

The evidence of these restorations and of others which had evidently been effected elsewhere was enough to prove that traditions of Buddhist piety were deep rooted among the people of Tun-huang and by no means extinct even now, in spite of all the *péripéties* which this westernmost outpost of true China had suffered. It is of importance to note this tenacity of local Buddhist traditions and their special attachment to this sacred site. There are ample antiquarian grounds, as we shall see, to justify the belief that the period when the shrines of the Thousand Buddhas and the monastic establishments near them enjoyed special splendour and affluence lies as far back as T'ang rule. It was then that the empire assured effective protection to Tun-huang both against the Turks in the north and against the Tibetans on the south, and just then, too, that Buddhism flourished greatly in China. During the following four centuries and more, until the establishment of paramount Mongol dominion, these outlying marches had, except for relatively short intervals, been exposed to a succession of barbarian inroads.

Tenacity of
Buddhist
traditions at
Tun-huang.

These political vicissitudes must have sadly affected the glory of the 'Thousand Buddhas' abodes and the numbers of those who ministered to their worship. Yet, I think, there can be little doubt that it was the sight of these multitudinous shrines at the chief site of Tun-huang and the vivid first impressions there received of the cult paid to their denizens which had made Marco Polo put into his chapter on *Sachiu* a long and detailed account of the strange idolatrous customs of its people. We have had already occasion to quote its introductory notice. 'After you have travelled thirty days through the Desert, as I have described, you come to a city called SACHIU, lying between north-east and east; it belongs to the Great Kaan, and is in a province called TANGUT. The people are for the most part Idolaters, but there are also some Nestorian Christians and some Saracens. The Idolaters have a peculiar language, and are no traders, but live by their agriculture. They have a great many abbeys and minsters full of idols of sundry fashions, to which they pay great honour and reverence, worshipping them and sacrificing to them with much ado.' Then follows a lengthy description of various customs connected with worship and the disposal of the dead which, as Sir Henry Yule has duly pointed out, are essentially Chinese.⁷ Throughout my travels in western Kan-su—Marco Polo calls it *Tangut*, the popular name derived from the Tangut, or Hsi-hsia, rule there prevailing until the Mongol conquest—I had plenty of opportunities to observe the maintenance of those customs among the local Chinese.

Marco Polo
on Buddhist
worship of
Tun-huang.

But there was one aspect in the conditions of this sacred site where the break with the past seemed great. I mean the total absence of a resident monastic community and even of remains of such structures as might have served for its accommodation. It seemed impossible to believe that 'The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas', in T'ang times and later, could have lacked this essential portion or rather base of the Buddhist religious system. Subsequent discoveries were to place in my hands plentiful evidence, documentary and other, that Buddhist monastic life had once also flourished here. The causes for its complete disappearance I need not attempt to discuss. They are likely to be bound up closely with those gradual changes which have led Buddhism in most parts of China, as far as doctrine and organization are concerned, to become practically absorbed in the queer syncretistic medley of Chinese popular religion. It must suffice to note that at the time of my first visit I found this impressive array of cave-temples without a single resident guardian, and even the small cluster of pilgrims' quarters situated amidst some arbours and fields near the southern end of the site was only tenanted by a single young 'Ho-shang', a visitor from the plateaus of Tsaidam.

Absence of
monastic
community.

⁷ Cf. Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. pp. 203 sqq.