

skill of generations and all technical facilities, might have accomplished the task in the course of months. Even they could not have solved the problem of how to divide the crowded fresco frieze without risking vandalism, nor have assured its safe transport over such a distance. But how was I to improvise in the desert the skilled help and appliances needed, or even to secure the time required for such a task? Whatever local information I had been able to obtain about the route through the desert to Tun-huang told me that it would not be safe to delay the start of a caravan counting so many men and ponies beyond the close of February, owing to the dependence on ice for a number of stages where the water was too salt for consumption except when frozen. The desert journey was reckoned to last not less than three weeks even at a rapid rate of marching.

As it was impossible to secure extra camels, the difficulties about the transport of adequate supplies for men and beasts were sufficiently serious to preclude any thought of marching at a later season when additional animals would have been needed for the transport of ice or water. And besides all this, an early start eastwards was urged by my hope, built on slender foundations, but all the same strong, that I should find ruins deserving excavation along that ancient desert route. To reserve adequate time for the exploration of them before the summer heats was an imperative consideration.

It was not with a light heart that I could bring myself to abandon the temples which had yielded such a harvest of ancient art work. As long as possible I kept their interior open to the sunlight they had not seen for so many centuries, while going on with the packing of the frescoes which it had been found possible to remove, and the survey of the remaining scattered ruins of the earlier settlement. Most of these proved to be decayed Stupa mounds of the usual type without enclosing rotundas, but had been dug into long before by treasure-seekers. A few others were probably the remnants of substantial dwellings, built partly in hard bricks, but in a far advanced state of erosion.