

the same direction, I decided to give Musa Haji his chance, and started on New Year's Day south-westwards with light baggage and a small band of labourers. All Korla took it to be a real 'treasure quest,' and in spite of the winter cold recruits offered themselves in numbers.

After two short marches across excellent grazing-lands and then luxuriant riverine jungle, we crossed the hard-frozen Konche Darya and moved up along the flood-bed which occasionally receives water from the west, and is known as the Charchak Darya. The short expedition thus effected into the unsurveyed desert belt between the Inchike and Charchak river beds proved interesting geographically, showing in typical form the changes brought about by shifting river courses and general desiccation (Fig. 279). But after several days' close search in the desert, Musa Haji, whom I had taken care to keep accompanied by level-headed Daroghas, had to confess his inability to locate the 'old town' which he still swore he had seen and approached.

On the strength of equally positive assertions made by two other hunters, we subsequently pushed a net of systematic reconnaissances into the desert north of the Charchak river bed, but in vain. In the end I was able to establish with certainty that those elaborate reports had no more substantial foundation than the existence of early Muhammadan tombs and of rude shepherd huts amidst the dead jungle belts of earlier river beds. We succeeded in accurately tracing these remains after much trouble caused by the very deceptive ground. At the same time, the close study of the physical conditions convinced me that no permanent cultivation on any scale could have existed on this ground within historical times.

For some time I was puzzled how to account for the conduct and psychological motives of my several *soi-disant* guides (Fig. 280). They all seemed quite genuine in their own way, and stuck stoutly to their story of what they believed they had seen, though differing as to the location of their respective 'old towns.' Most puzzling thing of all, I could not discern any reason for conscious imposition, considering that no reward for their guidance had been