

it seemed from its debouchure to look down upon the oasis of Korla and, sighting the unlimited horizon of the yellow 'sand-ocean' beyond, to feel that there was but a single watershed far away left between me and the Indus! The short halt which detained me at Korla until New Year's Day of 1908 was pleasant though full of work. It was cheerful to find myself again among homely Turki folk of the true type, and to enjoy the comfort of such a clean and spacious room as the local Beg was able to offer me, boasting even of a papered window. It was a pleasant experience, too, to behold an oasis which enjoyed the rare boon of having an unfailing supply of water for irrigation, far in excess of the actual needs of its people. But foremost in my feelings was the satisfaction of having here, close to the north-east end of the great sandy desert, returned once more to my own ground.

This old fascination of the Taklamakan induced me to test the persistent reports about an 'old town' half-buried amidst the dunes, which Korla people declared they had seen in the desert south-westwards. The information which reached me while at 'Ming-oi' had sounded rather vague and romantic when gathered from the fear-bound tongues of labourers. But it took a more substantial form when at last fat and jovial Tahir Beg (Fig. 277), whom the Amban had deputed to act as my local factotum, acknowledged that he, too, knew of the 'old town.' His own cousin Musa, the 'Haji,' he told me, had some five years before come upon the ruins while hunting in the desert west of the Konche Darya, as the river from the Baghrash Lake is called below Korla.

The detailed account of the place which was described as a small ruined fort with a conspicuous gate, was confirmed in essential particulars by the discoverer himself, a gaunt, weatherbeaten figure, when he was brought into Korla (Fig. 280). He declared that he had not seen the ruins again, a dust-storm immediately after the discovery having prevented return, but was prepared to guide me. As the existence of some ruined 'Gumbaz,' or domed structures, was attested independently by a number of persons in the jungle belt of the Inchike Darya which lay in