

The man who brought me the tablets had picked them up on the road to Imam Jafar's Mazar. But I soon ascertained the original finder in the person of Ibrahim, an enterprising young villager who had dug them out from a "house of the old town" in the desert beyond. He had gone there a year before in search of treasure, but had found only a number of these, to him, useless tablets. He brought away six, only to throw some away on the road and to give the rest to his children to play with. The latter specimens were soon destroyed, and Ibrahim now greatly regretted their loss, when he saw how well I rewarded the more sensible man who had picked up what he had cast aside. I tried to hide my delight as well as I could, but did not fail to secure Ibrahim as a guide for my party, and to assure him of a good reward if he could show me the ruined structure where he made his find. Kharoshthi writing had before been found in Central Asia only on the earliest Khotan coins approximately assigned to the first and second centuries of our era, and in those remarkable fragments of a birch-bark codex which M. Dutreuil de Rhins, the ill-starred French traveller, acquired in Khotan in 1892. It was a happy evening when I examined these most promising finds. The very cursive form of the writing and the faded appearance of the ink prevented any attempt at immediate decipherment. Certain linguistic features seemed to prove that the tablets I held in my hands contained documents with an early Indian text, and the writing alone sufficed to assure me of the antiquity of the ruins that had furnished them. But full of expectation as I was, I little anticipated at the time what a rich harvest was awaiting me there.

A three days' march from Niya brought me to Imam Jafar Sadik's shrine, the starting-point of my fresh expedition into the desert. Scenery as well as the weather helped to make these days pleasant. I left Niya on a delightfully sunny morning, and the sky kept clear all the way, but the cold was still severe, the temperature at night falling to somewhere about 8° Fahr. below zero, and in daytime never rising much above 22° Fahr.

The route lay, of course, all along the Niya River, as the "old