CH. 13: CAVE 26-COMPLEX—EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Cave 26-Complex (Figures 180-182) is a fascinating creation.[54] It has attracted a lot of scholarly attention.[55] Particular mention may be made of James Burgess (Fergusson and Burgess 1880, 341–45), (Burgess 1883, 58–59, 132–36)), B. Ch. Chhabra (1952), and Spink (2006, 22–96), (2007, 311–42), who have contributed much to the advancement of our knowledge about it. Each of them has described the edifice from different angles; yet there remains a lot of scope for further research. Recent scholarship has opened new possibilities as

new facts come to light, each of them warranting scrutiny and further probing.

As a result, I investigated the edifice for seven years and a summary of my understanding has been presented in this essay. Although a number of questions and issues have been addressed here, the central concern regards the sequence of the development of the Cave 26 complex, including the wings. The development has been described stage by stage along with the circumstances presenting peculiar challenges at every stage, and ways and means devised to tackle these. Within the confines of this article, I am able to present only the initial few years of the site (in the Vākāṭaka phase). A further focus is on the early years. This story is rather different from the sequence proposed by Spink.

SOME EARLY CREATIONS OF THE VĀKĀṬAKA PHASE: CAVES 8, 27, 25, AND 26

A summary of some early activities on the site under the Vākāṭakas is necessary for focusing on the early development of the Cave 26-complex (Table 11). Therefore, let us visualise what the hill looked like before the start of the Cave 26 complex. I believe that the renaissance of Ajanta began in c. 461 CE, an year earlier than Spink's dating. During the inauguration of Cave 26 in c. mid-461 CE, there was no other edifice on the scarp except for the Sātavāhana

period caves and the Vākāṭaka period Cave 8. It was not the case as if the site was fully occupied, and our *ćaityagṛha* as a result was forced at the western end of the scarp (Figures 1, 179). I contend that the *ćaityagṛha* was carved on that location, at a distance of approximately 400 m from the Sātavāhana period caves, for two reasons: the governing geo-politics on the site and astronomical alignment to the sunrise of Dharma/ Dhamma Day (also known as Āṣāḍha Pūrṇimā or Asalha Pujā) and the start of *ćaturmāsa*, i.e. the start of the first of the two spells of *varṣāvāsa*. Spink has described the site's geo-politics[56] and the astronomical connection of the fifth-century temples (W. M. Spink 1985). The studies of the present researcher on the astronomical dimensions are very different from Spink's, which is included in the next chapter (Chapter 14).

Cave 8 – the first edifice of the Vākāṭaka phase

As noted in Chapter 11, Cave 8 was probably the first initiated edifice of the fifth-century phase, and it was completed in what I call Phase I of that cave (Singh 2009a). Suresh Vasant Jadhav (1987) and M. K. Dhavalikar (1992) have provided convincing evidence for this.[57] The conventional understanding that it is a Sātavāhana period *upāśraya* is no longer credible[58]. It was after Cave 8 was nearly completed as per the original layout that Buddhabhadra's Cave 26 seems to

have been inaugurated. The reason for suggesting this sequence results from the study of Cave 27 (Figures 183-190) – one of the most neglected caves on the site (see Chapter 19).

Cave 27 – some puzzles

The *upāśraya* (later *maṇḍapa*) Cave 27 (Figures 181, 183)) is half perished. Entry is not only restricted for tourists – there is no access to it except climbing along a bamboo ladder used by the staff for occasional cleaning. Scholars have shown little interest in studying the cave. There is hardly any published material except for the studies of Spink (2006, 21–53) (2007, 318–21). The blame for its neglect must go to its state of preservation, as one does not seem to find any paintings, sculptures, epigraphs, or architectural details. All we see are partially extant walls that are empty, a broken floor, a ceiling, some extant cells, and an unfinished shrine (or antechamber). However, our study will show that it is a remarkable cave. It opens our view to a completely new world; it is a key to understand some crucial and interesting developments at Ajantā. It is, in brief, a fascinating cave from the researcher's perspective. Before explaining its importance, it will be useful to record some facts and features to facilitate the discussion ahead.

On northern side of Cave 27 are some curious-looking pillar bases (*akṣas* or *adhiṣṭhānas*)[59]. They are circular with ring-like designs (Figures 184, 189) reaching up to the height of twenty centimetres from the floor. It seems that they belong to the circular type of pillars (*vṛtta-stambha*) that are also found in the left window (*vātāyana*) of the porch (*niṣkāsa*) of Cave 11, i.e. the only other place where they occur on the site (Figure 108). Obviously, these remains belong to pillars that have perished. The pillars stood before a vestibule or antechamber (*anuśālā*, *anunāsi*, or *antarāla*) (Figure 184), which can also still be clearly recognised, in spite of having half perished. The ceiling and left wall (*bhitti*) of this vestibule have partially collapsed, although the right wall is fully extant. There is a small doorway (*kṣudra-dvāra*) in the rear wall of the vestibule that opens onto a small monk's cell (*koṣṭha* or *pariveṇa*). The entire component may be termed a 'cell-with-pillared-antechamber', a component typical of the later developments in the Vākāṭaka period of Ajantā[60], and seen in many other caves. This component is rarely found in the Sātavāhana period *upāśrayas* of Ajantā or elsewhere. It appears that they were not actually planned as such, but became like that in the course of time. They show an evolutionary process of their own guided by practical demands, the necessity for more room, a growing comfort with

the medium, and evolving architectural aesthetics. These cells with a pillared antechamber became a standard component of Ajantā's fifth-century architecture, and in later centuries continued to evolve and flourish at other sites. In the beginning, the porches had only blank walls at either end. When the need for more room was felt, a single cell (koṣṭha) was excavated in the walls at either end of the porch. When the need for further room arose, the front wall of the cell was removed for converting it into a vestibule, and over time, an inner cell was carved on the vestibule's rear wall. With the front wall removed the vestibule allowed in the required light, such that the inner cells were not completely dark. At times, especially in later years, the front walls were not entirely removed, but cut in such a way as to retain the pillar matrix. Such pillars could not, of course, have been thicker than the thickness of the earlier walls from which they were carved. It is for this reason that such front pillars of a vestibule are so thin.

The cell-with-pillared-antechamber as witnessed in Cave 27 at first appears an archaeological enigma. When we try to relate it to the *upāśraya*, many problems are encountered due to the direction or orientation of the *upāśraya*. To the present-day visitor it appears that Cave 27 is facing the ravine, that is, towards the east, as do for example Caves 24, 25, 26, and 28 (Figure 182). Our perception of its

orientation to the east is supported by the crucial positioning of the shrine on the *upāśraya*'s western wall. Indeed, it was never until recently suspected that the *upāśraya* Cave 27 is not facing the east; however, our investigation will support Spink's recent conclusion that it is actually facing the north (Figures 203, 205, 207).

The evidence to this effect is provided by none other than the cell with the pillared antechamber. Its location is highly perplexing. This architectural component is always an adjunct, and as it demands symmetry, normally it tends to have a counterpart. A survey of the ground plans of Ajantā caves shows that there are variations on this particular architectural component, such as pillared or astylar vestibules, single or multiple inner cells, inner cells in one wall, or even in two or three walls. The cell-with-pillared-antechamber is found only in select caves and belongs to the later years of the site's development. Its locations are: (*a*) the outer walls of the facade, e.g. of Cave 1; (*b*) at the ends of a porch, e.g. in Cave 1; (*c*) the ends of an aisle, e.g. in Cave 2; (*d*) the centre of a wall inside a hall, e.g. in Cave Upper 6; and (*e*) the wall area flanking a central shrine, e.g. in Caves 1 and 2 where they have been made into side-shrines.

The cell-with-pillared-antechamber in Cave 27 ought to fit in one of the above categories, but finds no match.

Rather, what we seem to find is completely different, i.e. the *upāśraya* seems to be facing eastward, and curiously, the cell-with-pillared-antechamber appears to be located outside the hall, off centre of the hall's wall, as a single unit without a counterpart (Figure 188).

While the above is the impression that the viewer gets, originally the floor plan, the directional orientation, and the disposition of various architectural components of the edifice must have been notably different. Actually, the present appearance of Cave 27 is grossly misleading. It has misled Ajantā scholars too, for it does not seem to match with any of the five possible arrangements. The five possible locations for a cell-with-pillared-antechamber were among some of the unwritten conventions followed at Ajantā, without any exception. It will become clear from the analysis below that the cell-with-pillared-antechamber in Cave 27 was no exception; it too adhered to the conventions listed above.

The above conclusion emerges from a detailed analysis of on-site data, much of these from the neighbouring excavations and carvings. For instance, the excavation beneath Cave 27, which has no number, conceals many clues. That excavation is known as the (lower) left adjunct of Cave 26. We shall call it 'Cave 26-lower left wing', hereafter 'Cave 26-LLW' (Figures 181, 185). It has a porch, which is still easily recognizable, in spite of having perished for the most part.

The western end of this porch is of great interest for our purpose. It shows a cell-with-pillared-antechamber located vertically below an identical component upstairs, which is Cave 27's. The two make a nice elevation, as if they are parts of a single plan. When seen from far away, say, from across the river, they display a revealing elevation (Figures 182, 184). Both are two-pillared vestibules and are aligned vertically with a marginal difference. They look similar in shape and size, like identical parts of a multi-storied building. They therefore seem to have a structural relationship. What is that relationship?

Actually, neither of the two can be explained without the other. The pillars of the vestibule above (of which only the traces of the bases remain) are closely aligned to the pillars extant in the vestibule of the lower storey.

Further, the southern walls of the two vestibules are closely aligned with each other on the vertical plane. What does this point to? Because the lower vestibule with inner cells is situated on the west side of the porch of Cave 26-LLW, the identical component exactly above must have belonged to an identical structure in an identical location. In other words, the vestibule of the upper floor (Cave 27) must have been situated on the west side of the porch of Cave 27. This means that Cave 27 once had a porch, which has now perished. This porch was situated exactly above the porch of Cave 26-

LLW. The discovery of the former existence of a porch in Cave 27 helps us to reconsider the orientation of Cave 27. It now appears clear that Cave 27, just like Cave 26-LLW below, was facing north, and not towards the ravine, as might be concluded based on the heavy damage to its structures. We can safely say that the facades (*ghara-mukhas*) and the axes of both caves are and were oriented towards the same direction, i.e. the north (Figures 185, 207). The rear wall of Cave 27, then, just like the rear wall of the lower storey, is located on the south side.

The above reconstruction, however, raises a question that is extremely vital to address and very complex to answer. What about the shrine (or shrine-antechamber) of Cave 27? If the rear wall faces the south, why is the shrine (-antechamber) located on the cave's western wall (Figure 187), while one would expect it to exist on the southern wall, like the shrine of the lower storey? It is unusual to find the shrine on an *upāśraya*'s right wall, unless it was impossible to have it in its logical place, i.e. opposite the facade. So why this exception here? The answer to this question is complex, and requires insight into the development sequence not only of the *ćaityagṛha* complex, but also of the site as a whole.

Cave 25 – the puzzle of the 'left door'

Before moving further, we need to consider briefly some issues that are raised by Cave 25 (Figure 191). These issues, as will be seen, are closely connected to Caves 27 and 26. There is a fascinating observation contained in *The Cave Temples of India* by Fergusson and Burgess, published in 1880:

> In front [of Cave 25] is an enclosed space [front court], about 30 feet 3 inches by 14 feet, with two openings in front, and a door to the left leading on to the terrace of the next Cave [26-*caityagṛha*]. [(Fergusson and Burgess 1880, 341)]

When one tries to check whether the observation of Burgess is reliable, one is likely to be disappointed on the site, for there is no trace in and around Cave 25 that even remotely suggests the existence of the 'two openings in front' or of the 'door to the left' (Figures 181, 191). What is even more remarkable is the fact that such doors are not shown in the only known ground plan (Figure 30) prepared under the supervision of Burgess. His plans are considered most reliable and are frequently published; see plate 34.4 of (Burgess 1883). However, his plan in this case shows neither the 'two openings in front' nor to the 'left' of Cave 25. Yet Burgess described such multiple doors fronting the courtyard of Cave 25. One could ignore his 1880 description, were it not for the fact that he repeated the observation a few years later (1883):

> Over the porch [of Cave 26, the *caityagṛha*], in front of the great window and upper facade of the cave, there was a balcony, about 8 feet 3 inches wide and 40 feet long, entered at the end from the front of the last cave [25]. [(Burgess 1883, 58)]

This observation essentially repeats the former. We are told here that there was a balcony or terrace over the porch of Cave 26, which was entered from the left door of Cave 25. In other words, the terrace or balcony of Cave 26 was approached through the left door of Cave 25. A reconstructive 3D rendering is accordingly provided here (Figure 205).

The observations of Burgess present a puzzle for us about Cave 25, which has remained neglected by scholarship. If there were any such doors, have they perished now? If there were any such doors, why did they surround the courtyard of Cave 25? Why did the 'left door' open towards the balcony of Cave 26? This entry or exit route would have been inconvenient to say the least, and against the norms and principles. The basic question is: in order to enter Cave 25, why should a route be made that would require one to climb up to the terrace of the porch of Cave 26, turn right, and then enter Cave 25? Why would the builders devise such an entry point when there is already a staircase on the north-eastern corner of the facade? The staircase is still in use today (Figure 199).

Cave 26-complex – some facts

As seen earlier, there is a structural relationship between Caves 27 and 26-LLW, indicated by the fact that they both face the same direction. It is also easy to infer that there is a structural relationship between Caves 26-LLW and the *sugatālaya*. Burgess suggested that the *sugatālaya* is structurally connected to Cave 25. Taken together, this calls for an assessment of the exact nature of the inter-relationship between all these structures. Yazdani also saw the scope for this, for he wrote:

> Cave XXV, of which a plan is also given by Burgess[61], is only an adjunct of Cave XXVI, being a chapel with two columns in the front facing the court and three cells in its left side, one of which is incomplete [. . .] The entire forefront of Cave XXVI was covered with debris, and that was the reason why Burgess and other archaeologists could not understand the disposition of the various adjuncts of this ćaitya. [(Yazdani 1952, 16-17)]

Yazdani, however, neither probed the matter further nor explained why and how he was able to draw such a conclusion. Contrary to Yazdani, I will propose an explanation for why Caves 25 and 27 can be described as the upper adjuncts of the *sugatālaya*, while Cave 26-LRW and 26-LLW can be described as the lower adjuncts of the *sugatālaya*. We shall also discover that none of the adjuncts was planned from the very beginning.

It appears that the architects (*sthapati*)[62] had initially planned to excavate only the *sugatālaya*. If they had planned to build the adjunct from the very start, the layout of Caves 25 and 27 would have been identical and they would have faced the same direction (Figure 34). Even their dimensions and distance from the *ćaityagṛha* would most likely have been identical. In fact, if four wings were planned from the start, one would expect a close semblance amongst them, which is not the case. Each of the adjuncts is unique in its design, dimensions, and layout. There are even more reasons to suggest that the *sugatālaya* and the wings were not conceived simultaneously.

In order to understand how the adjuncts came into being, one needs to survey the *sugatālaya* complex. Analysis of extant evidence brings forth a story of fascinating and dramatic developments. One should realize that no rock-cut temple had ever been made in the previous two and a half centuries anywhere in South Asia. In that context, the conception of a rock-cut (*śaila*-) temple equipped with as many as four adjuncts must have been a daunting task for the builders. We may wonder why they chose to build such a complex structure, especially when there must have been a paucity of workers who knew how to excavate monumental rock-cut architecture. During the period of the lull, (3rd to mid-5th century CE) most monastic establishments might have been

built in less durable media such as wood, clay, or brick. What seems likely, however, is that there still existed a guild that had somehow preserved the knowhow of rock-cut architecture. Were the craftspeople employed proficient in all types of assignments, ranging from Hindu shrines to Buddhist or Jain temples? Alternatively, were the builders none other than *bhikṣus* proficient in such arts? Hindu texts mention the following ranks with overlapping roles: the *sthapati*, the chief architect and master builder; the *sūtragrāhin*, the expert in drawing; the *vardhakī*, a designer, painter, carpenter, and sculptor; the *sūtradhāra*, an architect, master-draftsman, master-artisan, master-mason, and sculptor; the *śilpin*, the engraver and sculptor; the *sūtra-dhṛta*, an artisan; the *takṣaka*, a wood- cutter and carpenter; and the *śilā-śilpin*, a stonemason (Acharya 1946, 578–92).

At Ajantā, it was Cave 8 (Figure 87) that was first inaugurated in the Vākāṭaka period. This cave, like all the other caves at the site, underwent multiple phases of activity. In Phase I, it was just like a typical Sātavāhana period *upāśraya*. Only three monk's cells (*pariveṇas*) could have existed in the small type of hall (*kṣudraśālā*). In later phases, more cells were added, the size of the hall was expanded, and a shrine was created as well, in which a portable, perhaps wooden (*dārūmayī*) Buddha image was

installed (Jadhav 1987, 249–54). Cave 8 provided the rebirth of the tradition of rock-cut architecture after the lull. Sadly, until 2004, the cave served as the power-generator room of the Archaeological Survey of India, and it is still poorly kept.[63]

Somehow, news of the successful completion of Cave 8 must have spread in the region and the neighbouring 'countries' so as to attract more patrons to the site to initiate ambitious undertakings. Monks, merchants, kings, and ministers who had wealth and good intentions started their patronage. Varāhadeva, Upendragupta II (or Dharādhipa)[64], Mathura, Buddhabhadra, etc. are the patrons who have left epigraphs giving vital information about themselves, the political climate, and the times. Although there were a number of monastic sites, the reason why Ajantā was chosen for this great renaissance has not been sufficiently explored. The site's geography and natural abundance must have played a vital role in its rejuvenation. Varāhamihira, who is believed to have lived in the late fifth and early sixth centuries CE, succeeding Ajantā's Vākāṭaka phase, offers a clue. In his *Bṛhatsaṃhitā,* he described what the ideal site of a temple should be like:

> Deities come near the spots furnished with water and groves, natural and artificial. They always sport in places rendered charming on account of ponds, which have a parasol of lotuses warding off the beams of the sun, clear water with

> the avenues of white lotuses agitated by swans with their shoulders, resound with the notes of swans, *kāraṇḍava*, *krauñca*, and *cakravāka* and have the aquatic animals in the shade of *nicula* trees standing on their banks; or near the rivers having *krauñca* birds for their elaborate girdles, melodious notes of *rājahamsas* for their voice, beautiful garments in the shape of a vast sheet of water, belts in the form of fishes, floral ear-ornaments in the form of blooming trees on their banks, buttocks formed by confluences, lofty spots on the banks forming their breasts, and *hamsas* for laughter. The gods are delighted to dwell in places skirted by forests, rivers, mountains, and cataracts as also in towns furnished with parks. [(Varaha-Mihira 1865, 3–8, 55)]

Monk Buddhabhadra, the patron of Cave 26, was probably a person of extraordinary merit and talent (Singh 2012a). His motive was clear from his dedicatory inscription:

> The monk Buddhabhadra has caused (this) temple of Sugata to be made in honour of his parents as well as in honour of (that) Bhavvirāja who served the mighty king of Aśmaka as the latter's minister, who was attached to him (the monk) in friendship through many successive births [. . .] [(Chhabra 1952, 118)]

The sumptuous '*sugatālaya*' (Buddha Temple) was erected in honour of his friend Bhavvirāja. Unlike Varāhadeva and Upendragupta II (or Dharādhipa), he makes no mention of the Vākāṭaka kings[65]. He relates that the Aśmaka king had defeated the Ṛṣika king in war. Caves 17–20, which were sponsored by the Ṛṣika king (either Upendragupta II or Dharādhipa), are situated near the cluster of Sātavāhana period caves. However, Cave 26 and its auxiliary edifices are at a distance on the western side of the hill. Possibly the Ṛṣika

administered the Sātavāhana-period caves, while Buddhabhadra from the Aśmaka country administered the site's sector from Caves 21 to 28. This view, first expressed by Spink, was contested. 'Holy places in ancient India were nobody's monopoly and any one could visit them and do pious acts there unhindered by the ruling family of the region'; so wrote Ajay Mitra Shastri (Shastri 1997, 49). Shastri may be generally right, but a detailed examination of the trend of excavation activities at Ajantā suggests that this was not exactly the case during the site's Vākāṭaka phase. After all, the Ṛṣikas' Cave 19 was vandalized by the rival Aśmakas, for which physical and circumstantial evidence is extant in situ (Figures 146-147). Possibly, there existed a troublesome relationship between the 'countries' of Ṛṣika and Aśmaka (Figures 8-11). They seem to have come into serious conflict. According to inscriptions in Caves 17 and 26, after the first encounter the Ṛṣika claimed victory, while the second time the Aśmakas claimed victory. The Aśmaka king (his name is illegible in Buddhabhadra's inscription) later connived with other fief-holders and local kings to mount an insurrection against the Vākāṭaka king(s). This seems to have ultimately caused the downfall of the Western Vākāṭakas[66].

The above political climate may explain why Buddhabhadra decided to select a far-flung location on the scarp, even when the space between his anticipated *sugatālaya* and the

Sātavāhana period caves was still vacant and available during mid-462 CE (Figures 1, 12). He found it wise to maintain a discreet distance from the Ṛṣika-administered caves[67].

Cave 26-complex – the patron Buddhabhadra

Buddhabhadra became a monk at an early age, as evident from verse 16 of his dedicatory inscription in Cave 26, *Buddha-śāsana-gatiṃ samabuddhya jāto bhikshur-vya (r-vva)yasy-abhinave* ('[He who having] perfectly mastered the course of the Buddha's teachings, became a monk in his early age') (Chhabra 1952, 115-18). Buddhabhadra's inscription suggests that he became the leader or head of a sect[68]. It seems that he must have been a well-known personality in his own lifetime. We are also led to understand that, while being a monk, he retained private property and wealth. Verse 7 observes: *[. . .] saṃvidyamāna-vibhāvai katha na kāryyā bhavet-kīrtti* ('why should not a monument be raised by those possessing wealth, desirous of mundane happiness as also of liberation?') (Yazdani 1952, 115-17).

The facts that the donor had the means to create such an elaborate edifice, resembling a palace (prāsāda), and that he managed to erect one of the largest and most composite Buddhist rock-cut temple-complex created thus far (Figures 00) reveal the magnitude of his resources. The donor's respect for artists and architects is also overt. In fact, he

made an exceptional gesture by recording, in verse 14, sentiments of gratitude for the architects whom he sought to immortalise by giving their names — Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu: *āgamya dharmmadattaṃ chcha(cha) bhikshuṃ sach-chhi-shyam-eva cha bhadrabu(ba)ndhuṃ-idaṃ ves´ma tābhyāṃ nishpāditaṃ cha me* ('Thanks to the monk Dharmadatta as well as to (my) good pupil Bhadrabandhu; for it is these two who have seen to the excavation and completion of this (cave) temple on my behalf') (Yazdani 1952, 115-18).

EARLY EXCAVATION STAGES IN THE CAVE 26-COMPLEX

Stage 1: the ćaityagṛha – *Phase I: the upper half*

The extent of Buddhabhadra's resources and the corresponding achievement appears even greater when we consider and accept the newly emerging view that he must also have been the patron of Caves 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, and 29 (W. M. Spink 2006, 22-53). Like any rock-cut edifice, Buddhabhadra's *ćaityagṛha* must been excavated from the top downwards, a process that is clearly visible in Caves 24, 5, and 29 (Figure 00) that are quite instructive for understanding the process and stages of excavation. It appears that Buddhabhadra's *ćaityagṛha* witnessed distinct and multiple phases of excavation. In Phase I, the facade must have been half cut from the top. The ground level was just around the

base of the sill of the arch (ćaitya vātāyana or ćaitya window). Probably the terrace or the balcony (*alinda*) was not yet exposed. There must have been a large sunshade, canopy, or eaves projecting from the facade, which has now perished. Scant traces of this can be spotted in some nineteenth-century photographs. Similar eaves were later emulated in Cave 19, as can be gleaned from a nineteenth century etching and a photograph (Figures 00). There is nothing to suggest that the *ćaityagṛha* had any decoration yet. The interior too must have been cut half from the top. That is to say, the vault must have been shaped up. Even the rock-beams and rafters (*tulopatulā*) must have been carved out, for if left for later on, they would have been difficult to carve out due to height, and the flakes would have fallen on the heads of the excavators while chiselling and hammering. It is for such practical reasons that another rule can be inferred from the evidence: in a *ćaityagṛha*, the vertical and horizontal excavations progress side by side. The horizontal progress of work has to proceed simultaneously with the vertical progress of work. Thus, by the end of Phase I the *ćaityagṛha* had fully progressed on the horizontal plane; it had reached its maximum and expected depth. In other words, the hemi-spherical rear roof must have been shaped up along with the agro lithic ribs.

As far as the stūpa is concerned, its upper portion must have been blocked out, for it could not have been left for a later stage while the hemispherical roof was being worked out. The excavation of a stūpa, whether inside a hall, a shrine, or a *caityagṛha*, requires some degree of mathematical and geometrical thought, as the centre of the stūpa must be placed along the central axis and on the centre of the hemisphere. In comparison to a structural edifice, the task is rather difficult to achieve in the case of a rock-cut *caityagṛha*, as one needs to identify the centre while the interior is still full of uncut rock, and before the corners and peripheries physically exist. In structural edifices, marking the centre can be done on the plinth or floor, but here the plinth or floor would be finalised at the end, and the centre of the stūpa would have to be measured before. Thus, fixing the centre of the stūpa and aligning that centre with the centre of the hemisphere in rock-cut edifices is a particularly challenging task requiring great precision, a special method, and lots of experience. The typical method evidently used in most of the *caityagṛhas* across India required the use of an element called the *yaṣṭī*. It physically exists in most of the *caityagṛhas* and can be found as a little projection in the centre of the hemisphere as in Ajantā Cave 10. The *yaṣṭī* is the centre and the vertical axis

of every element of the stūpa, including the *sīrṣa*, *chattra*, vedikā, harmikā, aṇḍa, and meḍhī – all parts of a stūpa.

The ćaitya window that was obviously cut first must have served as the provisional entry and exit point of the edifice. It must have been the only source of light, the only entranceway, and the only way for moving out the chunks of boulders, flakes, and other pieces of the excavated rock.

Thus, in Phase I the entire lower half on the horizontal plane was left uncut, including the open courtyard (*mukta-prapāṅga*, *brahmāṅgaṇa*), the porch, the pillars (*stambhas*), and the lower half of the stūpa. The wings (*viṣāṇakas*) did not yet exist; I believe they were not even planned.

Stage 2: the upper right wing (Cave 25) – Phases I, II, III, and IV

Buddhabhadra selected the site high (about 50 m) on a near-perpendicular cliff (Figures 1, 181). Climbing to it from the level of the riverbed is exhausting. At the top of the cliff are some plain tracts of land that meet again with higher range of slopes of the Western Ghāṭs. These were the likely accommodation sites of the workers and supervisors, as there were no other caves in the vicinity. On the top of the cliff lies the source of the upstream rivulet Waghur (Figure 4), flowing by the hamlet of Lenapur, with about three dozen mud, brick, or thatched huts. At first it looks like just another

of the millions of such tiny Indian villages. However, Lenapur has proven to be of great archaeological significance. The village and the riverbed opposite the caves have yielded some ancient artefacts dating to the times of the caves[69] (Figure 4).

The climb from the riverbed must have been difficult for the workers, although due to the relatively shorter distance, it would have been less stressful to commute from Lenape on the cliff top. Either way, coming to the site, perhaps multiple times a day, must have had an adverse impact on the gross output of work. There must have been a need to plan for shelter at the project site to enable the overseers – and quite possibly the workers – to rest, manage, or officiate. For this purpose, the creation of some kind of *upāśraya* was needed. Such an *upāśraya* would normally have been excavated before starting the work on the main project, i.e. the *ćaityagṛha*. However, the priority here was different. One needed first to test whether the workers would be able to execute the task of excavating the *ćaityagṛha* and whether they would be able to accomplish the mathematical precise exercise of getting the *ćaityagṛha*'s proportions right, since that was the task that would have been of central importance and concern for everybody. The fact that a project like this (a rock-cut *ćaityagṛha*) was carried out for the first time in about two or three centuries speaks volumes about the sense

of optimism that must have prevailed. At the same time, there may have been a lack of expertise and knowhow about rock-cut excavation, casting doubts in the minds of many. The majority of the workers must have been beginners at both the moderately difficult and the truly challenging aspects of the project.

Under the circumstances, the work on the *ćaityagṛha* commanded more urgency than work on an *upāśraya*. However, as soon as the *ćaityagṛha* was deemed to be progressing as planned, a level of satisfaction must have been reached. Every Buddhist temple requires residential units (*upāśrayas*), as witnessed at most of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites, due to the crucial functional roles that the *upāśrayas* play. Therefore, we may assume that, after completing Phase I of the *ćaityagṛha*, it was time to focus on creating an *upāśraya*, which, if tackled now, could also provide shelter needed during the excavation work. Yazdani came to a similar conclusion: 'Cave XXVI [. . .] on account of its size must have needed a monastery of equal magnitude for the accommodation of the bhikṣus' (Yazdani 1952, 16). Yazdani's observation, contained in his discussion on Cave 24, has not been noticed in subsequent scholarship. Although a crucial observation, Yazdani did not get the whole picture. Cave 24 is certainly linked to Cave 26, and had the same patron

(Buddhabhadra), but it was Cave 25 that came first to fulfil this need. It was begun before any other adjacent *upāśraya*.

Cave 25 (Figure 191) had a different layout and design from what we see today. It appears that the adjunct passed through four different phases; yet the cave, due to the ever recurring changes, was never completed. In fact, Cave 25 is in an extremely incomplete state. The *upāśraya* is fascinating, but hitherto unexplained. Therefore, a working reconstruction of its development sequence is attempted below.

Phase I. Cave 25 was initially planned as a very small *upāśraya* like the Sātavāhana-period Caves 13 (Figure 24) or 15A/30 (Figure 26). To understand it properly, let us imagine the stage when the *ćaityagṛha* was only half cut from the top and its lower half, below the arch, was not yet revealed. The lower wings did not yet exist, nor did Cave 27. The conjectural picture includes blank perpendicular walls on either side, i.e. outside the facade. Hence, there is a left outer wall and a right outer wall. As one *upāśraya* was needed, it must have been decided to excavate the same either on the left or on the right outer wall. Evidence suggests that the builders opted for the right wall. An *upāśraya* on this wall will face the south, i.e. towards Cave 27. This conjectural picture derives from the crucial evidence of the 'left door' of Cave 25 that opened toward the terrace of the

ćaityagṛha, as noticed by Burgess, shown on Robert Gill's ground plan (Figure 31) and in his photograph (Figure 191).

Gill's ground plan shows the existence of three doors around the courtyard of Cave 25 (Figure 31). The one on the left opens in a southerly direction, towards the terrace of the *ćaityagṛha*. The other two are in the front of the courtyard facing east, i.e. towards the ravine. However, it is surprising that the plan made by Burgess does not show any of these doors (Figure 30).

It appears that the door in Gill's photograph (Figure 31) was the original door and the only entrance to the cave in Phase I. The door remained functional up to Phase II. In Phase III, it became redundant due to a change in plan. Therefore, a new staircase was made from the side of Cave 24 (Figure 193).

The layout in Phase I must have consisted of a diminutive hall (*kṣudraśālā*) equipped with single or double cells on each wall except the frontal facade. The hall must have occupied some, but not all, of the space where the present courtyard is located. The evidence of the cells is offered by the extant on-site data: (a) what appear to be the remains of the hall's eastern wall (Figure 193), i.e. the front wall of the courtyard in Gill's ground plan (Figure 31); (b) what appear to be the remains of some corners and walls of the cells on that wall (Figure 193).

There may have been similar double cells on the northern and western walls of the hall in Phase I. If so, these were removed by the workers in Phases II due to changes in the plan.

Modification of the layout of Phase I is suggested by the following evidence. Once the lower half of the *caityagṛha* had been excavated, the original door of Cave 25 (opening towards the south) (Figure 205) would have become redundant or at least inconvenient. Therefore, another access point to Cave 25 was created in the form of a monolithic staircase rising from Cave 24 (Figure 199). There was also an unsuccessful attempt to remove the eastern wall along with its cells, as suggested by the extant remains of the lower part of the eastern wall (Figures 193).

It is difficult to understand why the layout was changed. Probably the receding face of the cliff was restricting the plans. On the other hand, layer of lava flow on the ceiling level (Figure 194) posed a problem to the design, as it made the ceiling liable to collapse.

Phase II. The orientation of the *upāśraya* was rotated at right angles to face eastward, its current orientation. The size of the hall was increased by merging it with the northern and western cells. The new orientation benefitted greatly from the removal of the eastern cells, as it offered scope to carve out an outer court (*bahirāṅgaṇa*) that the

earlier plan did not have. Notably, the eastern wall now served as the front wall of the rotated *upāśraya*. The small doorways (*kṣudradvāras*) of the removed cells on the east side must have been retained to function as double-doors of the expanded hall (Figure 31). The plan with a double door or side door (*kampadvāra*) was quite commonly used at Ajantā, albeit not without a central door.

Phase III. The floor plan of Phase II was abandoned before all work relating to it could be completed. The biggest drawback of the Phase II layout was the size of the hall, which was an expanded version of the hall of Phase I. Any further modification or sustained innovation could not have been envisaged had there not been a growing ability to work with rock.

Desiring to introduce an even bigger hall for an *upāśraya* that would add value and functionality to the *caityagṛha*, the planners appear to have created the layout that we see today. Much of the present appearance of Cave 25, consisting of a two-pillared porch, owes to the floor plan of Phase III. In this phase, the workers excavated the entire width and depth of the porch. The porch pillars were of the octagonal type introduced earlier in the *caityagṛha*. The *viṣṇukānt* type was most predominant in the Sātavāhana age and is found in the earliest excavations of the Vākāṭaka phase. They are simple,

robust, and even crude. They show the learner's hand rather than the master's, and they look archaic.

The hall is entered through three doorways. These were shaped up in Phase III. The floor was not fully levelled, as is apparent from marks of incompleteness at floor level, such as the monolithic platform in a corner of the exterior (Figure 195), first noticed and discussed at length by Spink (W. M. Spink 2006, 21-53). As far as the hall is concerned, the workers must have penetrated it only a few metres deep. The left vestibule and inner cells on the porch did not yet exist; they belong to Phase IV.

Phase III normally would have been completed, but for a grave error of judgement. The story of Ajantā's carvers is full of hopes and failures, but every failure created a novel solution. Such stories, once decoded from the evidence of the stone, also tell us that the carvers were not following an architectural manual placed before them. At best, they had seen such rock-cut edifices else- where, which they were attempting to excavate, while relying on the principle of trial and error.

When the work relating to Phase III had advanced, the planners must have realized that they would not be able to carry out the extension according to plan. The southern side of the interior of the edifice encroaches upon the northern contours of the *caityagṛha* Cave 26. This is not so much

reflected on the level of the facade where there is still a gap of a few centimetres between the two edifices (Figures 181-182). Obviously, there was no room left for accommodating the southern cells of the hall of Cave 25 (Figures 33) (W. M. Spink 1981). Any attempt to excavate the southern cells would invade the contour and physical space of the *caityagṛha*, and any misadventure might damage the vault[70]. It was a serious concern[71]. The dangerous proximity of Cave 25 to Cave 26 must have been noticed after much hard work and investment of time. In rock-cut architecture, an action cannot be reversed. Consequently, all the work had to be abandoned, but the abandonment was to last for only three years, until 465 CE (according to Spink's chronology), when the cave received attention again.

Phase IV. By 465 CE, work on most of the other Vākāṭaka phase caves on the site had been started and had reached various stages of development. Among them was Cave 24[72]. It was after significant progress on Cave 24 that the work on the abandoned Cave 25 was resumed. The last phase saw no drastic changes in the layout, except for the completion of the pending tasks of Phase III and two adaptations: (*a*) the lowering of the floor to reach the planned level, which so far had not been reached; (*b*) the addition of a vestibule with inner cells on the porch; and (*c*) the addition of a

staircase on the north-eastern side (which we use today to enter Cave 25).

The floor level had not been reached throughout the first three phases. Hence, an attempt was now made to reach it. This is evident from a matrix of the rock on the floor, several metres long, wide, and high, appearing like a cubical platform jutting out from the floor in the north-western corner of the courtyard (Figures 195). It was left in place in order to save the ceiling of the cell underneath belonging to the neighbouring Cave 24 (Figure 199). That cave and its left outer cell (later converted into a shrine) had been carved out while Cave 25 lay in virtual abandonment[73].

Besides lowering the floor, the builders now attempted to excavate a vestibule with inner cells on the left end of the porch (Figure 196). Curiously, the vestibule has no counterpart on the opposite end. Such asymmetry is rare at Ajantā and begs for an explanation. Actually, because of the creation of Cave 24 it was no longer feasible to carve either a vestibule or inner cells on the northern wall of the porch. In other words, if work on Cave 25 had still been in progress while Cave 24 was conceptualized, the planners of Cave 24, which is a well- planned *upāśraya*, would have been expected to maintain a reasonable distance from Cave 25 in order to allow for its northern vestibule and inner cells. In addition, the left outer cell of Cave 24 would probably not

have been excavated, as it would have stood in the way of lowering the floor of Cave 25 above.

Finally, in Phase IV a staircase ascending from Cave 24 was also excavated (Figure 199). The planners must have intended to finish the hall with cells along the walls (Figures 34-35), but a grave accident seems to have happened. While excavating the inner cell inside the vestibule of the porch (Figure 196), the workers bumped into the vault of *ćaityagṛha* Cave 26, creating an ominous gaping hole (Figure 197). Their worst fear had come true, and it was the last thing that the authorities would have wanted to see. The damage to the *ćaityagṛha* was irreversible, so all work in Cave 25 was permanently abandoned.

Thus, in spite of four phases of development and four modifications of the layout, Cave 25 could not be completed, and remained one of the most ill-fated edifices on the site. It is still neglected by tourists and scholars alike. Except for the study by Spink, hardly anything has been written about it during one and a half centuries of research on Ajantā.

Stage 3: the upper left wing (Cave 27) – Phase I

The problem encountered in Cave 25 must have been an enormous setback. However, it taught many lessons. The relatively inexperienced masons had come to understand the challenges

and risks posed by the tough and irreversible rocky medium. In spite of the tragic experience of Cave 25, a well-constructed *upāśraya* was required. Apparently, work was then started on another *upāśraya* that could replace Cave 25 and would not have the same flaws.

The layout of the new *upāśraya* was more spacious. It had a much larger hall, plenty of rooms for many monks to stay, a nice porch, and a courtyard. Essentially, these are the chief components of an *upāśraya*, which had already achieved a refined stage centuries ago at sites such as Kanherī, Junnar, Koṇḍāṇe, and Nasik (and perhaps even at Beḍsā, Karle, and Pitalkhorā, which are now badly damaged). An important consideration was to ensure that the new *upāśraya* would be situated at a reasonable distance from the *ćaityagṛha*, so that cells on all sides of the hall and any future expansions would be feasible. The cave was pushed to the south, allowing for a spacious frontcourt and a porch. The latter must have had two pillars and similar dimensions to the present porch of Cave 25. The pillars must have been of the same octagonal type, which was fashionable at the time. The large hall (*mahāśālā*) was to be comparable to that of the Sātavāhana-period Cave 12.

Unfortunately, the choice of a suitable location for the new *upāśraya* was restricted, as there was no point in going further to the north, for it would be complicated to relate

it structurally and functionally to the *ćaityagṛha*; it would necessitate the creation of another access system. There was a better location available to the south of the *ćaityagṛha*. Regarding the orientation of the new *upāśraya*, apparently a drastic decision was made not to orient it towards the east in the fashion of the *ćaityagṛha* Cave 26 and Cave 25. Instead, it was made to face the north, i.e. towards Cave 25 (Figure 203, 205, 207). The reason is clear: the builders had decided to supplement Caves 25 and 27 with counterparts that would be situated on the lower level. This would ensure structural and symmetrical connections with the *ćaityagṛha*. Thus, the *ćaityagṛha* came to have four adjuncts in total: two on the upper level and two on the lower level.

The excavation work in Cave 27 went through at least four distinct phases. The original floor plan (in Phase I) consisted of a hall much larger than its symmetrical counterparts, i.e. Cave 25 (on the horizontal level) and Cave 26-LLW (on the vertical level). The hall must have been equipped with twelve or more cells, four each in the eastern and western walls and an equal number or more on the southern wall[74]. Were the north-south axes of the left wings vertically aligned with each other (Figure 185)? If so, the hall must have been very large. At least half of it, on the eastern side, has now perished. The hall must have been rectangular, rather than the more usual square type. As long as the lower

floor had not been cut, there was no terrace or balcony yet, but an outer court. There was no garbhagṛha in this floor plan, as the *upāśrayas* at this time were strictly places of residence or congregation. The *ćaityagṛhas* were regarded as the places for veneration.

The absence of pillars, remarkable in view of the size of the hall, is one of the most conspicuous features of Cave 27.[75] Compare this with Cave 11, which even though far smaller is still equipped with pillars. The absence of pillars in Cave 27 suggests an early date. The edifice seems to have been modelled after a typical astylar prototype of the Sātavāhana period.[76] Other artistic, architectural, and iconographic features of the Sātavāhana-period *upāśrayas* are however absent in the early Vākāṭaka period *upāśrayas* of Ajantā. Perhaps inspiration from other sites somehow had not reached Ajantā during the inaugural years of the Vākāṭaka phase. What is even more apparent is that many of the artistic and architectural peculiarities of Ajantā appear to be the result of on-site innovations instead.

Overall, the floor plan of Cave 27 in Phase I had an archaic simplicity and it was quite robust compared to later *upāśrayas*. In subsequent years, the planners learned that pillars offer a better support for the ceiling, and even allow for an expansion of the hall.[77] The early date of Cave 27 suggests an early date for the start of Cave 26 as well,

because of the particular structural connection shared by both edifices.

Work on Phase II of Cave 27 was started after some years. The floor plan was slightly amended through the addition of cells on the hitherto blank walls on either end of the porch, apparently to create more rooms. This happened after many new edifices had been started on the site, and the already existing structures were being modified. One of the prominent trends was to add single cells on the walls on either end of the porch, and Cave 27 went through a lot of adaptation too.

Cave 27's Phase III was brief. Only limited changes were done, among them the conversion of the cells at the porch ends into pillared vestibules and the addition of an inner cell on the rear wall of the newly created vestibule. These kind of changes were carried through everywhere at Ajantā.[78]

By Phase IV, the last construction phase of Cave 27 (late 477–478 CE),[79] all the Vākāṭaka period *upāśrayas* at Ajantā had been successfully transformed, or were in the process of being transformed, into temples. Apparently, the builders of Cave 27 planned to convert it into a temple as well. At this time, attempts to paint the edifice had begun, as suggested by the traces of painting on the ceiling of the inner cell that lies on the western end of the porch (Figure 190 (W. M. Spink 2006, fig. 43)). Work on the adjoining Cave 28 had also started (Spink's early 477 CE (W. M. Spink 2009, fig. 39)),

and it was impossible to excavate a shrine in the rear, southern wall of Cave 27, as it would encroach upon Cave 28. Perhaps because the conversion was considered top priority, a unique, albeit odd, alternative was decided upon to situate the shrine on the right or western wall of the *mahāśālā*. Accordingly, work on the shrine or its antechamber began on the right wall. To achieve this, the two central cells were to be converted into a shrine or shrine antechamber (Figure 187).

Sadly, however, before this conversion could progress to any extent, a tragedy apparently took place that changed the situation forever. According to Spink's theory, Hariṣeṇa, a major ruling power of the dominion, suddenly died or was killed. The Vākāṭaka kingdom gradually receded into disintegration. The culminating chaos was so drastic and vast that the patrons were forced to flee from the region. The sites of Ajantā, Aurangabad, Ghaṭotkacha, Banoṭī, and Bāgh were abandoned forever. Every Vākāṭaka period cave at these sites bears the marks of sudden abandonment just before the anticipated completion.

Stage 4: the ćaityagṛha *– Phase II: the lower half*

It was not before substantial progress in Phase I of Cave 27 had been achieved, around early 463 CE (W. M. Spink 2009, fig. 39), that the workers were asked to resume work on

digging the lower half of the *ćaityagṛha* Cave 26. Several months had elapsed since work on the *ćaityagṛha* had halted for the sake of creating Caves 25 and 27. The intermission ultimately turned out to be advantageous, since the progress in Cave 27 not only provided much-needed experience for apprentices, but also turned out to have a positive effect on the willingness of the patrons. In the meantime, Caves 7, Lower 6, 15, 20, and 11 had been inaugurated, as new patrons had been drawn to the site by the news of such resurgent and pious activities. These patrons came with their own ideas, and so did newly arrived hordes of artisans from different regions and backgrounds. Ajantā had turned into a vast laboratory of ideas. The urge to introduce new things was unparalleled. From each of these developments, Buddhabhadra's *ćaityagṛha* only stood to gain.

The lower half of the *ćaityagṛha* was excavated starting with the cistern, followed by the main gateway (*mūladvāra*) at the head of the courtyard (Figures 205-206), the large courtyard of the complex, the porch, and ultimately the nave. The cells on either end of the porch are a later addition (c. 464 CE) (W. M. Spink 2009, fig. 39). Traces of the main gateway that are still extant on the floor (Figure 189) suggest that the gateway was approximately 3 m wide and 1.2 m in thickness. It must have been as high as the ceiling of the porch, which means around 5 m.[80] *śilpaśāstras* mention that

such gates should carry carvings of different orders, measures, and types. Door guardians (*dvārapālas*) must also have been there. Cave 19 had a similar main gateway, of which some portions are still extant with images of a *nāgarāja* as *dvārapāla* or *pratihāra* (Figure 201). Next to him is his attendant called *pramatha*. They are mentioned in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*:

> The door-jamb comprises of 3, 5, 7, or 9 vertical mouldings, the lower one-fourth portion of the door-jamb occupied by an attendant figure (*pratihāra*) on each side, auspicious birds such as *hamsa*, *jīvaka*, *kāraṇḍava* and *cakravāka*, *śrīvṛkṣa*, *svāstika*, auspicious pitchers, amorous couples, foliated scrolls, and the dwarfish figures called *pramathas*. [(Varaha-Mihira 1865, lv, 14–15)]

Many elements from the above description are found in Ajantā doorways. A similar *pramatha* figure was present on the main gate of Cave 26. It now lies in a fragmentary state on the riverbed below Cave 26 (Figure 201).

Stages 5–6: the lower wings

Next, it was the turn of the lower wings. While Cave 27 was being planned, the idea had arisen to excavate more *upāśrayas* below the upper adjuncts. Thus Cave 26-Lower Right Wing (Figures 180) was started (c. 464 CE) (W. M. Spink 2009, fig. 39), as, subsequently, was Cave 26-LLW (Figures 180). These lower wings were planned as modest *upāśrayas*, far smaller than Cave 27, thus defying symmetry and proportion.

Apparently, practical considerations outweighed the concerns for symmetry and dimensions. As the concept of using pillars in the halls had not yet been introduced, the planners, in order to maximise the strength of the ceiling (below) and floor (above), decided to reduce the size of the lower wings. This is how the two lower wings originated. They also saw multiple adaptations in the course of time as explained by Spink in his volumes.

CONCLUSION

Buddhabhadra, the benefactor of Cave 26 *caityagṛha*, also sponsored Caves 25 and 27. Together with other additions, such as Caves 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, and 29 the western range of caves at Ajantā assumes the shape of an exclusive monastic complex connected through a single *toraṇa-dvāra*. There was a somewhat steep flight of steps ascending from the ravine up to the main gate of the complex.

Buddhabhadra's initial plans must have been rather modest, but he ended up creating what became arguably the grandest and most extraordinary Buddhist rock-cut temple-complex that the world had seen until then. Much credit must also go to his chief architects, Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu, who saw to the excavation on Buddhabhadra's behalf. Among the ranks of the world's 'Great Masters',

Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu may be considered the first architects known by name from ancient India, who became agents of Ajantā's renaissance in the fifth century CE and contributed significantly to the revival of rock-cut architecture. In spite of the odds, what they created is an impressive achievement. Considering their accomplishments, they may be compared to other great contemporaries, such as the poet Kālidāsa, who may have been employed at the Vākāṭaka court as well, as suggested by Mirashi.