

little scraping revealed the same fascines of reeds or brushwood. Before I reached our camp in the evening, I had secured unmistakable proof that the watch-towers were meant to guard a continuous border line. It recalled at once those *Limes* lines with which the Roman Empire protected its frontiers wherever barbarian inroads threatened them, from Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland down to the Syrian and Arabian marches.

It was a fascinating discovery which invited prolonged exploration. The line could be followed two more marches for a total distance of over fifty miles by the towers actually passed on the caravan track or else clearly sighted at varying distances to the north. More imposing ruins, too, were met as we moved on until the track towards the Tun-huang oasis obliged us to turn off across the bare gravel plateau to the south-east.

Before systematic exploration of all these remains in the desert west of Tun-huang could be undertaken it was essential to secure needful supplies and also labour for excavations. So I now had to turn south to Tun-huang or Sha-chou, the 'Town of the Sands', as its alternative name of later origin appropriately calls it. The surroundings of the small walled town of Tun-huang still showed plentiful evidence of the terrible devastations the oasis had suffered during the last great Muhammadan rising. It proved difficult to obtain even a minimum of diggers from its scanty and indolent population. But the two local mandarins, both the scholarly magistrate and the military commander, a dear old warrior, showed friendly interest in my aims and did all they could to help me. So by March 24 I was able to set out again for the desert with