

Characteristics of 'oblong' tablets.

tablets, owing to the striking divergence between individual pieces as regards shape, proportions, and finish; but it is easy to indicate certain generally prevailing characteristics. Most striking among these is the comparative narrowness of the pieces; for though many among them attain considerable dimensions in length, up to close on 30 in., yet none exceed  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in. in width, while some of the longest are only from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 in. wide, and thus approach the shape of mere sticks, e.g. N. iv. 103 (see Plate CII)<sup>9</sup>. Out of a total of 44 'oblong' tablets recovered in N. iv. not less than 26 show a string-hole. Useful as this hole must have been for handling and storing them, it is clear that it could not have been intended for a string, either to fasten pairs of them into a closed document, as in the case of the 'double wedges' previously described, or to unite a series of them into a sort of 'Pōthi,' or file, as might be done with palm-leaves, the shape of which these long narrow tablets curiously recall. For not only are such tablets of entirely different sizes, but the great divergence observed in the position of the hole, placed indiscriminately in the corner of a square end, near a pointed end, the centre of a long side, &c., seems to preclude any thought of regular 'filing'<sup>10</sup>.

Probable contents of oblong tablets.

The irregularity so noticeable in the outward appearance of these oblong tablets fully agrees with, and is in fact explained by, what even a cursory examination of the writing, without any attempt at decipherment, sufficed to indicate as to their probable contents. The majority of the pieces show plainly—by the irregular arrangement of their writing, in small columns which, whether parallel or running in different directions, usually conclude with numerical figures; by the appearance of various handwritings or different inks on the same tablet; tabular entries, erasures, bracketings, ink-cancellings, and similar indications—that they did not contain texts or connected communications such as letters or official orders, but probably memoranda, tabular statements, lists, accounts, and other miscellaneous records of a less formal character<sup>11</sup>. N. iv. 29. a (see Plate CIII) may serve as a specimen of the columnar arrangement of lines all ending with numerals. The same is clearly visible also in the tablets N. iv. 35. a, 124 (written transversely), 103 (over 25 in. long) which Plate CII shows, though their much reduced reproduction fails to bring out the writing. The text arranged in three columns (with some lines cut out by crossing) can be seen more distinctly in N. iv. 8. a (see Plate CIII). The latter oblong tablet, curving to a point at one end, closely approaches in form certain large wedge-shaped tablets found in N. iv., which from the evidence of their writing had not belonged to regular 'double-wedges', but were used in the same way as oblongs<sup>12</sup>.

Rectangular tablets.

I have left to the last the mention of two series of tablets largely represented among the finds of N. iv., which showed far greater regularity and care in writing as well as in technical

<sup>9</sup> See also N. iv. 22, 24, 24. a, b, 56, 118, 123.

<sup>10</sup> The only oblong tablets showing traces of a device, distinct from a string-hole, which was probably intended for fastening, are N. iv. 110, 133 (see Plate XCIII). The notches observed here on the Reverse manifestly mark these pieces as under-tablets; but the corresponding covering-tablets are missing, and the original arrangement can therefore not be ascertained.

<sup>11</sup> Columnar arrangement of the writing, usually parallel to the longer side of the tablets, but sometimes transversely, is observable in N. iv. 1, 2, 4, 8, 8. a, 9, 17, 24, 25, 29. a, 35. a, 35. b, 47, 53. a, 54 (with head-lines), 103, 113, 123 (with 19 columns), 124 (two different hands), 125, 129, 132, 142. For erasures, bracketings, and lines cancelled see N. iv. 8, 8. a, 9, 113. For different handwritings, N. i. 124.

<sup>12</sup> See N. iv. 6, 20, 81, 136; for a reproduction and translation of the last comp. Professor Rapson's *Specimens*. This reproduction shows very distinctly the numerous scorings, as if made with the point of a knife, which appear on the Reverse of this tablet. The same curious feature recurs in other tablets from N. iv., e.g., N. iv. 17, 55, 124 (Plate CII), 129. It is quite distinct from the scraping by which certain tablets, after having been previously written upon, were rendered available for fresh use (like palimpsests). The scorings look exactly like those which would be left by a sharp knife cutting leather. Do they indicate that tablets which had become 'waste-paper' were sometimes used in ancient 'Dāftars' as convenient cutting-boards for those pieces of leather, which, as we shall see, served as subsidiary 'stationery'?