

## CHAPTER XII.—A RECONNAISSANCE OF THE KURGANS OF THE MERV OASIS.

As one looks northward from the great citadel of Ghiaur Kala in the center of the ruins of ancient Merv, the monotonous expanse of the flat sunny plain is broken here and there in the shimmering distance by pale gray mounds, or kurgans, of large dimensions. For a space of fifty miles from north to south and of forty from east to west they form one of the most marked features of the otherwise level landscape. A brief reconnaissance among them indicates that the old cities of Merv were surrounded by a dense suburban and presumably agricultural population which clustered around the kurgans. Fruitful fields and teeming villages appear to have been supported by the Murg-ab river, not only in the districts now under cultivation, but also in regions at present waterless. The distribution of the kurgans suggests that their future study will not only throw much light upon the civilization of the ancient people of Transcaspia, but will be of especial service in elucidating the physical changes, climatic or otherwise, which are sometimes thought to have been the cause of the decay of the ancient empires of the arid regions of Asia.

Outside the cities of the ancient Merv Oasis the relics of the former inhabitants are of two distinct types, characteristic of two quite different periods. The more recent ruins, which are fairly well preserved, are built almost entirely of sun-dried mud bricks, and consist of old houses and castles, rectangular forts with very thick walls, round towers to protect the fields and villages, and old canals guarded by mile after mile of walls flanked with square towers. The date at which they were built is in many cases historically known, and there is good reason for believing that they all belong to the latter half of the Mohammedan era. With these more recent ruins we are not now concerned, although a study of their extent and distribution would probably lead to significant results as to the water-supply of the Middle Ages.

The older ruins are of a distinctly different type. Chief among them are numerous flat-topped kurgans, or tepes\* as the Turkomans call them, which are so abundant that in eight days the writer was able to visit and examine 28, and might have made the number larger if it had not seemed advisable to visit those lying on the extreme outskirts of the oasis. The distribution of most of those investigated and of a few others is shown on the accompanying revised copy of the Russian 5-verst map (fig. 430), where it will be seen that they are most abundant in the region directly north of Bairam Ali and the various ruined cities of ancient Merv. In addition to the kurgans, there are a number of large rectangular forts, the thick and lofty mud walls of which have been reduced either to mere rows of hillocks, as at Kirk Tepe, or to rounded ridges, as at Yasi Tepe. Houses of the

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\*Tepe (pronounced tē'pā) means an isolated hill.