

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE CAVES OF THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS

#### SECTION I.—GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

My exploration of the ancient desert Limes of Tun-huang had been exceptionally fruitful in results, but I felt glad, all the same, when its successful completion allowed me by May 15, 1907, to regain the oasis; for now I was free to turn definitely towards the cave-temples of the 'Thousand Buddhas' or *Ch'ien-fo-tung*, in the barren foot-hills south-east of Tun-huang, upon which my eyes had been fixed from the very first as one of the main goals of my expedition. The rapid preliminary visit I had paid to these shrines after my first arrival in March, as previously mentioned,<sup>1</sup> had shown me their wealth of old Buddhist sculptures and frescoes. It had amply sufficed to convince me how well, by their artistic value and archaeological interest, they deserved the glowing description which five years before Professor L. de Lóczy had given me of them. But what I had been able to ascertain on my first visit about a great collection of ancient manuscripts, accidentally discovered some years before in one of the temples, had made me still more anxious to explore the site. For some days, however, after my return I was detained by urgent practical tasks and still more by needful regard for the annual pilgrimage, which just then carried thousands of pious folk from all parts of the district to the sacred caves and for the time would have seriously hampered operations on my part. So it was not until May 21 that I could establish my camp there.

Archaeo-  
logical  
interest of  
*Ch'ien-fo-  
tung*.

Before proceeding to an account of the labours which kept me busy at the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' for over three weeks, and of the results which they yielded, it is necessary to give a general description of this important site and of its most notable features. At a distance of about 10 miles in the direct line from Tun-huang town to the south-east there debouches into the Su-lo Ho basin a desert valley, half a mile or so wide at its mouth, but higher up contracting into a cañon-like gorge. A now insignificant stream, fed at present by the subsoil drainage coming from a higher outward range of the Nan-shan,<sup>2</sup> has in an earlier geological epoch carved out this valley through the low hill chain, furthest to the north. To the west of the *Ch'ien-fo-tung* valley this hill chain is completely covered by huge dunes of coarse drift-sand. These, extending as far as the Tang Ho, fringe the southern edge of the Tun-huang oasis and account for the later name of its town, *Sha-chou*, or 'the City of the Sands'. Offshoots of these high drift-sand ridges overlook the *Ch'ien-fo-tung* valley from the west and are visible in the background of Figs. 191, 193. To the east of it the low chain of hills bears an equally desolate aspect. Curiously eroded grey slopes, bare of all traces of vegetation, emerge here above the glaxis of gravel which lower down has smothered all features of the ground (Fig. 194). For a description of the route which leads from Tun-huang town to the debouchure of the valley, and for almost

Physical  
surround-  
ings of site.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, pp. 585 sq.

<sup>2</sup> From Captain Roborovsky's map and the survey effected by R. B. Lal Singh in 1914 it is seen that this drainage

originates on the western continuation of the range which I reached south of Shih-pao-ch'êng; see Map No. 82 and Map No. 39. c. 1 of the 1:500,000 Atlas of our Central-Asian surveys.