

**CH. 19: CAVE 27—A REVEALING YET NEGLECTED MAṆḌAPA**

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**THE NEGLECT**

EXCEPT FOR some unpublished studies by Spink, the entire corpus of writings on Ajantā had very little on Cave 27 (Figures 180, 190) this cave at the time this chapter was drafted in 2006. I would like to reproduce here everything that was published till then to display the scholarly neglect of the cave.

Burgess:

Cave XXVII is the last accessible *vihāra*. The front is broken away and a huge fragment of rock lies before the cave, which is about 43.5 feet wide and 31 feet deep, without pillars. It has never been finished, and the antechamber to the shrine is only blocked out. There are three cells on the left side, two in the back, and one in the portion of the left side that remains. (Fergusson and Burgess 1880, 346)

Mukul Chandra Dey:

Left of XXVI is the last accessible *bihara*, Number XXVII. The whole front is broken away, with huge rocks on the ground and blocking the entrance, and so making a comfortable home for tigers. It measures about forty-four feet wide and thirty-one feet long; but has never been finished. Inside are a few cells. It has no pillars. (Dey 1925, 196)

Gupte: "Cave No. XXVII is an unfinished *vihāra*" (Gupte and Mahajan 1962, 106). Debala Mitra reported:

The landing ([of which] the right wall contains the Rashtrakuta record...) and the porch on the left side of the court of Cave XXVI leads to a small hall, which has a shrine and an antechamber facing the entrance-door. The antechamber advances into the hall. Its narrow front wall to the right of the pilaster is divided vertically into three compartments containing a *nagaraja*, a couple and a female standing gracefully on a *makara* with a bird perched on her right hand and her left hand resting on the head of a dwarf. The shrine has an image of Buddha in teaching attitude on its back wall. Of the cells around hall, only four on the right half, one of them having a porch, have survived... the cave cannot properly be called an independent monastery, as it forms an adjunct to Cave XXVI. The unfinished upper storey has suffered greatly by landslide. [ (Mitra, Ajanta 1980, 78-79)]

Actually, Mitra's description above is not about Cave 27 but the cave below it, which Spink and I have labelled lower left wing of Cave 26-complex (26LLW). Even the Archaeological Survey of India is neglecting the cave, since it has no clue to its importance. Or else the cave would not still have been inaccessible.<sup>101</sup>

There are two main reasons of the neglect. First, the cave is heavily damaged. The cliff has significantly retreated due to rockslides. Secondly, whatever that is extant does not seem to exhibit attractive features, such as architectural detailing, carvings, sculptures, paintings, or inscriptions.

**CONCEIVED AFTER THE FAILED CAVE 25, AND LED TO THE EXPANSION  
OF CAVE 26-COMPLEX**

Spink is of the view that Buddhahadbra's temple-complex was designed as such from the very beginning; that the temple had the four adjuncts or wings right from the time of the temple's conception (Figures 33-35). I doubt that, and the reasons have been explained, evidence for our contention presented, in Chapter 13. Some more clarifications will be found here in the detailed study of Cave 27.

As noted in Chapter 15 the excavation work on Buddhahadbra's *sugatālaya* (Cave 26) was halted in early circa 462 CE for addressing the emergent need of a residential chamber nearby (Cave 25) that was not planned to take much time given the large workforce at disposal. However, no sooner than it started, Cave 25 met with unexpected problems. While the work was still underway, many adaptations were attempted. Nothing, however, worked leading to the decision to halt the work there. To compensate for the failed project,

another, well-designed residential chamber was planned whose location was chosen to be on the symmetrically opposite side of the *sugatālaya*. This residential chamber was none other than our Cave 27.

The planning of Cave 27 involved several important considerations. First, they no longer wanted anything provisional. So, a detailed plan was made to address the residential requirements for the temple for the time as well as future needs. Since Cave 25 was already attempted on the right upper side of the *sugatālaya*, another residential chamber had to be placed on the left upper side to maintain the aesthetics and symmetry. The scheme was alright for the time being since only the upper half of the temple-complex was revealed yet; the expected floor level of the temple had not yet been reached. They assessed that a fully excavated temple would be requiring lower adjuncts too, placed below caves 25 and 27 that would flank the frontcourt. Thus, there would be all together four adjuncts flanking the temple, two on either side. The whole emergent programme now was very aesthetic, functional, and unique in the history of rock-cut architecture (Figures 33-35).

What was earlier just a temple had now become a temple-complex. There was, however, an important decision to make regarding the orientation of the newly planned adjuncts. If the adjuncts faced eastward like the *sugatālaya* and Cave 25

they would require own entrances from the front, which would make them fall outside the premises of the temple (Cave 26). It would also make them detached and practically inconvenient; they would just be separate units clubbed together. It would not create a cohesive complex accessed by one centrally placed entrance gate. Speaking of the orientation, Cave 27 presently appears to be facing the ravine, like caves 26, 25, 24 and the rest on the hill. This, however, is not true, as was revealed in Spink's and my prolonged study of the cave. It was actually facing the same direction as the lower storey, exactly beneath it (Figures 203, 205, 207).

Thus, we have the two left wings of the *sugatālaya* facing in the same direction, i.e. they are oriented toward the front court of Cave 26. The now planned lower right wing (LRW) was also then designed to face the frontcourt of Cave 26. As regards the eastward orientation of Cave 25, we have seen in Chapter 15 that it was not originally so. It was made to face the east in a later phase of work in that cave. Originally, Cave 25 too was facing the frontcourt. This is something that cannot be realised at first glance. Under the newly expanded layout all the wings were approachable from the frontcourt of what had now effectively become a cave-complex. The improvised and expanded layout admitted conversion of the directional orientation of the adjuncts to

a central point in the frontcourt; it was a centripetal arrangement. In other words, the axis of each of the 3 adjunct *maṇḍapas* as well as that of the stupa temple now converged, more or less, to a centre in the frontcourt. It was designed with as much mathematical accuracy as was possible. Each architectural unit had now become a part of the whole, yet each was an independent edifice in its own right (Figures 35, 203, 205).

The new layout, however, created a problem for the original approach of Cave 25. At the time (circa mid-462 CE), Cave 25 was approached from the terrace of the half-uncut Cave 26. Upon the excavation of the lower half of the temple including the lower wings, the frontcourt, and *torāṇa-dvāra*, the approach to Cave 25 had become inconvenient and cumbersome. It was not much of a concern though as there were no plans to do anything further with the failed Cave 25. We have seen, however, that the plans were revived in c. 465 CE to resume work in Cave 25. And at that time, a separate entrance was opened up from another direction, i.e. from the side of Cave 24 (Figure 199). The visitors use this same approach today. It is a monolithic staircase springing from the left side of the frontcourt of Cave 24.

Some explanation is needed about the relative dimensions of the various adjuncts. It can easily be noted that the four adjuncts have different dimensions. Cave 25 was obviously a

very small *upāśraya* in the original conception; it was rather like the Sātavāhana-period caves 13 or 15A; extremely modest in size. Later, it was somewhat expanded by major adaptation attempts all of which had somehow failed. The present layout and dimensions of the cave is on the account of the still later adaptations in Phase III.

Cave 27 was planned far bigger than Cave 25. It was also excavated largely. There were as many as 12 cells in the hall, 4 on each wall, although the rear wall might possibly had 5 instead of the expected 4 cells. If this was so, we would be highly surprised, since the *maṇḍapas* always followed standard mathematical norms as far as possible, i.e. equal number of cells in each walls (except for the front wall).

However, the lower story directly beneath Cave 27 is (Figure 183) far smaller with fewer number of cells. The same is the case of the lower right wing (Figure 33). There are many reasons for this. First is the nature of the cliff there. On close examination of the whole area, and especially the cliff region there, it can be observed that the receding slope of the cliff could possibly have been the reason for the smaller dimension of the lowered edifices. There was no sufficient room in the cliff for making the lower adjuncts any larger than what they are.

The second reason why the lower storeys were made smaller could be the fear of instability. Small *maṇḍapa* below could

naturally afford greater stability for the upper floors. This is because by the time all of this was being planned there was no provision in place for pillars in the hall. That is why there are no pillars in the hall of Cave 27. That is why we must infer that the pillared example of Cave 11 (Figure 25) had not yet been conceived. In fact, Cave 27 would not have suffered such huge damage and rockslide had there been some pillars in the hall (Figure 185). This is not something that they realised then.

The third reason why the lower adjuncts were made smaller regards the constricted space available to them on the ground. Consider the case of the lower right wing, for example. On one side it is confined by the porch of Cave 26. On the other side, it was confined by the limits of the cliff as well as the pre-existing cistern excavated right next to it (Figure 198). The cistern must already have been excavated because water is the first need on the site of any architectural undertaking. The human force on duty would have required water; and on this height of the cliff, no one would be expected to keep climbing up and down the cliff for the need of water.

#### **CIRCA MID-462 CE: ORIGINAL LAYOUT AND PLANNING**

When the work on Cave 27 began in circa mid-462 CE, the scenario on the hill was like this. The five Sātavāhana-



period caves were of course there. And, in addition to them cave 8 (Figure 87), 26 (Figure 181), 25, 7 (Figure 81), 11 (Figure 95), and 6L (Figure 54) were already initiated, and other caves were also in the process of beginning (Figure 12). Caves 26 and 25 were only half-dug on the vertical plane.

The reason why we must date the inauguration at this point of time relies a great deal on the astylar type of the hall (Figures 32, 183). Had it been later, pillars would have been placed inside the hall. The hall itself is not exactly a square. The corners are not exactly on right angles; they do not precisely make 90 degree. The hall is somewhat crooked. The ceiling is low.

The second reason why we must place Cave 27 before the date of the lower wings relates to the process of rock-cut excavations and the elevation of the cave. Rock-cut excavations have the inverse process. They are not 'constructed' but 'excavated.' The workers start from the top and then gradually reach for the floor. Thus, it would be contrary to assume that the lower wings started before the upper left wing, i.e. Cave 27. The exception is Cave Upper 6, which was not conceived at the time Cave Lower 6 was started (Figure 54). And due to that reason, Cave 6U could never have its own frontal access. Its access is very inconvenient, from the interior of lower storey (Figures 64-65). Unless a

similar means was devised for linking the two left wings, of which there is no visible trace, there is no reason to think why the lower storey should have been started earlier.

Of course, the pillared vestibule with inner chamber seen on the right-end of the perished porch was a later addition (Figures 188-190). The *upāśraya* did not have any of the advanced features: shrine, side-shrines, pillars, and aisles. These features can be seen in the following caves (because it was possible for them to be upgraded with these features): caves 1, 2, 4, 7, Upper 6, 16, 17, 21, 23, and 24. There were, however, a porch and a shallow frontcourt that must have been enclosed with a monolithic or wooden parapet (Figure 200). The side-walls of the porch were surely blank in the first layout. There was provision of a staircase from the front left corner of the frontcourt of Cave 26.

The frontcourt was probably equally spacious as that of the lower storey. It is for this purpose that the cave was located at a distance from the left edges of Cave 26. The frontcourt must have been identical to the one in the lower storey. The frontcourt's right outer wall is intact in the lower storey, wherein the ambiguous Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription is incised. But the same wall in upper storey, Cave 27, is covered with intrusive sculptures datable to circa 478 or 479 CE. These sculptures are mistakenly identified as belonging to the left façade of Cave 26. Subsequent to the frontcourt,

the porch was excavated, which might have had octagonal pillars, but we are not too sure about it. Unfortunately, the entire court and porch is now perished.

Phase I of Cave 27 must have been completed in a few months. Then, the workers were able to come back to Cave 26 and start digging it for reaching the expected floor level. In the process, they would excavate the four-pillared porch, the lower parts of the nave and the stupa, and the main gate at the centre of the *prākāra* (walled enclosure) that allowed entry into the frontcourt of Cave 26-complex. In the process, the two lower wings were excavated.

#### **CIRCA 464-465 CE: A VESTIBULE FOR THE HALL AND THE PORCH-END CELLS**

##### *The porch-end vestibule with inner cell*

There is a very interesting story about the developments and expansion of porches, which is valid for most of the larger caves on the site, including Cave 27. The same is summarised in Table 17.

One such pillared-vestibule-with-inner-cell is partially extant in Cave 27 (Figures 188-190). It was excavated in c. 465-469 CE. The cave is so heavily damaged that the relation of the cave with this element is not easy to explain. It took several years of research for this researcher to unravel the

puzzle of this element. It is this element, which explains much of the development of the cave, from Phase I to the last. The extant example belonged to the western wall of the perished porch.

#### *Orientation of Cave 27*

The vestibule's ceiling and southern wall is much damaged but enough still remains for its clear identification; the base of four pillars are scantily extant on the floor (Figure 189). Four number of pillars suggests that it was created at an advanced stage. This feature alone is helpful in determining the original orientation of Cave 27. Because the porch-end vestibules and cells always have symmetrical counterparts, as far as possible, we can expect the counterpart on the eastern side of the perished porch. Of course all of that is now gone. That this must have been the case is further indicated by the similar structure on the lower floor (Figure 184). In fact the pillars of the vestibules on both the floors are very closely aligned on the vertical plane.

The cave's orientation to the north and the existence of the porch is inferred from another source. There cannot be an *upāśraya* or a hall with cells on the front wall. In cave 27, whatever that is preserved, shows that there are no traces of cells on the northern, i.e. the front wall (Figure 188). The cells are there on the southern and western walls. Thus, the

northern wall must be regarded as the front wall. Further, Cave 27's southern wall is the rear wall; the antechamber is on the right wall (Figure 187); and the northern wall is the front wall (Figure 188). It is now clear that the cave faced north (as does the lower storey), and not east, which was assumed so far.

The above facts tell us more: (a) the identical frontcourts, porches, and porch-end-vestibules-with-inner-cell could have only come about when both the floors were planned together from the very start. (b) Originally, the layout of both the storeys were identical with the only difference being in terms of the dimensions. The upper wing was planned larger.

#### *The hall and cells*

The hall's left (east) wall and the back wall's first cell on the left (cell B1) are completely lost (Figures 185-186, 208). Cells B2 and B3 (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> from left) seem to have been merged together (Figure 186), which may be dated to circa 464-465 CE. This was to create an astylar vestibule on rear (southern wall). The merger happened by removing the walls in-between the cells and their front walls. Thus, they got a rectangular vestibule whose left portion is now perished (Figure 186). The proof of the earlier cells is gained from the extant parts of the recessed doors. This belongs to what

was earlier the right jamb of cell B3's D-mode doorway. Cell B4 is well preserved on far right of this wall showing the same D-mode recessed doorframe.

Likewise, there were originally four cells on the right (west) wall (Figure 187). Of them, the two central cells were barely excavated in Phase I. In circa 477 CE, they were removed for excavating a shrine antechamber. The central cells were apparently incomplete as is cell R1 (far left on this wall). It is mysterious why the cells of this wall were left incomplete until c. 477 CE. It was only cell R4 (far right on this wall) that was fully completed. Its interior, D-mode recessed doorframe, and a late type square step before the doorway are all well-defined (Figure 209). There are traces that suggest that similar steps apparently existed before the central cell doorways, and if so they were being removed for the shrine antechamber. It also suggests that the floor area was not defined fully in Phase I, which later permitted the excavation of the steps in question.

The very incomplete cells R1, R2, and R3 indicate that they lay abandoned until circa 477 CE meaning that the cave was not used during this time. It lay largely forsaken for about 15 years. Such abandonment of a well-planned initiative begs for explanation. Perhaps Phase I was never fully completed. What could be the reason? Was there a tragic event in the cave? Or did the patron run out of patience and

ordered the workers to move to the still pending Cave 26, which was of course the most central edifice in all respect. Could it be possible that the masons thereafter remained so occupied with the priorities of the next undertakings (lower half of Cave 26, the lower adjuncts, then Caves 21, 23, and 24—all donated by the same patron Buddhahadra) that they could practically never return to complete whatever little that was pending in this cave?

The question whether the hall was inhabited or not would require further research. What is baffling is that the cave was certainly not left completely unattended during this period. There was certainly no lull between Phase I and Phase IV here. For in Phase II (circa 464-65 CE), the two central cells of the back wall were merged for making the astylar vestibule. Also, single cells were excavated on porch-end walls. Thus, it becomes clear that the patron had never actually abandoned the cave.

Further in Phase IV (circa 475-77) the porch-end chambers were converted into pillared vestibule, and inner chambers excavated in the vestibule's rear wall. The late date of this work is suggested by the greater number of vestibule pillars: 4 of them (Figure 189), never seen elsewhere on the site in a vestibule of this size. Further, the pillars are circular with circular mouldings at the bases, a type which was the last of the developments on the site. But, the most defining

date is gained by the presence of the D-mode door fittings in the inner cell as well as the recessed corners of the cell doorway, which never happened on the site before circa 477 CE.

In Phase IV (circa 477 CE), the antechamber was initiated on the cave's right wall (Figure 187). Even this, alas, was never completed. Just a few weeks of work could have completed the antechamber. But, they did not obviously had even this much of time. From this point, no work seems to have taken place in the cave again. Spink attributes the abrupt abandonment of not only this cave, but also of all the other caves to the sudden death of Emperor Hariṣeṇa.

#### **CIRCA 477 CE: THE ECCENTRIC SHRINE-ANTECHAMBER AND THE SUDDEN DESECRATION OF AJANTĀ**

It should have become clear by now that monk Buddhābhaddra, the known patron of Cave 26, was also the patron of these adjuncts—a fact realised by only two researchers till date: Spink and the present author. For, other writings on the subject have not ascribed any authorship to the adjuncts (Cave 25 and 27). What is worse, it is continued to be believed that the two are distinct and separate edifices. It was a mistake perpetuated by Fergusson and Burgess who gave separate numbers to Caves 25, 26, and 27 without realising that they are parts of one inclusive layout.



It should also have become clear by now that the two individuals—monk Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu—who have been thanked by the patron Buddhabadra 'for having seen to the excavation of the temple on my behalf' were none other than the chief architects or planners (to use the modern nomenclature) of the entire temple complex. Surely, they must be accredited for whatever good or bad that was happening during the development of the premises. It was these people who were taking decisions for the changes and expansion of the plans. And, surely they would not have been doing anything without the approval of the donor who funded the project. Thus, no adaptation or expansion would have been permitted without the involvement of the donor Buddhabadra.

We have thus the names of the three individuals who displayed remarkable ingenuity in the overall creation of the whole temple-complex. They were able to overcome the problems and tragic scenario that inflicted the work from time to time. It would not be wrong to say that they knew how to turn the adversities into opportunities. Just another example of their ingenious and bold decisions is reflected in the crucial year of circa 477 CE, when they did something or were attempting to do something that was against every rule in the book; it was downright outlandish and bizarre, but the only option left for doing what should and must have been done, i.e. to add a shrine to Cave 27. It was a decision too late

to make but it was something that had to be done, that is, the conversion of the residential *upāśraya* into a temple with a Buddha shrine. Let's see the situation on the hill to understand what was happening and why.

Things were peaceful and certainly helpful when Hariṣeṇa was ruling as mentioned in at least 3 Ajantā inscriptions. He has been mentioned in the present tense, and not in the past tense. He has been eulogised in the inscriptions. Although he was a Hindu king, and there is no record to suggest that he had any direct involvement in the making of Ajantā, he seems to have been a supporter of the creation of the *Saṅghārāma*. The abrupt abandonment, as if it happened overnight, the impression of which is seen in every cave of Ajantā, Bāgh, Aurangabad, Banoṭī, and Ghaṭotkacha could only be attributed to the huge political crisis in the kingdom affecting so many of the sites that fell in the kingdom of Hariṣeṇa. The critics of Spink must realise that it was not a local problem of Ajantā. Such abandonment could only be attributed to the death of Hariṣeṇa whose successors do not seem to have been the supporters of the Buddhists who were evidently expelled from these sites. But, how could the monks and patrons who expended so much on the site with so much of enthusiasm, energy, and piety leave the site just like that, unless without offering some kind of resistance? We may never know.

Was there a bloodbath on the site itself? We are not in the position to rule out the possibility.

All of this would remain a guesswork. What is sure is that the supportive Hariṣeṇa was not around to save the fate of these *saṅghārāmas*. At that time, in that decisive year, which Spink has placed to circa 477 CE (which could be a few years forward or before; it's flexible, but we need an anchor point in time to tell the gradual story of development) Ajantā was experiencing what may be called a climactic crescendo. Most of the caves were nearing the stage of full completion had they been granted just a few years more; and many more new caves were still being inaugurated, as Cave 3 (Figure 36), 29 (Figure 214) and 28 (Figure 181). The whole site must have been hustling and bustling with numerous kinds of activities. The painting work was at zenith in most of the caves, because this is the last logical thing to be done. Some caves were even put to worship, and in the most the shrine was being excavated, painted, or arranged to the maximum perfection possible. The caves that had reached the maximum degree of completion had even incised the donative inscription dedicating the cave to the Saṅgha and the people. In Cave 19 interior a large rectangular area was already prepared for incising the donative inscription. Many of the travelling merchants, pilgrims, and other people must already have been visiting the site to behold a cinematic experience

of a whole new world not usually seen in an era without mechanical reproduction. The guilds of artists, masons, and patrons must already have been feeling proud of the achievements, for several breakthroughs had been achieved on the site seldom heard or heard before. These were the age of vigorous work, since it had taken nearly 18 years since inception. Inscriptions mention the donors in singular person; and even while giving the genealogy of the donor there is no clue that the work was initiated by former members of the clan. There is absolutely no doubt that every cave was initiated in the lifetime of a single donor and was brought to the present stage of completion within the lifetime of the donor. Those who attributed several generations and centuries for the creation of the caves neither read the inscriptions closely nor did they see the site in detail.

Great transformations had taken place here. Most of the originally started residential halls had now been effectively converted into temples of a new kind—seldom seen before in history. The distinction between the stupa temples and the monastic halls of residence had been submerged.

In this scenario it was obviously odd to digest the fact that Cave 27 was still laying abandoned, a hall without any Buddha shrine in it. The rules had been changed. Now, there was no residential unit without the Buddha in it; those caves

that still display the absence of the Buddha shrine would have surely had one had there was enough time.

Even within Cave 26-complex the lower adjuncts had already been added with Buddha shrines. Cave 25 had insurmountable problems, but they could have still imagined a shrine for that cave too, at some location, had there was a chance. We can say this with utmost certainty based on what they did in Cave 27. They were willing to keep the rulebook aside; such was the yearning for shrines.

No doubt Cave 27 was a nicely planned edifice without any obvious problems. For some reason, it was left uninhabited for as long as 16 years, for the right wall and parts of the floor were not still completed until circa 477 CE. The ongoing worship in the main temple (Cave 26) now demanded that the *upāśraya* be completed and put to use. Thus, a decision was apparently made to resume the pending work in that cave, and not without converting it to a temple in itself. For that, it too needed a shrine.

But, there was a problem—a serious problem. Very recently (barely months before) Cave 28 had been inaugurated on the south of Cave 27 (Figures 180-181). That was already dug half from the top; just a few feet of the earth had to be excavated for reaching the expected floor level, as can be seen clearly. The depths of the pillared porch had also been partly revealed. That cave was progressing at a distance that

was too close to the southern walls of Cave 27. It was not a problem at all at the time Cave 28 had started (circa late 476-early 477 CE) for whatever the gap that was maintained between the two edifices was deemed just adequate for the excavation of the porch-end vestibules with inner cells, which had become a standard part of the design of new *maṇḍapa* type of temples.

Apparently, the makers of Cave 28 had no inclination about any plans of Cave 27. Even the planners of Cave 27 had seemingly no such plan to do anything further about Cave 27, let alone the idea of adding any shrine on the rear (southern) wall; such apparently was the state of the cave's abandonment. Had there been any plan to convert Cave 27 into a temple, the planners would have requested the planners of Cave 28 to leave adequate gap for the creation of a shrine. For clearly, and most logically, it is the rear wall of the hall, i.e. the southern wall, where the shrine could be added (Figure 186). No one would think of adding the shrine on the hall's right wall (Figure 187), instead of the rear wall. Nowhere in history do we have anything like this, unless there was a compulsion, an improbability of going by the rule book. If only the decision to carve the shrine antechamber was made a few months earlier, perhaps it would have found its rightful place on the hall's rear wall (on south). For this, the already existing astylar vestibule could have been

removed; and further necessary excavations could have been initiated to achieve the purpose. But alas, it was too late a decision; Cave 28 was well underway, which would not have logically permitted infringement on its original plan, which had to consume the gap between the two edifices for the creation of its porch-end cells.

Luckily for Cave 27, the cells on right wall and parts of the floor were still grossly incomplete. Even the front-walls had not been properly defined. So, it was just possible to merge them and convert as pillared antechamber (Figures 187, 209). The downside was that the shrine would not be in the proper place, i.e. the rear wall. But the upside was that the edifice would conform to the new rule, i.e. every residential hall must ideally have a Buddha shrine in it. Even small size *upāśrayas* such as Caves 22, 20, and the lower wings of Cave 26 were now provided with Buddha shrines.

The execution involved the following process and adaptations. The height of the doorways of the earlier cells R2 and R3 was almost doubled, reaching close to the ceiling level. This was to create the space between the pillars and pilasters of the antechamber. The proof of the former existence of cells are extant in form of a matrix of rock preserved before cell R2 for the creation of step (Figure 209). This was going to be removed. Also the thickness of the

antechamber's pillars are close to the thickness of the front walls of the cells, i.e. 15".

The antechamber's placement on the hall's right (western) wall (Figure 186), opposite the cliff, has misled us greatly with regard to the cave's orientation. Due to its unusual positioning, it has been hitherto mistaken that the cave is facing the ravine (East), which as per our analysis of evidence, is not tenable any more. It is, indeed, a rare case where the shrine was planned and initiated not on the rear but on the right wall.

Let us now address the issue of the antechamber's date. The clue lies in Cave 28 (Figures 180-181), which is a very late beginning. The location of that cave on the southwestern extremity of the scarp (Figure 12) itself suggests that it is a late excavation, as other caves had occupied all areas from here up to Cave 1. Its long and wide lintel, thick and robust porch pillars, and big dimensions are characteristic of a very late beginning. An assessment of the work progress, the quantum of work force involved, and the pace of work suggests that the cave had started vigorously using a greater work force. The work, however, suddenly and permanently stopped halfway down. This abrupt and permanent abandonment of excavation activity is also seen in most other Mahāyāna caves including the case of Cave 27's shrine antechamber. If these are studied together in combination, it



will become clear that an event had taken place, which had catastrophic effect throughout the site effecting all excavations, in whatever stages they were. This event could not be linked to the context of an individual patron or excavation alone or else other caves would not have been effected.

Due to the above on-site evidence, we are inclined to accept Spink's proposition that the ruling king, Hariṣeṇa, of the Vākāṭaka Empire had suddenly died leaving an inept son as his successor. He proposes that the Aśmakas had planned a coup of which some reflections are traceable in Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāraśarita*. Unnecessary controversy has erupted on the point because the critics have not taken the trouble of examining the on-site evidence pointed out by Spink.

It is very unfortunate that no sooner than the antechamber of Cave 27 begun to be excavated, Hariṣeṇa died. The fate of the long-abandoned cave, and every other cave on this and other sites within the kingdom of Hariṣeṇa, was sealed forever. Tremendous anarchy must have prevailed in all corners. Could it be due to the resurgence of Hindu aggression? Is it possible that mere political change could have forced the monks and thousands of workers, artists, and *upāsakas* to abandon a *saṅghārāma* overnight? Or, was there a bloodbath on the hill? We have no answer.

If Ajantā inscriptions, read with Viśrūtaśarita (the last chapter of Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāraśarita*) and on-site data are any indicators, it all started with the Aśmakas the local king of southern Khāndesh. It was the Aśmaka king (whose name has not come down to us) who designed the disastrous political collapse of Vākāṭaka dynasty under Hariṣeṇa; and ironically they too were consumed by the same fire of rebellion and insurrection they had ignited. The caves donated by their 'friend' Buddhābhadrā too had to be abandoned overnight and relegated to the centuries of oblivion.