

CH. 1: A new introduction to the ancient

saṅghārāma of Ajantā

THE ANCIENT *saṅghārāma* (Buddhist temple and monastic establishment) of Ajantā (Figures 1-2) was excavated amid a geologically and geographically strategic location of the Indhyadri range of the Western Ghāṭs. The *ghāṭs* of the Deccan plateau are dotted with dozens of ancient Buddhist *saṅghārāmas* (Figures 5-7). They also cradled the pilgrimage sites of other faiths, including those of the Śaivites, Vaiṣṇavites, and the Jains. Many *saṅghārāmas* have not survived the ravages of time, especially those that were made of less resilient media like brick, wood, and stone.

Currently the *saṅghārāma* is known after a nearby village named Ajinṭhā in the Soyegaon taluka of Aurangabad district in Maharashtra. The site is about 62 km from Jalgaon and about 100 km from Aurangabad. In the region there are other cave sites too, e.g. Banoṭī (Figures 216-224), Ghaṭotkacha (Figure 215), Bhokardan, Aurangabad caves, Ellora, and Pitalkhorā. They are at a distance of 65 km, 40 km, 60 km, 100 km, 120 km, and 130 km respectively from Ajantā. The Loṇār crater lies 180 km away.

We learn from the Buddhist textual sources that the Buddha had asked the monks to dwell neither too far nor too

near to a city. That is why such recessed spots, often near a waterfall, were chosen near trade routes or human settlements. This allowed the monks to maintain a distance from worldly life as well as be close enough for their daily rounds of begging for alms. The caves were primarily meant for the annual rainy season (*varṣāvāsa* in Sanskrit and *vassāvāsa* in Pāli). Apparently the Buddha (ca. 566-486 or 488-368 BCE) was initially reluctant to grant the monks any place for lodging, but after requests from pupils, he granted them five types of dwelling (*pañca leṇāni*): *guhā*, *harmya*, *prāsāda*, *vihāra*, and *ardhayoga*.

Archaeological Survey of India has numbered the caves from 1 to 29. All the caves belong to the Buddhist faith. The numbering, however, has nothing to do with the sequence of excavation. The caves are generally described under two conventional nomenclatures: the 'Hīnayāna' phase and the 'Mahāyāna' phase. However, these nomenclatures have come under serious scrutiny in recent researches and are increasingly being avoided the present work being no exception. I find it safer to use a system of nomenclature after the rulers of the region whether or not the rulers had any direct involvement at Ajantā.

During the earlier phase, the region fell in the kingdom of the powerful Sātavāhana rulers. So, the earlier group of caves, i.e. Caves 9, 10, 12, 13, and 15A, shall—in this work—

be called as the 'Sātavāhana period caves.' The latter group of caves were excavated when the region was being governed by the powerful Vākāṭaka dynasty with maximum territorial control during late fifth century. Our knowledge about this dynasty continues to be inadequate in spite of the fact that we know much more about them now than we did a few decades ago. Many scholars from different disciplines are involved in discovering fresh facts about the Vākāṭakas. There are many disagreements too among scholars on various finer points. In this work, the debating issues have been analysed in a separate chapter. In consequence of that analysis, the present scholar has come to accept the broad and tentative historical framework of the leading subject expert, Professor Emeritus Walter M. Spink of the University of Michigan. Spink has proposed that the second phase of activity at Ajantā was rather brief, incredibly so, spanning no more than 18 years, i.e. ca. 462 to 480 CE (Figure 225). During this time, Maharaja Hariṣeṇa of the Western Vākāṭaka dynasty was ruling over the region. We shall, therefore, replace the nomenclature 'Mahāyāna phase' with 'Vākāṭaka period caves', and use as such in this work.

Conventionally the caves are described in terms of 'completed' or 'incomplete.' This is actually misleading, since all of the fifth-century caves, without any exception, are incomplete. It is a tragic fact that except for the

Sātavāhana period caves, no other edifice on the hill and related sites, e.g. Banoṭī, Ghaṭotkacha, and Aurangabad was ever fully completed. All the Vākāṭaka period cave sites are incomplete. They were abandoned during ca. 477-480 CE by the original patrons and the *saṅgha* that was likely in charge of the affairs at the *saṅghārāmas*. The abandonment may have been prompted by a catastrophic event that forced everyone to rush the activities and focus on the completion of Buddha shrines, and ultimately, to abandon the sites. The catastrophe was possibly the death of the ruler, Hariṣeṇa. Post-Hariṣeṇa, the Vākāṭakas speedily declined in the Deccan.

Although there is no evidence of the direct involvement of the Vākāṭakas in Ajantā, there are two strong reasons to believe that Hariṣeṇa supported the cause of the Buddhists. One, he has been eulogised in Ajantā inscriptions even though he was a 'Hindu' king, and two, it was during his reign and within his dominion that Buddhist rock-cut architecture was revived in India after many centuries of lull.

After being abandoned for many centuries, the site received the world's attention in the early nineteenth century. According to prevailing belief, published frequently in literature on Ajantā, John Smith first rediscovered the caves in 1819. This, however, is far from true, as is proved by Colman McLaughlin of UK in his forthcoming publication,

Ajantā in the Nineteenth Century, where he has cited some published notices of the caves dating prior to 1819.