CHAPTER TWO
THE BEGINNINGS AT AURANGABAD

2.1 Establishing a Chronology

The caitya cave 4 at Aurangabad is the only cave that reveals indications of the first phase of occupation of the site (Fig. 42). It was a rather damaged hall, now restored, with a rectangular plan and a rock-hewn stūpa at the end of the apsidal colonnade (fig. 41). All the later caves in the western group were carved near it, indicating that the caitya hall continued to be considered the sacred core of the complex in later periods (fig. 4). A comparable phenomenon can be observed at Ajanta, where the earliest fifth century CE caves seem to have been placed on either side of the pre-existing excavations dating to the so-called ‘Hīnayāna’ phase. It is impossible to date securely the Aurangabad caitya hall because of its poor state of preservation and the absence of inscriptions, and so the chronology of the early life of the complex remains a source of debate. However, a foundation date of the first century CE seems probable.

The chronologies of early Buddhist rock-cut temples in the western Deccan have all been established on the basis of two factors: epigraphic study and architectural analyses of the caves. The caitya halls in particular have consistently worked as ‘guide fossils’: by mapping the caitya layouts, decorations, and epigraphs, elaborate chronologies of the cave complexes have been formulated. Obviously, both the epigraphic and art historical parameters are intrinsically problematic. The cave inscriptions only rarely mention rulers or epochal dates, which is not necessarily a disadvantage in ancient India, where

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1 According to Spink (2007, 127 and 141) the Ajanta caves 8 and 11, located right next to the early caitya halls 9 and 10, were among the first fifth century CE caves at the site.

2 The only exceptions are the Kṣatrapa and Sātavāhana inscriptions from Nasik, Junnar, and Karli that include specific dates of unidentified eras. Among the five Kṣatrapa epigraphs mentioning Nahapāna from the Nasik caves (Burgess 1883; reprint 1994a nos. 5, 6a, 7, 8, and 9), only inscription 7 includes a specific date: year 42. The Kṣatrapa inscription 32 from Junnar at Manmodi Hill mentions Nahapāna and a regnal year 46, whereas no specific dates appear in Karli inscription 19, which also contains reference
all the kings used different eras hinging on dates unknown to us. In addition, the paleographic tool, an important aspect of the epigraphic analysis, cannot provide absolute chronologies. James Burgess, in his monumental survey of the cave temples of western India first published in 1880, underlined even then the impossibility of establishing a chronology based solely on inscriptions. He argued that architectural elements offer much more valuable information on the relative dates of the Buddhist excavations, the milestone for his architectural chronology being the Lomas Rishi cave in Bihar, anchored by an Asokan period inscription to the middle of the third century BCE (Burgess and Fergusson 1880). After Burgess, scholars seem to agree that the Lomas Rishi cave, dedicated to Ājīvika ascetics, was the prototype for the Buddhist caves of the western Deccan, and in particular for the caitya halls that are so distinctive in these caves. Also, it became commonly accepted that all the cave sites developed more or less between the second century BCE and the second century CE, and that the caitya halls of Bhaja and Kanheri should be placed towards the beginning and the end, respectively, of this chronological spectrum (figs. 103, 107). In his book *Indian Architecture*, Brown (1940, 27) agreed in general with Burgess’s views, but Brown added another important chronological factor. He argued that the caityagrha form and ornamentation derive from wooden prototypes that obviously did not leave traces in the archaeological record. Therefore, he suggested that each caitya hall may be dated on the degree of its emancipation from original wooden models.

In recent years Vidya Dehejia is the only scholar who has attempted a comprehensive study of the early Buddhist rock-cut sites of the Deccan. In her book *Early Buddhist Rock Cut Temples* (Dehejia 1972), she carefully combines epigraphic and architectural evidence to map the architectural development of caves. She sees the Kondivte caitya hall as a direct descendant of Lomas Rishi cave and places it at the beginning of her chronological scheme, whereas Kanheri is positioned at the

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to Nahapāna. Epigraphs referring to Sātavāhana rulers are also preserved in Nasik and Karli. Inscriptions 11a and 11b from Nasik mention Gautamiputra Śatakarni as well as regnal years 14 and 26; inscriptions 12, 13, 14, and 15 from Nasik mention Vāsiṣṭhiputra Puḷumāvi and the regnal years 2, 6, 5, and 19, while inscription 22 mentions Yañāsī Śatakarni and the year 7; in Karli, Puḷumāvi is mentioned in inscriptions 21 (year 1) and 22 (year 24) and in an epigraph inscribed in the great caitya hall (Burgess 1883; reprint 1994a, 99–114). A Sātavāhana inscription (no. 16) from Kanheri cave 5 does not include any specific era (Gokhale 1991, 62).