

## INTRODUCTION

THE present work is intended to describe in detail the archaeological results of the explorations which I carried out in 1900-01, under the orders of the Government of India, in the southern portion of Chinese Turkestan, and particularly in the region of Khotan. It has been my endeavour to make this account as exact and exhaustive as seemed justified by the importance of the discoveries which rewarded my journey, and by the interest of the observations then collected regarding the early geography and civilization of the country. Considering the length to which the work has grown, and also that its conclusion coincides with the commencement of a fresh and absorbing task in the same field, I may be allowed to restrict my introductory remarks to a brief record of the circumstances which led me to form my plan and enabled me to carry it into execution, and to some needful explanations concerning the conditions in which the results were finally elaborated.

Ever since 1891, when the famous birch-bark codex acquired by Colonel Bower from Kuchā became known to Indologists, my eyes had been turned towards Eastern Turkestan as a field for archaeological enterprise. But the difficulties with which then, and for long years thereafter, I had to contend, in order to assure the completion of my labours on Kalhaṇa's Chronicle of Kashmīr, while the leisure left to me by onerous administrative duties was of the scantiest, precluded any actual steps in that direction. In the spring of 1897, when the conclusion of those labours was drawing within sight, I became acquainted, through personal communications from the late Professor Bühler, with the important find of ancient birch-bark leaves, containing a Buddhist text in early Prākṛit and in Kharoṣṭhī writing, of which M. Dutreuil de Rhins had acquired a portion during his stay at Khotan. These remarkable fragments, of which others had found their way to St. Petersburg, were on their publication by M. Senart at once recognized as the oldest Indian MS. then known, and they decided me to fix upon Khotan as my goal.

Other acquisitions from the same region, which had reached Calcutta, helped to assure me still further of the importance of this particular field. Dr. A. F. R. Hoernle, c. i. e., to whose long-continued efforts we owe the decipherment and elucidation of those first discoveries of ancient Sanskrit texts from Kuchā, had induced the Government of India to issue instructions to its political representatives in Kāshgar, Ladāk and Kashmīr for the acquisition of antiques from Chinese Turkestan. The most notable additions which the collection thus formed in Calcutta under Dr. Hoernle's charge received during the years 1895-7, consisted of MSS. and other remains which were said to have been obtained by native 'treasure-seekers' from sites in the Khotan oasis and adjoining parts of the Taklamakān desert. But no reliable information was ever forthcoming as to the exact origin of these finds, or the character of the sites which were supposed to have furnished them. The many questions of historical interest which from the absence of such data had to be left unanswered—and the doubts which soon arose as to the genuineness of a large portion of these acquisitions, consisting of MSS. and block-prints in