

CH. 5: All together how many *upāśrayas* and *maṇḍapas* are there at Ajantā?

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THE EXTANT NUMBERING SYSTEM

THE ROCK-CUT caves of Ajantā are numbered consecutively from Cave 1 to 29 according to the sequence by which the present day visitor enters the site, beginning from the side of the ticket office of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The one that is nearest to the ticket office is assigned No. 1, and the one at the farthest end from the ticket office is assigned the last number in sequence, i.e. 28 (Figure 12).

The *caityagṛha* No. 29 is situated on the uppermost level and is in the centre of the horseshoe-shaped scarp, between caves 20 and 21. In the earliest literature on Ajantā, no number is found for it. The first official report of the ASI missed it too. It was only in 1883 that James Burgess—in his numbering

scheme—provided a place for this cave, and called it No. 29 making it the last number in his sequence (Burgess 1883, 59). In fact, it is this numbering sequence of Burgess read with the earlier work by Fergusson and Burgess (1880) that came to be adopted by the ASI, and which is still being followed without any change whatsoever. Further, the literature or research on the subject of Ajantā has grown around this numbering scheme. Any modification to this numbering would create great confusion among readers. Therefore, the purpose here is not to suggest any changes, but to stress upon the fact that the extant numbering scheme is arbitrary; it is determined solely by the sequence in which the visitor makes a journey through the site; it has nothing to do with the *historical* sequence in which the caves were excavated; and lastly that there are serious anomalies in the present scheme.

Actually, no one knows for sure what that sequence in which the caves were excavated was. There is just one person we know of who made it a mission of his lifetime to learn and investigate exactly this. He is Walter M. Spink, Professor Emeritus of University of Michigan. His research is currently being published in a series; so far, seven volumes have been published since 2005 (W. M. Spink 2005-2013). His research has brought forth such facts that were seldom known or realised earlier. Some of his observations are so

astonishing, and so very different from the earlier published literature, that no one would believe in his conclusions unless the trouble is taken to go to the site, spend several months, and examine every bit of evidence in every cave, wall, pillar, doorway, sculpture, or painting that is cited by Spink. Only after a meticulous and detailed analysis, one would be able to realise the deductive logic behind the stories of chronological developments he tells. Since I have done precisely this over the last few years, I have no hesitation to say that I am among those lucky few who have grasped the merit of his research and the consequent reconstructions of the site's chronological development. If there are any differences of opinion, they are minor.

Coming back to the number of the caves at Ajantā, we find different figures in different literature. Some authors say there are 29 caves: (Fergusson and Burgess 1880, 283) and (Yazdani 1931). Some say 30: (Gupte and Mahajan 1962, 106) and (Mitra, Ajanta 1956, 5). Others say 31: (Weiner 1977, 1). These are just few examples of different figures. Actually, the confusion has in part arisen from some serious anomalies in the extant numbering system. Let us study what these anomalies are.

PROBLEMS OR ANOMALIES

The first anomaly is because of the recent re-discovery of a small, unpretentious, and mostly locked up residential cave belonging to the Sātavāhana period. It is situated near the elephant gate of Cave 16, and came to light during the clearing of debris in early 1950s. This cave, thus, would be an addition to the count of total caves but the ASI has not officially placed any number there; its publications still make no mention of it. The omission therefore is contributing to the confusion, since the cave (15A; Figure 126) is being added to the count in recent research-based publications (Table 4).

The second anomaly arises from the fact that two *maṇḍapas* (instead of 'cave', this is the word the makers of Ajantā used), situated one above the other, are assigned a single number, i.e. No. 6 (Figure 54). This happened because Fergusson and Burgess who numbered the caves, and whose numbering system is still being followed, perceived that the two storeys are parts of a single edifice. They believed that it was a 'two-storeyed' edifice. However, recent research by Spink (2007) and the present researcher (see Chapter 18) show that the upper storey is an edifice with a distinct ground plan (Figures 18-19), architectural scheme, and aesthetic arrangements. The upper storey is assertively different from

the lower storey. It was an error to identify them as a single edifice. Thus, we have currently designated them as Cave Lower 6 and Cave Upper 6. While this is convenient, it does not add up to the total count of caves at Ajantā. Besides, it never signifies that the two are distinct edifices. We shall not be surprised if the two had different patrons, but this of course may never be known with certainty.

The third anomaly appears from the caves on the western extremity of the scarp, namely, caves 25, 26, and 27 (Figure 12). Recent research by Spink (2006, 22-96) and Singh (2012b) has proven beyond doubt that these are not unconnected *śailagṛhas*. Residential caves 25 and 27 are actually the adjuncts of the '*sugatālaya*' No. 26 (Figures 180-181). They are components of one grand design, one temple-complex (see chapters 13, 15, and 19). Thus, a single number ought to have been assigned to all the three excavations, if such a criterion was laid out (Figure 205).

Conversely, if the criterion is to count an edifice even if it is a part or adjunct then the lower adjuncts (situated right below them), flanking the frontcourt of the same Cave 26, ought to have been numbered too (Figures 205-207). This, however, is not the case. The lower '*wings*' have neither been counted nor been assigned any number.

Actually, it is not difficult to infer why no number was given to the lower 'wings.' It is because of an un-written criterion that we infer must have been not to count the parts, but only to consider the whole. Thus, the lower wings were not assigned any number because they were rightfully identified as 'lower wings' to Cave 26 'sugatālaya.' Similarly Caves 25 and 26 that are also adjuncts to the same 'sugatālaya' as 'upper wings' would not have been assigned unique numbers had they realised that they are also adjuncts.

'CAVE' VERSUS 'MAṆḌAPA'

Part of the problem also originates from the use of the English word 'cave.' This word has a very generic connotation, and implies too many things in too many contexts to the extent that it hardly gives insight into the specifics. In fact, it is grossly misleading in the case of Ajantā, Ellora, and other cave sites of India. It neither gives any insight into the plans and layout, nor alludes to the types of patronage, affiliation, or purpose. It also disregards the scale and proportions of edifices, and provides no way to tell the part from the whole. Consider for instance, in the case of Ajantā: a small and incomplete edifice like No. 3 (Figure 36) is called a cave while some very elaborately planned edifices with many adjuncts like Cave 26 complex (Figures 180-181) is also called a cave;

shockingly, the sprawling Kailāśanāth temple at Ellora with several layers, tiers, parts, and annexes within a grand complex is also called a cave. On the other hand, Ajantā No. 18, which is just a few metres in length, width, and depth having just two pillars and a cistern chamber, is also called a cave, even though it was not meant for either worshipping or residence (Figure 140).

SOLUTION TO THE ANOMALIES

There shall be no anomalies if the modern scholar writing in English gave up the linguistic delinquency, and took refuge in the language and architectural terms that were actually used by the ancient monastics of Ajantā. No one it seems bothered to carefully read the writings on the walls. The writings that are right inside the caves of Ajantā, left by the ancient monastics for us, the posterity; for they chose not just to write, but to inscribe on rock surface.

Epigraphists did not adopt the very words they translated, which are indeed so convenient, so useful, and perfected in the course of thousands of years of usage. Indeed, there shall be no ambiguity if modern scholar resorted to the use of the same terminology as used by the monastics of Ajantā.

And, there was not just one word, but many whose meaning interchanged from context to context: '*stūpavihāram*,'

'*caityamandiram*,' '*sugatālayam*,' '*śailagṛham*,'

'munirājaśaityam,' 'maṇḍapam,' 'kandarā,' 'layaṇam', and 'upāśrayam.'

Using the above terms let us review the edifices. I shall depend more on 'śailagṛham' as generic since it would mean both the purely residential edifices as well as the temples with the stūpa or image shrine.

First, let us set aside those 27 caves that are not anomalous from our angle. These are Cave No. 1-5, 7-15, 16-24, 26, and 28-29. The problematic ones are (i) Cave 6: actually 2 śailagṛhas (ii) Cave 15A (or 30): śailagṛha without a number (iii) Cave 26 lower wings: śailagṛhas which are not numbered because they are adjuncts to Cave 26 (iv) Cave 25: adjunct to Cave 26, but not recognized as such (v) Cave 27: adjunct to Cave 26, but not recognized as such (Table 4).

FURTHER EXPLANATIONS

Cave 6: The number has been assigned to two maṇḍapas, excavated one above the other (Figure 54). The Upper 6 is accessed by a staircase rising from the interior of Lower 6 (Figure 64). Thus, both the maṇḍapas share a single entrance door located in Lower 6 (Figures 59-61). In addition, this is what led to the impression that both the maṇḍapas belong to the same plan.

Spink (2007) and the present researcher (see chapter 18) have found after years of study of the same edifice that although the two *maṇḍapas* share the same entrance doorway, they are actually distinct undertakings. Their plans, designs, and arrangements have little in common (Figures 18-19). In fact, some very glaring art and architectural distinctions place them apart. It is even likely that Upper 6 had a separate entrance of its own; one might have entered from a corner of the frontcourt through a flight of steps coming up from the ravine. My current understanding is that this flight of step was perished in a landslide not long after the work began on Upper 6. There must also have been a pillared porch before Lower 6, which too seems to have been perished (Figures 57-58).

It appears that the idea of Upper 6 had not germinated until the hall of Lower 6 was penetrated. When the front pillars of Lower 6 were not even defined the upper areas near the ceiling level was already scooped out. That is why a wooden or stone or brick staircase was devised and erected for accessing Upper 6 (Figure 64-65). This need could occur only after the front portions of Upper and Lower 6 were damaged in landslide that might have occurred in circa 464-65 CE. Had there not been a landslide, there would have been excavated a monolithic staircase for Upper 6. The constructed staircase rather than the excavated one indicates that there

was no plan of any such staircase when the front aisle of Lower 6 was being excavated (Figure 64). The lack of plan for the staircase could only be attributed to two factors: late beginning of Upper 6 and pre-existence of another access. The former is ruled out, because so many pillars in the hall of Lower 6 would not have been excavated unless for the reason to support the upper floor.

Thus, although Upper 6 began just a few years after the Cave Lower 6 began the desire for identical layout was replaced by new ideas developed in other caves in the course of time. It is not the space here to go into the details of how the two *maṇḍapas* gradually developed. Suffice to indicate that the two are separate *maṇḍapas*, which should not have been clubbed together.

Caves 25 and 27: Spink (2006, 22–96) and Singh (2012b) have shown that these two excavations started early (c. 462 CE) in the Vākāṭaka phase. They were the upper adjuncts of Cave 26-*śaityagrha* (Figures 180–181). Due to the heavy damage and landslide on the cliff the front portions of these edifices, including the façade areas are perished. Thus, earlier scholars were not able to recognise the relationship among Caves 25, 26, and 27. Actually, they belong all to one program, one *stūpavihāram*, one *sugatālaya*, housing several adjunct residential halls (Table 11). Because the lower wings have not been assigned any number, similarly the upper wings

need not have been assigned separate numbers. Our total count would have been lesser by two.

Cave 15A or 30: The lately rediscovered cave has not been numbered yet (Figure 126). The cave remains locked, perhaps due to its supposed insignificance. Some call it Cave 30 (Gupte and Mahajan 1962) others Cave 15A (W. M. Spink 2007), but the cave is still to be added to the counting. Thus, to sum up, our exercise yields an aggregate of 28 *Śailagrhas* at Ajantā.