

The 'old town,' of which I had heard the vaguest of accounts at An-hsi, proved a large site and one highly instructive. It lay at a distance of about five miles due south of Nan-Ch'iao-tzū. It was separated from the extant oasis first by a belt of scrub-covered steppe, and then by a narrower strip of ground partly undergoing wind erosion and partly overrun by low dunes which reeds and tamarisks were binding. Here I found the conspicuous remains of a walled town of the usual Chinese type forming an irregular quadrangle. Outside it, and scattered over an area which covers at least half-a-dozen square miles, there rose ruins of clay-built towers, walled enclosures, and thick pottery débris marking the position of dwellings now completely eroded.

I soon saw that within the walled area there was little scope left for systematic excavation; for the slow but sure destruction dealt by wind erosion and the depredations of villagers had spared nothing but massive walls of stamped clay, and here and there big mounds composed of potsherds, brick fragments, charcoal, and similar hard débris. At the same time the abundant tamarisk growth and the presence even of trees in depressions not covered by deep sand were indications of subsoil water with its destructive moisture relatively near. But the study of the physical changes which had come over the ruins and the adjoining ground since they had been deserted proved very instructive. Copper coins, of which plenty were picked up on soil swept clear by the winds, showed that the site must have been inhabited during the whole of the T'ang period and down to at least the twelfth century A.D. Yet, relatively short as the time passed since its abandonment may appear, it had sufficed to produce effects on the ruins as well as on the soil which vividly recalled to my mind the most striking features observed at the far more ancient sites in the desert north of Lop-nor.

The town and the once cultivated area near it occupy a flat stretch of fertile loess soil extending along the edge of the bare gravel glacis which slopes down from the hill range south. Left unprotected now by vegetation owing to want of surface water, this belt, stretching away to west