

a fertile strip of ground, partly abandoned to rank tamarisk growth, and partly cultivated in turns of two or three years. A short distance beyond, on a scrub-covered sandy steppe, the track we were following led past a roughly built structure of timber and reed walls. Some ten years before it had served as a shelter for a Chinese detachment posted here to intercept the body of Tungan rebels who had fled from Hsi-ning to Tsaidam, and were expected to debouch upon Charklik from the mountains. Then we emerged soon upon a bare, gravel-covered waste, absolutely level but for a succession of narrow and low ridges. Their curious look and straight direction, running roughly parallel from south to north, at once suggested that they marked old canals.

Near to where the first of them was crossed by the caravan track leading eastwards—the route to Tun-huang and also to the mountains of the Altin-tagh—I came upon a completely ruined mound showing solid brick masonry and still about fifteen feet high. The tunnel dug into it from one side by treasure-seekers left no doubt about its having been a Stupa. That it was of considerable antiquity was proved by the difference of level, some seven or eight feet, between the eroded terrace or 'witness' on which the lowest brick course rose and the ground surrounding the ruin. Yet the presence of such a 'witness' on what looked like gravel soil not easily attacked by wind erosion puzzled me a good deal at the outset, until I convinced myself on my tramp across this strange plain that its apparent gravel soil in reality consisted only of a thin layer of small pebbles covering deposits of fine loose sand beneath. Our footprints sank deep into the ground as they never would do on real gravel, passing easily through the thin surface dressing into the soft sand below.

So I gradually realized that deflation was at work here too, the sharp blasts of the desert slowly carrying away all the finer particles, while the small pebbles mixed up with the original sandy layers, which the winds could not lift, were left behind to accumulate on the surface. This quasi-geological explanation subsequently helped me to account for the apparent disproportion between the great