

Ram Singh had to chisel off the brickwork behind before the panels could be secured. The specimen reproduced in Plate xi. A shows Buddha in the unusual act of writing, with disciples holding Pothi leaves and what is evidently intended for a brush such as used in Chinese script. The rich and harmonious colouring used throughout these frescoes is distinctly superior to the drawing, and the same observation applies to the painted votive panels of wood which had escaped the effects of fire and damp. The damp had dealt badly with manuscript remains; but enough of fragmentary leaves in Indian and Central-Asian Brahmi and in Uigur script survived to help in confirming my approximate dating of the site.

The frequency with which cinerary urns and boxes were found around some of the shrines was a curious feature of the site; but of traces of the abodes of the living there were none. Was the great plain stretching eastwards already in old days the same desolate scrub-covered waste which it is now, notwithstanding the relative ease with which it could be brought under irrigation by canals from the large Kara-shahr River? Everywhere in this north-eastern corner of the Tarim Basin I was struck by the thinness of the population in relation to the abundance of cultivable land and of water to irrigate it, and many indications suggest that the conditions were not essentially different in ancient times. Had the peculiar position of Kara-shahr, which exposes it to attacks from all sides, something to do with this?

As if to remind me of this local feature, there rose on the height of a barren ridge, and just above the caves already mentioned, half a mile to the north, a solid watch-tower built of bricks with thin layers of reeds between. In construction it was closely akin to those towers of the Han border with which I had become so familiar. Since corresponding watch-towers have been traced by Hedin and others along the west foot of the Kuruk-tagh on a line which the ancient route from Lop-nor must have followed, this similarity may have its significance. As a matter of fact, I subsequently came across another tower of this type at the foot of the range skirted by the direct route to