

There were finds of interest here too, but I cannot spare space now to detail them. The general impression I gained was that the area occupied by these older ruins, though adjacent to the Tibetan fort, must have been completely abandoned and practically clear of vegetation when the latter had its garrison; for only thus did it seem possible to account for the remarkable difference seen in the effects of wind erosion. Near some of the earlier structures this had excavated the soil down to seventeen feet below the original level, while round the fort walls the maximum result of the erosion nowhere exceeded six feet.

After our long weeks of exposure to the bitter cold and incessant winds it was a real relief when my practicable tasks at the site were concluded. And yet it cost me a wrench to give the order for that final duty of all—the filling-in again of the interior of the temples, which was to assure fresh protection for the frescoes. This heavy piece of earthwork was, with the help of extra men from Abdal, accomplished on February 11th. It was a melancholy business to watch those graceful wall-paintings, on which my eyes had so fondly feasted in the midst of the wintry desert, as they slowly disappeared again under the dust and clay débris. It seemed like a true burial of figures still instinct with life. Nothing could relieve its gloom but a vague hope for their eventual resurrection, and the thought that if they could but take a look at the desolation around, they might prefer to rest again in the darkness. I could not foresee what was written by Fate, that fifteen months later they would again emerge to light from beneath their protective covering—only to witness a bitter human tragedy, darkness falling for ever on the eyes of my brave Naik Ram Singh!

But for the time being it felt like a difficult task accomplished with abundant reward, and as I rode off late that day, guided by honest Tokhta Akhun, to rejoin my base at Abdal, my heart was kept buoyant in the darkness with hopes for the new field which was to open eastwards.