

to clear the clay sealings on the documents which I had carried away to my tent carefully wrapped up, I discovered that almost all remained as fresh as when first impressed, and that most of them were from intaglios of classical workmanship representing Pallas Promachos, Heracles with club and lion-skin, Zeus, and helmeted busts (Fig. 95).

The fact that the majority of these tablets bore in the sunk socket of their covers or envelopes the impressions of two, or in a few cases even three, seals strongly supported the assumption of their containing agreements or bonds executed before witnesses. Among the tablets with single seal impressions there were two showing the official title of the Chinese commander at Shan-shan or Lop-nor in Chinese lapidary characters (Fig. 95, 6). The importance attached to the preservation of the sealings was illustrated by the silk wraps found tied closely for protection over the clay-filled seal sockets of several tablets.

The clearing resumed early next morning brought the total number of perfectly preserved documents close up to three dozen, by far the largest series of complete records which any of the ruins had yielded. I wondered when the time would come for having the strings cut which still fastened them as securely as when they were first sealed down. It was strange to find myself the *de facto* possessor of Sojaka's deeds probably referring to lands and other real property. True enough, they had all lain buried for centuries under the silent dunes or those sombre sand-cones covered with tangled tamarisk scrub dead or dying. Yet so fond had I become of this great dead waste, fascinating and peaceful, that I should have felt sorely tempted to assert legal claims to any part of it, had there been but an Amban ready to read 'my' deeds and recognize their validity!

The circumstances in which these documents had come to be buried were, as I recognized from the first, deserving of the closest consideration; for it was evident that they might throw light on the important question as to how this settlement was deserted. The care which had been taken to hide the deposit and at the same time to mark its