

well-preserved stretch of it. Close examination proved that it was a narrow but well-defined track, worn into the coarse gravel soil by the patrols who had tramped along here for centuries. Again and again this strange, uncanny track reappeared along wall sections miles away from the caravan route, wherever the remains of the wall were high enough to offer protection against the coarse sand and pebbles driven by the north and north-east winds. Nevertheless I might have doubted this simple explanation, had I not had such abundant occasion to convince myself of the remarkable persistence with which this gravel soil retains all impressions such as footprints or wheel-tracks.

Frequently I came across the latter running to depressions which may at one time have afforded some grazing or fuel, but where both these inducements to visits on the part of the cart-loving Tun-huang herdsmen must have disappeared for many years past. Yet the tracks left even by a single vehicle which had thus crossed the Sai were usually quite clear and continuous. Then elsewhere I noted with surprise that the footprints which we ourselves and our ponies had left on the ground when first tracing the wall on our journey to Tun-huang, looked two months later absolutely as fresh as if we had just passed by. We knew by sad experience the force of the gales which in the interval had blown almost daily over this desert valley. I have since ascertained that exactly corresponding observations have been repeatedly reported by French and other travellers of experience from gravel areas of the Sahara.

An equally striking proof of the extraordinarily preservative power of this desert soil and climate was supplied by an observation which at first puzzled me greatly. At a number of the watch-stations examined on my first reconnaissances I had noticed a series of queer little mounds, arranged in regular cross rows *quincunx* fashion, wherever the ground adjoining the wall on its inner side afforded sufficient level space for such an arrangement. Closer examination revealed that these small structures, each about seven or eight feet square and up to seven feet in height, were built up entirely of regular reed fascines, laid