

thick plaster had, of course, fallen where not protected by the quarters which had been built against the foot of the tower, and often the erosive action of the winds had laid bare on the top the heavy Toghrak timber inserted to strengthen the masonry (Fig. 180). Where, however, the clay terrace or knoll selected for the watch-post assured by itself a commanding view, the towers had been built less high (Fig. 178). No doubt the reason is to be found in that intelligent aim at economy in efforts and means which is so characteristic a feature in all works of Chinese civilization. In cases where it was easy to provide access by means of a regular staircase, I found that the top was usually occupied not by a mere conning-platform, but by a small room affording better shelter to the men on guard.

The walls of such little watch-rooms had necessarily decayed far more than the tower below; but their débris made access to the top still practicable. As I sat there with my eyes wandering over this vast expanse of equally desolate marsh and gravel Sai, which was relieved only here and there by a narrow streak of Toghrak jungle or glittering sheet of salt water, it seemed easy to call back the dreary lives which had once been lived here. The setting of the scene—of this I had ample proof—could have changed but little as far as human conditions were concerned. The very materials of which wall and towers were built proved that the ground over which the troops of the Han emperors had kept border-guard, consisted then as now of nothing but bare desert, marshes, and such dreary scrub and reed thickets as could find nourishment in their salty water.

By contrast it seemed almost a pleasing picture when I raised my eyes to the long chain of barren brown hills which lined the horizon northward. Yet there, too, everything bore the impress of death-like torpor. Not a trace of vegetation survives on the detritus glacis sloping down to the wide desert valley, and the closely set ravines which furrow the bleak hill-sides looked as if scooped out by rain such as has failed to reach here for thousands of years. None of the valleys on this side of the Kuruk-tagh are now known to possess wells or springs. But there were