

Of paintings in built structures very few of an early period have escaped the destructive influences to which they were exposed. Within caves, owing to the greater protection afforded, deterioration due to forces of nature has been slower, although human activities have left their malefic trail. The adoption for religious purposes of natural caves, and of those excavated in suitable cliff faces, had many obvious advantages, not the least being a measure of security from aggression, a consideration of some importance in a land subject to tribal disturbances, especially in the north and in that much-harried territory comprising the Tārīm basin and the main roads connecting China with India and the West.

With the expansion of Buddhism and the erection of increasing numbers of stūpas and shrines, sculptors and painters were in constant demand for work on the enrichment of these sacred structures. Inexhaustible subject-matter was provided in Buddhist legends—the *Jātakas*—and when elements from the richly complex Hindu mythology were later imported into the relatively simple creed of early Buddhism the scope for the artist was immensely extended. Approved designs, originally drawn by competent artists, were used repeatedly, and in repetition, often by indifferently trained artisans, suffered deterioration.

In the territory north of the K'un-lun range the roads or tracks that served the traffic, both civilian and military, between China, India, and the West were favourable routes along which to establish shrines. Besides the flow of usual caravan traffic, pilgrims on their way to visit famous Buddhist sites would pass along these roads and would naturally pause to pay devotion at such shrines as lay on, or sufficiently near, their way, thereby accumulating spiritual merit for themselves and contributing towards the maintenance of the shrines. The donations of these wayfarers would provide means to pay for the services of roving painters, who doubtless frequented the neighbourhood of shrines for chance employment either by the priests or by prospective donors anxious to acquire merit; and to assure that such claims should be rightly credited, it was not unusual for the donor, by arrangement with the painter, to be represented in the picture in a suitably devout pose and drawn to a becoming scale. The occasional traces of earlier work under the later painting, already referred to, seem to be of a superior quality, but are too scanty and fragmentary to admit of conclusive judgement on this point or to identify the subject. Besides finer craftsmanship there appeared to have been a more generous use of gold-leaf than in the later work. The reason for effacement can be only surmised. It may be that they were in bad condition, or that they were