

CHAPTER XVI

THE OASIS OF NAN-HU AND THE YANG BARRIER

SECTION I.—REMAINS BETWEEN TUN-HUANG AND NAN-HU

Help for
desert cam-
paign west-
wards.

REGARD for the tasks ahead made me restrict my halt at Tun-huang to a single day, April 4, 1907. Considering the manifold preparations needed for my main campaign in the desert westwards, this could not possibly have sufficed, if the opportune arrival of circular instructions from the Viceroy at Lan-chou, recommending me and my researches to all authorities of westernmost Kan-su, had not stimulated my official friends at Tun-huang to increased efforts to help me in overcoming the local *vis inertiae*. At the same time I was glad to note the genuine scholarly interest which my discovery of dated Han records had aroused in the learned magistrate Wang Ta-lao-yeh. With his ready support—and by using the incentive of high rates for all payments—I managed somehow to raise a month's supplies, twelve fresh labourers, additional camels for transport, and also as many 'Ketmans', those excellent implements of the Turkestān excavator, as could be secured among the Muhammadan refugees at Tun-huang.

Ruined
walls of
Sha-chou
town.

The route I proposed to follow was first to take me south-west along the edge of the foot-hills to Nan-hu, a small oasis where I knew, from Zahīd Bēg's information and Captain Roborovsky's map, of the existence of ruins. Moving due north from Nan-hu, I would strike the line of the western Limes near its middle, and survey new ground *en route*. The first march, on April 5, was short, and left time also for a rapid examination of the 'old town' (*chiu ch'êng*), the crumbling clay walls of which face the present town of Tun-huang at about a mile's distance to the west of the Tang Ho. The site was said to mark the position of the *Sha-chou* of T'ang times, but it is now completely abandoned to fields and gardens. I was unable to discover any reliable tradition as to the date at which this town was deserted; but the liability of the site to inundation from the river was said to have been the cause of it. That the place must have ceased to be occupied long before the Tungan rebellion was clearly proved by the total absence within the circumvallation of any structural remains above ground. That no such remains could have survived below the soil was made obvious by the swampy condition of the fields. The enclosing walls, completely ruined in places, formed a duly orientated rectangle, measuring about 1,485 yards from north to south and 650 yards across. They were built throughout of solid layers of clay, about four inches thick, and at the south-east corner still rose in fair preservation to a height of about twenty feet. The distance thence to the west bank of the river bed was only some 150 yards. One gate on the south and two on the west face were traceable. A tower defending the north-west corner was still about forty feet high. A comparison with the walls of the present town, which form a square of about 1,100 yards, shows that the area enclosed within the old *ch'êng* was slightly smaller.

Ruins of
Chên-
fan-hsien.

Thence the route turned off to the south-west and, passing several large and well-kept temples, brought me to the edge of present cultivation on this side after a little over three miles. Here the ruins of a smaller walled town, known as *Chên-fan-hsien* and said to have been the seat of a separate *hsien* or magistrate in pre-rebellion times, served to recall again the havoc wrought by the last great Tungan rising. From this place the route led along the banks of an earlier river bed, now