

Shrivelled trunks of ancient fruit-trees appeared rising from the low sand. Moving on northward for less than two miles I soon sighted the first two 'old houses', standing on what looked at first sight like small elevated plateaus, but which closer observation proved to be merely portions of the original loess soil that had escaped the erosion proceeding all round. These were the ruins to be described below as N. III. and N. IV.¹⁴ A rapid inspection showed me that the mode of construction in these buildings was substantially the same as that in the dwellings of Dandān-Uiliq, but their dimensions were larger and the timber framework far more elaborate and solid. The conclusion that I instinctively drew as to the far greater antiquity of these remains was confirmed almost immediately when, in one of the outer rooms of the ruin N. III., where the sand lay only about half a foot deep, I came upon some finely-carved pieces of wood lying practically on the surface, which showed ornamentation unmistakably of the Gandhāra style. I subsequently identified them as parts of the ancient chair seen in Plate LXVIII. Marching about two miles further north, across broad swelling dunes, I arrived at the ruined structure of sun-dried bricks of which Abdullah had already spoken at Keriya as a 'Potai'. It proved, as I had expected, to be the remains of a small Stūpa, buried for the most part under the slope of a high conical sandhill.

First ruins sighted.

Here, in a position conveniently central for the exploration of the scattered ruins (see Plate XXVII), I pitched my camp. The ground in the immediate vicinity showed all the characteristic traces of excessive erosion. Broad patches of bare loess displayed in profusion pieces of broken pottery, bleached and twisted trunks of fallen poplars and other garden trees, as well as much decayed remains of ancient timber that splintered and broke almost as soon as lifted. Of the buildings to which this timber débris had belonged it was impossible to trace even the roughest outlines. A few small loess-banks, regular 'witnesses', with almost vertical wind-eroded sites, which rose a short distance to the west of the Stūpa, 12-15 feet above the level of the débris-covered area, showed plainly how far the present surface of the latter had been reduced below the ancient ground-level. Numerous fragments of stone, evidently the remains of larger pieces that must have once been brought from far away for use in the houses, bore even more impressive evidence to the destructive force of the desert winds and of the extremes of climate. But as I retired to my first night's rest among these silent witnesses of ancient habitations my main thought was how many of the precious documents on wood, which Ibrāhīm declared he had left behind at the ruin 'explored' by him a year before, were still waiting to be recovered.

Effects of erosion near Stūpa camp.

¹⁴ See Figs. 40, 41.