

small but well-preserved fort which I had passed before some twelve miles east of our first lake camp (Fig. 154). It lay conveniently central for a number of watch-stations to be explored; but it did not fall on the line of wall, and there was nothing exactly to indicate its antiquity or purpose. To the north-west stretched a broad marshy Nullah, fed by springs which supplied us with water. It was, alas! also a fertile breeding-place for mosquitoes and other insects, which now, as it grew warmer day by day, would issue in perfect clouds to make our evenings lively.

The first important discovery which gladdened my heart while encamped here, came from one of the towers that guarded a section of the wall some four miles to the west. A number of wooden records in Chinese, among them two with exact dates corresponding to the year of Christ's birth and 20 A.D., had already emerged from the débris of some rooms adjoining this tower (T. XII. A) (Fig. 177), when I had to leave the work for a fresh reconnaissance eastwards. As usual, I had left Chiang and Naik Ram Singh behind to supervise the final clearing. My own ride that day showed me a great many promising ruins; but still greater was my satisfaction with what my assistants brought back to camp when we met again in the evening.

In a long narrow passage, scarcely two feet wide, left between the massive tower base and a decayed wall of the watchmen's quarters, had been found a thick layer of rubbish, mostly stable refuse. From this emerged one small roll after another of neatly folded paper containing what was manifestly some Western writing. A few of these letters—for as such they could easily be recognized from their folding and tying—had been found wrapped up in silk, while others were merely fastened with string. None of them, of course, had as yet been opened, but a glance at the partly legible writing on the outside of some of the documents showed me the same unknown script resembling early Aramaic which I had first come across on that piece of paper from the Lop-nor site. The paper here was exceedingly thin and brittle; but when at last I had succeeded in unfolding one roll, there emerged a