

SECTION V.—WORK AT THE SITES OF MURTUK

On December 9th I left Toyuk and proceeded past the oases of Su-bāshi and Sengim north of the outer hill range to the village of Murtuk (Map No. 28. c. 3). I had previously made a reconnaissance from Kara-khōja to the many cave-temples and shrines of Bezeklik, situated about two miles below the southern end of the cultivated area of Murtuk, in the gorge which the stream flowing towards Kara-khōja has here cut through the range. This visit had shown me that those shrines still retained a great portion of their wall-paintings. But it had also afforded unmistakable evidence of the increased damage which the pictorial remains of this, the largest of the Buddhist sites of Turfān, had suffered from vandal hands since my first visit in November 1907. A year before that, Professor Grünwedel had made a two months' stay at the site and devoted all his archaeological care and expert iconographic knowledge to the complete excavation and study of its remains. For the thoroughness with which he has recorded, in his *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten*, the results of his prolonged labours at these ruined shrines, students of the ancient art of Chinese Turkestan will for ever remain deeply indebted.¹ Many of the most interesting specimens of the paintings on the walls of the Bezeklik temples were then removed for safety to the Ethnographic Museum of Berlin, as had been, two years earlier, the remarkably well preserved fresco panels of the shrine which Professor von Lecoq had found filled with debris and had cleared before Professor Grünwedel's return to Turfān.²

First visit
to shrines of
Bezeklik.

With the sad proofs of progressive damage before my eyes, I could feel no doubt that, as local protection was out of the question, careful removal of as much of these mural paintings as circumstances would permit and artistic or iconographic interest would warrant, offered the only means of assuring their security. This was the important task which brought me now to Murtuk, and to which I devoted the greater part of two successive stays of an aggregate length of fifteen days. The safe and careful execution of the task was made far easier than it could possibly have been otherwise by the fact that all the remains of the Bezeklik site had previously been thoroughly investigated and described by Professor Grünwedel, whose familiarity with Buddhist iconography is exceptional. It was fortunate also that once the selection of fresco panels for removal had been decided by myself, their position and relation to the general decorative scheme, &c., carefully noted, and exact instructions given as to the lines along which the portions of larger frescoed surfaces were to be separated, I could safely leave the work of actual removal, strengthening, and safe packing of the fresco pieces to the hands of my two Indian assistants, whom previous training at other sites under my direction had qualified for the purpose.

Arrange-
ments for
removing
selected
frescoes.

It was mainly due to Naik Shamsuddīn's skill and indefatigable industry, with the valiant assistance of Afrāz-gul during the greater part of nearly two months which the task occupied, that the removal and packing of all the selected fresco panels were safely accomplished, in strict accordance with the methods that I had first applied in the case of the frescoes of the Mīrān temples.³ These technical methods proved equally successful in the case of the Bezeklik frescoes selected for removal. These in the end filled over a hundred large cases, each as heavy as a camel could carry. Considering that the work was carried out at the coldest season of the year and for the greater part without such assistance as my presence could have afforded as regards the supply of needful materials, labour, &c., my capable 'handy man' may well claim special credit for this achievement.

Method of
removal.

¹ See Grünwedel, *Kultstätten*, pp. 223-301, with Figs. 494-613, among which many carefully executed drawings of specially interesting compositions, figures and decorative details.

² See Von Lecoq, *Chotscho*, Pl. 16-38, with explanatory text on the same.

³ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 463 sqq.