

the Niya River now loses itself in the desert. Their peculiar writing material (so much older than the paper of my other literary finds), their early Indian script and language, and the surprisingly perfect state of preservation of many among them would alone have sufficed to invest these documents with special interest. But their exceptional historical value is derived from the fact that they prove to contain records written as early as the third century of our era, and dealing with a wide range of matters of administration and private life.

In Chapter XXVI. I have endeavoured to indicate the varied nature and abounding interest of the information which this mass of official reports and orders, letters, accounts, and miscellaneous "papers" (to use an anachronism) is bound to reveal to us. The results already obtained have opened new and far-reaching vistas. It is no small discovery to find the old local tradition of a colonisation of Khotan from the extreme North-West of India confirmed by the use, in ordinary practical intercourse, of an Indian language and a script peculiar to the very region from which those Indian immigrants were believed to have come.

The thought of the grave risks with which nature and, still more, human activity threaten all these relics of antiquity, was ever present to my mind, and formed an urgent incentive to unwearied exertion, however trying the conditions of work might be. On the one hand I had ample occasion in the desert to observe the destructive effect of erosion by wind and sand on whatever of ancient remains is left exposed to its slow but unrelenting power. On the other I could not fail to be impressed by the warnings of impending destruction through the hand of man: there were the evident traces of the mischief done by Khotan "treasure-seekers" at the more accessible sites, and also, alas! a vivid remembrance of the irretrievable loss which the study of Indian art and antiquities has suffered through "irresponsible digging" carried on until recent years by, and for, amateur collectors among the ruined Buddhist shrines of the North-West Frontier of India.

Though the climate of the Turkestan desert is not inferior in