

Advantages
of Tāsh-
kurghān site.

In a previous section I have already explained the topographical facts which make the vicinity of Tāsh-kurghān the political centre of the Sarīkol region, and the natural meeting place for all the routes from the Tārīm Basin to the Upper Oxus. In the fertile riverine flat to which the bottom of the main Sarīkol valley widens out just before the river takes its sharp turn to the east and enters the narrow gorge of Shindī, there is no position offering greater advantages for a settlement, capable of defence and yet easily accessible, than the site of Tāsh-kurghān. It occupies a narrow but well-defined plateau of conglomerate cliffs rising immediately above the broad bed of the river and at the extreme eastern edge of a fertile plain, from three to four miles broad, which spreads from the foot of the high range westwards. The numerous irrigation canals fed by the Shingun river, which comes down from the Naiza-tāsh Pass and debouches here into the valley, render this plain the most cultivated part of Sarīkol. It is probable that the silt brought down by these canals has helped to reduce not inconsiderably the difference in level between the site of Tāsh-kurghān town and the adjoining plain. But seen from the wide expanse of meadow land to the east and south over which the river spreads itself in numerous branches, the commanding position of the plateau is fully realized; the rise of its steep banks to a height of about a hundred feet suffices to render the walls that crown them a conspicuous object from afar.

Walls of
Tāsh-
kurghān.

The area enclosed by these walls, as seen in the plan (Plate XIX), may be thoroughly described as an irregular quadrangle, having a circumference of about one mile. It comprises the highest portion of the plateau, being separated from its continuations both to south and north by shallow depressions, in which the drainage of the plain behind finds its way towards the river. A small portion of this area, on the east side facing the river, is occupied by the modern Chinese fort visible in Fig. 10. With the exception of the portion where its high and carefully plastered walls of sun-dried bricks hide the earlier foundations, the edge of the plateau shows everywhere the remains of massive stone walls now crumbling to ruin (see Fig. 9). Only unhewn stones of varying size seem to have been used in their construction. Large blocks are to be found, particularly in the foundations; these, however, owing to the quantity of débris encumbering the slopes, are traceable only at a few points. The walls are best preserved on the north and west faces; elsewhere they show wide gaps, attributed to a severe earthquake which is said to have occurred some thirty years before my visit.

The interior of the circumvallated area is strewn with the crumbling remains of houses, found particularly thick towards the south side. These rubble-built dwellings were tenanted as long as the risk of raids from Hunza made it impossible for the scanty colonies of cultivators to live near their fields. Since peace has come to Sarīkol and the present fort of Tāsh-kurghān was occupied by the Chinese, in 1892, new villages have sprung up near all the cultivated places, and the stronghold has become deserted. When the earthquake of 1895 shook down most of the dwellings there was no need to rebuild them.

The walls of the town had already suffered by earlier earthquakes, and from general decay, which continued unchecked during the disturbed conditions prevailing throughout Sarīkol for some time previous to Yāqūb Bēg's rebellion, and again after its collapse¹³. Rebuilt undoubtedly again and again after successive periods of neglect, and always of unhewn stone, the walls now in ruins cannot afford any distinct criterion of age. But the high mounds of débris over which the extant walls rise, in some places to a height of over twenty-five feet, plainly indicate that these fortifications mark the lines of far more ancient ones.

¹³ For a brief account of the state of ruin which the town of Tāsh-kurghān presented in 1874 to members

of Col. Gordon's party, see *Yarkand Mission Report*, pp. 267 sq.