

ground easy but still devoid of any trace of vegetation, dead or alive, finally brought us to the last offshoot of a low desert range, which overlooks from the north the great bay at the extreme eastern extension of the ancient dried-up sea-bed. Then, as we skirted its shore-line, under steep cliffs looking exactly like those of a sea still in being, I had the satisfaction to find the ancient Chinese road still in one place plainly marked. For there a straight wide track worn by the passage for centuries of transport animals, and probably also of carts, cuts across a small bay of the salt-encrusted sea-bed.

It was a great relief when on the ninth day from Altmish-bulak we came upon the first scanty scrub and reeds growing on sandy soil by the shore of the dried-up sea-bed. Then finally a long march to the south-east brought us safely across the wide salt-encrusted bay, here showing patches of actual salt bog, to the lonely caravan track towards Tun-huang at the well of Kum-kuduk.

How traffic of such magnitude, as the Chinese Annals indicate was organized and maintained on a route passing across some 120 miles of utterly barren ground, already in ancient times without water, fuel or grazing, is a problem I need not discuss here. It was an achievement fraught with momentous results for the interchange of civilizations. There is deep significance in the fact that it was due far more to prestige, economic resources and capacity for organization on the side of China than to any military prowess among its people or its rulers. It may well, in fact, be looked upon as a triumph of the mind over matter.