

PREFACE

That nearly forty years should have elapsed between the discovery of these documents and their publication is in part due to the immense difficulty of deciphering and interpreting them, but mainly to a long series of obstacles created by world events. The material, consisting of 930 manuscripts, 219 on wood and 711 on paper, was discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in the course of his third Central Asian expedition of 1913-15. Soon after the end of the first world war, all the manuscript finds of this expedition had been brought from Kashmir to the British Museum for classification and distribution. The Chinese documents recovered on the explorer's first and second Central Asian expeditions had already been edited by Edouard Chavannes, Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the Collège de France, and published, with a subvention from the Government of India, by the Clarendon Press in 1913. M. Chavannes died in 1917 and was succeeded in the chair of Chinese by his pupil, Henri Maspero, a sinologist no less brilliant than his master. In 1920, M. Maspero, having agreed to edit, purely as a labour of love, the Chinese manuscripts from this third expedition, Sir Aurel Stein transmitted to him in Paris all the material. But the problems of decipherment and interpretation tested to the uttermost even the superb scholarship of M. Maspero, who, it may be said, treated his subject even more exhaustively than did his great predecessor Chavannes. For over fifteen years he devoted much of his time to the task, and it was not until 1936 that he was sufficiently content with the result of his labours to send the finished work to London.

Meanwhile, by decision of the Government of India, all Chinese manuscript materials brought back from the third expedition had been allotted to the British Museum, and negotiations had begun for the publication of M. Maspero's book at the joint expense of the Trustees of the British Museum and the Government of India. These negotiations dragged slowly on, hampered chiefly by financial difficulties, until the war-clouds once again closed over Europe and all thought of publication had to be abandoned for the time being.

At the end of the war the project sustained another grievous blow when the world of scholarship learned with deep sorrow and indignation that Professor Maspero had died on 17 March 1945 in a concentration camp at Buchenwald.

Meanwhile the British Museum's extensive collections of Far Eastern manuscripts and books had been evacuated *en bloc* into protective storage far from London, and owing to war damage to the Museum building during their absence it was late in 1947 before they could be restored to their shelves and made available to scholars.

Steps were now taken to proceed with the printing of M. Maspero's work at the joint expense of the Museum and the India Office as originally planned. The plan in this form was, however, soon ruled out by the constitutional changes in India which terminated the existence of the India Office, and in June 1948 the Commonwealth Relations Office announced its withdrawal from financial participation in the project. In July 1949 the Trustees of the British Museum decided, in view of their obligations to Professor Maspero, Sir Aurel Stein and the former Government of India, that the volume be produced as a Museum publication and the printing entrusted to Messrs Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd. At long last the goal seemed to have been reached when an appeal from the Treasury for stringent economies halted the undertaking for a further period of eighteen months.

Printing eventually began in April 1951, and the publication of one of this century's most striking contributions to Chinese scholarship is now, after many vicissitudes, an accomplished fact.