It was easier to become familiar on the spot with the stationery aspect of these miscellaneous 'papers', to use an anachronism. The most usual form was that of thin wooden slips (Fig. 45), always measuring about nine and a half inches in length and from a quarter to half an inch wide. The fact that a single vertical line often contained over thirty Chinese ideograms, *i.e.* words, illustrates the remarkable neatness of the writing which prevails. Besides the carefully smoothed slips of wood or bamboo, use had been made also for less formal communications of that abundant, if rougher, local writing material, tamarisk wood. Cut into fancy shapes, it was obviously good enough for mere copy-writing. With such the soldiers stationed at these desolate posts had evidently been used to beguile their time.

Plenty of 'shavings' showed that the supply of proper wooden stationery had its value and was used over and over again. There was other evidence also among the miscellaneous relics recovered from the refuse of the straits which seem to have beset the guardians of these remote posts in the desert. It could scarcely have been otherwise, since the records deciphered make it probable that the rank and file was composed mainly of convicts deported from distant parts of the Empire for service on this forbidding border.

By April 1 we had completed the search of all watch-posts which a succession of icy sand-storms raising a thick dust haze allowed us for the time being to trace eastwards. The exhaustion of our small band of Chinese diggers would have in any case necessitated a return to our base at Tun-huang. After a day's halt there I set out with a fresh set of