

long time. A dismal monotonous waste, salt-encrusted, extended as far as the eye could reach around this Ultima Thule of the Tarim Basin. We sighted on our left a succession of small, reed-fringed lakes, all connected with the dying Tarim, and visited at times by fishing canoes. But the dry, salt-covered ground which the track crossed, no doubt part of a relatively recent lake bed, showed not a trace of vegetation until after riding close on twenty-four miles we approached in the dark the meandering dry beds of a tiny stream appropriately known as Achchik-bulak, 'the Bitter Springs.' At the point called Donglik where the caravan had halted, I found the narrow water-course covered with ice and a plentiful growth of tamarisks with some reeds. These were welcome for the animals, ponies and donkeys having been watered by melting ice. I, for my part, was glad for the peace of my tent, which allowed me to struggle with a big mail to Europe for two hours or so after midnight.

Next morning I noticed, from the small hillock of gravel and salt where we fixed the plane-table before our start, that about three miles to the west there rose a high and massive mound recalling a Pao-t'ai. Mullah and Tokhta Akhun, who had come so far to bid me farewell, assured me that it showed no brickwork. Nevertheless, it seemed *a priori* very probable that it was of artificial origin and meant for a road-mark or watch-station. The gravel of which it was said to be composed would naturally be bound together into a sort of conglomerate or marl by the salt contained in the soil and seen everywhere efflorescent. The direction which it indicated was exactly that of Miran and of the straight caravan route to Charklik leading past it. In spite of all efforts my mail-bag was not yet completed, and as the despatch of it could not be delayed beyond the next halt and time was pressing, I had reluctantly to forgo a visit to the mound, which would have implied a great détour.

A look round Donglik revealed close to our camping-place another historical relic of the route, though dating only from its most recent past. It was a wooden Stêlê set up on a tamarisk hillock, with a Chinese inscription written