INTRODUCTION

WHY AURANGABAD?

This book should open with a question about its raison d’être: Why study the caves at Aurangabad? Twelve main caves are excavated in the slopes of the Sihyachal range branching south from the Ajanta range in northwestern Maharashtra, and they overlook an area now occupied by the sprawling city of Aurangabad (figs. 2 and 3). They reveal an uncommon continuity in occupation and patronage since the time of their foundation in the first century CE until the beginning of the seventh century, and they trace different stages in the development of the Buddhist tradition that still remain poorly understood.

This study is not just an art historical analysis of the Aurangabad caves. This rock-cut site is a conduit through which we can gain a better understanding of many critical issues that shaped the Buddhist tradition and the art and communities of western Deccan for the first seven centuries of the Common Era. The Aurangabad caves are not examined here in isolation but rather are considered as part of a larger cultural and artistic milieu in constant transformation through the centuries. The architecture, iconography, and patronage patterns at Aurangabad reveal the constant intertwining of two worlds, the local and the trans-regional. On one hand the caves speak of local devotees, patrons, kings, and their concerns; on the other hand they record the main changes that Buddhism underwent through the centuries. Aurangabad is perhaps the only cave site in the Deccan Plateau that documents all of the critical moments of the steady growth of a major religious tradition: the first burst of popularity of Buddhist practices in the region, the emergence and consolidation of the Mahāyāna creed, and the Buddhist dialogue with an ever stronger Hindu presence, eventually leading to the full affirmation of an esoteric tradition.

Beginning with the second and first centuries BCE, when Buddhism became popular in the Deccan, a large number of cave sites were established around the Western Ghats: among the most well known centers are Bhaja, Junnar, Nasik, Karli, Kanheri, and Ajanta. The creation of the rock-cut complex at Aurangabad marked the culmination of this process: the very first cave at this site, consisting of an apsidal caitya hall with interior colonnade and a rock-cut stūpa-shaped monument
at its core (cave 4), was likely completed in the late part of the first century CE. The initial establishment of rock-cut Buddhist sites in the western Deccan was unquestionably connected with the emergence of prosperous commercial activities in the area and the creation of an efficient Indian Ocean trade network linking this part of India directly to the Western world. The day-to-day existence of many Buddhist complexes, however, was also tied to the agricultural economy and to the rural landscape of the region. This initial time of Buddhist activity in the western Deccan is generally defined as the ‘Hinayana phase’. In this volume, however, the term Hinayana will be avoided, because its categorical use in antithesis to the term Mahayana in traditional scholarship does not capture the dynamic complexity of early Buddhist religiosity in the western Deccan.1

As time went by, the political and economic geography of the western Deccan underwent significant changes. Some of the early rock-cut sites fell into disuse, while others continued to thrive. Ajanta and Aurangabad found new patronage and prosperity in the fifth century. Caves 1, 3, and 4a were added to the early nucleus at Aurangabad, reflecting a newfound emphasis on anthropomorphic Buddha images developed after the beginning of the Common Era. These units can be closely linked to the Vakataka caves at Ajanta in terms of architecture, art, and patronage. Aurangabad, however, became the visual expression of a new geopolitical order dominated by local rulers striving for supremacy at the time when the Vakatakas were exiting the political arena. Aurangabad cave 3, with its devotees and exuberant style, is a testament to the rising power of the periphery versus the center.

During the sixth century CE, a third major series of excavations was undertaken at Aurangabad: caves 2 and 5 and the Eastern group of caves were carved out, making the site a Buddhist landmark in the western Deccan. At this time new cave types were introduced to reflect the changing needs of the devotees, votive panels portraying a hope for a better rebirth and sponsored by individuals lined the walls of sacred areas, and bodhisattvas dominated devotional scenes.

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1 Buddhist scholars in recent years have demonstrated the inadequacy of the categorical juxtaposition of the terms Hinayana and Mahayana that have dominated the secondary literature dedicated to Buddhism and its art during the past century. See for example Bechert (1987, 289–269), or Schopen (1997, 23–71). On the historiography see also Hallisley (1995, 31–62).