

sand. Where double tablets had remained together and thus protected each other, the black ink of the Kharoshthi lines written on the inner surface looked as fresh as if penned yesterday. On others it was necessary to apply the brush to clear away an adherent crust of sand, but only on comparatively few had the writing faded so far as to become illegible.

It was easy to recognise that the tablets, though written by many different hands, showed throughout the characteristic peculiarities of that type of Kharoshthi writing which in India is invariably exhibited by the inscriptions of the so-called Kushana or Indo-Scythian kings. The period during which these kings ruled over the Punjab and the regions to the west of the Indus falls within the first three centuries of our era. The earliest coins of Khotan and the fragmentary birch-bark leaves of the Dutreuil de Rhins Manuscript, which were the only relics of Kharoshthi writing so far known in Central Asia, have with good reason been assigned to the same period. Thus even while still engaged in gathering the remarkable documents that were coming to light here in such surprising numbers, and long before any careful examination became possible, I felt absolutely assured as to their high antiquity and exceptional value.

And yet during that day's animating labours and as I marched back to camp in the failing light of the evening, there remained a thought that prevented my archæological conscience from becoming over-triumphant. It was true that the collected text of the hundred odd tablets, which I was carrying away carefully packed and labelled as the result of my first day's work, could not fall much short of, if it did not exceed, the aggregate of all the materials previously available for the study of Kharoshthi, whether in or outside India. But was it not possible that these strange records, with the striking similarity of their outward form and almost all, as I had noticed, showing when complete an identical short formula at their commencement, might prove to be mere replicas of the same text, perhaps a prayer or an extract from sacred Buddhist writings? The care taken about the sealing of most of the tablets