

CHAPTER IV

FIRST EXPLORATIONS AT A SAND-BURIED SITE

AFTER strenuous weeks of geographical work in those forbidding mountains south of Khotan where the utter barrenness of Nature had given no chance for history to leave its traces, the time came when I could turn to the fascinating task of exploring sand-buried ancient sites in the desert. I had gathered my earliest experience of such work in December 1900, when on my first expedition I set out from the Khotan oasis into the sandy wastes northward. The observations and encouraging discoveries then made were so instructive and have remained so fresh in my memory that I feel induced to take a step back in chronology and to ask the reader of these pages to accompany me on that initial archaeological venture.

The weeks immediately preceding it had been spent within the Khotan oasis, then looking rather bare and bleak in spite of all its fertility. The last dust-storm of the year had effaced all view of the K'un-lun, near as its outer range is to the oasis where it extends by the Kara-kash and Yurungkash rivers as they debouch from the mountains. It had brushed away all gay-coloured leaves from the trees of the orchards and arbours and spread over the fertile plain the atmosphere of a foggy autumn day in England. I had suc-