

seemed as if three civilizations from the East, West, and South had combined to leave their written traces at this lonely watch-station in the desert, and with them to demonstrate also the earliest writing materials.

Expert investigation effected by learned collaborators since my return to Europe has singularly confirmed these conjectures. Professor J. von Wiesner, the chief authority on plant physiology as connected with the history of paper manufacture, has proved by a microscopical analysis of the paper that the material used for those documents represents the earliest effort so far known at producing rag paper. I had reason to feel equally gratified after the publication of one of the documents by my learned friend Dr. A. Cowley, and its subsequent analysis by M. R. Gauthiot, an accomplished young Iranian scholar. These furnished conclusive evidence that the script was, indeed, of Aramaic origin, and the language an early form of that Iranian dialect which was spoken in ancient Sogdiana (the region of the present Samarkand and Bokhara), and of which the Sogdian manuscripts recently recovered from Turfan and Tun-huang have preserved us later specimens. The documents can be clearly recognized now as letters, and complete decipherment may reasonably be hoped for as a result of further researches.

The old fort (T. xiv.) near which my camp stood, has already been briefly described in connection with my first passage along this route. With its thick walls of stamped clay it was an imposing structure to behold (Fig. 154). But vainly did I search within it and along its walls for any definite indication of its age. Not even refuse was to be found inside, a curious fact, seeing how grateful travellers would feel for the shelter it offers against cutting winds. My men, too, had shunned the place; for, rightly enough, they suspected that it would swarm with those terribly aggressive little insect fiends, the 'Tsao-p'i,' as the Chinese called them, from which we had trouble enough to escape even in the open. This absence of any mark of ancient occupation at a ruin occupying so convenient a position by the high road to Lop-nor puzzled me greatly, and as soon as my reconnaissances farther