CHAPTER FOUR

ILLUSTRATIONS & LABELS—SHRINE BUDDHAS

1. Shrine Buddhas

RESUME: Starting in 466 shrines began to be added to all of the viharas. Typically, they contained a central block appropriate for cutting into a stupa (Cave 11), but from 469 on, the central blocks were used to hold a Buddha image. Until 470, in part because due to the constraints imposed by the block, the Buddhas were very simple; but starting in Cave 17 and 19 paired bodhisattvas became essential additions, causing extreme crowding in Caves 1 and 4, cut as they were from the face of the central block. It was only by about 475 that Buddhas and attendants would be comfortably placed in the rear wall of the shrines. This also allowed the easier placement of the throne base devotees that became de rigueur in the last years of activity at the site. In 477, the concept of the “Six Buddhas of the Past”, attending upon Sakyamuni (in the shrine) also added to the meaningful complexity of the Buddha groups.
When the idea of making shrines in the viharas first dramatically impacted upon the site, the intention was to make stupas rather than Buddhas the object of worship. However, only the stupa in Cave 11 was ever started and it was abandoned while still in process. The Buddha image that replaces it is very early in type, centered in the shrine and having no bodhisattva attendants.