

CHAPTER XXV

CAVE-TEMPLES AND ANTIQUES OF THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS

SECTION I.—DECORATIVE ART IN SOME CH'IENT-FO-TUNG SHRINES

It was only after my immediate labours at the great hoard of the hidden chapel had ended that I was able to turn my attention to a closer examination of at least some of the other cave-temples and of their mural paintings. A description of the observations made in them may hence serve as a fit conclusion also to the account of my work at Ch'ien-fo-tung and of the relics I was able to carry away.

No detailed
survey
possible.

The general account I have given in Chapter XXI of the site and its great array of cave-temples would alone suffice to explain why it was impossible for me to attempt anything like a detailed survey of these hundreds of rock-cut shrines. Quite apart from the very limited time which regard for the summer programme of geographical exploration in the Nan-shan ranges left available to me, I realized fully that for a task of this magnitude special qualifications would have been needed, as well as technical help such as I did not command. Without Sinologue knowledge and sufficient familiarity with Buddhist iconography as developed in China I could not hope to secure proper guidance to the interpretation of all this vast display of wall-paintings, and still less to find clues for determining their chronological sequence and that of the shrines they adorned. At the same time I sadly lacked the technical experience and trained help needed for obtaining, within reasonable time limits, photographic reproductions of all the more notable paintings and sculptures and for gaining access to those grottoes which, high up on the cliff, could not be safely approached without special arrangements.¹

Difficulties
of photo-
graphic
record.

These considerations will explain why I felt obliged to limit my examination to a certain number of cave-shrines which by their arrangement and decoration might serve as typical specimens. In their case, too, special difficulties were often encountered owing to the bad conditions of lighting. Only during certain hours of the morning could adequate light be obtained for particular portions of the painted surfaces of the walls. Even then work was often seriously interfered with by the dust haze due to the violent gales which used to blow up the desert valley from the north or north-east, recurring at that season at frequent intervals. Thus it cost no small amount of time and effort to secure the photographic negatives upon which I had to rely mainly for some record of the chief characteristic schemes of mural decoration to be found in the caves.

I was well aware that these photographs, of which a selection is reproduced in Figs. 200-36, would by themselves be wholly inadequate for a proper study of the varied aspects of Buddhist pictorial art as displayed on the rock-cut walls of the Thousand Buddhas of Tun-huang. For conveying some impression of its colour effects, often exquisite and always harmonious in the older frescoes, and constituting one of their chief charms, I had no means at all. Fortunately I knew that these fine paintings, all excepting one shrine executed in tempera, were reasonably safe from

¹ I may note here that throughout my stay at Ch'ien-fo-tung both the Surveyor and Naik Rām Singh were ailing, the latter from what sad experience subsequently proved to have

been premonitory symptoms of the fell disease which caused his blindness a year later, and to which he finally succumbed. See below, chap. xxxiii. sec. i.