

CH. 17: CAVE 11—A RESEARCHER’S NIGHTMARE

Original layout and constricted location	309
The façade	312
Circa 462-465 CE	313
Circa 465 CE: the <i>saṅghārāma</i> has the new plan to convert the residential <i>upāśrayas</i> into temples	315
Circa 466-477 CE: the porch receives copious adaptations	318
• The porch cells	318
• The main doorway	318
• The porch floor and doorway lions	319
• Pillars, shafts, and <i>adhiṣṭhānas</i>	320
• The porch benches	321
• The windows	323
Circa 466-477 CE: adaptations in the hall	325
Circa 470s CE: evidence of worship activities	328

ORIGINAL LAYOUT AND CONSTRICTED LOCATION

IN CIRCA LATE 462 CE, the patron of Cave 11, without willing to go far on the hill, decided to fit his *upāśraya* in the still vacant albeit constricted space between Caves 10 and 12, the Sātavāhana-period caves, which were pivotal to the site’s activities and architectural expansion (Figures 90, 95). The location high up was chosen because it was just alright for them since there was no plan to carve any cells on the porch. Had it not been so the planners would have noted that there was never going to be any required space to fit the porch-end cells (Figure 25).

Actually the monks' cells were planned only for the interior, which was the whole and the sole focus of the *upāśraya*. Even the standard norm was to have the cells inside the hall, on all the walls excepting the front one. However, what we actually see here is baffling. It is in fact the only cave on the site which departs from the rule, for the cave has cells on just two interior walls. There are no cells on the right interior wall. What is further surprising is that instead of cells on the right wall there is excavated a rock-cut bench along the entire stretch of the right wall. This is indeed quite unique on the site.

When we analyse the scenario, we shall come to the conclusion that such outlandish features are met here on account of what was surely a blunder of judgement. Spink calls it sheer 'stupidity' or negligence for they failed to prejudge the fact that the intended cells of the right interior wall would never be able to be carved in the meagre space between this cave and the neighbouring *śaityagṛha* Cave 10 (Figure 12). They had apparently also not perceived that the *śaityagṛha*'s nave turned slightly to the left toward the interior. Indeed, Cave 10 is angled on the face of the cliff, a fact not easily noted at first glance.

Simultaneously, Cave 12 on the left was not less a problem, which the planners did not evidently fail to realise in advance. This is learned from the fact that the planners

elevated the cave high up to maintain a safe distance from the ceiling and right cells of Cave 12 (Figure 96). It is this elevation which incidentally permitted the excavation of the cells of Cave 11, and I mean not just those on the exterior or porch areas, but also those in the interior.

The constricted space was chosen because the plans were such initially that presented no obvious problems, or so they thought. Had they realised the problems that were on the anvil they would have chosen another location, for there were plenty of vacant locations at the time between the Sātavāhana period Caves 13 (Figure 124) and 15A (Figure 126). Caves 14 (Figure 125) and 15 (Figure 126) were not yet started. Or maybe, these areas too were earmarked for the creation of Caves 14 and 15 that were to start within a year or so, i.e. in circa 463-464 CE. There was also a possibility to go across on the side of Cave 7 (Figure 12), but the fact that this was not done indicates either that it was considered rather far from the *śaityagrhas* or those locations too were probably earmarked for the creation of Caves 7 and 6. This is the only explanation why in this early phase they decided rather to sandwich the cave between the meagre space of Caves 10 and 12, and that too not without the inconvenience of elevating it high above.

THE FAÇADE

It is hard to figure out how the façade must have looked like in the fifth century CE since the areas outside the façade is considerably damaged. The damage may well be up to 7 metres as can be assessed by the original cliff position here and near the adjacent Caves 10 and 12 (Figures 95-96). It is also hard to know whether the lower steps of the cement staircase is a reconstruction of the original monolithic staircase, for it appears that the cement staircase springs from an area that looks like an outer cell which is mostly perished now (Figure 97). If this was not the original location of the steps' landing, the only other location of the steps' landing could have been right in front of the cave's axis (Figure 96).

The cave has eaves, although in future excavations the dimensions of the eaves would be increasing gradually and ultimately assuming great proportions as in Caves 21 (Figure 170), 23 (Figure 173), and 24 (Figure 176). The most remarkable aspect of the eaves here is that they have miraculously preserved the paintings that incidentally are among the finest ceiling decorations on the site. Exposed to the inclemency of weather they have retained the vibrancy of colour. The painted ceiling on the porch, however, has turned black, which is either due to a problem in pigment

manufacturing by the guild responsible there or the dark discolouration is due to the soot from the smoke during the worship activities. We should not be surprised, for this was a cave where, in my observation, worship started very early, and went on for many years.

CIRCA 462-465 CE

As can be seen in the plan by Burgess, a path breaking attempt was already made in planning the layout, because for the first time a monastic hall of residence was designed from the very beginning to have a pillared hall (Figure 24). The fact assumes significance, since rarely before in history, anywhere in India, do we see a *upāśraya* with a pillars in the interior. To my observation, there is just one exception at Konḍāṇe datable to 2nd century CE that has a pillared hall. However, Cave 11 is too small as compared to the Konḍāṇe precedence to require pillars. Note also that the very adjoining *upāśraya* Cave 12 (Figure 26) as well as Cave 27 (Figures 32-33) had no provision of any interior pillars, although they are far larger. In such circumstances, the planning of the pillared hall for Cave 11 assumes a remarkable aesthetic significance. It was also catalytic on the site, since from now on all sizable *upāśrayas* on the site as well as elsewhere would be provided with interior pillars,

except for the very curious example of Cave 15, Ajantā (Figure 24, 126-127).

We are of the view that every pillar of Cave 11, four on the porch (Figures 98-99) and 4 in the hall (Figure 110-111) must initially have been square, and not octagonal. What appears even more surprising is the possibility that there were evidently just 2 pillars planned on the porch. This is something Spink has not observed. He hasn't even observed that many large and small *upāśrayas* on the site were planned much smaller than they appear today; lesser number of porch pillars were planned on them. Spink hasn't also noticed that many of the *upāśrayas* had several phases of re-cutting of the floor level. In other words, the floors were lowered, and in some caves, even the ceilings were raised higher up.

The original floor level in this cave was not intended to be at the level where it is seen today. It was 30" higher on the porch (Figures 98-99) and 24" higher in the hall (Figures 110-111). In circa 466 CE, when the idea of providing the residential *upāśrayas* with Buddha shrines engulfed the site like a jungle fire, many adaptations were consequently required. Some of them were standard changes applicable to all such caves, and some adaptations were unique for a cave depending upon the prevailing conditions and particular situations.

**CIRCA 465 CE: THE SAṄGHĀRĀMA HAS THE NEW PLAN TO CONVERT THE
RESIDENTIAL UPĀŚRAYAS INTO TEMPLES**

The *upāśraya* was planned without any provision of the shrine. In fact all the monastic residential halls at Ajantā that began from 462 to 465 CE, and which form a majority of the fifth-century caves on the site, began rather like dormitories. Evidence suggests that it was during circa late 465 CE that the idea of converting the dormitories into '*stupavihāram*' or '*caityamandiram*' was introduced on the site. By circa 465 more than a dozen *upāśrayas* had already started and had progressed in the varying stages of excavation. Some had barely penetrated the porch area while others had progressed considerably deep inside the hall. As it turned out, the idea was irresistible without exception, and understandably so, for it not only retained the residential provisions as originally planned but also provided a scope for converting the dormitories into '*sugatālaya*' (the abode of the Buddha).

Theoretically it might have appeared not very cumbersome in the beginning, as was the case in Cave 8 (Figures 21-22) that was restructured, perhaps in 465, to add an image shrine in the rear of the hall, and place a portable Buddha image there for worship. This was done for the first time in the fifth-century phase of Ajantā. Either cave 8's initiative for

the image shrine may have resulted from a disenchantment with the stupa worship or from a desire for the image along with the stupa as was mostly the case throughout the fifth-century phase. Whatever be the case, what is certain is that both the stupa and the image evolved together, were created together, and worshipped together in the fifth-century phase of Ajantā, which fact should finally dispel the existing theory that there was a discord between the stupa and image worshippers. We have no way to know which sects dwelled there. We get just 3 sects mentioned in the inscriptions of three different caves, which cannot be taken as representative fact for the whole site, and the inscriptions do not make any such generalised implications. We have to be cautious in making a judgement since there were as many as 18 schools of mainstream Buddhism (Table 5), and the variety of iconographic treatments seen at Ajantā indicates the presence of many sects there, a fact seldom noted in the secondary literature on Ajantā.

Although the initiative of Cave 8 in circa late 465 CE was so modest—a portable image placed on the altar abutting the rear wall of the modest and newly created shrine—its ramifications were of great magnitude. All the patrons now—from circa 466 onwards—wanted to have an image shrine by converting the monastic dormitories into *sugatālayas*. As

evidence has it, Cave 11 took the first step to follow the example of Cave 8.

Theoretically the 'conversion' was easy. All they had to do was to carve a Buddha shrine at the rear wall, which could easily be done by removing the central cell(s) of the rear interior walls (Figure 25). In the caves where the cells in the hall's rear wall had not yet been carved, it was all the more better since the shrine could now be planned with special provisions and designs. Every cave of the fifth century retains proof that indicates the above situation. We can tell with conformity which *upāśraya* started before the idea of the 'shrine-cum-dormitory' was introduced at the site and which started after the idea. We can also roughly tell the extent of excavation work in each of the earlier started caves when the idea hit the site.

Practically, however, the idea meant a major overhaul of the whole plan to verify what should and could be added, altered, or removed. Little, they thought initially, was required; much they found later, was necessitated due to unfolding situations and problems in the process. Admittedly, there is a big difference between a dormitory and a temple. It's never just about adding a mere shrine as it turned out to be, for a host of other changes were made out, or at least attempted to be made out; some successfully, others unsuccessfully.

CIRCA 466-477 CE: THE PORCH RECEIVES COPIOUS ADAPTATIONS*The porch cells*

There is no cell on right wall of the porch although cells are there on the left wall, which were excavated in circa 466 CE. The floor level of these cells was raised high to save the ceiling of the neighbouring Cave 12 (Figure 96). No cell on the opposite side could be carved because of Cave 10 (Figures 12, 95). However, two cells were indeed carved, somewhat later on this side of the porch. These were innovatively punctured on the front and rear walls of the right-ends of the porch. They too are raised high to save the ceiling of Cave 10. Similar caution was not maintained during the excavation of the inner cell on the left porch-end vestibule of Cave 25 porch, which led to a disastrous condition, because the workers accidentally broke through the vault of Cave 26 (Figures 196-197). Thus, a lesson seems to have been learned from that disaster, and the workers here seem to have maintained great caution.

The main doorway

The main doorway comprises of three-stepped jambs—all plain without any carving (Figure 108). This was typically planned for a majority of the *upāśrayas* on the drawing board, e.g. Caves 15 (Figure 127), 16 (Figure 132), 17 (Figure 136),

and many others some of them were carved later. Invariably, the flat doorway jambs were painted after the shrine was introduced. Double layers of paintings are visible here indicating re-painting. The outer layers has geometric and vegetation themes as decoration. Probably the porch ceiling too hides a former layer of painting.

The porch floor and doorway lions

Initially in circa 462 CE, the porch floor was about 24 inches higher whereas the interior floor level was about 16 inches higher. In other words the floor levels of the porch and hall were even. During circa 466-468 CE the plan was 'revised' to add a shrine to what was essentially planned as a pure dormitory or congregation hall. For adding a shrine to the *upāśraya*, they decided to convert the central cell of the hall's rear wall into a shrine (Figure 25). At that time (circa 466-468 CE) they also decided to lower the floor level of the porch and hall. The primary reason for lowering of the floor was more on aesthetic and stylistic grounds rather than pragmatic. We can think of no other reason, but of adding the lion pedestals below the plain central doorway, and the steps before the main doorway (Figures 107-108). The extent of lowering the porch floor had to be greater than was needed in the hall. This was because the lions demanded a particular size, which could only have been achieved by lowering the porch floor up to 24 inches.

Pillars, shafts, and adhiṣṭhānas

The central shaft of the porch pillars are octagonal (Figures 98-99). The upper and lower parts, however, are square. This suggests the earlier, original, shape of the columns, which was square, in keeping with the process and method of carving the pillars. First square blocks were hewed, and then the corners were chiselled out to create octagonal shafts. But, what is noteworthy is the point that the 'squares' and octagons of the axial pillars are of different length than those of the side pillars near the pilasters. While the square bases of the axial pillars are about 27 inches high, the other two pillars (next to pilasters) have even higher square bases (Figures 99-100); they are about 45 inches high from the floor level. How do we explain the difference in height? Further, these side pillars that have such high square bases do not have any *adhiṣṭhāna* as found in the pilasters.

In contrast, the axial porch pillars have *adhiṣṭhānas* that are a bit larger than the square shafts they hold (Figure 101). Here again an anomaly is observed. While the *adhiṣṭhānas* of the pillar on east is only 7 inches high and is plain without mouldings, the counterpart on west is 10.5 inches high, and has many mouldings (Figure 102). The mouldings on one of them (Figure 103) are comparable to those on the pillar bases inside the hall, albeit the latter are

octagonal (Figures 111-112). If the octagonal shaft of this porch pillar was continued further downwards by removing the square base, the pillar would be totally octagonal like the ones inside the hall. In such a case, the octagonal pillars would have required similar *adhiṣṭhāna* as in the interior. In doing so, one would get an octagonal *adhiṣṭhāna* with mouldings that are similar to the ones seen inside the hall. Perhaps, they were going to do the same, but stopped short here (in porch), because an equal treatment was no longer possible for the *adhiṣṭhāna* of the central pillar on eastern side (Figure 104). This might be because, the other one was already worked upon; already they had created a simple, plain, flat, square-shaped *adhiṣṭhāna* there; and no further adaptation, or implementation of the new idea was feasible in that case. Clearly, however, an invention of sorts was already made by the experiment carried out on the lower part of the central pillar on west (Figure 103). The resultant idea—the idea of a fully octagonal shaft with octagonal *adhiṣṭhāna*—was then implemented inside the hall (Figures 111-112). This is how the hall's pillars came to acquire the octagonal *adhiṣṭhānas* in circa 465-66 CE.

The porch benches

The curious and unique parapet and benches on the porch between the pillars are also noteworthy and curious (Figures 98-100). They seem to have a story to tell. They are located

between the porch pillars, except for the space between the axial pillars. Evidently, in circa 462 CE, these items did not exist. The height of the parapets (circa 42" long, 15" thick, and 19" high) between the axial pillars and pillars next to them is suggestive of the original floor level in circa 462 CE (Figure 100). The same level was likely maintained, or was at least planned, in the interior. This parapet was revealed in c. 465-466 CE because of the floor level being higher originally in c. 462 CE. This was created when the floor level was being lowered under a 'revised' plan to carve out a shrine at the rear of the hall. It seems that this parapet was created for safety, for without it there was a chance of falling down from the porch. The other reason was that it could, as it still does, function as a bench for sitting. For excavating this, the porch floor was cut down by saving about 15" of rock along the outer edge of the porch, between the central pillars and the pillars next to them. The case of the benches (Figures 98-99, 105), as different from the parapets (Figure 100) are rather revealing. They indicate the extent of excavation in circa 462 CE. These benches, still used today by tourists and staff, are located between the porch pilasters and the pillars next to them. While the height of the seat of the benches are about the same level as the height of the parapets, the back-rest of these benches are considerably high, almost 23" high from the seat level (Figure 105). The back rest could not have been excavated had

there not been extant the required matrix of rock for it. It appears, therefore, that the original level of the floor on these locations was quite high. Perhaps the whole area on the left and right sides of the porch, including the areas between the pilaster and adjacent pillars was quite unfinished with plenty of rock still remaining to be hewed before reaching the intended floor in circa 462 CE. That is why in circa 465-466 CE under the revised plan, when a decision was made to lower the floor, it was possible to create such benches with back-rests because there was so much of rock left uncut on these locations. Now, we can well surmise how a similar strategy of creating benches on the front wall was implemented in the adjacent Sātavāhana-period Cave 12 of which, unfortunately, only the lowest portions near the floor level now remain (Figure 123). These parapets and benches, therefore, make Caves 12 and 11 quite unusual at Ajantā, for no such facility is seen in other caves. This also indicates that Cave 12 was so heavily reworked in the fifth century, perhaps taking inspiration from the experiment carried out in Cave 11.

The windows

Another example of such re-working can be seen in the case of the windows. On the porch rear wall, there are two, considerably large windows: about 6' high, 7.5' wide including the frame, and 40" thick (Figure 108). The most

unusual thing about these windows is that the western window has square pillars, circa 9.5" sq. (Figure 109), but the eastern window has circular pillars, circa 11" sq. (Figure 108). The *adhiṣṭhāna* of the circular pillars have 18"-19" diameter.

The upper parts of the square pillars of the left window have uniquely carved designs (Figure 109) not seen anywhere else at Ajantā—as far as the extant remains are concerned on the site. Even the circular pillars, on the right window are very rare on the site. The only other place of their occurrence is the western antechamber pillars on the perished porch of Cave 27 (Figure 189). In that antechamber, circular *adhiṣṭhāna* are partially extant.

From a comparative and relative analysis it would appear that the two windows were not excavated at the same time. They are separated by a gap of many years. The square pillar type on the left window (Figure 109) indicates an early date—circa 462 CE, but at that time, it was without any carved motifs. However, the circular type seen in the right window (Figure 108) indicates a late variety, perhaps circa 466-467 CE, when the antechamber of Cave 27 too was thus created in the circular type. This fashion is not seen in other caves. They had already excavated windows without pillars, for pillared windows were probably found to be space consuming due to their size. Also, the larger *upāśrayas* like Caves 16,

17, 1, 2, 21, 23, 24, etc. were going to have side-doors for the lighting of aisles, which left little space for any pillared windows.

If the circular pillars of the right window of Cave 11, must belong to circa 466-467 CE, it could only have been because that area was all uncut by circa 466 CE. If we try to find further evidence of this, we may probably be helped by the presence of two different types of chisel marks in that area of the wall exposed after the damage to the painted Bodhisattva King, on the right of the doorway.

Eventually, it appears that much of the right portion of the porch of Cave 11 remained uncut until circa 466 CE—almost for 4 years while work progressed inside the hall.

CIRCA 466-477 CE: ADAPTATIONS IN THE HALL

The hall has four pillars arranged in the centre (Figure 25). These pillars have octagonal shaft with octagonal *adhiṣṭhānas* (Figures 110-112), and a schematic *ghāṭapallava* motif below the square capital (Figure 113). Perhaps these were originally square pillars in circa 462 CE, which were made octagonal in circa 465-466 CE during the 'revised' plan. As noted earlier, the revised shape of the pillars along with the octagonal *adhiṣṭhāna* was inspired by the experiments made with one of the western axial pillars on the porch.

There are three cells on the left wall, none on the right, and two on the left of the shrine on the rear wall, and one on the right of the shrine. The question emerges: why are there no cells at all on the right (eastern) wall? Why are there two cells on the left but only one on the right of the shrine? Why is the shrine doorway so thin (13" measured on the left vertical) compared to the thickness of many other shrine doorways at Ajantā? Why is the thickness of the shrine doorway similar to the thickness of the cell doorways (11")? Why is the foreground in the shrine so smoothly levelled out, but the background and the sides of the enshrined Buddha so much incomplete? Much of the matrix of the rock in the ambulatory round the image was still to be hewed out. Why are the left and right interior walls of the shrine not levelled out? Why are these the sidewalls of the shrine narrower toward the front but wider toward the rear? Why the flying *gandharvas* above the Buddha (Figure 119) look rather suspended from the ceiling with the matrix of rock on the east and west of them chiselled out? How can we explain the presence of the 'half-stupa' at the back of the Buddha (Figure 120), and that too so grossly incomplete?

On the inner side of the main doorway there are monolithic cubical projections on the upper left and right side. But these projections do not have holes for the intended double doors, indicating that the doors here were

never put in place. But the scene inside the shrine is exactly the opposite. Even today one can see a fifth-century cubical piece of wood fitted inside a cubical socket excavated inside the shrine base, near the base of the door. A similar socket is excavated on the western side of the shrine doorway, albeit the wooden socket is no longer there. The extant wooden socket with the hole was obviously to hold the pivot of one of the double doors that was evidently put in place here, and was well used. The evidence of the usage comes from the smoothened interiors of the hole which can be better felt by sliding fingers along the inside walls of the sockets. On the upper level, there are recessed sockets of T-shape. The questions finally are: why is there projected monolith for intended double doors on either side of the main doorway? In contrast, where are the recessed sockets of the shrine double doors? Why were the shrine double-doors fitted out and used but those intended for the main doorway were never fitted out or used?

Further questions regard the painting scheme. The hall's ceiling is plastered thoroughly. As we know, halls were plastered for paintings (exception are the cell interiors, which in many cases were plastered but weren't intended to be painted). Why were the planned ceiling paintings never actually executed? This is in contrast with what we see on the porch, for the porch ceiling is thoroughly painted. This

is also in contrast with the interior walls, which too are thoroughly painted. When we try to find the answers to the questions, the whole story of the cave would be revealed, a gist of which is presented in Table 16.

CIRCA 470S CE: EVIDENCE OF WORSHIP ACTIVITIES

There are small square mortises on the top corners of the main doorway. Symmetrical counterparts are visible on the inner side of the capitals of the axial porch pillars. They indicate that the holes were used for hanging garlands, flags, or festoons on ceremonial occasions. There are six such mortises on the inner side of the capitals of the porch pillars; these have six counterparts on the upper corners of the porch rear wall. Vertically aligned to these mortises are equal number of holes on the porch pillar bases; and the same is symmetrically reflected on the opposite side, that is, on the lower corners of the porch rear wall. This profusion of holes and placements on upper and lower levels is unique here, and warrants further scrutiny as to their purpose beyond the more usual explanation that they were for hanging garlands, flags, and festoons. There is also seen an iron hook in the porch; it is hammered directly into the rock. More of such evidence, a great number of them is visible inside the hall.

The hooks, holes, and ample of carbon soot indicate that worship was going on in this cave. (These evidence are among the major contributions of Spink to Ajantā studies.) Many more such evidence—a great number of them—are extant in this cave that irrefutably prove that the cave was dedicated and worship was underway for several years before the cave fell in disuse or was abandoned due to the downfall of the ruling house and wars that likely afflicted the region.