

occupy island-like terraces rising high above the wind-eroded bare ground close by. The debris of walls or the fallen trunks of trees had here protected the soil from erosion and thus preserved the original level, while the ground around was being scooped out around them lower and lower.

The possibility of permanent human occupation within the Tarim basin is confined to the small zone of oases left between the Taklamakan and the encircling mountain ranges. Owing to extreme aridity cultivation here wholly depends on canal irrigation. The same deficiency of atmospheric moisture restricts grazing to the narrow belts of riverine jungle. This explains why the great migrating tribes of Wusun, Sakas, Yüeh-chih, Huns, Turks, Mongols and the rest, who during the last two thousand years were in successive possession of the northern slopes of the T'ien-shan, were always ready to raid or to make tributary the oases of the Tarim basin, but never crossed the range to occupy it permanently. To them the laborious and narrowly circumscribed life of the cultivator in these irrigated oases could offer but little attraction as long as there were big open grazing grounds to hold or to conquer.

The cultivated ground within the Tarim basin could never have borne more than an extremely slight proportion to the extent of absolute desert it comprises. As the map shows, the green oases of the basin appear like mere specks and splashes on the big canvas of yellow and light brown which marks the desert. The aridity of the climate accounts for the striking uniformity in physical conditions which prevails throughout these oases. Whatever their position or size, the traveller sees everywhere the same fields of wheat, maize or