was capable of being irrigated, over a maximum width of about 15 miles from east to west, by canals which once took off from the mouth of the old bed of the Helmand known as the river of Trākun or Rūd-i-biyābān and now quite dry. This is shown by the map as diverging from the present Helmand river-bed about 36 miles due south of the Band-i-Sīstān at a point called Bandar-i-Kamāl Khān (see Sheet No. 30 F.); after passing westwards in a winding course through the barrier of the Dasht it debouches in several outlets north and south of the ruin known as Yak-gumbaz, close to the boundary line between Persian and Afghān territory.¹

Former
irrigation of
southern
delta.

Direct historical evidence that this old Helmand bed carried water to the southern delta can apparently not be traced back farther than the time of Tīmūr, and that, too, only if we may trust the traditional location near the Bandar-i-Kamāl Khan of the weir known as Band-i-Rustam which Tīmūr is said to have destroyed.² But there is, as we shall see, good reason to assume that this area had been occupied for centuries earlier, and also that this occupation, whatever its extent may have been, did not imply simultaneous abandonment of the northern delta. Information, recorded without definite indication of its sources but probably correct, points to the continuance, down to the close of the seventeenth century, of at least partial cultivation of the area commanded by canals from the Rūd-i-biyābān.³ According to local tradition a change came about during the reign of Malik Fath 'Alī (A. D. 1692–1721). The Rūd-i-biyābān then ceased to receive an appreciable volume of water, and cultivation along it became restricted to the wide trough of the old river-bed, being dependent on canals that took off from what has remained ever since the only active course

Rūd-i-biyā-
bān branch
of Helmand.

¹ For some account of the Rūd-i-biyābān, 'the waterless river', and the country traversed by it, see Tate, *Seistan*,

pp. 129 sqq.

² See *ibid.*, pp. 156 sqq.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 160 sq.