

no particularly ancient look and a couple of small brick Stupas, well plastered and manifestly still receiving worship, were the only objects to distract the eye in this dreary landscape.

The route left the river not far from the point where the Tang Ho valley turns sharply into the mountains south-east, and was skirting the foot of a gradually rising ridge when I first noticed what looked like a low dyke of gravel and stones. It only rose four or five feet above the bare Sai, and could easily have been mistaken for a natural swelling, had it not stretched away steadily to the south by west in a line absolutely straight. The route kept close by it for upwards of five miles. As the dyke was broad, measuring about twenty-four feet at its base, and the surface on its top hard, it seemed to be used for preference as a cart track. But what could its real purpose have been? Without any trace of watch-towers or other structures, and with nothing but absolute desert to right and left, it seemed hard to imagine any defensive line of wall here. At last the route diverged to the south-west while the puzzling dyke could be seen running straight on towards a tower just visible far away in the distance.

I was still searching in my mind for some explanation of this strange work of man in the wilderness, when my eye was caught by many curious low stone heaps rising on the level flat of gravel. Of greatly varying sizes, they were always circular in shape, and either had a straight line of stones attached on one side like a handle, or else faced small rectangular enclosures laid out with big pebbles. The circular cairns—for such they seemed—never rose more than three or four feet above the ground; but as they appeared on all sides in dozens, brought into relief by the slanting light of the evening, the effect was quite weird. Was this the desert cemetery of some ancient population which had held the oasis we were approaching before the Chinese occupation, or primitive marks of cult left behind by some tribe which once had swept through this region? I knew of no analogy by which to guide my conjectures, nor could I stop there and then to dig up some of the cairns.