

us near the 'old town.' There was at last abundance of flour, rice, and fat for the men; and such small luxuries as eggs, frozen milk, and dried fruits brought home to me likewise the advantage of resuming touch with a 'base of supply.'

Next morning, leaving my men and animals behind to enjoy a well-earned holiday, I set out with Osman Bai and the Lopliks for the old site. It proved far nearer than expected, but disappointing, too, at the same time. For a mile or so we crossed to the south-west a belt of luxuriant reed-beds, with traces of dried-up lagoons. Then we came upon a line of sand-hills up to thirty feet high, covered with tamarisks and wild poplars mostly dead, and clearly marking the direction of a former river bed. It was about half a mile broad, and ran parallel to the present course of the Charchan Darya. Beyond, there extended an open eroded zone of alluvial loess steppe, from one to one and a half miles wide, and covered with many low 'witnesses' rising four to six feet above the general level.

Fragments of coarse and brittle pottery, also pieces of stone showing marks of grinding, could be picked up in plenty; but vainly did I search for any trace of structural remains or even a single coin or piece of worked metal. All the potsherds were hand-made, and in their gritty coarse substance resembled the pottery I had grown accustomed to associate with neolithic remains. Judging from the extent over which this ancient débris was scattered and the relative thinness of its distribution, I was led to conclude that a settlement, sparse but perhaps long continued, had existed here in times earlier than any to which our present historical evidence reaches back. It seemed probable that similar remains might survive at many points along the whole river course, but were hidden from view by vegetation or drift sand. South of the eroded area there spread a belt of true desert. But the dunes were low, and a well-marked sheep track showed that herdsmen on their way from and to Vash-shahri were accustomed to move across it. Before mid-day I was back in camp, and with the sun shining brightly through the leafless trees settled down to busy work on a long-