

SECTION III.—THE CHARCHAN RIVER ROUTE AND VĀSH-SHAHRI

Journey
along Char-
chan River.

Careful inquiries made at Charchan had failed to reveal any information about ancient remains except those already described and some modest ruins mentioned near the route which leads along the Charchan River towards Charkhlik. I was anxious to reach the latter place as early as possible, and left Charchan for it on November 23 with all the more assurance because I knew that the diligent search made by Professor Huntington in the desert eastwards had failed to reveal there any traces of earlier settlements. For a general description of the five marches which we made down the right bank of the river or along the line of lagoons and marshes fringing it at various distances, I must refer to my Personal Narrative.¹ In Ismail, a hunter and cultivator from Tatan, a small hamlet and the only inhabited place on the river below Charchan, I found an exceptionally reliable guide, and with his help the reported remains near the route could be located and visited without loss of time. Tatan itself, being situated on the opposite side of the river, was not visited. But from the information supplied by Ismail and confirmed at Charchan, it was clear that what hampered the growth of the small settlement, then said to count only six families of permanent settlers, was not want of water or of arable land, but mainly the difficulty, due to inadequate labour, of maintaining the canal head in position during the heavy floods of the spring and summer. In fact, the flow of water in the river, in spite of the late season, was still so deep and rapid as to make its fording on foot awkward at most places where the bed was united.

Ruin of
Stūpa
known as
Tim.

I had occasion to convince myself of this when on November 25 I crossed the left bank from near the shepherd hut of Shōr-köl-ōghil in order to examine a small ruined structure called merely *Tim* or 'tower'. It is situated about eleven miles below Tatan, at *circ.* 38°33' lat., 85°55' long., and has been briefly referred to by Dr. Hedin as the ruin of an 'old P'ao-tai'. The 'Tim', discovered only some hundred yards off the river-bank, proved to be the ruin of a small structure, once apparently square, solidly built with sun-dried bricks and stamped clay. The extant portion, best preserved on the south-west face, showed there a length of eleven feet. The north-east face being badly broken, the breadth of the surviving masonry was reduced to about seven feet. Its clear height was also about seven feet; but the top of the small débris-covered mound which the structure occupied rose itself four feet above the general ground-level. The ruin represents in all probability the lowest base of a small Stūpa, and its antiquity is attested by the great size of the bricks and their peculiar setting. The bricks measured on the average nineteen to twenty by fourteen to fifteen inches, with a thickness of four inches. They were well made, and set in regular single courses with layers of hard stamped clay, eight inches high, between them. The system of masonry closely resembled that observed in the ruins of the earlier settlement at the Endere Site, and bore the same ancient appearance.

Early settle-
ment by
present
river-
course.

No pottery débris or other ancient remains could be traced near by. But this is scarcely surprising on ground kept moist by the vicinity of the river, where less solid structures were bound to decay and small débris was liable to be covered by riverine loess. The main interest of the ruin lies in the fact that it proves the existence of a settlement in Buddhist times very near the present river course, and thus supports the presumption that the latter has changed less in its main direction than the many dry channels and the strings of lagoons, encountered on either side from a point below Tatan, might otherwise lead one to suppose. Close by I noticed the course of a small irrigation cut. According to Ismail it dated back to an attempt made about fifteen years before by people from Tatan to carry on cultivation at this point. After a few years it was abandoned owing to the *shōr* or salinity developed by the soil.

¹ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 326 sqq.