

complete document neatly written in bold black characters, and measuring about fifteen by nine and a half inches.

I could not attempt a decipherment, nor more than conjectures about the language in which this and the other ten as yet unopened documents were written. But in the very fact of this Semitic writing turning up on the border of China and in the material used for it, there was enough to keep my thoughts busy. Were these papers perhaps in some Iranian tongue, and were they left behind by some early traders from Sogdiana, or still farther west, who had come for the silk of the distant Seres while the route was kept open for direct trade from China to the regions on the Jaxartes and Oxus? How had they found their way into the rubbish heap of a lonely watch-station far removed from the actual Lop-nor route?

No less curious was the chronological puzzle. From the position in which these papers had been found, close to Chinese records on wood, it appeared highly probable that they must have found their way into the rubbish heap approximately at the same period. Now, among the tablets, over a dozen in number, the two exactly dated ones belonged, as already stated, to the years 1 and 20 A.D.; among the rest there were several which by the dynastic style used in the designation of a certain military body proved clearly to date from the reign of the usurper Wang Mang (9-23 A.D.).

The early form of Aramaic script presented by the documents would agree well enough with such a dating. Yet how to account for the material on which they were written, considering that the first discovery of paper in China is attributed by reliable historical texts to the year 102 A.D.? An explanation might possibly be found, I thought, in the references which M. Chavannes has unearthed in early Chinese texts to 'silk paper,' introduced some time before the manufacture of real paper from rags and bark was invented. Curiously enough, as if to illustrate in a palpable fashion what these texts record of the use of silk fabrics as a still earlier writing material, the same refuse layer had furnished a small strip of cream-coloured silk inscribed with a fragmentary line in Kharoshthi. It