

about twenty-five feet (Fig. 156). A natural clay terrace some fifteen feet high had been used as a base and added greatly to the appearance of height. There were remains of a massive walled enclosure with high towers jutting out at the four corners as if guarding a palace court. The sight of so imposing a building was doubly impressive for wanderers in the wilderness such as we had been for months, and the purpose of the grand ruin most puzzling. The position showed clearly that it could not have been intended as a fortified station. And what could have been the object of a palatial structure which comprised only three vast halls and seemed wholly to lack accessory habitations?

The problem was not solved that night. I found the men pitching camp near some springs about a mile farther east, close to some beds of dry reeds which seemed but to wait for a conflagration. After an incipient one had, luckily, been extinguished, a shift of camp became unavoidable. In the darkness it took time to find a spot where the bare saline soil would safeguard us from that danger. But the inevitable delay had manifestly affected the temper of the more excitable people in my party, already tried by the long desert marches, and a succession of squabbles and affrays between Ramzan, my worthless Kashmiri cook, Ahmad, the servant of Chiang, and, alas! honest Naik Ram Singh, too, kept matters lively till midnight. As an offset to these petty worries, Hassan Akhun, the ever wide-awake camel-man, was able to hand me two copper coins which he had picked up in the evening while searching around the foot of the great ruin. They proved to be of an early Han type, and thus furnished the first distinct indication as to the antiquity of the site.

Next morning in the bitter cold I examined the big ruin more closely, and soon ascertained all the main facts as to its plan and dimensions. But there was no clue to the real character of the imposing erection. The total absence of any other remains near by only added to the puzzle. Straight north there extended a wide salt marsh where there was neither need nor possibility of continuing the wall line. But both to west and east a succession of