

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE NIYA SITE RUINS

ON the morning of October 20th we left behind the last abode of the living, and also the present end of the Niya River. Five camels carried the first supply of water for my column, counting in all over fifty labourers. I was bent upon moving that day as far as possible ahead towards the ancient site to which my thoughts had turned so often since those happy days of labour in the winter of 1901. Yet unexpected finds en route delayed my arrival at the ruins which had then served as familiar landmarks. I had just passed, some five miles beyond Tülküch-köl, the last deserted shepherd's hut in the gradually thinning jungle, when Ibrahim and his fellow-guides suddenly told me of some remains they had discovered since my visit among the high tamarisk-crowned sand-hills east of the route.

On reaching the hidden spot I found a small open area about 340 yards from north to south, and about half that distance across, covered with unmistakable traces of ancient avenues and fenced gardens, and much-eroded remains of some dwellings constructed in timber and plaster. Owing to far advanced erosion of the open ground around, there was no cover of sand or refuse to protect these scanty relics of ancient houses. All I could still distinguish in the least damaged of them was the foundation beams which had once borne the rush and plaster walls of several small apartments. Yet even thus my familiarity with constructive peculiarities previously observed sufficed to convince me that the remains dated back, like those of the main site ahead, to the third century A.D. Long centuries of