

that a Chinese or Kalmuk village stood on this plain. There can be no doubt about dwellings having stood here at one time, but when?

Almost in a straight line northward from the »gateway» in the Beltagh the guide pointed out a Chinese paotai post on the summit of the vertical Laltagh. It must be of goodly proportions to be visible across about 10 miles of the plain. It is supposed to date from the time when this was a tilled area and the high-road to Aqsu passed along here. When I reached the foot of the mountain after a ride of 3 hours and examined the interesting old post through my glasses, I came to the conclusion that it was not the work of human hands, but one of those whimsical, inexplicable shapes that the mountains assume here sometimes owing to their weathering. The likeness to a paotai post with its steps was so surprising that I tried to photograph it in the poor evening light at a short distance from the mountain. From this point I followed the Laltagh westward until I rejoined the road that creeps between the mountain and some rocks that rise from the plain close to it. The ground, like the foot of most of the other mountains, is covered with gravel washed or blown down from them. There is no old toghraq visible and only a very little zakzak. The road continues northward about 1 1/2—2 miles east of the Kumatlag tagh, called Duvantagh here. About an hour further on the hillocks begin again with tall, dry toghraq and without a trace of younger vegetation.

It was quite dark before we reached the edge of this »forest zone». Some asses with maize and hay, that had been despatched from Maral Bashi on the previous day, but had arrived after the caravan, awaited my arrival. The caravan had gone farther than I had instructed it to go and it took another couple of hours for it to return. We pitched our camp at the foot of one of these sandy mounds round a good fire of dry toghraq. Some bits of ice that we had brought provided very dirty water, but in sufficient quantity to make tea and after riding for 11 1/2 hours, we washed down our meal of a little frozen mutton and bread with it eagerly enough. Our faithful companions, the horses, were treated shabbily and had to content themselves with some dry fodder, for there was no sign of snow in these parts.

The morning was so cold that there was no risk of anyone oversleeping. There was no water to wash with. A cup of tea with dregs of coffee at the bottom, a piece of bread, and we were off again soon after seven. The road goes NE parallel to yesterday's mountain ridge, Kumatlag tagh, that goes by a string of names to-day: Duvantagh, Kuzlag, Konekan and Parsh tagh, across a plain that seems interminable. On the right there is a broad band of sandy hillocks, with toghraq growing on them, and further east this is replaced by a white band of salty ground («shã», as the population calls these places, where the salt settles on the surface), beyond which sandy hillocks with their meagre vegetation, looking like a thin wood on the horizon, are again visible. The ground that slopes towards the road from the mountains about a mile and a half away, contains a lot of gravel. In some places this layer of gravel is of such a dark green colour that it gives the impression of being a grassy slope. Other places have a reddish-mauve tinge. The toghraq is supplanted by its inseparable companion »zakzak», but other-

*February 11th.*

*In camp near*

*Achal village.*