

different works in Khotanese language, one of them, Ch. ii. 003 (Plate CL), a medical text, being represented by not less than 71 leaves.

Mixed up with these disarranged leaves, Chinese and Tibetan rolls, and portions of large Tibetan Pōthīs, there were found convolutes of miscellaneous Chinese papers, written on detached sheets. The utter confusion prevailing in these bundles and their careless fastening, often without an outer cloth cover, clearly showed that no trouble had been taken to preserve the materials in whatever kind of arrangement they might have originally been found. But the very careless treatment to which the manuscripts had been exposed on that occasion, and probably also in subsequent searches for treasure, helped to bring out still more the remarkable state of preservation observed in individual pieces. However much disturbed in their order, the contents of the bundles showed no sign of having suffered in their material. Nowhere could I trace the slightest effect of moisture, and there was an equally striking absence of brittleness. The explanation was sufficiently obvious. No place could have been better adapted for preserving such relics than a chamber carved in the live rock of these absolutely barren hills and completely shut off from any moisture that the atmosphere of this desert valley ever contained. Enclosed by thick rock everywhere, except for the narrow walled-up entrance, and that, too, covered up by drift-sand for centuries, the air within the small chapel could have undergone but slight changes of temperature. Not in the driest soil could the relics of a ruined site have been so completely protected from injury as they had been here.

The importance of the exceptionally favourable conditions of preservation enjoyed by this great deposit impressed itself upon me even more when, on opening a large packet wrapped in a sheet of stout discoloured canvas, I found in it, mixed up with miscellaneous papers, paintings on fine gauze-like silk and on linen, as well as a mass of textile pieces in all kinds of silk and brocade, suggesting ex-votos. Most of the paintings first found were narrow pieces from 2 to 3 feet in length, and could, by their triangular tops and floating streamers, be recognized at once as having been intended for temple banners. Their general arrangement is shown by the specimens in Plates LXXVII, LXXX–LXXXIX, and will be fully explained further on. The silk banners were usually found rolled up tightly over the small lacquered or painted 'strainers' of wood which had served to hold the streamers in position at the bottom. When unfurled, these silk banners showed painted figures of Buddhist divinities, retaining their harmonious colours in perfect freshness.<sup>4</sup> The silk used for them was invariably a transparent gauze of remarkable fineness. Any damage that their delicate material had in some cases suffered was the result, not of centuries of internment, but of long exposure in the shrines, as proved by the care with which rents had been repaired, etc.

The risks attending the use of a very fine fabric were demonstrated only too clearly when subsequently I came upon convolutes containing silk paintings much larger in size. They must have been closely and often carelessly folded up at the time of their deposition, and were much creased and crumpled in consequence. After centuries of compression any attempt to open them out completely would have entailed obvious risks of damage to the thin material. But by lifting a fold here and there it was possible to see that the scenes represented were often as elaborate and crowded with figures as the fresco panels on the walls of some of the largest temple cellas. In Plates LVI–LXIV specimens of such large pictures on silk are reproduced after the delicate and difficult process of unfolding and cleaning had been successfully accomplished by expert hands at the British Museum. Plate LXXVI (Ch. 00350) illustrates one of the instances where such paintings were originally found in the state of mere crumpled-up packets of smoke-begrimed silk. The comparison shows, on the one hand, how great the risks of complete destruction had been for these

<sup>4</sup> See Pl. LXXVIII, LXXX for specimens of these first finds.