

historical times must have been as devoid of plant or animal life as it is now. As we left behind the withered and bleached fragments of the last dead tamarisk lying on the salt soil, I felt that we had passed from the land of the dead into ground that never knew life—except on the route which we were to track.

But as we started north-eastwards by the compass across absolutely barren wastes of clayey detritus or salt crust, chance came again and again to our help in a way which at times seemed almost uncanny. Finds of early Chinese copper coins, small metal objects, beads and the like seemed as if meant to assure us that we were still near the ancient track by which Chinese missions, troops and traders had toiled for four centuries through this lifeless wilderness. These finds showed that I was right in my reliance on those ancient Chinese with their topographical sense having for good reasons selected this bearing, puzzling as it seemed at the time.

It must suffice here to mention what perhaps was the most striking and welcome of these finds. The last traces of dead vegetation marking the termination of the ancient delta had long been left behind when we suddenly found the old route-line plainly marked by 200 odd Chinese copper coins strewn the dismal ground of salt-encrusted clay for a distance of about thirty yards. They lay in a well-defined line running from north-east to south-west. The coins, square-holed, were all of the Han type and seemed as if fresh from a mint. Clearly they had got loose from the string which tied them, and gradually dropped out through an opening of the bag or case in which they were being carried by some convoy. Some fifty yards away in the same