

which they are known, is appropriate enough; for the mural paintings which decorate these grottoes, though badly effaced in many places, very closely resemble, in subject and style, those found in the smaller of the 'Thousand Buddhas' Caves' and approximately dating from the end of the T'ang period and the century following. None of the grottoes measured over 16 feet square, most of them only 10-12 feet, and all showed restoration by their modern stucco images, etc.

No detailed examination being called for here, the march was continued up the picturesque winding gorge in which the river above Hsiao Ch'ien-fo-tung passes the outer hill range. At a point some fifteen miles above T'a-shih, where the route leads through a particularly narrow defile between serrated bare cliffs, a massive stone-built wall of old appearance closes the bottom of the gorge and ascends for some 250 yards the steep slope to the east which commands it. It is a regular 'chiusa', meant to bar this important route by which danger of inroads from the south has always threatened, as was proved as late as 1894 or so by the advance of Tungan rebels upon T'a-shih.² Together with similar defensive works seen at and above Shih-pao-ch'êng and elsewhere in these mountains, it suggested to me at the time that the Chinese settlements on the ancient line of communication from Su-chou to Tun-huang must have been exposed to attacks from the side of the plateaus and high valleys of Tsaidam quite as much, perhaps, as to barbarian raids across the desert north and west.

'Chiusa' in
T'a-shih
river gorge.

Above this defile the valley becomes somewhat wider, though still bare. After about two miles the route ascending it reaches a little basin on the right bank of the river, filled with luxuriant shrubs and trees and known as Mo-ku-t'ai-tzŭ. Beyond this the course of the river lies in a deep-cut and in parts quite inaccessible cañon, while on either side of it there extends, with gentle but steady rise, a vast and utterly barren gravel slope towards the third outer mountain range in the south. It appears to me very probable that the existence of so fertile a spot as Mo-ku-t'ai-tzŭ, providing plenty of grazing and fuel in what otherwise is a great submontane desert of barren hills and Piedmont gravel, accounts mainly, if not wholly, for the establishment in its vicinity of the important pilgrimage place represented by the grottoes of *Wan-fo-hsia* 萬佛峽, the 'Valley of the Myriad Buddhas'. An ascent of about four miles further on the right bank over a steadily rising gravel 'Sai' brought us to that point above the river gorge, now turned into a regular cañon, from which the sacred site can be approached with least difficulty. The information collected at Tun-huang had made me aware that, notwithstanding its grandiloquent name, this collection of cave-temples could not compare in extent and importance with that of the 'Thousand Buddhas'. Yet what the site lacks in size seemed to be made up by the singular wildness of its setting, which rendered the first impression most striking.

Approach
to *Wan-fo-
hsia* site.

Along both sides of the deep rift, here only about 200 yards wide at the bottom and much narrower still higher up, which the river coming from the snowy range above Shih-pao-ch'êng has cut through the hard conglomerate, the cliffs, nearly vertical for most of their height, show the openings of temple grottoes extending for a distance of over a quarter of a mile.³ The effect of the frowning rock walls over a hundred feet high and of the dark cavities piercing them is heightened by the contrast which the narrow green strip of orchard and cultivation raised along a tiny canal presents at the bottom. Steep slopes of weathered conglomerate strata continue the rock faces to the bare plateau above. Desolate as the scene is, it receives animation from the sound and rapid movement of the river tossing in its boulder-filled bed. It issues at the south-eastern end of the site from beneath confused masses of fallen rock which stop further ascent in the chasm. The condition of the sacred site, as I found it at the time of my visit, harmonized very pleasantly with the picturesque seclusion and peace of this submontane Thebais. Whatever damage the interior of the cave-temples had suffered during earlier times, the numerous small shrines and Stūpas scattered along a raised

Situation of
Wan-fo-hsia
grottoes.

² Cf. *Desert Cathay*, ii. p. 256.

³ See Figs. 242-4.