

Kara-shahr looked a small and poor town ; yet in recognition, no doubt, of the manifest strategic and administrative importance of the district as the geographical link between the Tarim Basin and the Turkestan territory north and east, it boasted of a full-blown prefect. Being a subordinate of my old friend, the Tao-t'ai P'an Ta-jên, and forewarned of my coming, he gave me the kindest welcome. His help proved particularly useful when, after a rapid examination, I decided upon systematic excavations at the extensive collection of Buddhist shrines situated near Shikchin, some fifteen miles to the south-west of Kara-shahr, and known to the Turki-speaking Muhammadans as 'Ming-oi,' 'the Thousand Houses.' The ruins lie only about four miles away from the little station of Chorchuk on the high road, and have been repeatedly visited by European travellers. Yet there had been no digging except by Professor Grünwedel's party, which, as I had learned at Turfan, had been able to stay but a few days and had confined its attention mainly to some small cave-temples a short distance to the north of the main site.

The ruins of the latter dot a series of low rock terraces jutting out from the last spur of the hill range which flanks the valley of the Kara-shahr River on the south. A desolate waste of sand and scrub stretches around without a trace of ancient occupation, and the recent settlement of half-nomad Mongols a few miles to the north-east was too small to involve any risk to the ruins. Fortunately a little spring of fairly drinkable water rises at the foot of one of the rocky ledges. So by the evening of December 11th I was able to pitch camp at once in the midst of the ruins (Fig. 265).

It was easy to realize that the disposition of the ruins in long rows of detached cellas, varying in size but similar in plan and construction, and all in close proximity, would facilitate the employment of a large number of labourers, and thus help me in making the most of my time. Fortunately, too, there was the populous village tract of Korla only some twenty miles off to supply willing contingents of Turki Muhammadans who knew how to use