

CHAPTER LXXXIV

FROM KHORA TO KUCHAR

THE conditions of work at 'Ming-oi,' under what seemed to me Cimmerian gloom, had been so trying, that it was a great relief for all when the completion of the tasks I had set myself at the site allowed us just before Christmas to move up to the cold but sunny mountains of Khora. There, some twenty miles up the broad Kara-shahr Valley, information elicited with much trouble from reticent Mongol shepherds led to the discovery of Buddhist remains hitherto unnoticed. It was a collection of much-decayed little temples and Stupas perched boldly on low but steep rock spurs (Fig. 276). Below them a spring, now spreading itself under a glittering ice sheet, allowed of a few fields being occasionally cultivated by Mongols.

The picturesque seclusion of the site vividly brought back to my mind old Buddhist ruins once explored in the hills of far-off Swat and Buner. It had not saved the shrines from the fury of iconoclastic invaders, and moisture too had caused damage. Yet the clearing of them revealed interesting remains of their once rich decoration, including well-carved relievos in wood (Fig. 273, 2), and a large panel with an encaustic painting on gilt ground, alas! badly scorched. While I myself, refreshed by the delightfully clear atmosphere, spent busy Christmas days over these excavations, Rai Lal Singh profited by the opportunity for useful surveys on the range dividing the Kara-shahr Valley from the great Turkestan plains.

Then we moved down through the grim defile by which the green waters of the river which drains Lake Baghrash have burst their way into the Tarim Basin. How delightful