

CH. 9: Ajantā in the Sātavāhana period

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CAVE 10

INTRODUCTION

IT IS THE LARGEST, tallest, and probably the oldest of the five stupa-temples at Ajantā (Figures 90, 93). The others are Caves 9, 19, 26, and 29. The monolithic stupa temple is dated to 3rd century BCE when the region was ruled by the Sātavāhanas. Epigraphic records inform us that it was the result of collective patronage. The dimensions of the cave are as under for the record:

Hall - 29.1 m deep, 12.5 m wide, 17.1 m high

Aisles- 17.1 m deep, 1.78 m wide

Stupa - 5.03 m diameter, 6.5 m high

The edifice was served by Cave 13 (Figure 124), one of the smallest *upāśrayas* (monastic residence) on the site (Nagaraju 1981, 100-102). However, according to Walter M. Spink, the stupa temple was served by Cave 12 (Figure 122), which is an *upāśraya* without any pillars. It is generally agreed though that Cave 10 is the first *śaītyagr̥ha* of Ajantā datable to late 3rd c. BCE, and is among the earliest surviving monuments of Buddhist art and architecture. Indeed, there are few caves of this antiquity, and hence the historical place of this cave assumes great significance within the context of India's *śaīlagr̥ha-saṅghārāmas* (rock-cut monastery). The edifices was preceded by few examples at Bhājā, Jivadhan-Virar, Junnar (Tulaja-lena and Manmodi), and Kanherī. It is a close contemporary to Kanherī Caves 9 and 12 (Nagaraju 1981, 100-102)

PLAN

The *śaītyagr̥ha* has an apsidal hall consisting of a wide nave, side aisles, and a semi-circular apse or ambulatory at the back (Figure 26). The nave is separated from the aisles and apse by a colonnade of 39 pillars. In the centre of the nave's rear stands the stupendous stupa. It has a two-stepped *meḍhī* (cylindrical drum) above which rests the massive *aṅḍa* (hemispherical dome), which is surmounted by the *harmikā*. Atop the *harmikā* is excavated a 3-stepped square capital

(*vedikā*). The pillars are octagonal (*viṣṇukānt* type) without *adhiṣṭhānas* (base), capitals, or carvings.

There is a curious feature about the plan. The quadrant ceiling of the aisles with rock-cut beams and rafters is continued right up to the front wall (mostly perished on either side). This wall was about 1.78 m; i.e. equal of the width of the aisles. Between the front pillars and the perished front walls, there are extant quadrant canopies existing right under the arch. Thus, the extant of the nave is not what meets with the eyes today; it extended 1.78 m forward. Based on the frontal quadrant canopies on either sides of the nave, Nagaraju has suggested that the nave was probably elliptical in design, something similar to the Nagarjuni Cave in Barabar Hills of Bihar.

ARCHITECTURE

Façade. The *śaītyagr̥ha* has an open façade allowing entry directly through the width of the cave. The open *śaītya* arch springs from the height of about 3.2 m. The inside of the arch (soffit) has stone-rafters imitating wooden prototype. The façade is enclosed within a square frame (13.4 m high, 13.4 m wide, and 93 cm deep) cut into the vertical face of the cliff. It had elaborate wooden fixtures that would have made it resemble like the elaborate façade decorations extant in part at Bhājā, Koṇḍāṇe, Pitalkhorā, etc. The wooden

fixture was donated by one 'Son of Vaśiṣṭha,' as reads a donative inscription on the façade '*vāsiṭhiputasya kathahāḍīno gharamukhadānam* (Figure 94).' There was also a large wooden canopy affixed into mortises and slots created into the soffits of the arch, a feature also seen in the neighbouring *ĉaityaḡṛha* Cave 9.

Vault. Inside the vault, too there were wooden fixtures, as the vault was aesthetically—rather than practically—supported by wooden beams and rafters like those still extant at Bhājā. The marks of such fixtures are clearly visible. The beams were thicker than the rafters were and were of equal thickness, including the central beam. Similarly, the rafters had equal thickness. There were 12 beams and 30 rafters arranged with great mathematical precision. The rafters did not end at the base of the vault; they continued down to the entire extent of the large and spacious triforium. Curiously, however, there is no sign to indicate that rafters were ever placed on the triforium. The arrangement of the crossbeams and rafters on the vault created a chequerboard pattern consisting of 360 squares, each of which was painted with decorated motifs while the wooden fixtures of the vault and triforium along with the paintings are all gone, except the traces, the painted square niches are better preserved on the roof of aisles that too have beams and rafters, but of rock type instead of wood.

CAVE 13

Cave 13 (Figure 124) is located nearly 8 feet higher than the adjoining Cave 12 (Figure 122). It was related to the *śaityagr̥ha* Cave 10 (Figure 93) that, like other sacred spaces, required a residential unit (Nagaraju 1981, 102). Dated to late 3rd century BCE, the cave was carved during the reign of the Sātavāhanas. The hall is 4.1 m wide, 4.7 m deep and 2.1 m high. The cells are about 1.8 m sq. and 2 m high.

The front portion is mostly perished now. Entered through a single doorway, the *upāśraya* has arrangements for 14 monks to stay, as there are 2 rock-benches with rock pillows in each of the 7 cells (Figure 26). The cell doorways are provided with a step before them. The absence of pillars, decorative *śaitya* arches, *vedikā*, and the polished surface indicate its early date. About six centuries later, in late fifth century, Cave 14 was going to be excavated directly above this *upāśraya*.

CAVE 12

Nagaraju has dated this *upāśraya* (Figure 122) after Caves 10 and 13, but Spink has dated it before Cave 13 considering its proximity to Cave 10. For Spink it is this *upāśraya* that served the *śaityagr̥ha* Cave 10 (W. M. Spink 2007). It was excavated in early 2nd c. BCE during the reign of the Sātavāhanas (Nagaraju 1981), patronised by many *upāsakas*, one

of them Ghanamadada, hailing from the nearby village of Thana near Fardapur who donated a cell (*upavaraka*). It is the largest *vihāra* of its times. The hall is 10.8 m sq. and 2.4 m high. The cells are 2.7 m sq. and 2.4 m high.

The *upāśraya* probably had a pillared porch. Its façade may have been decorated with carvings like the walls of the extant hall. Unfortunately, the façade and the pillared porch are altogether perished. Even the front wall and the lower parts of other walls are perished. That is why it looks open from the front. The floor and the lower parts of the left, rear, and right walls are repaired with cement. There are 12 cells in the hall, 4 each on the left, rear, and right walls (Figure 26). Each cell has 2 rock-benches. Thus, there was arrangement of 24 monks to stay.

The cell doorways have relatively large *śaitya* arches placed above them. Between them are placed a pair of smaller arches resting above a *vedikā* or rail pattern. The upper portions have cornices running along the ceiling level. All these decorations are indicative of early type.

The front wall (10.8 m long, 27' cm thick) of the hall consisted of a doorway (3.5" wide) with a monolithic step in front (39" long, 16" wide). The *upāśraya* just as the rest of the Sātavāhana period caves was re-worked with significant adaptations in Ajantā's fifth-century phase. An observation of the remains of the hall's perished front wall suggests

that among many of the adaptations, there was excavated some rock benches on the front wall (Figure 123) like the benches on the porch of the neighbouring Cave 11 (Figure 105). These benches were close to the floor level, the seats being 10-15" higher from the floor. There were 4 such benches, 2 on either side of the doorway. The benches may have been excavated after the examples in Cave 11. Thus, like the benches of Cave 11, they may be dated to circa 466-68 CE. Due to the creation of such benches there were revealed some pillars on either side of the doorway traces of which are visible near the floor level. Unusually, the pillars seem to have been rectangular rather than square since they measure 21" by 27". The newly revealed pillars enclosed the doorway as well as the benches on the sides. The benches measured 10-15" high from the floor, the seat about 35" long, 22-24" deep, and the backrest of the benches were about 11-13" thick. About 5' of the wall on the right side and about 7 feet wall on the left was left untouched from these experiments. By the creation of the benches, the rocks between the newly revealed pillars were cut away; these spaces were either just empty or were occupied by windows with or without screens.

An inscription carved on the left of the right rear cell doorway records that this excavation consisting of cells and hall (*upasatho*) was a gift of a merchant Ghanamadada, a native of Thana. This Thana is homonymous with a village 6 km

from Ajantā as also with a district in the municipality of Mumbai. The present researcher has found Sātavāhana-period bricks in the Thāṇā village near Ajantā. Thus, the donor might have hailed from this village.

CAVE 9

INTRODUCTION

Excavated on a lower level than the adjoining *śaityagrha* Cave 10, it is positioned on a slightly higher level than Cave 8 on the right of the cliff (Figure 90). Nagaraju has dated this edifice to circa mid-2nd century BCE when the region was ruled by the Sātavāhana kings. It too was created by collective patronage. The hall is 13.72 m deep and 6.93 m wide.

The dimensions of the cave are far smaller than Cave 10, but in terms of carved embellishment, it maintains a unique beauty. In fifth century CE, the stupa-temple was redecorated with Buddha images.

PLAN

The *śaityagrha* has a square hall (Figure 23). The ceiling too is square except the nave area whose vaulted ceiling is much higher. The nave is separated from the aisles by a colonnade

of 23 pillars that are 3.15 m high. The pillars, all octagonal being the earliest type, support the triforium and ultimately the vault. The triforium is 2 metre high from the ceiling of the aisles. The vault is 1.78 metre high from the upper level of the triforium (Figure 92).

The plan is unique at Ajantā whereas the other *caityagṛhas* have apsidal back meaning that the rear wall is semi-circular to allow for the *pradakṣiṇā-patha* or ambulatory. Here, the line of the colonnade is semi-circular at the back, thus making for the ambulatory, but the distinction rests in the rear wall that is not semi-circular but rectangular.

At the end of the nave is a modest stupa, with the *meḍhī*, *aṇḍa*, *harmikā*, and *vedikā*. The sockets on top of the *vedikā* were evidently for a wooden *chhatrāvalī*, which is now missing. The vault was aesthetically—rather than functionally—supported by wooden beams and rafters, which too are lost. They are structurally similar to the arrangements described in Cave 10.

ARCHITECTURE

Façade. The façade is sunk into the cliff by several metres. Nineteenth century photographs and etchings indicate sprawling and richly decorated eaves or canopy projecting

forth from the crest of the façade. The architectural and sculptural motifs suggest that the entire façade is almost a replica of wooden prototype.

The most prominent feature is the *śaitya* arch carved in the centre. Made in the likeness of a *pīpal* leaf, the *śaitya* arch symbolically represents the Buddha who had enlightenment under a *pīpal* tree, and was, for this reason, worshipped initially in the symbol of the *pīpal* tree or the *pīpal* leaf. The *śaitya* arch is symbolic of the presence of the Buddha.

Around the *śaitya* arch, there are similar but far smaller arches, which are not functional but merely decorative. Beams and rafters are excavated under the eaves. The square spaces among the junctions of the beams and rafters are painted with floral motifs.

'*Intrusive*' sculptures. There are some Buddha images carved on the façade. These date to fifth century and were patronized by such individuals who wanted to make merit for themselves, after the original patrons had left the region due to the catastrophic collapse of the Vākāṭakas. Similar Buddha images called 'intrusive' by Spink were also painted on the pillars and walls inside the *śaityagrha*.

CAVE 15A

It is one of the smallest *upāśrayas* at Ajantā that has no number (Figures 26, 126). It was unearthed in 1952 during the

clearing of debris near the elephant gate. According to Nagaraju, this *upāśraya* was made for Cave 9 *caityagṛha*.