

SECTION II.—INSCRIPTIONS AT THE CAVES OF THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS

M. Chavannes on Chien-fo-tung inscriptions.

If it is possible for me to follow up this rapid general survey of the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas by a brief account of the documentary evidence concerning its history that was available before my work there, I owe this advantage solely to the lucid translation and analysis of five important Chinese inscriptions preserved at the site which M. Chavannes has published, mainly from *estampages* brought back by M. Bonin.¹ M. Chavannes has clearly revealed the interesting sidelights which these inscriptions throw upon the political and ethnic conditions prevailing on these extreme north-west marches of China during T'ang times and also under the Mongol Yüan dynasty. Hence, referring for all the broader aspects of their contents to his introductory synopsis and his notes, I can confine myself to those points which have a direct bearing on the history and remains of the site.

Inscription of A. D. 698.

The oldest and, as M. Chavannes has duly emphasized, the most important of the inscriptions is dated in A. D. 698. It was accessible to him through its reproduction in the *Hsi yü shui tao chi*, a learned Chinese publication of the last century, and is, I believe, identical with the inscribed stēlē now seen in the cave-shrine Ch. III.² It appears to have been originally set up before the 'Cave of unequalled height', and eulogizes the repairs of the niches of Buddha images which were carried out by a certain personage bearing the family name of Li. In a passage of special interest it names the year corresponding to A. D. 366 as the one from which the earliest establishment of a Buddhist sanctuary at the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' dates.

Tradition of first caves constructed.

In that year the Śramaṇa *Lo-tsun*, 'holding the pilgrim's staff in his hand across forests and plains, marched and arrived at this mountain; suddenly he saw an apparition in a flash of gold; in its shape there were a thousand Buddhas . . . he constructed a cave. Then there was the master of Dhyāna *Fa-liang*; coming from the East, he arrived here; in his turn he made himself another construction by the side of the cave of the master [*Lo-tsun*]. The erection of sacred edifices (*saṃghārāma*) commenced with these two monks. After that there was the prefect, the duke of *Chien-p'ing*, and *Wang* . . ., a native of *Tung-yang*. . . . Subsequently persons from the population of the whole district, one after another, made constructions.' A subsequent passage of the inscription confirms this by the statement: 'Lo-tsun and Fa-liang were the initiators: *Chien-p'ing* and *Tung-yang* enlarged the traces left by them. If one calculates the epochs, it is approximately four hundred years since then, and if one counts the habitations in the caves, one finds more than a thousand.'

Site first consecrated in A. D. 366.

It is clear from this record that the tradition of early T'ang times ascribed the first consecration of the site for Buddhist worship to the reign of Fu Chien (A. D. 357-84), who belonged to the short-lived Former Ch'in dynasty established at Hsi-an-fu. This date accords well, as M. Chavannes has shown, with what is otherwise known of the impetus received by Buddhist propaganda under that reign. Hence there is no reason to doubt the correctness of that tradition. But I found no indication enabling us definitely to locate the caves which it identified with the two shrines first established by Lo-tsun and Fa-liang. All that my knowledge of the site permits me to assert is that of the extant excavations the one containing the colossal seated Buddha image (south of Ch. XI in Plate 42) is certainly the highest. Whether this can be meant by the 'Cave of unequalled height' mentioned in the inscription is a question to which I shall have to recur presently.

¹ Cf. Chavannes, *Dix inscriptions chinoises de l'Asie centrale d'après les estampages de M. Ch.-E. Bonin*, 1902, pp. 10-16, 58-103 (in *Mémoires présentés par divers savants*

à l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1^{re} série, tome xi, 11^e partie, pp. 202-8, 250-95).

² Cf. Chavannes, *Dix inscriptions*, pp. 58 sqq.