

INTRODUCTION

THE journey described in these pages was carried out in the year 1900-01, under the auspices of the Government of India. Its main object was the systematic exploration of ancient remains about Khotan and in the adjoining parts of the great desert of Chinese Turkestan. The fresh materials thus brought to light for the study of the early history and culture of those regions were so extensive that my full scientific report must, by reason of its bulk and cost, necessarily remain beyond the reach of the general public. I have therefore gladly availed myself of the permission accorded to me to publish independently the present narrative, which is intended to record for a wider class of readers my personal experiences and observations, as well as the main facts concerning my antiquarian discoveries.

I have spared no trouble to render my account of the latter accurate in its details and yet thoroughly intelligible to the non-Orientalist. It has been my hope to attract his interest to a fascinating chapter of ancient history which witnessed interchange between the civilisations of India, China, and the Classical West in that distant part of Central Asia, and which seemed almost completely lost to us. If this hope is fulfilled, and if at the same time these pages convey adequate impressions of the strange scenes and conditions amidst which I passed that year of trying but happy toil, I shall feel repaid for the additional labour involved in the preparation of this narrative.

The circumstances which induced me to form the project of