

when a fortunate find on its slopes of Chinese coins and a collection of metal objects, including a well-preserved iron dagger and bridle, showed that it had evidently served as a halting-place on the ancient route. Inspection of the ground ahead confirmed the suggestion that it had been used for this purpose, because at its foot was the first piece of ground, tolerably level and clear of salt, which travellers would strike after passing the hard, salt-encrusted sea bottom beyond.

So I at once decided to head straight eastwards for that bed, and the crossing effected next day proved that I had been rightly guided. The march across this petrified sea-bed (Fig. 68), with its hard salt crust crumpled up into big cakes aslant and with small pressure ridges between them, was most trying for men and beasts alike. But when this weary tramp of twenty miles had safely brought us to the first patch of soft salt in front of the opposite line of salt-coated terraces, and we could halt for a night's rest, I had reason to feel glad of my choice and grateful for the finds which had prompted it. As subsequent surveys showed, we had crossed the forbidding salt sea-bed at its very narrowest point, and had thus escaped a night's halt on ground where neither beast nor man could have found a spot to rest in comfort.

It was, no doubt, this consideration which had determined the early Chinese pioneers in the choice of this line for their route. Archaeological evidence of ancient traffic on it soon cropped up again in the shape of coins and other small relics when, through the opposite belt of 'White Dragon Mounds', we had gained the eastern shores of the ancient salt-marsh. Three marches along these shores, over