

This and the third group still farther down comprises only small grottoes, practically retaining no traces of decoration and evidently inaccessible for long ages. The stream here washes the very foot of the conglomerate cliff, about 50 to 60 feet high in its lowest and most precipitous step, and much of the friable rock-face once containing approaches to the various cave chambers and passages between them has fallen and crumbled away completely. Of wooden galleries and stairs such as must once have served in addition for communication, no trace has survived here. It is probable that most of these small grottoes in the northern groups served as quarters for monks rather than as shrines.

In the southern and largest group, too, the caves are disposed in so irregular a fashion as to preclude all idea of systematic planning. The number of grottoes excavated one above the other varies according to their respective heights; and only for short distances, such as near the Tao-shih's temple (Fig. 198) and between the two shrines containing colossal seated Buddhas (Fig. 199), is it possible to recognize something corresponding to regular rows or stories. In front of many of the upper grottoes wooden stairs and verandahs, dating from the time of the last restoration, are visible, though generally far too decayed for use. Elsewhere their position can still be made out by the holes cut into the rock as supports for the rafters (Fig. 159). The varying stages of decay shown by these adjunct structures suggest that restoration has never quite ceased. The different styles of decoration displayed by the frescoes in parts of the same shrine as well as by the stucco sculptures confirm this conclusion. In fact, with so many grottoes left neglected and available for fresh consecration by any pious donor who would pay for their restoration, centuries are likely to have passed since any new excavation.

A number of archaeological indications show that most if not all the large cave-temples, usually situated on the ground level, date back to T'ang times or even earlier. There is strong reason to assume that the best work in their decoration belongs to the same period, though even