

difficulty to a point about twenty-five yards from the edge of the salt-encrusted lake. As its level lay only five feet or so below the exposed foot of the wall, it was clear that the extent of 'desiccation' since the wall was built could here not have been great. This at once supplied evidence which was archaeologically very helpful and afterwards received support from many other observations. But it was even more important to note how the lake had been used as a substitute for the strange wall elsewhere guarding the line. It soon became clear to me that those who laid down the line carefully kept their eyes on all natural features which might serve for defence, in order to save themselves building labour on ground that in ancient times was already desert.

SECTION V.—RUINS BY THE SU-LO HO MARSHES

The archaeological evidence gathered in the course of that first day's exploration sufficed to convince me that the ruins I had passed, and those to be expected in continuation eastwards, belonged to an early system of frontier defence or *Limes*, corresponding in character to the existing 'Great Wall' shown by the maps on the north-western borders of Kan-su. The historical records discussed above in connexion with the route through Lou-lan made it appear *a priori* very probable that this defensive system dated back to Han times. Its thorough exploration appealed to me as a task combining both archaeological and geographical interest, and hence of special importance. So I decided there and then to return to the old border line in the desert as soon as men and animals had recovered from their fatigues by a short rest at the Tun-huang oasis. There alone would it be possible, too, to secure the fresh supplies and transport of which we were badly in need.

Opportunities for getting more familiar with details of the ancient Limes occurred frequently on our journey of March 9. After skirting the winding south shore of the lake for about a mile and a half among abundant reed-beds, the caravan track brought me to the narrow southern end of a steep gravel-covered plateau, about 80 to 100 feet high, which edges the lake on its east side. On the highest knoll, overlooking the route below for a considerable distance on either side, there rose the ruin, massive but badly decayed, of a watch-tower, T. XI (Fig. 178). In size and methods of construction it closely resembled T. x. There was evidence here of more or less continuous occupation in the shape of what seemed to be rubbish-heaps both within and without a small enclosure around the tower. A short scramble along the back of the plateau or ridge, here less than half a mile wide, soon brought into view the old Limes wall, running approximately east and west and displaying its characteristic reed fascines. It started on the west from the shore of the lake opposite to the one where I had last traced it that morning, and ran across the ridge down to the edge of another marshy basin eastwards.

Two more towers could be sighted beyond the lakelets in this depression. Their position and the general configuration of the ground made me feel certain that the line of the wall ran more or less parallel to the end of the Su-lo Ho drainage. The marshy basins connected with this drainage had evidently been utilized, wherever possible, to supplement or replace the actual defences of the line to be guarded. The conclusion seemed to be justified—and subsequent experience soon confirmed it—that the route leading to Tun-huang would keep within it and probably near it. The track brought us, indeed, after about five miles from camp, close to the next tower, T. XII, situated at the end of a narrow plateau which overlooked the southern portion of the second basin. But the wall could not be traced near that tower, as it evidently followed a line further away to the north, and there was no time then to search for it.

For the rest of the day's march, the succession of distant towers on our left kept rising above the grey, hazy horizon like a line of yellowish beacons. I was eager to visit them all there and then.

Plan for
exploring
Limes.

Watch-
station
T. XI.

Marshes
supplement
defensive
line.

Succession
of towers
sighted.