

Groups of
stucco
images.

The centre was invariably occupied by a colossal stucco image of Buddha, by the side of which were grouped in a symmetrical fashion statues of smaller divinities, all of them often badly injured, completely destroyed, or replaced by modern restorations. Usually a kind of screen and canopy combined had been left standing in the rock at the back of the principal image. Behind this, and between the platform and the cella walls, a passage was invariably left for the worshippers to perform the circumambulation, or *pradakṣiṇā*. In the smaller shrines similar groups of stucco images, with a seated Buddha in their centre, were ordinarily found placed in a kind of alcove or raised chapel (Figs. 207, 208, 211, 212, 228, 229; Plates 44, 45). Only in a few instances did I find a departure from these two types of internal arrangement in favour of another by which the centre of the cella was left unexcavated and the square block of rock used as a backing for statues (Fig. 196; Plate 43).

Preserva-
tion of wall-
paintings.

It was only too easy to realize from the first how much all this statuary in friable stucco had suffered in the course of long centuries through the natural decay of its material, mere soft clay, and even more from the hands of iconoclasts and the zeal of pious restorers. But all the more I was bound to be impressed by the wealth and abundant artistic interest of the obviously old paintings, throughout Buddhist in character, which cover the plastered walls of all the large shrines and of many of the smaller ones. For the most part they are in remarkably good preservation. The last feature, I may explain at once, must be attributed, apart from the extreme aridity of the atmosphere and the dryness of the rock-cut walls, to the profusion of the paintings themselves and to the strength and tenacity with which the plaster bearing them clings to the conglomerate surface. Extensive destruction in the course of vandal inroads would have required here much more time and exertion than it unfortunately did in the case of the mural decoration of Buddhist shrines, whether structural or excavated, at sites of the Tārīm Basin or the Turfān region.⁵ At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the additional safeguard which the strongly marked traditions of Buddhist piety, surviving among the people of Tun-huang to the present day, have continued to provide for this place of cult still 'in being', in spite of all its vicissitudes.

General
scheme of
mural
decorations.

I found that the wall-paintings, with the possible exception of those in a single small shrine to be described below,⁶ are all executed in tempera. It is in this modified, technically inaccurate, sense that the term 'fresco' must be understood where it is used in the following pages for the sake of convenient brevity. The mural decoration in the passages and antechapels ordinarily represents rows of large Bodhisattvas moving in procession, as seen in Figs. 200, 214, or else seated in tiers. Diapers of small figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, arranged after the fashion familiar to me from the shrines of Dandān-oilik and Khādalik, were found to cover the walls in numbers of small cellas (Figs. 211, 212, 228). Along with elaborate floral designs and tracery they had often been used also for the adornment of the ceiling in the large cellas (Figs. 218, 219). But it was on the walls of these last that the wonderful richness and variety of this pictorial art had found room to express itself fully. There the frescoes generally filled large panels, bordered by floral scrolls of striking beauty. They were arranged either singly (Figs. 209, 210, 231, 232) or, where the surface of the wall was extensive, in a series, as illustrated by Figs. 219-24, 233-6, which show a succession of such big panels from the cella walls of two temples. Painted dados, often representing figures of worshippers, in some cases monks or nuns (Figs. 216, 217, 230), served to raise these panels to an appropriate height above the floor and the statue-bearing platform.

⁵ The same technical reason, the firm adherence of the wall plaster to the naturally unequal pebble surface of the conglomerate, promises effectively to protect these mural paintings also from the risk of removal to museums and of

far more destructive local exploitation on the same lines; cf. below, chap. xxv. sec. 1, note 2.

⁶ Cf. below, p. 929, for the true frescoes of Ch. II. a.