

It proved to have retained a few roots of tamarisk scrub dead long ages ago. The men dug them out keenly, and had a tiny fire to crouch round for the night and to prepare our meal by.

Immediately near this old tamarisk cone the soil felt moist, and a thin crust of salt covered the surface. So subsoil water must still find its way there. But where did it come from? There could be little doubt about the day's march having led mainly over what had been a lake or marsh bed at some distant period. But how far back did this lie? In the present state of our knowledge there is neither geographical nor archaeological evidence to supply a clear answer. Implements of the Stone Age and neolithic pottery débris cropped up at intervals along the day's route. Had the people who used them occupied this area before it was last under water, and how long ago? Before such questions can be discussed with any prospect of settlement much minute survey work will be needed all over the Lop Desert, and the time for that does not seem to be at hand yet. In the meantime the total absence over this area of the lines of dead forest and of the old river beds which they mark, is a feature deserving special notice.

The temperature of the night had fallen to a minimum of 13 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. So I felt doubly grateful that the morning of the New Year 1907 dawned upon us not merely in brilliant clearness, but without wind. There was no fire to warm myself by in the morning, and even in the sun the temperature of the day did not rise more than a few degrees above freezing-point. The march proved tiring to men and beasts alike; for at intervals of two to three miles broad Dawans up to sixty feet and more in height had to be surmounted, and even most of the depressions between them were covered with a succession of smaller dunes. The occasional patches of hard ground met with in narrow, trough-like valleys would have offered better going. But they were rarely more than thirty or forty yards long, and running just like the Dawans and individual dunes from north to south, could not be utilized for our progress.