

purpose of this queerly shaped 'tablet'? The string still firmly fixed into the broad end showed plainly that this inscribed piece of wood was meant to be carried about or hung up. But it was only weeks later, when several other watch-stations along the wall had yielded exactly similar objects, that the true explanation was hit upon by my Chinese assistant.

Elsewhere, too, these wedges had turned up singly, and marked with two characters which would give no proper sense except as names. The size varied, but there was always the string. So Chiang-ssü-yeh remembered how he had seen at Lan-chou and other garrisons soldiers from small detachments, when off duty and permitted to 'go to the Bazar,' as we should say in India, carrying about conspicuous pieces of wood inscribed with the initials or name of their commandant as tokens of their 'permit.' Being large and easily distinguished by any passer-by, such a token would save the bearer any questions as to whether his absence from the post was authorized. If provided for each detachment only in a single specimen it would also prevent too numerous applications for leave, just as in a school where only one boy at a time is allowed to leave the class-room.

This first find was soon followed by real records on wood: a large rectangular tablet with account entries, an inscribed seal-case, some broken 'slips' with the usual single line of characters. Their material left no doubt as to the early date when the tower was occupied. It was clear that this portion of the frontier line went back to the time of the Han dynasty, like the one explored eastwards. Conclusive proof came to light next morning when, continuing the clearance of this room and of a sort of gate passage built against the east face of the tower, the men came upon more wooden slips of the orthodox shape, one of them dated in the third year of the Chü-shê period, corresponding to 8 A.D. With such evidence of high antiquity, all the relics left behind in these humble quarters by their last occupants acquired increased interest (Figs. 173, 174). There were plenty of quaintly carved wooden hooks, resembling the head and neck of some animal,