

and shows curious variants. These notes, brief as they are, will suffice to show how much fresh light may yet be thrown on manifold aspects of the culture and administration prevailing in this region during the early centuries of our era when these abundant records have been fully examined and made accessible for detailed researches.

From the first I recognized that the circumstances in which the documents contained in the hidden deposit of N. xxiv. viii had come to be buried were deserving of the closest consideration. It was obvious that they might help to elucidate the important question as to how this settlement was deserted. From the care which had been taken to hide the deeds and at the same time to mark their position—for that, no doubt, was the purpose of the clay lump which had been found placed in front of it, and had first led Rustam to start his burrowing—it was clear that the owner had been obliged to leave the place in an emergency, but with a hope of returning. Rustam had quickly guessed the meaning of that mark because similar practices are still resorted to by villagers when obliged to leave their dwellings unguarded. In the case of the deeds the absence of any provision for a covering or receptacle to protect such valuable records while buried, clearly suggested hurried departure. With this indication the scattered condition of the other files of tablets, mostly wedges, left above ground seemed to agree well.

Circumstances in which documents were hidden.

In any case it would be difficult to account otherwise for such a cache and the way in which its place was marked. Had the hole below the foundation beam been regularly used as a sort of safe, some receptacle would have been provided, and it would not have been necessary to mark its position at all as long as its existence was remembered. If, on the other hand, the departure of the owner had been due to a systematic abandonment of the site, such as the gradual failure of the water-supply would have entailed, we should have expected this collection of specially valued records to be removed with other cherished possessions, neither bulk nor weight presenting any difficulty.

Marking of cache.

It would serve no useful purpose to conjecture what particular emergency gave rise to this sudden departure, or what prevented the owner's return. So much, however, is certain, that the reoccupation of the settlement must have been subsequently rendered impossible—we do not know how much later—through the change in physical conditions brought about by desiccation. We shall have occasion below to refer to the conclusive proofs which the site furnishes of this change. That it was a gradual one is certain, and it could not, therefore, prevent the abandoned dwellings being visited and exploited during centuries before they were finally covered up by the sands. They must have continued to be searched, probably from the very time of the abandonment, for any objects of value or practical utility left behind. Hence we have reason to feel grateful for the fortunate chance, whatever its nature, which protected the small hidden archive, and the office 'papers' left near it, from the risks of premature discovery and disturbance. But it was scarcely surprising that the other 'finds' in this room included nothing of more value or interest than the various rags and small wooden implements which the Descriptive List shows under N. xxiv. viii. 001-14.

Among the scanty 'finds' which the remaining portions of the ruin yielded, the only one needing special mention is the small wooden fire-stick, N. xxiv. x. 001. It is a 'female' stick closely resembling in shape the fire-stick, N. xxix. ii. 001. a (see Plate XXVIII), and has been reproduced in the paper in which Mr. T. A. Joyce has fully discussed the specimens, found here and at other sites, of this primitive apparatus used for producing fire by 'twirling'.²⁰ The earliest of these specimens

Wooden fire-stick.

²⁰ Cf. *Note on a number of fire-sticks from ruined sites on the south and east of the Takla-makan Desert*, by T. A. Joyce, M.A., in *Man*, xi. No. 3, 24; Fig. 6.