

The two inscriptions next in order of time are engraved on the obverse and reverse of a fine big slab of black marble which I found set up in the wholly modern antechapel of a large, much-restored shrine, Ch. xv. It lies just north of the one marked Ch. xvi in the plan, Plate 42, and its approach is seen on the extreme left of Fig. 191. The two inscriptions are separated by more than a century in time. The earlier one, dated in the year corresponding to A. D. 776, was 'engraved on stone to celebrate the merits accomplished by Li [T'ai-pin] 李太賓 a notable of the prefecture, a native of Lung-hsi, under the great T'ang dynasty'.³ After extensive eulogies of this personage's ancestors, some of whom had held high office at Tun-huang, and his own religious virtues, the inscription relates how Li T'ai-pin, on returning from protracted travels of devotion, found a 'spot fit to receive sculptures'. It then proceeds to give an elaborate description of the Buddhist divine figures and scenes which this pious donor caused to be modelled or painted at the site, besides a hundred Stūpas. This long catalogue, apart from the interesting light it throws on the early importance attained in Buddhist cult by certain Tantric divinities which two Indian Śramaṇas introduced into China in the eighth century A. D.,⁴ may yet prove to be of considerable value for the detailed iconographic interpretation of the frescoes at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas and for that of the plentiful remains of pictorial art which a fortunate discovery enabled me to secure there. But, unluckily, the absence of any local indications and the thorough restoration accomplished in the shrine before which the stēlē is now set up leave but scant hope of any of Li T'ai-pin's sacred representations being exactly identified.

Inscription
of A. D. 775.
Li T'ai-pin's
sacred gifts.

The later inscription on the back of Li T'ai-pin's stēlē bears the date of A. D. 894, and is, as its title indicates, intended to 'commemorate the meritorious act of repairing a construction accomplished by Mr. Li, of Lung-hsi, a member of the imperial family of the T'ang'.⁵ It is a rhetorical composition, setting forth at great length the distinctions of this defunct scion of the imperial family and of several of his nearest relatives. It furnishes historically useful information about Chang I-ch'ao, the local chief of Tun-huang, who was his father-in-law, and who after a century of Tibetan predominance over Tun-huang and the adjoining tracts (A. D. 757-850) submitted to the T'ang, and thus enabled the imperial Chinese power once more for a time to assert itself along the natural passage leading towards the Western regions.⁶ But, apart from such historical glimpses of local interest and the sidelight incidentally thrown on the close relations which Buddhist monastic communities of Tun-huang maintained at that period with Tibet,⁷ the inscription does not assist archaeological inquiry concerning the site.

Historical
data in
inscription
of A. D. 894.

It is different with the last two inscriptions, which, as M. Chavannes has duly pointed out, are very closely connected with each other. For a reason to be discussed presently it is important to note that I found both of them placed together in the antechapel, constructed of wood and manifestly modern, of the cave-temple marked Ch. xi in Plate 42. This is situated, next but one, to the north of the cave containing the colossal clay statue of a seated Buddha already referred to. The two stēlēs, dated in the years 1348 and 1351 respectively, were set up by Shou-lang 守朗, a monk from a temple in the province of Shan-hsi, in order to commemorate religious foundations attributed to Sulaimān, king of Hsi-ning, as the principal donor. This prince, as M. Chavannes has shown, is identical with the Su-lai-man 速來蠻 who is mentioned by the Annals of the Yüan, or Mongol, dynasty as having been installed in A. D. 1329, and to whom, under a slightly different representation of his name, reference is also made there as a descendant of Chingis Khān.⁸

Inscription
recording
Sulaimān's
foundations.

³ Cf. Chavannes, *Dix inscriptions*, pp. 60 sqq.

⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ Cf. Chavannes, *ibid.*, pp. 77 sqq.

⁶ Cf. Chavannes, *Dix inscriptions*, pp. 12 sq., 80, note 1.

⁷ See Chavannes, *ibid.*, p. 85, with note 4.

⁸ Cf. Chavannes, *ibid.*, pp. 102 sq.