

The line of wall further to the east had become in many places eroded, and the height of the exposed portion was lower. But even where, after about two miles, it had entered the sandy, scrub-covered depression, its traces in the shape of layers of reeds reappeared again and again on patches of gravel, though elsewhere on softer soil they had decayed completely. Thus the line could be tracked quite straight to within a quarter of a mile of the next tower, T. VII, which rose on the edge of the gravel plateau opposite. This proved to be similar in size and shape to the last, though less well preserved. The construction was varied by the substitution for the brickwork of regular layers of hard stamped clay from two and a half to four and a half inches thick. No reed straw had been put between the layers of clay; but, in order to secure more consistency, roughly-hewn posts of wild poplar wood had been inserted vertically near the four corners and joined together, at intervals of about ten inches, by thick ropes of twisted reeds. Embedded in the clay, these had remained perfectly sound, as could be seen at the north-east corner, where the outer portion of the pisé had fallen to some height above the ground. The whole, like the materials used in the wall, showed plainly how little the physical conditions and resources of this desert ground had changed since wall and towers were constructed.

The purpose of the towers was clearly shown when on the south face of T. VII I noticed a succession of rough foot-holes, made in the solid clay along the centre line and ascending towards the top. They were about a foot apart vertically and were obviously intended to assist a person climbing to the top. The position of the ropes provided to assist him in the performance was still marked by a regular succession of holes which must once have held beams inserted into the masonry and meant to stick out. These beams, always arranged in pairs, about three and a half feet apart and at intervals of four feet vertically, must have secured the ropes that served as a hand-rail. The top, about twenty-two feet from the ground, was no longer accessible, but there could be no doubt that the small space available on it was intended to be occupied by a man or two charged with watching and signalling.

No structural remains of any kind were traceable near this tower, and beyond it the continuation of the wall seemed to be lost completely. Therefore, crossing the bare gravel plateau to the north-east, I regained the caravan track, and soon found that it was leading us eastward in the direction of a tower, T. IX, which now came into view in the distance. We had followed the track for scarcely more than a mile when Surveyor Rām Singh's keen eye noticed a very slight swelling on the gravel soil, running parallel to the route and quite close to it on the north. While the rest of the ground was here absolutely bare of vegetation, alive or dead, remains of reeds, half-petrified with salt-encrustation, were seen cropping out on the top and side of the swelling. Mere scraping of the surface sufficed to make it certain that we were moving once more by the side of the old wall, the reeds clearly belonging to the lowest layers of a section now almost completely eroded. Looking back, the eye could catch its line for some distance westwards. But neither then nor on subsequent visits did I succeed in tracing the section which must have formed the connexion with the tower T. VII. It is probable that the complete disappearance of this small section, less than a mile in length, must be ascribed to its lying across, instead of parallel to, the direction of the prevailing east winds of the Tun-huang-An-hsi valley.

Further east the swelling, almost imperceptible at first, rose till it ran in a perfectly straight line, 6 to 8 feet high. It was easy to make sure by a little digging that the wall still existed here, covered by heaped-up gravel and drift-sand. At a point nearly three miles from T. VII, I noticed a low mound about twenty-four yards to the south of the *agger* marking the wall, which here seemed to make a small curve, like a semi-lune, northward. Pieces of Toghrak wood protruding from the north-east corner of the mound and stones lying on its top clearly showed that it contained the débris of a ruined watch-station, T. VIII, as subsequently proved by excavation (see Figs. 166, 168).

Wall line  
tracked to  
tower  
T. VII.

Access to  
top of  
tower.

Wall line  
lost and  
regained.

Ruined  
mound of  
T. VIII.