

That such influences had been at work there for long centuries, and sometimes penetrated even much further to the East, occasional references in the Chinese Annals and elsewhere had led us to suspect. But of those indigenous records and remains which might enable us to reconstruct that bygone phase of civilisation in its main aspects, all trace seemed to have vanished with the Muhammadan conquest (tenth–eleventh century).

Chance finds of ancient manuscripts, in Sanskrit and mostly Buddhistic, which commenced in 1890 with Captain (now Colonel) Bower's famous birch-bark leaves from Kucha, were the first tangible proof that precious materials of this kind might still be preserved under the arid soil of Chinese Turkestan. The importance of these literary relics was great, apart from their philological value ; for they plainly showed that, together with Buddhism, the study of the classical language of India also found a home in that distant land beyond the Himalaya. But on the cultural *entourage* in which this far transplanted Indian learning had flourished, such chance acquisitions, of uncertain origin and unaccompanied by archæological evidence, could throw little light.

For systematic excavations, which alone could supply this evidence, the region of Khotan appeared from the first a field of particular promise. In scattered notices of Chinese records there was much to suggest that this little kingdom, situated on the important route that led from China to the Oxus Valley and hence to India as well as to the West, had played a prominent part in developing the impulses received from India and transmitting them eastwards. The close connection with ancient Indian art seemed particularly marked in whatever of small antiques, such as pottery fragments, coins and seals, native agency had supplied from Khotan. And fortunately for our researches, archæology could here rely on the help of a very effective ally—the moving sand of the desert which preserves what it buries. Ever since human activity first created the oases of Khotan territory, their outskirts must have witnessed a continuous struggle with that most formidable of deserts, the Taklamakan ; while local traditions, attested from an early