

The structure which had so richly rewarded my first two days' labours was too far decayed to permit of any certain conclusion as to its real character. The records which had escaped destruction, buried low on its floors, would, no doubt, furnish the clue, though I foresaw that their complete elucidation might be a labour of years. Whether, however, the building I had excavated had once served as the residence of some local official or perhaps as a monastic dwelling, it was clear that the writings found in it could only be the remains of a collection that had gradually accumulated and been left behind by chance when the place was abandoned.

It was hence a fact of archaeological significance that among all this wealth of written documents not a single scrap of actual paper was found. Nor could I discover a trace of paper among the miscellaneous rubbish which was brought to light in other rooms of the building. It was evident, therefore, that the use of this writing material, so much more convenient than wood, however old it may have been in China, had not spread in Eastern Turkestan at that early date which palæographic considerations indicated for my discoveries. Wooden tablets for writing purposes are indeed mentioned in very early Indian texts, particularly Buddhist ones; and it is easy to realise that their use recommended itself in a country like Turkestan which produces neither palm-leaves nor birch-bark, the other ancient writing materials known in India. None the less was it a delightful surprise when, far away at this sand-buried site on the eastern limits of ancient Khotan territory, I found myself in possession of the first specimens ever discovered of Indian records on wood.

All that day a breeze was blowing from the north-east, light yet sufficiently piercing in the prevailing cold and strong enough to drive before it a light spray of sand. As this passed over the ancient tablets laid out in rows as they were being recovered, it ever threatened to efface the pencil figures which I wrote with half-numbed fingers on the often soft wood of their surface to mark the succession of the finds. I scarcely needed to be thus gently reminded of the erosive power of the desert winds. With the view