

## CH. 16: CAVE 7—THE STORY BEHIND ITS ECCENTRIC LAYOUT

Inception and development	298
The porch and the absent hall	303
The shrine-antechamber	305
The shrine	306
Paintings	308

### INCEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT

BY THE MIDDLE of circa 462 CE, the entire site was full of activities. More than a dozen caves were already initiated within the space of one year. I totally agree with Spink on this subject although no one can pinpoint for sure which was the year when it all started. Even Spink allows for a margin of error of an year or two (Figure 225). In the absence of a full proof year for the site's renaissance to start, Spink has proposed an anchor point, i.e. circa 462 CE. From this date, everything must be counted, and every activity must fall within the span of next eighteen years.

I have proposed the year circa 461 for the site's renaissance to begin for the reasons already explained. Thus, by the middle of circa 462 CE many of the caves had made sizable progress on their frontcourts, porches, etc. It was

during this time that Cave 7 seems to have begun (Figures 81-86).

It seems abundantly clear that the *upāśrayas* (residential caves) still had no room for any shrine or figurative sculptures. The image of the Buddha as a subject of worship had not yet been introduced within the ritualistic gamut of the continuing norms here, since it were the existing Sātavāhana-period stupa-temples that must still have been in worship, and which would have been visited by the pilgrims of many of the eighteen different schools of early Buddhism (Table 5).

It is very difficult to envisage the sociological or sectarian picture during mid-fifth century Deccan. Perhaps, the site was initially populated largely by the schools that shared much in common with the Sthāviravādins (Theravāda) sect, which were popular mostly in the southern territories of the peninsula as well as Ceylon. Apparently, the so-called Mahāyāna faith or the schools that came to accept the cult of the Bodhisattva, and who had still not discarded the stupa worship were spreading rapidly in the Deccan. These were thus the times of great confluences and transformations, which was going to last for a hundred year more when similar theological and iconographical gamut was going to be expressed in Ellora, albeit with more variety and assimilations from other sects, such as the Vajrayānists.

The evidence at our disposal do not suggest the presence of strictly 'Mahāyāna' iconography anywhere at Ajantā at any point of time. Rather, we can say with utmost conviction that in the very early years of the fifth-century phase of Ajantā, the image worshippers were totally absent. What is even truer and baffling, as revealed from the meticulous studies of Spink and the present researcher, is that not a single Bodhisattva was evidently planned anywhere at Ajantā until the whole 'renaissance' was at least half-accomplished (Figure 227)! In other words, it is not until circa 475 that the very first Bodhisattva finds a place at Ajantā.

Especially after the recession and hiatus there is seen a wave of iconographic changes on the site that would force the transformation of the earlier Sātavāhana-period *śaityagṛhas* into the new iconographic regime—caves 9 and 10 would be converted to the new needs of having images. Figures of the Buddha would be painted, and other narratives too that would entail the anthropomorphic depiction of the Buddha. The stupas were indeed retained though, which is a telling proof that there was no disregard for the stupa, as it was also, of course, the symbol of the Buddha, no matter how old-fashioned the language of symbolic representation had become. The retention of the stupas, and further incorporation in many of the newly planned caves prove that the new sects or doctrines had not completely done away from stupa worship, a point that

would explain why the stupas of the fifth-century *śaityagrhas*, caves 19 and 26 came to have Buddha images fronting them—a unique solution indeed to assimilate the old and the new together.

In the architectural layout of Cave 7 (Figure 20), early features are clearly visible in spite of the clearly advanced model of planning. The location of Cave 7 (Figure 12) is indicative of its relative placement in the spatial arrangement of the site as well as on the chronological scale (Figure 225). A new cave, unless otherwise necessitated, would logically begin next to the pre-existing Sātavāhana-period caves, which must have been visited by pilgrims—since the site seems to have been alive. Had the site been dead or abandoned, no one would inhabit and find it suitable for the creation of new temples. Because the site fell on the trade route connecting the Uttarāpath and Dakṣiṇāpath that carried merchants, pilgrims, monks, travellers, kings, and armies since centuries there is no way why a pilgrimage site would be ignored by travellers who constantly needed shelter to stay after a day's walk or ride (Figures 6-7).

The inverted bell motif on the pillars of Cave 7 (Figure 81) do not seem to have been a part of the original conception. In fact most of the pillars on the site were re-worked either modestly or heavily during the site's development and evolution. Nearly all the pillars in the

first few years of the Vākāṭaka phase were octagonal and austere without plans for any decoration. It is very likely that the portico pillars were octagonal just like the porch pillars of the cave (Figure 83).

As regards the interior of the cave, Spink has successfully shown (Spink 2007) that the *maṇḍapa* was originally planned just like any other *maṇḍapa* having a hall with cells on the left, rear and right walls of the interior (Figure 20). However, soon after the porch was exposed, and even before the rear wall of the porch was fully reached, there came the period of recession and hiatus (Figure 225). Subsequently, it appears that the donor of the cave was no longer around. The patronage had apparently dried up, because the planned hall was never carved out. Spink has remarkably explained how the outlandish plan was freshly created after the hiatus to renounce the hall and carve the cells on the porch's rear wall. Cells were carved on either ends of the porch albeit on the higher levels (Figure 83). The elevation was to save the ceiling of the neighbouring caves that had progressed significantly by the time such expansionist ideas were mooted.

The relative gap between Cave 8 and this edifice is indeed negligible—a metre or so. And, this was going to pose problems in future for the leftward expansion of Cave 7, when in 465 the idea was launched, in keeping with the emergent

trend, to excavate cells, and later vestibules, on the left and right walls of the porch. At the time of inauguration, there was obviously no plan to excavate the cells or vestibules on the left or right walls of the porch. The fact, seen throughout the site, can clearly be observed in this cave, for the elevation of the vestibule and cells is significantly raised up, almost a metre or so, which was for no other reason but to save the ceiling and right portions of the adjacent Cave 8. If such planning of the porch-end vestibules and cells were planned from the very beginning, obviously greater gap would have been allowed from Cave 8 to permit the excavation of the porch-end vestibule and cells in Cave 7.

Still later, there came a time when the shrine was introduced with an antechamber. Even the shrine underwent a number of layers and phases of adaptation, which is all very tellingly and fascinatingly explained by Spink (W. M. Spink 1985).

#### **THE PORCH AND THE ABSENT HALL**

The *upāśraya*, having lost the painted surfaces, must have appeared far elegant in the fifth century than it is now. Even so, one would not fail to appreciate some of the remarkable initiatives that were planned and are still evidently visible. To begin with one must appreciate the

sheer size of the *upāśraya*, rarely found earlier in the history of Buddhist rock-cut architecture. The width of the façade is among the largest on the site, barring the porch-end extensions in the form of the vestibules and inner cells that extend several metres on either side.

Initially, the porch was never fully excavated as can be seen from the uncut matrix of rock on the left; western side of the floor. Most of this evidence is now covered with the cement steps created for access to the left vestibule. Significantly, the vestibule on the right (eastern side) has the floor on the lower level indicating that the same higher level was not needed on that side. These chambers and vestibules were never fully done; parts of the areas were never fully smoothed, especially on the lower sides of the wall.

The porch-end vestibules must initially have been single chambers, which were in later date, converted into vestibules by removing parts of the front wall, while retaining vertical shafts for pillars. This was done to create three rooms on each side of the porch, instead of the earlier room. The three rooms, after the creation of the vestibule, were carved each on the left, rear, and right walls.

Obviously, there must have been a plan to excavate pillars of the planned hall on the line occupied now by the rear wall of the porch. The fact that no trace of the planned

pillars of the hall is visible suggests that the excavation in the initial stage had never reached up to the location of the porch rear walls. The four cells on the rear wall of the porch (Figure 84) could never have come about if the original plan was implemented before the hiatus period.

### **THE SHRINE-ANTECHAMBER**

It is remarkable that the porch dates to circa 462 CE but the shrine antechamber dates to circa 467 CE. The shrine-antechamber pillars (Figures 85-86) are identical to those in Cave 15 porch, and shrine-antechamber. Even the shrine doorway exhibits an earlier layer of the plain, flat doorjambs just as in the shrine doorway of Cave 15. A closer look at the shrine doorway is necessary. The seated lions holding the doorjambs are similar to the main doorway of Cave 11 (Figure 107). This doorway, therefore, must be chronologically contemporaneous to the example in Cave 11. Notably, the lion pedestal motifs below the doorjambs will not be found in the doorways of the caves that are yet to be started. The original door jambs had three frames that were all probably flat, intended for painted decorations. Somewhere around 467, the upper part of the door jamb came to receive images of Ganga and Yamuna, but the lower part was blank. On these blank and flat spaces, intrusive Buddha figures were carved in 477 CE, one standing and two seated on



both sides. The inner jamb was also filled with such standing and seated Buddha figures that are interestingly reduced as decorative motifs here. Even the lintel area was carved with seated Buddha images. The marks of such later carvings are clearly visible.

Around the shrine doorway (Figure 86), there are three, much larger seated Buddha images. These too are late additions on the earlier flat walls that were painted or intended to be painted. These carved Buddha images, do not look out of scheme, because of the Mahāprātihārya (Miracle of Śrāvastī) scene carved on the left and right walls of the antechamber.

### THE SHRINE

There is a stark similarity between the shrine Buddha image here and in Cave 15 that would be inaugurated some years later. This similarity further attests to the later addition of the shrine at the end of the hiatus period in circa 465-466 CE. At that time, Cave 15 was already started and underway (Figure 225).

Spink has observed that not all the Buddha and Bodhisattva images in the shrine are of the same period. They were not conceived together (W. M. Spink 1985). The matrix of the rock on the left and right side of the floor-populated

with very late intrusive Buddha images of circa 477 CE—was remaining uncut from the floor to the ceiling level. The central space in shrine delineates the vertical block that was removed, at the end of which was excavated the singular, the central, seated Buddha image as the chief presiding deity. At this time (circa 465–466 CE) there was no plan whatsoever to excavate the two flanking Bodhisattvas behind the centrally seated Buddha figure. The Bodhisattvas are sunk into the background, for the areas left or right of them were already carved with other figures—the flying *kinnaras* or *gandharvas* and the two standing Buddhas. Now, even these Buddhas are not part of the original plan, for the Buddhas are never ‘attendants’ until the final years of disruption—when the original patrons were forced to flee from the site after Hariṣeṇa’s death in circa 477 CE.

In circa 477 CE, even the left and right walls of this very narrow shrine was removed for creating further Buddha images. Even the front wall was not spared, and the lower parts of the tall Buddhas on sides that somewhat earlier served as the pedestal was covered with a row of seated Buddhas. Moreover, the intermediary spaces between two Buddha images were utilized for carving tiny Buddha figures. In fact, a riot of imageries took place here—a kind of horror-vacuum prevails.

### PAINTINGS

There is sufficient evidence to show that the portico, porch, shrine antechamber, and the shrine were all plastered and painted most of which has unfortunately lost. Extant portions on rear right wall of porch (Figure 84) indicates that there were painted narrative devotional themes or those from the life of the Buddha as seen in Caves 1, 2, 16, or 17. The ceiling of the antechamber had painted themes emulating wooden beams and rafters, and various decorative themes painted amongst the interlocking square spaces.

The shrine ceiling has somewhat better preserved the large medallion painted inside a larger square. Floral motifs are painted all around and inside these circular and geometric spaces. All the Buddha images of the shrine and shrine antechamber too bear plenty of evidence of having been painted. The interior of the vestibules and cells are plastered with the mud-plaster type, but there is no evidence of them being painted. The porch ceiling was painted twice for there are two layers of plaster and paintings, although much is damaged, and nothing can be made out of the extant parts.