

First
Kharoṣṭhī
documents
on wood.

The halt which I had to make at Niya on January 22, in order to arrange for the labourers and supplies to be taken to the desert site I was about to visit, proved unexpectedly profitable from the archaeological point of view. A large jar of ancient pottery (see Pl. IX), remarkable for its good preservation and the hardness of its material, which had been found some five years earlier at that site by a Niya village headman and brought away to his home, was at first the only antiquity that Niya could show me. It measured 33 inches in diameter and height, with a mouth 10 in. wide. But in the afternoon I received proof of a kind wholly unexpected as to the great age of the desert site I was bound for. One of my two camelmen, a young fellow of an unusually inquisitive turn of mind, had in the Bāzār come across a villager possessing two inscribed tablets brought away from that site. As soon as they were produced before me I discovered to my joyful surprise that they contained Kharoṣṭhī writing, of a type which closely agreed with that prevailing during the period of Kuṣana rule in the first centuries of our era⁹.

Origin of
find.

The man who brought me the tablets had picked them up near Mūsa-Bēgim Öghil, the first stage on the pilgrims' road to Imām Ja'far Sādiq's Mazār. But the original finder was soon ascertained in the person of Ibrāhīm, an enterprising young villager, who had dug them out from a 'house of the old town' beyond. He had gone there a year before in search of treasure, but had found only these, to him, useless tablets. He brought away half a dozen or so, only to throw some away on the road and to give the rest to his children to play with. Of the latter tablets only one could be recovered next morning¹⁰, though Ibrāhīm, seeing how well I rewarded the more sensible second-hand finder, had eagerly searched his house for them. He declared that he had left plenty more at the find-place. Fearing the possibility of being forestalled, I tried to hide my delight, but took care to secure Ibrāhīm as a guide and to assure him of a good reward if he could show me undisturbed the ruined structure where he made his find. The ancient bilingual coins of Khotan, and the fragments of the Dutreuil de Rhins codex, had so far been the only evidence of the use of Kharoṣṭhī writing in Central Asia. Hence the two tablets which a fortunate chance had placed in my hands were scanned by me with no small keenness in the evening. The writing on *b*. (a rectangular 'under-tablet', to use the terminology subsequently established) seemed legible enough, in spite of the faded appearance of the ink; but the very cursive form of the characters and philological difficulties since better appreciated prevented any attempt at immediate decipherment. Nevertheless even this cursory study, resumed after each day's march, sufficed to convince me that the tablets were documents with an early Indian text, and to assure me of the antiquity of the ruins. But full of expectation as I was, I little anticipated at the time what a rich harvest was awaiting me.

March along
Niya river.

On January 23 I set out from Niya for Imām Ja'far Sādiq with twenty labourers and a small convoy of additional hired camels to help in the transport of a month's supplies. A three days' march brought me to the shrine, the starting-point for my fresh expedition into the desert. Famous as a pilgrimage-place throughout Turkeṣtān, it had never previously been visited by Europeans except M. Dutreuil de Rhins and M. Grenard. The route lay all along the Niya river, and through the belt of thick forest which accompanies its course from the point where the marshland immediately north of Niya is left behind to where the river dies

is intended to transcribe a name **Somaña*, or some similar form, we should have an instance of that process in Khotan itself; for the present name of the locality meant is *Somiya*, as demonstrated above, p. 225.

⁹ Now marked, with the date of their acquisition, N. 22. i. 1901, a, b.

¹⁰ Marked N. 23. i. 1901.