

flour and a guide. So no time was lost in striking across the reed-covered flood bed of the Ilek, here fully two miles broad, towards the hut of Arzan, an old fisherman who had been settled here with some cattle and sheep for six years past, and who was likely to guide us to 'Merdekshahr.' So far all Lopliks met with had stoutly denied any knowledge of the ruins.

By good chance we caught the quaint old herdsman 'at home' in his hut at the foot of a conspicuous sand-ridge, and found him ready to conduct us to the 'Tim' as he called the ruin. Soon leaving behind the narrow belt of living jungle, we marched eastwards for about two and a half miles over fairly high dunes and across depressions with salt pools, until by the side of a dry lagoon I sighted the clay rampart of a small circular fort overgrown with reeds (Fig. 131). Pitching camp there I devoted the day to a close examination of this modest ruin and soon found evidence of its early origin.

The very construction of the rampart, stamped clay below with sun-dried bricks above, both strengthened by layers of tamarisk twigs and horizontal Toghrak beams, suggested antiquity. The rampart measured some fourteen feet on the top, and at its base, now mostly covered by sand, showed a width of probably twice as much. Its total height above the present ground level was about ten feet. Measured from the centre line of the rampart the little stronghold had a diameter of about 132 feet. On clearing away the sand which covered the masonry portion of the rampart, I ascertained that its large bricks showed exactly the same dimensions as those found in the structures of the ancient sites north of Lop-nor, eighteen by eleven inches, with a thickness of four inches. The conclusion which this close agreement suggested as to contemporary origin was soon confirmed by finds of Chinese copper coins, all belonging to Han types, and two bearing a legend which we know to have been first introduced by the usurper Wang Mang at the very commencement of our era.

There could be no reasonable doubt that this small fortified post had been occupied during the earliest period