

could not find a trace. With nothing but absolute gravel desert on either north or south, it seemed hard to believe that this line had been drawn for a defensive purpose. Yet, on the other hand, I could not fail to note that, as the Map (No. 79. B. 1) shows, the line of the *agger* certainly forms a direct continuation to the Nan-hu oasis of the great natural flank defence provided by the fosse of the Tang Ho. The question as to the purpose which this embankment was originally intended to serve will be discussed further on.³

At last the route diverged to the south-west, while the puzzling *agger* was seen to run straight on towards a tower visible in the distance. It was just here, about one and a half miles from the edge of the belt of vegetation surrounding the present area of cultivation at Nan-hu, that my eye was caught by many low heaps of stones rising on the level expanse of gravel. Their sizes varied greatly, but they were always of circular shape, and either had a straight line of stones running out at right angles from one side like a handle, or else faced small rectangular plots of ground laid out with big pebbles. The circular 'cairns' never rose more than three or four feet above the ground. But the slanting light of the evening made them stand out in relief on all sides by the dozen, and there could be no doubt that this weird expanse represented an ancient burial-ground. I was still wondering whether it belonged to the period of Chinese occupation, or possibly was the mark left behind by people of a less developed civilization, when within view of the edge of vegetation, and not far from the track, I sighted in the dusk a brick-built gateway and an adjoining quadrangle marked by low gravel ridges, just like those I had examined the day before on the south-western edge of the Tun-huang oasis. Within the quadrangle I made out two circular tumuli (Fig. 165 shows one of them) larger than the cairns by which I had just passed, but exactly corresponding in shape. There could be no doubt any longer that both cairns and enclosures belonged to the same people, and probably also dated from approximately the same period.

Cairns and enclosures of burial-grounds.

SECTION II.—THE NAN-HU OASIS AND ITS PRESENT RESOURCES

Nan-hu, holding altogether some thirty Chinese homesteads scattered in a number of tiny hamlets, proved an unexpectedly pleasant little oasis, with its abundance of fine trees, its limpid spring-fed water, and its general air of rural seclusion and ease. In my Personal Narrative I have given a brief sketch of the local environment and of the comfortable conditions which under-population, coupled with adequate arable land and irrigation resources, has produced here for the present settlers.¹ But it was the opportunity for archaeological observations of interest, not the rural attractions of Nan-hu, welcome as the change was, which induced me to extend my stay there to four days. However, before I proceed to detail my observations, it is desirable to give a brief account of the topographical features which determine the present character and former importance of what was once the westernmost permanent agricultural settlement of 'China within the Wall'.

Attractions of Nan-hu oasis.

Most of the cultivated parts of Nan-hu, as well as the areas adjoining to the east and south which débris of the familiar 'Tati' type proves to have been occupied at earlier periods, are situated within a small basin close to the outermost foot-hills of the range which the *tāgh-yol*, or 'mountain route', to Lop follows. This basin, as far as it now shows signs of subsoil water or occasional surface floods and contains arable ground or scrubby jungle, extends for about ten miles from south-east to north-west, with a maximum width of about five miles (see Map No. 79. A, B. 1). The gravel-covered plateau crossed by the route from Tun-huang borders it on the east, while on the west and south it is hemmed in by low ridges and by belts of dunes covering their slopes. To the north-west this basin finds its continuation in a gradually widening stretch of clayey steppe

Alluvial basin of Nan-hu.

³ Cf. below, pp. 617 sqq.

¹ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, ii. pp. 75 sqq.