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The

p 70

Preliminary

The Ajanta caves, numbered sequentially from 1 to 29, are located in a great arc cut by the curving course of the Waghora river. Because the caves at the far end of the site are best seen in the morning light, you should proceed there without delay. Then, by the time you make your way back to Cave 1, the crowds will have diminished there and you will have the benefit of the afternoon light, which shows the caves in this area to best advantage. Although this guidebook describes the caves in the "normal" order, starting with Cave 1, this is only for easy reference, to help the reader more easily pick out the comments about any particular cave. Do not let this deter you from going immediately to the far end of the site to begin your visit.

Purchase a light ticket on arrival even if — as you should — you have a torch. Official guides are generally available and give interesting commentaries. Alternatively, if you wish to proceed at your own speed, the attendants in the caves are quite knowledgeable, especially regarding the fascinating narrative paintings in the elaborately decorated Caves 17, 16, 2, and 1. This brief guidebook intentionally omits summarizing these stories, for they are far more interesting if explicated "live" by those who can point out their salient features. Furthermore, summaries of many of the stories are available in an inexpensive booklet (*Ajanta*, by D. Mitra), published by the Archaeological Survey of India; it is usually available at the Ticket Office.

Cover :

*The waterfalls at
Ajanta*

Page : 1

*Cave 12, Monk's cells,
1st century B.C.*

*Cave 19, Facade,
guardian yaksha, right
of arch, 469*

Ajanta : Historical Background

Ajanta had two distinct periods of patronage. The earlier "Hinayana Buddhist" phase took place between approximately 100 B.C.E. (Before Common Era) and 100 C.E. Like so many other excavations throughout Maharashtra, the austere Caves 9, 10, 12, 13, and 15A were excavated as community efforts during that period. After that the site lay dormant for three centuries, Hinduism having become dominant in the region : the Chinese traveller Fa Hien reported, in about 400 C.E., that pilgrims still came here, but that the local people "do not know the... Law of Buddha".

However, the situation dramatically changed in the mid-fifth century, when a remarkable renaissance took place at Ajanta under the aegis of the powerful emperor Harisena of the Vakataka Dynasty. Already the lord of vast domains when he came to power in 460, by the time of his unexpected death in 477 he controlled all of central India from the western to the eastern sea. Possibly the most illustrious ruler in the world in his own day, it was he who sustained the splendor of India's "Golden Age" at the time of its fullest flowering. Thus Ajanta, during its heyday, stands as a miraculous record of the cresting of Indian classical culture, just as, in its sudden demise, it mirrors that great age's tragic decline.

Encouraged by Harisena, a group of powerful patrons — among them the emperor's own prime minister, the lavishly pious local ruler of the Ajanta region, and ambitious feudatories from nearby Asmaka — decided, early in the emperor's reign, to initiate this challenging new undertaking. Now, however, in contrast to the shared donations of Hinayana times, each cave was the exclusive offering of a single important donor, with the whole development under tight administrative controls.

From 462 on, activity burgeoned for an exuberant half-decade; at least twenty of the more than two dozen Vakataka caves were started in that period. However, by 468, the neighboring Asmakas — the sponsors of the great Cave 26 complex — were threatening the stability of the region with their territorial ambitions. As a consequence, Upendragupta, the local feudatory ruler, ordered work stopped on every excavation except for his own Caves 17-20 and his emperor's Cave 1. However, the political situation only worsened, and by 472 work on these privileged royal caves was hastily abandoned too. War must have flared in the region at this point, for the site's patronage was now totally cut off for a few years in the early 470s. Apparently many artists migrated north to work on the contemporaneous Bagh caves during this period, for that region was under the secure rule of Harisena's viceroy.

Significantly, when activity vigorously started up again in 475, it was the aggressive Asmakas — the sponsors of Cave 26 — who were the new feudatory lords of the region. As for the now-defeated local king, who had dreamed of "covering the earth with stupas and viharas", he was never heard from again; even worship in his beautiful chaitya hall (Cave 19) was now disallowed.



*Cave 1, Ceiling,
floriated bovines, 476*

Ajanta's new florescence was tragically short-lived, however. In 477, the great emperor Harisena suddenly died and, with his death, political turbulence began. Within a matter of weeks, the site had gone into deathly convulsions of its own. All ongoing excavation programs were rapidly abandoned during 478, as the worried patrons, except in the Asmaka's Cave 26, concentrated their efforts solely upon getting their main Buddha images completed and dedicated. Their evident anxiety was justified; for no sooner had Harisena's inept son ascended the throne than the contentious Asmakas boldly rejected his overlordship, plotting to take over the vast empire for themselves. Although their selfish scheme failed, they did in fact manage to destroy the once-proud Vakataka house and, with it, all further patronage at Ajanta too. The life of the site was quickly snuffed out by the winds of war.

For a brief period only (479-480), the monks still living at Ajanta, along with a few anxious local devotees, took advantage of the disruption of authority at the site by donating a host of intrusive Buddhas, to get such merit as they could. These appear, helter-skelter, outside and inside those caves where the main Buddha images were already in worship. However, this eruption of intrusive piety was short-lived, for the funds sustaining these modest offerings soon ran out, and the last remaining artists moved away. Monks continued living in a few of the caves for a few years; but soon the bitter realities of the present closed in upon the illumined past. After 480, not a single image was ever made again at the site; for when the region finally emerged from the late fifth century's darkness, Hinduism was again at the fore. Ajanta, deep in its remote valley, lay largely forgotten, treasuring the isolation that so remarkably preserved it.

*Cave 1, Shrine, flying
dwarf over Buddha,
477*





Cave 1, Right rear wall, Vajrapani, 477

Cave 1, Porch pillar, 475



The Caves : Brief Comments

Cave 1, the most sumptuous vihara at the site, was sponsored by the great Vakataka emperor Harisena himself. Significantly, its iconographic program is focussed upon themes connected with kingship. Carvings of the hunt, battles, and erotic dalliance adorn the rich facade, while the paintings within invariably emphasize royal virtue. Although it was Harisena's strong rule that made Ajanta's fifth century renaissance possible, he did not start his own beautiful cave until about 466, when all of the best spaces along the scarp were already gone; hence its non-central location. Harisena died suddenly in 477, leaving the empire in a state of shock from which it never recovered; and as a consequence, his own cave was neither finished nor dedicated, nor ever used for worship. This explains why its painted decoration, even in the shrine itself, shows not a trace of soot from oil lamps or from incense.

Cave 2 was started just before Cave 1, but work on it broke off when the Asmakas started threatening the region in 468. Consequently, all of its decoration was done after 475, in Ajanta's lavish late mode. A certain emphasis in its iconographic program upon virtuous or powerful women might suggest a queenly patronage; be that as it may, we can believe that mothers would have worshiped the powerful Hariti in the right rear shrinelet. A much-feared demoness who long had cannibalized children, after her conversion by the Buddha she became their powerful protectress. The development of Cave 2's paintings is discussed on page 30-33.

Cave 3, started very late, had been barely penetrated when Harisena died in 477. At that point, it was abruptly abandoned.

Cave 4, the largest vihara at the site, was sponsored by the rich but much-afflicted Mathura, one of the inaugurators of Ajanta's renaissance in the early 460s. The old-fashioned design of its porch colonnade shows how early the cave was started, while the late

intrusive sculptures flanking its doorway prove that even fifteen years later, the expected paintings in the porch had still not been started. Cave 4's problems were caused primarily by the fact that the fascinatingly-flawed hall ceiling collapsed in about 467, demanding voraciously time-consuming adjustments. Mathura managed to get his huge Buddha image completed and dedicated in 478, just after Harisena's death, but was forced to abandon work on much of the rest of his vast undertaking.

Cave 5, begun very early, was still very unfinished when Harisena died. Perhaps the patron of this little cave had trouble hiring workmen away from the more powerful donors' projects. When work broke off in 477, the old-fashioned windows, left unfinished in 468, were being reshaped and along with the doorway were being decorated in a very late mode. To the cave's right, the hopelessly "jointed" nature of the basalt demanded that the adjacent Cave 4 be placed at a higher level, where the rock had more integrity.

Cave Lower 6's partly "structural" doorway, once supplied with (now-missing) inset goddesses, may be the earliest in the Vakataka caves; and its fine Buddha shrine is also notably early, having been carved out by 468. The unusual number of pillars is a response to the presence of its unprecedented upper storey. The latter cave (Cave Upper 6), started slightly later, was to have no less than four pairs of pillared cell complexes, although a number of them had not been completed at the time of Harisena's death and were therefore converted to intrusive shrinelets during the Period of Disruption (479-480). Whoever the patron of this cave was, he appears to have been able to continue work on his main Buddha image right into this Period of Disruption; perhaps his special position explains why the cave was so richly crowded with carved and painted intrusions — although most of the latter have long since fallen away, exposing the less begrimed wall-surfaces beneath.

Cave 7, with its expensive double-porticoed facade, was planned as a grand excavation, and begun at the very start of the Vakataka renaissance. However, because of many problems it was reduced to little more than a long porch uncomfortably connected with a

*Cave 17, Shrine area
carved 470
painted 471*



modest shrine, its residence cells being located wherever space allowed. Its patron, possibly a monk, may have had connections with Asmaka rulers, for it appears that he was able to retain some control over the fate of his cave's program even during the Period of Disruption. Like the very early shrine doorway, the shrine itself was drastically remodelled in the late 470s, when all of the many attendant Buddhas were added.

The very broken Cave 8 unfortunately serves as the site's engine room. Long considered a Hinayana excavation because of its primitive character, it was actually undertaken at the very start of Ajanta's Vakataka phase, possibly being the earliest excavated Mahayana vihara in the whole of India. Abandoned in mid-course, it was finally plastered and painted just as the site was expiring.

The chaitya halls Caves 9 and 10, both planned as halls for worship and containing austere stupas, form the center of the old "Hinayana" nucleus of the site. Cave 9 dates to about the first century C.E., the more severe Cave 10 being excavated a century earlier. Created at a time when imagery of the Buddha was disallowed, both were newly decorated with multiple iconic forms in the site's later (fifth century) phase. On pillar R14 in Cave 10 one can see the words "John Smith, 28th Cavalry, 28th April, 1819" scratched across the chest of one of these later painted Buddha images; the English officer was standing on some five feet of accumulated debris when he wrote it, which explains why it is so high up today. Smith and his companions, said to have been tiger hunting nearby when a local boy guided them to the caves, may have been the first westerners to see the site.

The cluster of small shrinelets between Caves 9 and 10, as well as the Buddha images and stupas on those early facades are all later intrusions. All belong to the Period of Disruption (479-480), when anxious local devotees finally could make their own votive donations at this once highly exclusive site. Elaborate even if small, they once had double-panelled doors to close off their highly developed images, around which a number of hooks for garlands,

or holes for such hooks can be seen. A similar shrinelet between Caves 10 and 11 contains one of the first carved female bodhisattvas at the site.

Cave 11, another very early Vakataka vihara, is squeezed into the available space between the Hinayana Caves 10 and 12. Since the still-inexperienced excavators did not take account of the huge Cave 10's angled orientation, embarrassing revisions had to be made after the cave was underway. The fact that the Buddha shrine was obviously made from a converted cell only adds to the confusion. The once-splendid porch ceiling and beautiful bodhisattvas flanking the porch door were painted in 468, but most of the other images in the long-unfinished porch, and all in the main hall, are intrusions dating to the Period of Disruption.

The ancient Cave 12, its astylar and shrineless hall surrounded by cells containing two stone beds each, provided a ready model for the new Vakataka excavators, whose earliest caves all reflect this traditional vihara form. Since accommodations would have been badly needed when Ajanta's renaissance began, it is hardly surprising that it continued in use at this later date and that its old wall and ceiling surfaces, in bad condition, were eventually redecorated. The tell-tale late red plaster is enough to tell us that.

Above the simple Hinayana vihara, Cave 13, we can see two Vakataka excavations, Caves 14 and 15, located at a higher level. Both are approachable from their shared cistern chamber.

The very late Cave 14, expediently located directly above the old Cave 13, is one of the two major caves started after the Asmaka feudatories took over the site in 475. The porch doorway is of particular interest, being the work of two carvers. Like the rest of the cave, it remained revealingly incomplete when all further excavation was given up in 477.

Cave 15 was started very early, copying the model of the Hinayana Cave 12. But it had a sporadic development, much of its cutting

being long delayed. This explains why both its early porch doorway and its early Buddha image were drastically (and clumsily) redesigned in about 477. Although its image did get hastily dedicated, the whole cave still ended up very unfinished; even the pivot holes to hold the shrine doors were never cut.

Just west of the recently unearthed and much repaired Hinayana Cave 15A — not discovered when the caves were numbered — we come to the Vakataka prime-minister's Elephant Gate. Within, a splendid seven-hooded cobra king (nagaraja), seated upon his own coils, keeps watch over the whole ravine, as well as over approaching devotees. Significantly, Varahadeva's dedicatory inscription refers specifically to this "shrine for the lord of the nagas"; for Buddhism drew much of its power and popularity from its ready assimilation of such ancient cult divinities.

As you mount the tunnelled staircase to Cave 16, the prime minister's self-aggrandizing inscription demands your attention. Varahadeva, who "governed the country righteously", was one of most influential sponsors of Ajanta's revival. His vihara, surely designed and drafted in the capital, introduced this type of impressive pillared hall to the site with a ministerial authority. However, Cave 16 was started so early that it was soon regarded as hopelessly severe and old-fashioned. Perhaps for this reason, when its shrine Buddha was finally carved, after a long delay, both the authoritative image and its palatial chamber were given a revolutionary new form.

Adjacent to a deep cistern — still "filled with sweet, light, clear, cold and copious water", just as the cave's inscription says,—we find the handsome vihara Cave 17. Started immediately after Cave 16, which it not only emulates but intentionally outdoes, it is the first of the cluster of excavations (Caves 17, 18, 19, 20, 29) sponsored by Upendragupta, the feudatory ruler of the Ajanta region during the first decade of the site's renaissance. "Spending abundant wealth" this lavishly pious local king energized the site's new flowering.



*Cave 17, Porch
doorway, Buddhas of
the past, 470*

However, having spent too much on “covering the world with stupas and viharas” and not enough on preparations for war, early in the 470s he suffered a sobering defeat at the hands of the rival Asmakas. At this point, as the Ajanta region fell to his enemies, all work on Upendragupta’s caves came to a sudden and sobering halt.

The so-called Cave 18, an elaborate cistern chamber, where one can still see the old (as well as a newly cut) water-channel, probably served both of its adjacent caves. Like most cisterns, it was cut early, thus providing a ready water supply for the excavators.

Upendragupta’s “perfumed hall” — Chaitya Cave 19 — was conceived as the devotional focus of the site. Its every element characterizes the quality of work that the king, as the site’s most active donor, demanded, so it is hardly surprising that its superb motifs were often utilized as models by other artists. However, before the hall could be put into worship, the victorious Asmakas, having just taken over the region, forbade its use, even breaking a path through its forward court cells in order to more easily reach their own rival Cave 26. Later on, in the Period of Disruption, eager donors covered Cave 19’s court extensions with a hodgepodge of intrusive votive images. The famous cobra king (nagaraja) at the left, for instance, would originally have been paired with another ancient divinity at the right; but since Upendragupta’s program was never completed, an intrusive seated Buddha, his feet planted on the ground in a characteristically late way, was placed there instead. Such “intrusions” characterize the site’s last anxious years; and, understandably, the sacred chaitya halls were particularly favored for their location.

Upendragupta’s richly colonnaded Cave 20, lying just beyond Cave 19, was also hastily dedicated and then abruptly abandoned as a result of the Asmaka takeover in the early 470’s. Since it was accorded the lowest priority of any of Upendragupta’s caves, it suffered from constant cutbacks during the Recession, from the effects of which even the local king himself was not immune. As a result, in the mounting crisis caused by the threat of the Asmaka



*Cave 19, Chaitya hall,
463-471; intrusions
479-480*



*Cave 29, Unfinished
Chaitya hall,
abandoned, 471*

takeover of the region, parts of Cave 20’s main Buddha image had to be expediently completed with mud plaster just before work on the cave broke off in 471.

The incomplete Chaitya Cave 29, located near a small seasonal waterfall, and started in 469, was the last of Upendragupta’s many donations at the site. Begun just after he forbade further work on the Asmakas’ Chaitya Cave 26, it may well have been intended to replace that rival monument. The way that Cave 29 is twisted in the rock-face suggests that, just as may have been the case in Cave 26, the intent was to orient it to the summer solstice.

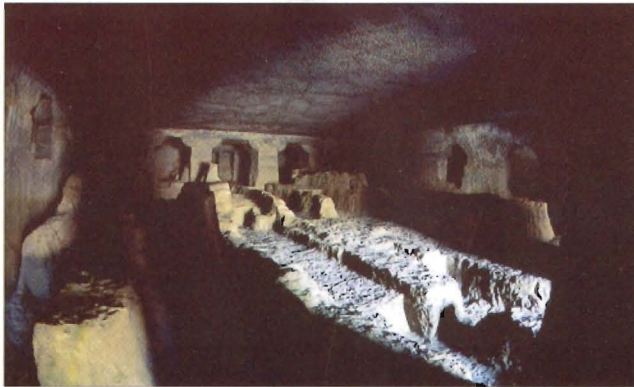
To the west of a small footbridge, which may be impassable for hours during a monsoonal torrent, lie three large related viharas, Caves 21, 23, and 24. The earliest, Cave 21 (whose front has been unfortunately restored in cement) was already being revealed by 465. However its fine carved decoration, all dating from the period of Asmaka domination starting in 475, was still underway when Harisena died, and consequently was never finished. Immediately thereafter, in 478, the patron struggled to hastily plaster and paint the whole interior; and although he failed to complete this task, he at least got his hurriedly — indeed only partially — carved Buddha image painted and dedicated before time ran out.

The tiny Cave 22, started in the still available space up above Caves

21 and 23 in 477, was still very incomplete when Harisena died. The patron may have hurriedly begun its expediently placed Buddha image the following year, but the surrounding spate of votive sculptures (some separately inscribed) are all intrusions of the Period of Disruption (479-480).

Cave 23, started a bit later than Cave 21, shows even more developed features in its porch, notably in its fine "T-shaped" doorway. The patron tried to complete the cave just after Harisena's death, but had to abandon the attempt before the Buddha image was started. Consequently, the cave was never dedicated.

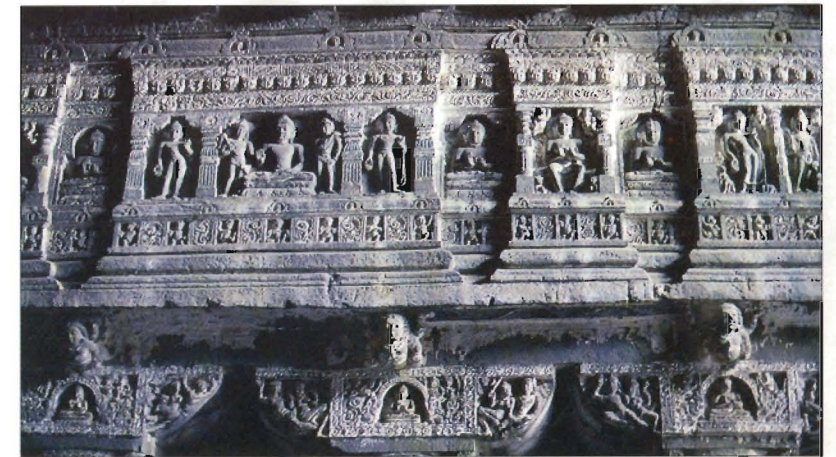
Cave 24 provides a remarkable example of an excavation in progress, being worked on at a time when the workers had gained a confidence never felt in the much earlier (and adjacent) Cave 25; it is instructive to compare their two unfinished interiors. One should also note how Cave 24 distinctly usurps the space needed for Cave 25's right cells; it seems evident that the monk Buddhahadra, who had earlier begun Cave 25, was Cave 24's patron too. If so, he obviously gave priority to this larger and far more impressive cave, which because of space restrictions had to extend leftward if it were to retain its expansive dimensions. Cave 24's beautiful porch, with its highly elaborated late features, had nearly been completed when Harisena died in 477. However, the vast and orderly interior, upon which dozens of workers labored for three years or more, was still



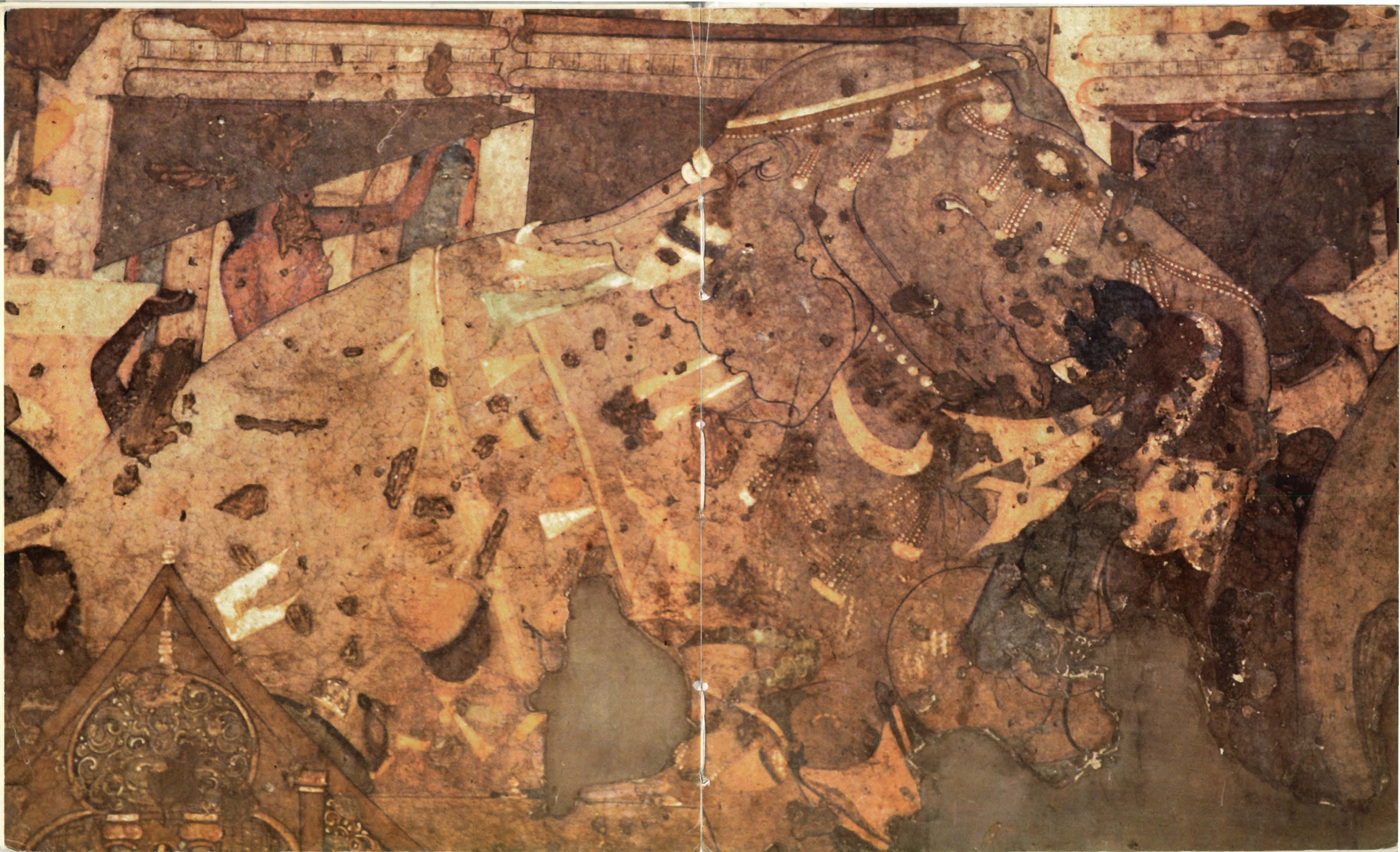
*Cave 24, Interior,
abandoned 477*



*Cave 26, Chaitya hall,
462-468; 475-478
(wide angle view)*



*Cave 26, Frieze over
pillars, completed 477*



so far from completion at that time, that it had to be summarily abandoned — leaving us with a highly instructive, but poignant, example of the fate that attended the site.

This same fate awaited the similar, but barely started, Cave 28. Now inaccessible, except by ropes let down from above, Cave 28 was the latest major undertaking at the site, and hints at the way the site would have been extended, had time allowed.

The farthest accessible excavation at Ajanta is in fact a complex of five caves, comprising the impressive chaitya hall Cave 26, along with its two upper and two lower wings (numbered as Caves 25, 27, 26RW, 26LW). The whole complex was given by the powerful monk Buddhahadra in honor of his long-time friend, the minister of Asmaka, to whom he had been deeply attached “through many successive births”. This “Asmaka connection” explains why work on the complex broke off so abruptly in 468, when the Asmakas started troubling the region. Similarly, it explains why work began again with such vigor in 475, by which time the Asmakas, not to be put off, had conquered the area. This disjunct development explains why the Cave 26 complex’s core is very primitive, whereas its late decorative overlay — more fully completed in the main hall and the lower left wing — is notably lavish. The cave’s orientation to the summer solstice is very close, and may explain why the great cave complex, although started very early, was located at the distant end of the arcing site.

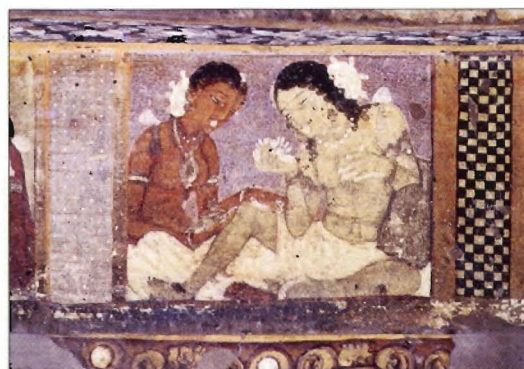
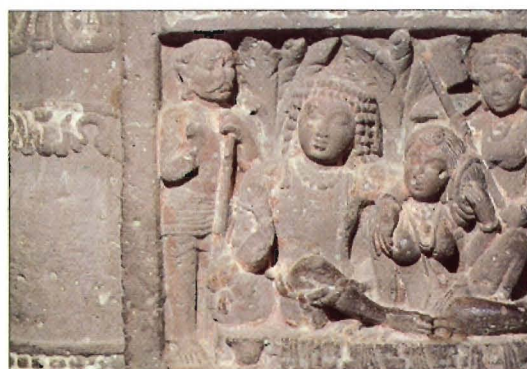
The cave 26 complex is the only excavation at the site where work continued with some confidence during 478, the year after Harisena died; for the Asmakas alone could view this disaster with satisfaction. However, the carving of the colossal Dying Buddha in that darkening year closes their own involvement with the site, for soon they too were caught up in the flames of the vast insurrection that they themselves had fueled. Then, just as elsewhere throughout the site, the still-available areas on Caves 26’s facade and in its ambulatory were filled up with the hodgepodge of intrusive images — often abandoned in mid-course — that announce Ajanta’s tragic end.

Pages : 20-21

*Cave 17, Porch right
rear, the Mad Elephant,
470*

*Cave 26, Ambulatory,
seated Buddha,
abandoned, 480*





*Cave 26, Ambulatory,
Mara's attack, 478*

*Cave 20, Shrine
antechamber frame,
lovers, 470*

*Cave 17, Porch
doorway, lovers, 470*

*Cave 4, Shrine,
Buddha's devotees, 477*

*Cave 1, Ceiling,
inhabited scroll, 476*



A Matter of Time



For convenience, I have used specific dates in referring to the evolution of Ajanta's Vakataka phase. This is because the continual changes that took place at Ajanta during this period can be analyzed with an unprecedented precision. So discrete is the course of its development that one not only can but must discuss its patterns of change within a year by year framework. However, since there are no absolute dates in the inscriptions at the site itself, the sequence has to be located by reference to records dated just before and just after Ajanta's Vakataka renaissance. Thus while the sequence of internal events at the site is secure, the whole suggested span (462-480) assumes a margin of error of a year or two.

Throughout man's history great monuments have generally been completed quickly, while inspiration, energy, and funds were all in abundant supply. Furthermore, most patrons wish to see their offerings completed, and the credit achieved, before they die. My so-called "Short Chronology" for Ajanta's main (Vakataka) phase reflects such realities. However, since its ultimate justification involves linkages with epigraphic and literary material, and with evidence from other sites, a few references are listed below for those who wish to explore this still-disputed view of Ajanta's development.

The craftsmen who, in the early 460s, were told by their patrons to make caves that would "resemble the palaces of the lord of the gods" had never cut into a cliff before. Thus their earliest undertakings, like the Prime Minister's Cave 16 or the rich Mathura's Cave 4, are soberly restrained. However, these artisans, most of whom must have come from the great cities of the empire, were highly skilled and eager to outdo each other. Urged on by the pride as well as the piety of their competing patrons, and by the excitement of the monks and merchants and pilgrims, which



*Cave 17, Porch
doorway, Maitreya, 470*

mounted as the site evolved, they moved from restraint to ripeness with a startling speed. This was, after all, India's "Golden Age"; so it is not surprising that they were soon making rock-cut monuments that were just as splendid as the lavish wooden palaces — seen over and over in Ajanta's own murals — that they had long been building, prior to coming here.

Thus the development of excavated forms in Ajanta's exuberant Vakataka phase goes on with a remarkable, but credible, rapidity. The shift from the austere and often clumsy style of the first Vakataka caves to the highly elaborated style of the latest ones did not take centuries (as some still assume) but less than two decades. As for Ajanta's famous murals, all done within a dozen years, between 468 and 480, their striking differences reflect the fact that the painters who did them were drawn to Ajanta from all parts of the great empire. Indeed, a work/time analysis makes it clear that the (estimated) thirty or forty different painters working at the site could easily have painted everything there in a mere single year, had their efforts been thus concentrated. The actual excavation work, and the carving of sculptural details — which the painters surely worked on too — was far more time-consuming. However, even this work, proceeding with an evident efficiency, should never have required twenty years, given the very large number of craftsmen available — a number that can be surmised from studying revealingly "in-process" excavations such as Cave 24, where perhaps a hundred different workers were involved. Consider too that in the vigorous years just prior to Harisena's death, Cave 24 was only one of more than twenty excavations simultaneously underway!

Therefore the crucial question facing anyone studying the site's Vakataka phase is not the all-too conventional query : "How could it have been done in less than twenty years?". It should be: "How could it take so long?"! The answer of course lies in the site's troubled history, outlined in the Time Chart. For year after impatient year many of the caves lay abandoned, waiting for their work programs to begin again. Furthermore, "actuarial" considerations in themselves demand a short chronology. Except

for the local king, who disappears from our record at the time of his defeat, every known inaugurator of the site — a total of five persons — was still alive when all work finally ended, and the emperor Harisena himself had died only just before. Such evidence severely limits the site's possible span; for how could six already-mature persons, given the life expectancies in those times, all still have been alive at the site's demise, if it had gone on longer than twenty years? One should note, too, that even though cells in many of the caves were put into use, not a single excavation at the site was ever fully completed! That such a vigorously developing site was never finished also suggests that its life, even if very beautiful, was very brief.

SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY

For a more sufficient review of the epigraphic, literary, and art historical evidence upon which the so-called "Short Chronology" is based, see the author's following articles:

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"The Archaeology of Ajanta", in *Ars Orientalis*, XXI, 1992, pp 67-94.

"The Achievement of Ajanta", in *The Age of the Vakatakas*, (ed. A.M. Shastri), New Delhi, 1992, pp. 177-202.

"Before the Fall: Pride and Piety at Ajanta" in *Patronage in India Culture* (ed. C. Blitzer and B.S. Miller), 1991.

"The Caves at Ajanta", *Archaeology*, Nov./Dec. 1992, pp. 52-60.



Do your own analysis!



You may be interested in critically reviewing the manner in which the sequence of events claimed to underlie the “Short Chronology” is reflected in the development of work in the caves. If so, the paintings of Cave 2, all assigned here to the last four years of activity at the site (477-480), can provide you with a test case. In analyzing the progress of the painted decoration in Cave 2, you will probably want to estimate the number of painters involved, decide what might be a reasonable time span for the work accomplished, and note the character of the painting as well as how much of the cave was actually finished. Finally, decide if changes in the style and/or iconography reveal a relationship between the decoration of the cave and the historical circumstances that allegedly controlled it.

477 : Site still flourishing under Harisena’s overlordship, with feudatory control of the region by the Asmakas.

Cave 2’s excavation having been essentially completed by 476, its plastering, and then its painting, began early in 477. All of the decoration of the porch and roughly half of the painting in the interior hall was accomplished during this final year of Harisena’s reign. Work on the beautifully organized ceiling proceeded generally rearward, and as soon as these upper areas had been completed, the painting of the pillars and of the side aisle walls was started, working from the upper levels downward and from front to back. However, work on this carefully planned program was suddenly disrupted when Harisena died. On the left wall, the “narrative” decoration ends with the clearly unfinished Birth of the Buddha scene. At this point the wall beyond, although plastered, was still unpainted, as were all the walls in the rear aisle, as well as the dark front wall. As for the ceiling decoration, before its careful program was disrupted at the end of 477, the painters had already finished that of the shrine antechamber as well as those in the

Page 28:
*Cave 26, Ambulatory
Mara defeated 478*

Page 29:
*Cave 1, ceiling section
476*

Page 30:
*Cave 2, Nidhi shrinelet,
ceiling, 477*

adjacent Nidhi and Hariti shrinelets to left and right. Indeed, the latter shrinelet had just been fully decorated when Harisena died, but neither the main Buddha shrine, nor the walls of the shrine antechamber, nor the rest of the Nidhi shrinelet had been painted by this time.

478 : The “Period of Anxious Consolidation”. Halting their overall programs, the site’s patrons rush to finish their main Buddhas.

Aware that a war for the control of the empire was looming, patrons throughout the site were now rushing to finish only the most essential portions of their caves. Thus the patron of Cave 2, abandoning work on the lower priority narrative murals, concentrated on painting the shrine; this had not been possible before because the Buddha image had not yet been finished. At the same time, the painters completed the all-too-hurried “Vajrapani” guarding the antechamber entrance at the right, as well as the similarly slap-dash paintings in the Nidhi shrinelet. Then, although the cave was still sadly incomplete, the involvement of the original patron came to an abrupt end.

479 : The “Period of Disruption” begins. Original patrons lose all control of their caves. New donors invade them with intrusions.

As the site’s economic base and its administrative controls collapsed, new donors, previously excluded from sharing in the site’s elitist patronage, “invaded” this and other caves with their own merit-making votive images, placing them in the most desirable locations still available. Probably the first such intrusion made in Cave 2 was the Sravasti Miracle, so grandly disposed on the highly visible wall left of the antechamber entrance, where the original patron had surely intended to put a “Padmapani” to match the “Vajrapani” to the right. The same artist probably painted the small Eight Buddhas at the right of the shrine doorway, just at eye level, while another more ambitious “intruder” took over all the rest of these high priority wall surfaces for his Myriad Buddhas. This makes a veritable radiation chamber of the area, the walls of which had already been plastered but were still not painted when



*Cave 2, Rear aisle
ceiling, center, 477*

Harisena died. Interestingly, the disposition of the Eight Buddhas' inscription proves that it was not written until after the Myriad Buddhas were started. Thus both groups are essentially contemporaneous, surely dating to the first year (i.e. 479) of the Period of Disruption, when such high priority locations could easily be had.

480: The "Period of Disruption" rapidly ends, leaving many available locations still untouched by intrusions.

The antechamber pillar bases, too, had been plastered earlier; and now an inscribed Buddha image was painted on one of them in the cursory style of the nearby Myriad Buddhas. The desirability of a location close to the shrine equally explains the addition of a similarly inscribed image in the unadorned corner of the adjacent Sravasti Miracle — an intrusion upon an intrusion! At the same time (in 480) an inscribed row of Buddhas was placed just below the much larger group painted (in 479) toward the rear of the already plastered left aisle wall. A few other areas in the cave (notably the front wall!) could have had similar intrusions; but here, as in all of the other caves at the site, time now ran out.

This concludes our "mini-survey" of four years of vigorous painting activity in one particular cave at the site — an analysis, allowed by Ajanta's unique complexity, — that could be paralleled by a study of developments in all of Ajanta's other caves as well. It is only through such point by point considerations that one can rightly judge the validity of the so-called "Short Chronology". If such tests are passed one can then declare that Ajanta's Vakataka patronage provides us with the single most telling reflection of classical Indian culture at its apogee. And one can further say that this apogee was reached not under the Guptas but during the reign of the all-too-unsung Vakataka Emperor Harisena, who surely had no peer in his time. It was he and he alone who led that radiant world, reflected upon Ajanta's walls, to the farthest edge of the Golden Age.

However, if these "monuments in the mountain" so remarkably describe this culminating moment in early Indian culture, at the same time they alone finally define the continent-shaking consequences, attendant upon Harisena's death, whereby the golden vessel that he had held aloft was so decisively shattered. This too is figured upon Ajanta's walls — in the unfinished paintings, the half-cut images, and the abandoned dreams.



Cave 1, facade, detail
showing lovers, 470

Cave 1, Interior, front
wall, grimacing figure,
477



Chronology of the paintings at Ajanta

The earliest (Hinayana) caves were probably fully painted, but little now remains. Most of the painting at the site belongs to the later (Vakataka) phase. The Vakataka patrons' intended painting programs all fall between 468 and 478, and exist in various stages of completion; none, with the possible exception of Cave 8's, were ever finished. In 469 and 478, both years of great stress, efforts were concentrated almost exclusively on finishing the main images and in their immediate context. In the Period of Disruption (479-480) painted intrusions were added to most of the caves in which the shrine Buddha had already been dedicated, their unfinished condition making this both feasible and tempting.

- 475-76 Cave 1 Facade and porch.
- 476-77 Cave 2 Hall and shrine.
- 477 Cave 2 Whole porch; all ceilings except shrine; pillars; right and left walls toward front; "Hariti" walls.
- 478 Vajrapani; "Nidhi" walls; shrine.
- 479-80 Cave 4 Remainder (multiple Buddhas).
- 478 Cave 4 Image; shrinedoor and two Buddhas.
- 479-80 Cave Lower 6 Ptd intrusions in porch, shrine.
- 468 Cave Upper 6 Main hall, except rear wall.
- 469 Cave Upper 6 Hall rear, antechamber, shrine.
- 479-80 Cave 7 Porch, main hall; (all intrusions). Antechamber, shrine (image).
- 478 Cave 7 Main ceiling, rear wall (left 479?)
- 479-80 Cave 7 Antechamber and shrine.

- Cave 8 478 Hall (traces, on later plaster).
- Cave 9 (repainted in later phase) 1stc. B.C.E. Aisle ceilings; front wall, traces under late ptg; herdsmen frieze.
- 477 Rear wall (possibly 478 or 479)
- 479-80 Pillars, wall above, front walls.
- Cave 9A, B 479-480 Traces of paint.
- Cave 10 (repainted in later phase) 1stc. C.E. Pillar tops; narratives in aisles.
- 477 Facade, hall ceilings; stupa; left pillar tops. Eye-level Buddhas on prime pillar faces (possibly 479?)
- 479-80 Other pillar images; aisle traces.
- Cave 10A 479-480 Whole shrinelet painted.
- Cave 11 468 Porch pillars; ceiling and dwarfs; doorway and flanking bodhisattvas.
- 469 Image (refurbished 479?) and door.
- 479-80 All other images in porch and hall.
- Cave 12 (repainted in later phase) 477 Ceiling, walls repaired, repainted.
- Cave 15 478 Antechamber, shrine ceilings; image.
- Cave 16 468 Porch ceiling, except medallion.
- 469 Porch walls, ceiling medallion, doorway; hall ceiling except left and rear; pillars; left, right, front narrative paintings.
- 478 Rear wall; shrine image, pillars.
- 479-80 Buddhas on right and left walls.
- Cave 17 469-70 Entire porch.
- 470-71 Hall ceiling, walls, pillars.
- 471 Shrine (Buddha image only).
- 479-80 Left front pilaster (intrusive?)
- Cave 19 470-71 Whole facade and hall.

- 479-80 Pillared complex at court right.
Cave 20
 470 Hall ceiling.
 471 Hall walls, antechamber, shrine (Buddha image only).
 479-80 Painted intrusions in porch, hall.
Cave 21
 478 Hall ceilings, pillars; shrine (Buddha image only).
 479-80 Buddha on left aisle wall.

- Cave 22**
 479-80 Painted images in hall and shrine.
Cave 26
 477 Facade; Buddhas in arch and vault.
 478 Main image; pillars and frieze; aisle ceilings; major aisle panels.
 479-80 Front wall Buddhas; intrusions.
Cave 27
 478 Ceiling of first cell at right.

Checklist of sculptured intrusions at Ajanta

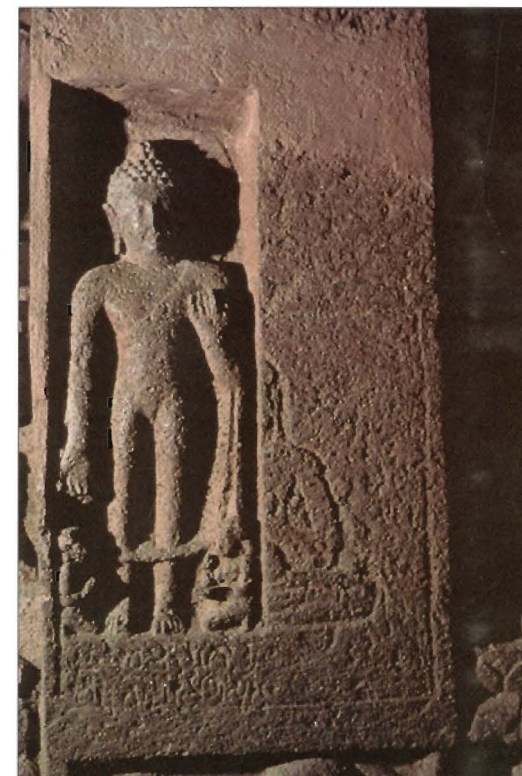
All of the votive intrusions at Ajanta were added to the caves during the brief and troubled Period of Disruption (479-480). Generally Buddha images, but sometimes stupas or bodhisattvas, they were given by eager and anxious new donors, most of whom appear to have been the monks still resident at the declining site, who had never been able to share in this merit-making activity during Ajanta's elitist heyday. These images, both painted and sculpted, were generally positioned helter-skelter with little or no respect for the original patron's well-laid plans. Understandably, locations near the shrine, or in good light, or where the wall surface was already prepared, were preferred, as long as they did not cover or cut into previously finished images. Intrusions were only placed in caves where the Buddha

image was either already dedicated or, as in Caves U6, 7, and 22, would be dedicated along with the new donations. A number of separate shrinelets were also made at this time (9A-D; 10A; 12A; 24 court), by more affluent donors. We can judge how intensive, and how brief, this intrusive phase was by noting how many of the carved images in the ambulatory of Cave 26 were simultaneously underway when work on them was abruptly abandoned.

Because these intrusions violate the original patrons' plans for the caves, it is important to be able to identify them. By visualizing the caves as if such added images were not there, we can better imagine what the completed programs might have been like. The following list comprises the site's sculptured intrusions.

- CAVE
- | | | |
|------|------------|--|
| 2 | Courtyard | Buddha at right |
| 4 | Porch | Buddha and bodhisattva panels |
| | Shrine | Buddha images on walls |
| U6 | Court | Shrinelets; front wall images |
| | Porch | All images |
| | Hall | All Buddhas and stupas; right front, right rear shrinelets |
| | A-chamber | All small Buddhas; final work on five large Buddhas |
| | Shrine | Finishing of main image; all Buddhas on front and sides |
| 7 | A-chamber | All except left & right walls |
| | Shrine | All but main and six largest; small Buddhas behind halo |
| 9 | Facade | All Buddhas and stupas |
| 9A-D | Shrinelets | Totally intrusive |
| 11 | Porch | Buddha panels at right end |
| 12A | Shrinelet | Unfinished Buddha |
| 15 | Hall | Buddhas at left rear |
| 17 | Court | Buddhas at left and right |
| 19 | Court | All except nagaraja panel |
| | Facade | On frames, pilaster bases |
| 20 | Porch | Buddha panels at left |
| | Hall | Buddha at left rear |

- | | | |
|------|--------|---|
| 21 | Porch | Buddhas at left end |
| 22 | Hall | All Buddha panels |
| | Shrine | All; main image begun 478 |
| 24 | Court | Buddhas in left court cell |
| 26 | Court | All images on facade returns |
| | Facade | Buddhas in and under arch |
| | Hall | Aisles, except Parinirvana, Temptation, elaborate Sravasti panels (R2-4; L8); |
| 26RW | Shrine | Doorway Buddhas? |
| 26LW | Porch | Left end; right ruinous |



*Cave 26 ambulatory
 Intrusive Buddha on
 unfinished Buddha
 479-480*

Insights into attitudes :

Excerpts from the inscriptions of major patrons

Cave 16: Dedicatory record of Prime Minister Varahadeva (trans. Mirashi)

...Beloved by the king and the subjects, he...governed the country righteously, (shining brightly) with the rays of his fame, religious merit, and virtue. (Realizing that) life, youth, wealth, and happiness are transitory, he... got constructed this magnificent dwelling to be occupied by the best of ascetics... (It resembles) the palaces of the lord of gods... (and is) clothed in the brilliance of Indra's crown, ...affording enjoyment of well-known comforts in all seasons... As long as the sun (shines) with rays reddish like fresh red arsenic — even so long may this spotless cave...be enjoyed!

Cave 17: Dedicatory record of King Upendragupta (trans. Mirashi)

...He adorned the earth with stupas and viharas, and caused the joy of supplicants by conferring gifts... Having expended abundant (wealth, he) caused to be constructed this donated (hall) which is almost measureless and which cannot be even imagined by little-souled men... May this Hall, out of affection.. cause the attainment of well-being by good people as long as the sun dispels darkness by its rays!

Cave 26: Dedicatory record of the monk Buddhahadra (trans. Chhabra)

Obeisance and praise (offered to the Buddha) will ... bring abundant and great reward... (Even) a single flower offered...yields the fruit known as paradise (and even) final emancipation. Therefore it behooves the wise man... to show extreme reverence...Why should not a monument be raised by those possessing wealth, desirous of mundane happiness as also of liberation? ...A man continues to enjoy himself in paradise as long as his memory is green in the world. One should (therefore) set up a memorial on the mountains that will endure for as long as the moon and the sun continue!



*Cave 2, Shrine,
Buddhas on right wall,
478*

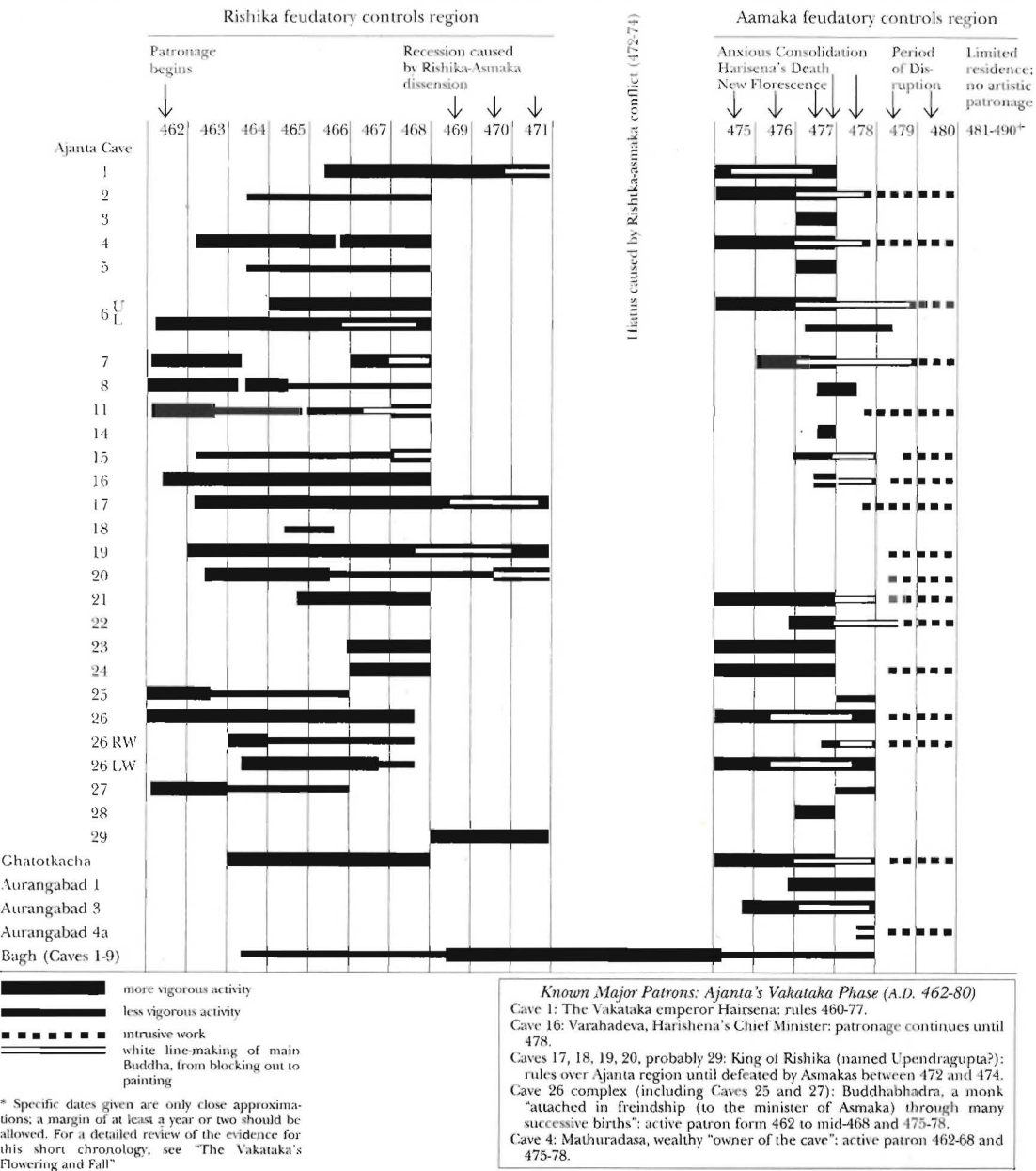
Reconstruction of events related to the development of the Vakataka caves

Absolute dates are underlined. Other dates are hypothetical.

458	Devasena reigning	Terminus post quem for Harisena's accession
460	Harisena's accession	Assuming he died in 477 and reigned over 15 years
462	Ajanta's inauguration	Follows Varahadeva's appointment as hereditary Prime Minister. Great patrons cooperate at start.
466	Harisena begins Cave 1	First vihara with shrine as part of original plan. By 467, shrines being added to all earlier Vakataka caves too.
469	Recession begins	Asmaka threat. Work programs halted on all caves except royal ones and (briefly) Cave 16. Shrines of Caves L6, 7, 11, and 15 expediently completed.
471	Asmaka attack imminent	Upendragupta rushes his royal caves toward completion.
472	Hiatus begins	Work stops completely, due to Asmaka aggression. Many workmen shift to Bagh caves temporarily.
475	Asmaka takeover of site	Vigorous renewal on all but Upendragupta's caves. Asmakas focus on Cave 26 and Aurangabad caves.
477	Harisena's death	Dies without warning. Cave 1 summarily abandoned. Shock wave runs through site.
478	Sarvasena III succeeds	"Year of Anxious Consolidation". Patrons rush shrine Buddhas to completion and dedication.
479	Period of Disruption	Asmakas, planning Vakataka overthrow, withdraw support. Old programs abandoned. New donors sponsor helter-skelter intrusive images.
480	End of all patronage	Situation worsens. Craftsmen leave. Some monks remains for a few years. No donations at site ever again.
483	Fall of Vakataka Empire	Weak Sarvasena III overthrown. Harisena's grandchildren flee to Mahismati, where uncle clings to local power.
485	Final power shifts	According to the <i>Dasakumaracarita</i> a Gupta prince (probably the historical Maharaja Subandhu of Mahismati) kills the uncle, marries the princess, and declares himself the avenger of the fallen Vakataka house.
486	Subandhu ruling	Barwani copper plate, issued by Maharaja Subandhu of Mahismati in 486, is secure terminus ante quem for Vakataka fall, since Mahismati had been one of Harisena's prime domains.
490	Traikutakas in Konkan	Traikutakas, also Vakataka feudatories, now independent rulers (Surat, Kanheri, Matvan plates of 490, 494, 505 C.E.) Similarly, King Gauri ruling over Western Malwa by 491, providing another terminus ante quem for Vakataka fall.

TIME CHART

Vakataka Patronage at Ajanta and Related Sites (462-80)*



The Caves in their context

Suggestions for seeing the site

Although visitors normally climb directly up to the caves from the Parking Area, a far more evocative and spectacular approach to the site is from the distant Viewpoint, some 8 kilometers down a small road which branches left at Balapur, 22 kilometers beyond Sillod on the Aurangabad-Jalgaon highway. Sending your vehicle on to the Parking Area below the caves you can proceed on foot down to the little Pavilion on the promontory overlooking the caves. This rustic walk will take about twenty minutes; and in fifteen minutes more you can reach the awesome (and hazardous) Seven Pools. Torrents of water pour down through them during the monsoons, while in the dry season they suggest gigantic Henry Moore sculptures turned inside out. Unless heavy rain has fallen one can easily jump across the little stream that winds down past the small village of Lenapur ("Cavetown") to feed the falls. Once you are on the other side, you can then continue walking along the beautiful rim of the gorge, directly above the caves, along a small pathway that finally leads right into the simple restaurant beside the Ticket Office.

If you are coming down from the Viewpoint and do not have time to see the beautiful Seven Pools, you can continue from the Pavilion down a steep path to the river below. Turn left, and you will soon reach the ravine's startling "dead-end", with its wide pool formed by the last of the waterfalls. Beyond the Old Bridge and the Forest Garden a long ramp then leads up to the Prime Minister's Cave 16, fronted by his impressive Elephant Gate — the ancient "entrance to the site". Have one of your party go to bring your tickets, while you proceed directly to Cave 26, which is best seen in the morning light.

The small Pavilion on the nearby promontory can also be reached from the Parking Area by crossing the generally almost-dry river bed; in the monsoon one may have to wade, with caution. After

proceeding a few minutes along the forest path, take the upward branch. When you reach the Pavilion you will have a dramatic view of the arcing scarp, and can see how, over millions of years, the successive layers of strong volcanic basalt (of which the whole Deccan plateau is formed) were built up. You can also see the problems that awaited the excavators who had to deal with its many flaws. If, however, you do not wish to climb to the Pavilion (and from there proceed to the spectacular Seven Pools), you can simply continue on over the Old Bridge and then via the Forest Garden up to the Elephant Gate.

Another course you could take is to follow the route along the ridge of the gorge in the reverse direction. Early in the morning, when the valley is "resonant with the chirping of birds and the chattering of monkeys" (Cave 26 inscription), go through the open-air restaurant, walk along high above the caves to the Seven Pools, then to the Pavilion, then down either to the Forest Garden or (by crossing the stream) to the Parking Area, finally going to the caves themselves. Or one could do this late in the day, after your visit to Cave 1, best seen in the low afternoon light; but allow an hour and a half for a leisurely circuit.

One final suggestion : the site is most beautiful, and relatively uncrowded, in the refreshingly cool rainy season. Although the rains, generally intermittent in this area, will hardly disturb your viewing of the caves, you should have both an umbrella and an extra day, if you come between late June and early August.

