

## CH. 2: Nomenclatures for the caves in Ajantā

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#### MISLEADING TERMS: '*CAITYAGR̥HA*' AND '*VIHĀRA*'

THE LITERATURE on rock-cut architecture and Buddhist art and archaeology has an unexplained tendency to describe the rock cut architecture as either *caityagr̥ha* or *vihāra*. Invariably, the former is used to denote a cave that has a stūpa shrine. In the case of Ajantā, such usage blindly ignores the fact that Buddha images have been carved prominently, iconically, and centrally on the frontal face of the stūpas. This is seen in caves 19 (Figure 152) and 26 (Figure 203). The latter classification, i.e. *vihāra*, is used to denote everything else, which is bereft of a stūpa shrine. This 'everything' has a ridiculously wide range. It means residential caves (*upāśrayas*) that must be without the Buddha shrines as well as those caves that are with the Buddha shrines!

This classification is strange. It does not and cannot take into account the fact that many of the so-called *vihāras*, some 17 of them in the fifth-century phase of Ajantā, which boast of a stūpa shrine or Buddha shrine, had no such provision at all in the beginning (Table 6). Spink's researches (W. M. Spink 2005-2013) supported by those by the present researcher demonstrate that until the crucial year of ca. 466 CE all of these stupendous edifices with a Buddha or stupa shrine had no provision of any shrine; they were planned as simple 'dormitories' (*upāśrayas*) like the Sātavāhana-period Cave 12, 13, and 15A (Figures 122, 124, 126).

Epigraphic evidence too would disapprove of such arbitrary classifications. For instance, the edifices that are typically described as '*vihāras*' (e.g. caves 16 and 17 (Figure 27))—and contrasted against the so-called '*śaityagṛhas*' (e.g. caves 9, 10, 19, and 26 (Figures 23, 28, 29, 33))—are called '*śaityamandiram*' in Cave 16 inscription, and '*stūpavihāram*' and '*munirājaśaityam*' in Cave 17 inscription! These edifices (Caves 16 and 17) have Buddha shrines, not the stūpa shrines. Combine with this the seldom-noticed evidence that some of the Buddha shrines were ultimately being added with stūpas at the rear of the images, as in caves 1 and 11 (Figure 120). The corpus of the fifth-century paintings and sculptures include numerous

representations of the stūpa. On the other hand, also consider the fact that the fifth-century stupa-temples (caves 19 (Figure 152) and 26 (Figure 203)) do not only have stūpas (as the Sātavāhana period caves 9 (Figure 92) and 10 (Figure 93)), they have Buddha images placed directly on the face of the stūpa, thus synthesizing the image with the symbol, the icon with the aniconic. The stūpa and image became inseparable; it was a fusion of two great ideas in the fifth century. If we do not understand these facts, we shall miss the most central idea, the inclusive and assimilative force that was driving the creations of the fifth-century phase of Ajantā. A closer examination of the latest, and widened, corpus of the known epigraphic, architectural, and iconographic material leaves us in no doubt that the binary opposition between *caityagṛhas* and *vihāras* that have been gradually created through the last two centuries is no longer tenable. The planners of fifth-century Ajantā did not obviously think in such contrasting and constricted sense as we do today. In Buddhist context, the word *vihāra* never excludes the presence of the Buddha. I find it absurd to restrict this word to mean just a residential edifice. *Vihāra* actually is another word for *saṅghārāma*.

**KANDARĀ, ŚAILAGṘHAM, LAYAṆAM, AND UPĀŚRAYA**

Caves in general are described in Ajantā inscriptions as '*kandarā*,' '*śailagṘham*' (Cave 26 inscription), *layaṇam* (Cave 16 inscription), and '*upāśrayam*' (Cave 12 inscription). In Sanskrit, these are generic terms to denote caves, cave dwelling, or cave temples. However, the creators of Ajantā apparently used them with qualifications. Only natural caves are denoted as '*kandarās*'. Rock-cut caves intended purely for dwelling, as was the case with many of the caves until ca. 465 CE before being converted into temples, have been alluded to as *layaṇam* or *upāśrayam*. In this sense, the *layaṇas* or *upāśrayas* are Caves 12, 13, 15A, and 25. The following caves were begun as *upāśrayam* and remained so only up to ca. 465 CE, because after this date these were converted into '*stūpavihāram*' or '*munirājaśāitryam*': Ajantā 1, 2, 4, 5, Lower & Upper 6, 7, 8, 11, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 23, 24, 27, and Ghaṭotkacha (Table 7).

**MAṆḌAPA**

This is a thought-provoking word that frequently occurs in the Ajantā inscriptions as well as in the inscriptions of other sites. The word '*maṇḍapa*'—literally, a 'pavilion'—as mentioned in the inscriptions of caves 16, 20, etc. meant a pavilion, secular or sacred. Since the Buddha frequently sat

in a *maṇḍapa*—as depicted in Buddhist literature, seen in Ajantā paintings, and evident in the architectural basis of the Ajantā caves that follows the idea of the *maṇḍapa*—the word gradually appears to have acquired the connotation of a Buddha temple. Perhaps, this is the reason why the caves with a shrine have been called *maṇḍapas* in inscriptions.

### **STŪPAVIHĀRAM, MUNIRĀJACAITYAM, CAITYAMANDIRAM OR ĀITYAGRHA**

On closer reading of the Ajantā inscriptions, we shall find the word '*stūpavihāram*' used variously to denote what we call stupa-temples as well as the temples with Buddha shrines and residential cells. The word was used for the temples with stūpa shrines (Caves 9, 10, 19, and 26) and for the *maṇḍapas*, which either were converted into or were freshly planned as temples from ca. 466 CE onwards. Thus, *stūpavihāram*, *munirājaśaityam*, *śaityamandiram*, or *śaityagrha* mean the same thing where they are stupa temples or Buddha temples. For the makers of Ajanta there was really no distinction. The following caves may be called by any of these names: 1, 2, 4, Lower & Upper 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, and Ghaṭotkacha. However, caves 3, 5, 12, 13, 18, 25, and 28 do not have any traces of Buddha image or shrine or stupa. Therefore, we cannot call them *stūpavihāram*, *munirājaśaityam*, *śaityamandiram*, or *śaityagrha*.