

CHAPTER XVII

THE END OF THE CHINESE LIMES

SECTION I.—THE TERMINAL STATION ON THE WALL

Return to western section of Limes.

IT was with great satisfaction that, on April 13, I found myself back again on the western portion of the ancient frontier line of which my rapid passage from the side of Lop-nōr, a little over a month before, had revealed glimpses here and there. Now at last I was free to start on its systematic exploration. Only a few of the watch-towers and other ruins which mark its line had then been visited. Most of the towers could only be sighted miles away, and the existence of a wall connecting them had of necessity remained a matter of conjecture. My subsequent discoveries had removed all possible doubts about the character and high antiquity of this Limes. There seemed now reasonable hope that, among the remains of a fortified border line which I knew to extend here over at least sixty miles, there were more relics waiting to be brought to light.

Explorations recorded in topographical order.

It was impossible for me to foresee then how abundant the archaeological harvest would be. But the great extent of the line to be explored, and regard for the increasing physical difficulties which the advance of the season was bound to cause in this desert region, made me fully realize from the start the importance of making the most of my time and the available resources in labour, transport, and supplies. Consideration for the tasks which I was anxious to carry out elsewhere supplied an additional reason for husbanding my time with particular care. For this purpose it became necessary to begin by making topographical reconnaissances of the different sections of the Limes, either through Surveyor Rai Rām Singh or in person, before actually starting excavations at the ruins along them, and in general to adapt the sequence of my labours to considerations of practical convenience dictated by distances, water-supply, etc. The result was that the chronological course of my explorations along the western end of the Limes had to depart considerably from the topographical order of its remains. It is obvious that, for the purposes of a systematic survey of the Limes and of the natural features of the ground upon which its line depended, the record of my observations and diggings ought to be presented in accordance with the topographical plan. I can follow this all the more easily because in Chapters LVIII–LXII of *Desert Cathay* I have already furnished a sufficient account of the course of my operations on this ground.¹

Westernmost point of Limes proper.

Adopting the method just stated, I shall best start our survey of the Limes from the point where the westernmost part of the line of its wall can be proved to have terminated. The fact that this point lay exactly where the fortified border line abuts on the marshes of the terminal Su-lo Ho basin, and thus finds in them a most effective natural flanking defence, makes this a particularly convenient starting-place; for we thus learn *a limine* to appreciate the decisive part which adaptation to all important natural features of the ground, and regard for their strategic advantages, have played in the planning and construction of this ancient defensive line. If we look at Map No. 74, or the somewhat more detailed one in Plate 33, we see that the line of the Limes wall runs almost due

¹ The facts above mentioned will help to explain why the numbers, T. I, II, etc., serving as 'site-marks' for the different ruins could not be given in strict accordance with their topographical order. These numbers had to be recorded on the

plane-table, for the most part, in the course of the first survey made on the way to Tun-huang, when numerous ruins necessarily remained unobserved. These, on being subsequently traced, were distinguished as T. IV. a, T. IV. b, etc.