

completely eroded, though the massive posts, bleached and splintered, still rose high, marking the position of the timber framework. But when I examined the ground underneath what appeared to have been an outhouse or stables, I realized quickly that it was made up of layers of a huge refuse-heap. Of course, previous experience supplied sufficient reason for digging into this unsavoury quarry, though the pungent smells which its contents emitted, even after seventeen centuries of burial, were doubly trying in the fresh eastern breeze which drove fine dust, dead microbes and all into one's eyes, throat and nose. Our perseverance in cutting through layer upon layer of stable refuse was rewarded, however, at last by striking, on a level fully seven feet below the surface, a small wooden enclosure which had probably served as a dustbin for some earlier habitation. There were curious sweepings of all sorts—rags of manifold fabrics in silk, cotton, felt; seals of bronze and bone; embroidered leather; wooden pens; fragments of lacquer-ware; broken implements in wood; etc.

But more gratifying still was a find of over a dozen small tablets inscribed with Chinese characters of exquisite penmanship (Fig. 47). Most of them when examined by M. Chavannes have proved to be labels originally fastened to presents made to members of the local chief's family. The reference which one of them makes to the home of one of the ruler's wives has rendered it possible to prove that the ancient site was included in the territory of Ching-chüeh, which the Annals of the Han dynasty mention as situated between Charchan and Keriya. Quite at the bottom of the enclosure we found a small heap of corn, still in sheaves