

THE TUN-HUANG PAINTINGS AND THEIR PLACE IN BUDDHIST ART

AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

BY

LAURENCE BINYON

I

THE paintings and drawings here reproduced are a selection from the mass of precious material discovered by Sir Aurel Stein, and brought away by him from 'The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' at Tun-huang, on the extreme western frontier of China. The romantic circumstances of the discovery have been fully described by Sir Aurel in the second volume of his *Ruins of Desert Cathay*; and to those pages the reader is referred. But it may be well to recall briefly the main facts of the narrative.

In March 1907 Sir Aurel Stein's expedition, which had left Kashmir in April of the preceding year, arrived at Tun-huang. From Kāshgar the travellers had proceeded to Yārkand; thence to Khotan, where Sir Aurel on his previous journey in 1900-1 had disinterred such interesting remains of the ancient civilization once flourishing in that region; thence eastward along the southern skirts of the great desert, exploring various sites by the way with rich results, till at Tun-huang they found themselves at last within the western border of the Chinese province of Kan-su.

Tun-huang is a square-walled town in a prosperous oasis of the desert. Sir Aurel Stein had been attracted thither by the knowledge that near the oasis were a number of sacred grottos known as 'The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas', filled with ancient Buddhist frescoes and sculptures.¹ But after arriving at Tun-huang, he also heard, through a Muhammadan trader, rumours of something still more exciting to the archaeologist—a hidden deposit of manuscripts which had been accidentally discovered a few years previously in one of the caves. In a barren valley to the south-east of the town, above a narrow strip of irrigated soil, with rows of elms and poplars, there is a cliff of conglomerate rock, which is honeycombed with hundreds of cavities. These have been hollowed out to serve as Buddhist shrines, still frequented by pious worshippers; and the walls of the cellas are covered with old frescoes.

It was in one of the larger shrines that the deposit of manuscripts had been discovered by the Taoist monk in charge of certain grottos. The monk had collected money from the faithful, and had undertaken to restore this particular shrine to its former splendour; a laborious work, since the drifting of the sand and falls of crumbling rock had here, as in many other cases, blocked the entrance of the cave, and the sand and débris had to be cleared away before the actual work of the restorer could begin. While the men engaged on this labour were at work, they had noticed a crack in the frescoed wall of the passage between temple and antechapel. An opening was found; and this led to a recess hollowed out of the rock behind the stuccoed wall. The room thus disclosed proved to be completely filled with rolls of manuscript. Specimens had been sent to the Viceroy of the Province, but no steps had been taken to remove them; and in fact when Sir Aurel Stein first arrived at the Caves he found

¹ For the wall-paintings and sculptures of the cave-temples of Tun-huang, see now the fine reproductions in M. PAUL PELLIOU'S *Les Grottes de Touen-houang*,

Peintures et Sculptures des époques des Wei, des T'ang et des Song (Paris, Paul Geuthner, in progress).