CH. 18: CAVE LOWER 6—SOME PUZZLES UNRAVELLED

THE LOCATION AND A HISTORICAL BLUNDER

There can be little doubt that the site—except for Buddhabhadra's donative projects starting with Cave 26 on western side of the scarp and moving rightwards to Cave 25, then again to the left for Cave 27, and yet again to the right for Caves 21, 23, and 24—expanded during the fifth century toward either side of the centre of the scarp (Figure 12). Even in the fifth-century phase the *saṅghārāma*'s geo-spatial axis was retained and measured by the imposing and splendid Sātavāhana-period *caityagṛhas*, namely, Caves 9 and 10 (Figure 90). The pattern of outward spreading from the Sātavāhana-period temples seem to have begun with caves 8 and 7 on the right, and Cave 11 on the left of the *caityagṛhas*.

It was thus time to move rightward again, i.e. to the southeast of the centre. All this, however, was so synchronised that these inaugurations almost certainly happened, as pre-planned by the Saṅgha and respective donors, within the span of a year or so from the time of the very first chisel hammered on the site in the fifth century (Figure 225). Spink's ideas on this are very much acceptable although I hesitate to endorse that things were being planned by the royal court of Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa rather than by the Buddhist monastic order, i.e. the Saṅgha to whom Spink, surprisingly, gives no role at the *saṅghārāma* of Ajantā.

Cave Lower 6, as distinct from Cave Upper 6 (Figure 54), started immediately southeast of Cave 7, which had begun shortly before in the same year (circa 462 CE). The upper storey is numbered Cave Upper 6 by Spink, which should be acceptable to us, since the site authorities have not given any number to it on account of a historical blunder committed by Fergusson and Burgess wherein both the upper and lower stories were grouped together, and assigned a single number based on the unqualified assumption that they are not separate but one "double-storeyed" edifice. In our account, as in Spink's, Cave Upper 6 will be explained separately.

CIRCA MID-462 CE: CAVE 6L STARTED WITHOUT PROVISION OF 6U

We have concluded after a detailed investigation that Cave Lower 6 once had a pillared porch, which is altogether perished now. No trace appears extant now. There are just two evidence that do not seem at first to indicate anything substantial, but after prolonged analysis we have accepted these traces as physical proof of the lost porch. There are albeit numerous circumstantial or indirect evidence of the lost porch, which shall be explained here.

The octagonal interior pillars (Figure 67) seem to suggest that the porch too consisted of similar octagonal pillars. However, it is quite possible that the porch pillars were originally square. We would not imply the same for the interior pillars, since it really took long (about 3 years) for the workers to reach up to the interior pillars (Figure 225).

The interior of the cave has 16 pillars arranged like a square of 4 pillars within a larger square of 12 pillars (Figure 18). This arrangement was unique in history. However, when the layout was planned on the drafting table, there was no provision of any pillar at all, as is the case of Cave 15 (Figure 24). Or, perhaps, because the pillars were already planned in the rather modest Cave 11 (Figures 24-25), they were planned here too, albeit not so many, and not in

chequerboard pattern as they are seen now. If the original layout consisted of pillars, they would surely have been just 12 in number arranged in a square, leaving a spacious central hall in the centre, as is the case of the other pillared halls on the site and elsewhere. The four central pillars placed inside the outer square format is a unique arrangement not seen anywhere else in India. The addition of the four inner pillars in the inside of the square colonnade could not have been conceptualised before circa 465 CE, since it is obviously not merely an aesthetic experiment. It was actually a need. The need had come up due to the new plan of excavating a cave above. They feared that the ceiling might collapse under the weight of the upper floor. Perhaps, at the time (c. 465 CE) the ceiling of Cave 4 had already collapsed sending warning signals to everyone on the site (Figure 47).

By circa 464 CE, no excavation of the hall of Cave 6 Lower had moved beyond the limits of the front aisle. This fact is known by the provision of a staircase for climbing up to the upper storey (Figures 64-65). The unique staircase was planned for reaching up to the upper storey is testimony to the late planning of the upper storey. Had it not been so, there would have been excavated monolithic staircase, instead of the 'constructed' one that was and is still in place. The right part of the ceiling in the front aisle (Figure 65) would not at all have been broken through for the staircase,

which springs from the right side of the front aisle (Figure 64). Oddly, it lands into the porch of the upper floor (Figures 75-76). Consider this: the staircase springs from the hall of the lower floor, but lands above not in the hall, but in the porch. Why is this so?

To cite another piece of evidence, had the upper storey been planned together with the lower storey, a better, more ideal and convenient, provision would have been made to excavate a monolithic staircase that would have ideally sprung from the porch of the lower storey and landed into the porch of the upper storey (Figure 19). In other words, the upper storey would not have been recessed into the cliff for up to 7.5′. The upper porch would have been vertically aligned with the lower porch.

The present *recessed* or *pushed back* location of the upper story was the only option in the given circumstances in circa 464 CE. If the upper story was planned from the very beginning a *monolithic* staircase for it would have been planned in front of its façade, and not crookedly devised as a *constructed* staircase arising from the inside of the hall of the lower storey.

The fact that the staircase is monolithic in the upper storey, and so awkwardly steep with the enclosing safety parapets on the above floor, and that the same monolithic format has not been retained in the lower storey speaks a lot

of what was going on. It is only *after* the mass of rock from the front aisle of the lower storey was entirely removed up to the floor level that the idea of the staircase arose so that there was no rock available any more for the creation of monolithic staircase. This suggests a moment in time, in circa 464 CE when the idea of the upper floor suddenly emerged (Figure 225). Then they fixed up and *constructed* a wooden or stone staircase to compensate for the monolithic type (Figure 64).

It is almost certain that the work at this time had not progressed beyond the depths of the front aisle. For, had it progressed deeper into the hall, there would have been the typical square format of the columns layout with 4 pillars on each side, and nothing in the centre of the square. The fact that there are for special pillars inside the outer square indicates clearly that the upper floor had been planned by the time the work had reached the front aisle, and not beyond it.

CIRCA 464-465 CE: THE PILLARED PORCH AND THE STAIRCASE FROM THE RIVERBED DAMAGED IN A ROCKSLIDE?

There is evidence that Cave Lower 6 originally had a frontal access system, and not lateral as tourists use today. There was an exclusive monolithic staircase coming up from the riverbed. Because the elevation of the cave is not very high

on the cliff, it was small climb for the visitors then. Evidence of the staircase is preserved in the form of about 3 to 4 steps of the staircase near the riverbed, and directly below Cave 6L (Figure 55).

We are of the view that there was a rockslide in circa 464-65 CE that more or less damaged the pillared porch of Cave 6L. There are many reasons pointing to a possible rockslide, which will be explained ahead. But, the rockslide itself should not be taken as an impossible theory, since the quality of rock is so bad in these locations. A comparative study of the extant portions of the cliff near Caves 7, 6 (Figures 54, 56), and 5 together with the extant architectural remains suggest that the recession of the cliff near the location of the cave is up to 10 m, at least half of which seems to have been perished in a possible rockslide during circa 464-465 CE. Had this not been so, neither the tunnelled staircase for going to Cave 7 from the front left side (datable to post-466) of Cave 6L nor the constructed staircase in the interior of the two storeys would have been necessitated or created.

Indeed the mass of rock in these areas of the cliff is among the worst on the scarp. The ceiling of the hall in Cave 6L clearly shows the cracks, and fissure, with large impregnable crystals (Figure 66)—there were attempts to repair the same as is seen on the left interior wall of 6L.

Stone bricks have been stuffed systematically in problematic areas with severe flaws. In fact, in the neighbouring Cave 4, which was still to begin at the time the porch of 6L was being defined (circa early 463 CE), the ceiling had suddenly collapsed disrupting the planned progress of the work (Figure 47). The serious damage to the façade of other adjacent Caves 7 and 8 are also due to the flaws in the rock (Figure 87). Perhaps, Cave 6U would never have been initiated if the work on the 6L interior had progressed as rapidly as in other caves. Had the hall of Cave 6L been exposed in circa 462 CE or even in circa 463 CE, the flaws on interior walls and ceiling would have been noticed. Consequently, neither Cave 6U, nor Cave 4, would have been initiated in those geological worse locations.

Thus, we should not be surprised if some of the front portions of Cave 6L was perished in a rockslide even while the work was underway in the front aisle of 6L. Perhaps, the rockslide was the reason why the work was halted in the cave for a few years.

CIRCA 465 CE: A TUNNELLED STAIRCASE EXCAVATED BETWEEN CAVES 6L AND 7

There is a curious, even though half-perished, doorway still extant on the left outer side of Cave 6L (Figures 57-58, 62-63). It is near the steps leading down to Cave 7 from the

front of Cave 6L. The extant portions of the doorway shows door fittings. It was apparently a wide doorway, and not the usual cell doorway. Perhaps, a cell was never there. After circa 465 CE, if these locations were not used, the planners would have excavated porch-end cells there. Because it is not a porch-end cell, the date of this architectural component must be placed between circa 462 and 465 CE. On closer examination of the area, we find that the doorway was actually carved inside what must have been a shallow vestibule (Figures 62-63). The rear top right corner of the vestibule is somewhat extant.

Vestibule on porch-ends always ring a bell. For, we have seen in the analysis of Caves 26 and 25 that the vestibules on porch-ends of Ajantā have a history of evolution, which can be very precisely defined and traced. They can in fact be a marker of relative chronological dating of the caves (Figure 227).

No porch-end vestibule was ever planned without the need of carving inner cells in its rear wall. Further, the vestibules never came prior to the first phase of the site's porch-end cells. The vestibules always have inner chambers. Therefore, the present vestibule warrants a date between circa 464 and 465 CE. It cannot be dated later, because if the porch's left wall was left blank until later, in circa 466 the planners would have already added a cell on this wall

like the porch-end cells of Caves 4, 16, and 17. The door has the advanced D mode door fitting suggesting that the door surely had the original A-mode door fitting, which was re-worked through circa 475 CE for converting into the D mode (Figure 226). The chamber's ceiling is not flat, square, or oblong. It is curved at the rear, which can be clearly seen (Figure 63). A cell's ceiling cannot be curved like this. It was most likely not a chamber but a tunnelled staircase, which connected Cave 6L to the neighbouring Cave 7. The provision of a tunnelled staircase should not take us with a surprise, for this was really not a unique thing on the site. Such tunnelled staircases were probably already excavated for approaching Cave 26, for the cliff there is so steep and the elevation of the cave so high that staircase from the front would not have been convenient. The same is the case with caves 16 and 17, which too had tunnelled staircases of whose some portions remain (Figure 134).

A question arises: why was this tunnelled staircase excavated at this location? Was it to provide an access to Cave 7 from Cave 6L, or vice versa? If Cave 6L had the frontal access from the riverbed it would not of course have needed another approach from Cave 7. The wooden doors, which were once fitted here, opened toward the porch of Cave 6L (Figure 62). As regards the question of approach to Cave 7, when the planners had such a vast, wide, and deep edifice

planned most elaborately and uniquely with a double portico on an expansive frontcourt, they would as well have had a frontal approach from the riverbed, and not the constricted tunnelled staircase from Cave 6L.

Yet, the tunnelled staircase is there warranting a logical explanation, and the only plausible explanation could be that it was never originally planned. It was excavated only after the porch of 6L was collapsed in a likely rockslide in circa 464 CE. There was no convenient way left any more of coming up to 6L. Thus, the present tunnelled staircase was excavated for approaching from the frontcourt area of Cave 7.

Probably this could also be the reason why no substantial work was carried out in the interior of this cave until circa 465 CE. The date of the rockslide, if it did indeed occurred, would have to be very early, i.e. around circa 464 CE—immediately after the excavation of the edifice started, and before they could penetrate beyond the front aisle of the interior.

THE MAIN DOORWAY

In circa 462 CE, when the work on the porch was happening and the main doorway (Figures 59-61) was being reamed out, it had to be a different kind of doorway. The doorways of the

earliest started fifth-century *upāśrayas* on the site were simple, without any decoration or images; they were neither so high nor so wide in dimension. Originally, the jambs would have been as plain as in the case of Caves 7 and 11 (Figure 108). The doorway was re-worked in later years to add lose river goddesses or *śālabhanjikās* on upper corners (Figure 60). More additional items were fitted out as judged by mortises and holes. Even the sill of the doorway was cut further down at a time when the interior floor was being cut down up to at least 12" (Figure 61). The lowering was probably done in circa 466 CE in order to cut the elephants and *yakṣas* below the pillars. This was after the similar attempts in Caves 11 (Figure 107), 16, and 17 (Figure 136).

THE HALL

As noted earlier, the hall in the beginning did not have any provision of pillars; or at least not so many pillars were planned. The colonnade layout would have resembled very much like what we see in other caves with interior pillars. By circa 465 CE most of the caves were underway, and hundreds of pillars had already been carved on the site, displaying a wide range of variety. Why is the pillars of this cave then without any decoration? Why are they still octagonal (Figure 67)? The reason is that the decorations, square bases, etc. required more thickness of the shaft, which would constrict

the space requirements of the interior. Therefore, the designs were sacrificed here in favour of function. Notice too that the pillars are remarkably slender as compared to other octagonal pillars on the site. This suggest a great control on the medium and design.

The *ćandraśilās* are seen before just three of the sixteen cells in the hall. They are a great indicator of how the excavation inside the hall progressed. According to Spink's 'defining features' (Figure 227) the *ćandraśilās* before the cells, anywhere on the site, were all carved between circa 464 and 467 CE. Later, it was a fashion to carve square steps (e.g. Figure 117) rather than *ćandraśilās* before the cell doorways (e.g. Figures 114-117). Still later, any such thing was completely omitted since the sill of the cell doorways were cut down or lowered, which did not require any such thing (e.g. Figure 118). Notably, the sills of cell doorways are often higher in earlier years requiring the *ćandraśilās*. Perhaps, at night, the *ćandraśilās* or steps had become inconvenient for some elderly monks due to which they fell in disuse.

Based on Spink's 'defining features' the three cells of Cave 6L with the *ćandraśilās* and higher sills can be dated to c. 464-467 CE. The fact that they are missing from other cells and that the sills are also lower in them suggest that those cells were excavated much later during c. 471-478 CE.

Thus, we learn that the hall remained very incomplete for about a decade.

Now let us consider another unique feature of the hall. The front and rear aisles are far wider than the width of the hall in the centre (Figure 18). This is because there must have been cells on the left and right ends of these aisle, which were removed in a later year, and another set of 4 cells carved on the recessed ends of these aisle. The logic of this change needs to be further probed.

THE INTERIOR COLUMNS

The antechamber pillars with square base and capital with the inverted *vedikā* motif (Figure 67) were must initially have been octagonal like the hall pillars. However, in circa 467 CE they were added with complex designs that included the *āmalaka* (cushion motif). Because of the relatively slender pillars of the hall, the same designs could not have been applied to them. The best they could do was to convert the upper parts of the octagonal pillars into the sixteen-sided type. This must have been done through circa 468-469 CE. The best evidence of the two-staged adaptations that were made on the hall pillars is preserved on the top of the rear left pillar. It can clearly be observed that the pillar was initially square shaped, then octagonal, and ultimately

sixteen-sided. A slight tapering towards the top was made in the process.

It is also noticeable that the hall pillars are shorter toward the front but taller towards the rear. The floor and the ceiling levels gradually rise up toward the rear. Something similar is seen in the upper storey. It is depicted in the plan by Burgess (Figure 19). This aspect does not seem to be incidental but carefully planned. This might have been to avoid water logging in the caves during cleaning and washing. Such a slope could help the water to flow down toward the front. Another interesting feature of the hall is its wall, which gradually become wider towards the rear. According to Spink, the increasing height of the celling and the increasing width of the hall toward the rear was designed to counter the effect of retinal perspective that tends to converge all the vertical and horizontal lines to a point at the horizon.

THE SHRINE ANTECHAMBER

The lower portions of the hall, pillars, cell doorways, etc. have suffered heavy damage in the course of time, and are now presently cemented. Even the lower parts of the shrine-antechamber pillars were perished and are now cemented. However, the cement reconstructions appear to be quite faithful. According to Spink's 'Defining Features', the

shrines in the *upāśrayas* were never introduced until circa 466 CE (Figure 227). This means that the antechamber pillars must be dated later than 466 CE. In circa 465 the hall was being excavated without any plan for a shrine. By the time they reached the rear, the idea of converting the *upāśrayas* into temples had engulfed the site. Every residential cave was now being converted into temples. The idea was adopted here too.

Spink believes that in circa 466 CE when the earliest shrines were introduced, it was a stupa shrine, and not the image shrine. He cites the example of Cave 11's shrine where a stupa is seen at the back of the shrine Buddha image (Figure 119-120). He says that the stupa was excavated before, and it was soon adapted with an image in the front. In my view, the case is exactly the opposite. The image was first done, and in a later year, they wanted to emulate the examples of caves 26 and 19 (Figure 152), thus adding a stupa behind. Based on his Cave 11 observation, Spink has conjectured that Cave 6 Lower basically attempted to introduce a similar stupa shrine, which was later converted into an image shrine. To my mind this is an untenable story.

Because *ćandraśilās* before doorways were still in vogue up until circa 467 CE, one was excavated before the antechamber in circa 466 CE. The rear aisle and ceiling was

raised high evidence of which can be seen in the unusually thick beams on the left and right of the rear aisle.

THE SHRINE DOORWAY

Up to circa 466 CE, the doorjambs were all flat, intended for painting. No sculptural decorations existed then. The fact that the present shrine doorway is hardly able to conceal the earlier flat jambs indicates that the shrine doorway was certainly carved out, and smoothened too in circa 466 CE. But the very next year, in circa 467 CE, they had the idea that sculptural decorations could be carved on the flat jambs and lintels, and multiple levels of jambs could be created with a variety of motifs. And, so was done (Figures 67-68).

THE SHRINE AND EVIDENCE OF WORSHIP ACTIVITIES

From the plan of Burgess, it is very clear how the floor and ceiling level was gradually raised toward the rear, especially in the rear aisle, reaching the zenith of height in the shrine area (Figure 19). The most unusual thing about the shrine, however, is the door fitting. It is a large monolithic cube as wide as the door, as thick as 15”, and as high as 24” (Figures 70-71). As if this was not unique enough, a D mode doorway is seen, which has to be post-475 CE. The door was supported by the monolithic raised pivot

holes below the jambs on the interior. Clearly, the door fitting ought to be placed later than the A+ mode type of Cave 11 (Figure 226). We have no idea for what purpose was excavated a sizable hole in the centre of the cubical monolith above (Figure 71). The polished interiors of the pivot holes, not only in the shrine but also in the hall's cells as well as the outer tunnel's door on porch left (Figure 62), suggest that wooden doors were actually fixed in them and the whole edifice was considerably used. The polished interiors are actually the signs of the wear in the course of prolonged usage of the door pivots. Also, there is enough carbon soot to suggest that incense etc. were being used during *pūjā* and ritual ceremonies. There are holes for iron hooks everywhere in the cave; inside the shrine, and on the top corners of the hall's pillars. These were obviously to hang garlands. There is a hook in the centre of the painted medallion in the shrine antechamber as well in the axial centre of the rear aisle. Broken iron hooks are found stuck in these halls, suggesting that they broke off during inserting or usage. However, there is no medallion painted here. Instead, one finds an iron hook, without counterparts—a single, isolated, hook on the front right side of the image. Spink rightly suggests that this hook was used for hanging a bell (Figure 72). The provision of a bell instead of garlands inside the shrine makes this shrine very special.

After due examination Spink's contention appears convincing that the shrine originally had a cylindrical matrix of rock reserved for a stupa with ambulatory; and that in circa 466 CE, it was decided to remove the stupa in the favour of a seated Buddha image. However, he rightly suggests that the throne behind the back of the Buddha was flat intended for painting. It was painted too, as there is a thin layer of painting underneath the present layer. In circa 475, the *vyāla*, elephant, and *makara* motif were excavated to upgrade the throne in accordance with the latest fashion emergent on the site. The shrine was painted along with other parts of the hall in c. 467-469 CE (Figures 72).