

inhabited.⁵ Everything pointed to the conclusion that the structural remains of the ruined fort and the deep deposits of rubbish—rich in archaeological plums and remarkable, too, for their dirt—accumulated within them, all belonged to a protracted period of Tibetan occupation which in the light of available historical evidence could safely be assigned to the eighth or ninth century A.D.

It seemed hard to leave unexhausted, even for a time, so promising a mine as the profuse antiquarian haul of that first day had revealed. But when, on the following morning, I left the excavations in the fort to be continued under Naik Rām Singh's and Chiang Ssü-yeh's supervision, and proceeded to a rapid preliminary examination of the ruin, about a mile and a half to the north-east, of which Tokhta Ākhūn had spoken as showing remains of sculptures, I soon convinced myself that, by settling down to a complete clearing of Mīrān, I should risk too long a delay of my expedition to the ruins in the north of the Lop-nōr desert. And against such a course there were the gravest practical reasons. The ruin proved to be that of a Buddhist shrine, with its central portion rising as a solid mass of masonry about forty-six feet long and thirty wide. Above the débris encumbering the north-east side of the base there still showed remains of stucco reliefs occupying niches divided by architectural decoration of good design. I cleared a small portion of the base on that side, and soon came upon fragments of stucco sculptures of large size, including a well-modelled colossal Buddha head, that closely resembled in style the reliefs of the Rawak Stūpa.

Temple
ruin M. II.

It was impossible to be mistaken in attributing the temple to a period far more ancient than that of the Tibetan fort. Various observations made it probable that a site of considerable antiquity had been reoccupied here as in the case of Endere. It was clear that in order to secure adequate time for the careful excavation of this temple and of other ruins of earlier origin, I should have to revisit the site after my return from the ruins northward. Fortunately the vicinity of Abdal, where my base was to be established, and which would have to serve also as the starting-point for the desert journey to Tun-huang, made it easy to shape my plans accordingly. So after a further rapid reconnaissance of the whole site I returned to the fort, where the excavations carried on in my absence had yielded interesting finds. By nightfall I had had everything filled in again as a precaution against 'exploration' by 'treasure-seekers'.

Further ex-
ploration of
Mīrān post-
poned.

SECTION II.—PAST THE TERMINAL LAGOONS OF THE TĀRĪM

On the morning of December 10 I set out from Mīrān for the journey to the ruins of 'Lou-lan'. On the preceding evening Surveyor R. S. Rām Singh had rejoined me from Charkhlik. He was suffering from rheumatic fever, and consequently needed a camel to ride from the point where the want of water would oblige us to leave our ponies behind. This necessitated a still more careful calculation of the weight of the indispensable food-supplies, baggage, and ice which we could carry into the desert on the available twenty camels. I found myself obliged to reduce the total number of labourers to be taken with us to thirty-five. In addition, there were fifteen in our own party, including camel-men and Lop hunters, for whom the necessities of life had to be assured during protracted operations in the waterless desert. The excavations at Mīrān had provided a useful test, and it was the least efficient of our diggers who were paid off and sent back to Charkhlik before starting.

Start from
Mīrān.

The march of some nineteen miles which brought us northward to the Tārīm led along the

March to
Loplik ham-
let at Abdal.

⁵ These jars were carefully re-buried before I left the Mīrān ruins on December 10 for the march across the Lop desert. But on my return to the site in January I found them unearched again and broken, the result of some attempt

at 'treasure-seeking' which the men of a caravan encamped at Mīrān were said to have indulged in. For two frs. recovered, see M. I. 0063 in List, Chap. XIII. sec. ix.