CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The caves at Aurangabad offer unique insights into how art interfaced with Buddhist practice in the western Deccan during the first 700 years of the Common Era. By relating the evidence available at Aurangabad to what we see in other rock-cut sites in the region, as well as to critically re-examined Buddhist inscriptions and texts, it has been possible to reframe our understanding of the Buddhist tradition in the Ajanta-Aurangabad area.

The rock-cut sites of Ajanta, Aurangabad, and Pithalkhora, established around the beginning of the Common Era, were all located away from the coast and the passes and appear to reflect a relatively independent tradition. They cannot be automatically associated to the rest of the caves carved all over the western Deccan simply on the basis of their date. Key architectural details in this particular group of sites indicate that the Buddhist caves in the Ajanta-Aurangabad area formed a relatively homogeneous system in which regional trends can be individuated. Those who were responsible for the caves located inland on the plateau consciously manipulated local visual idioms when developing new units. Art historians should take into account regional variations in cave architecture when formulating chronologies of Buddhist caves in the western Deccan. It is important to consider that pre-existing, archaic forms may have been purposefully cited in new caves.

Analysis of epigraphic evidence available in the caves corroborates the hypothesis that rock-cut Buddhist sites in the western Deccan grew in regional clusters. The provenance of donors cited in votive inscriptions is especially useful in reconstructing the network of connections that existed in antiquity among sites. The inscriptions also shed light on the movement of people and on the nature of the financial support these sites received. While it is now clear that many of these Buddhist centers relied on agriculture for their daily subsistence, the mercantile economy must have provided the vital funds necessary to implement major expansion and renovation of the caves. It is generally understood that in the western Deccan the growth of Buddhist sites was triggered by long-distance Indian Ocean trade under the Sātavāhana
rulers who controlled much of the Deccan Plateau and the ports of Konkan. Archaeological, literary, and epigraphic evidence suggests that the caves in the Ajanta-Aurangabad region thrived not only because of the trade economy linked to the Konkan ports, but also because they were providing merchandise to the emporium of Ujjain in the ancient region of Malwa and to the port of Bharuch (ancient Barygaza) in southern Gujarat.

The *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* mentions that the town of Barygaza under the Mahākṣatrapa rulers was a major international shipping center for goods coming from the Aurangabad area, such as onyx from Paithan and cloth from Ter. It is likely that the foundation of the Buddhist caves at Aurangabad and possibly the establishment of a second *caitya* hall at Ajāntā in the first century CE were related to the growing influence in those areas of the Mahākṣatrapas and their ruler Nahapāna, who sought to control economic resources vital to their own long-distance business.

Crucial to an understanding of the first century Buddhist tradition of the Aurangabad area is that Mahākṣatrapas not only were involved in Indian Ocean trade but also facilitated long-distance commerce via land with the northwest region of the Indian Subcontinent. A few luxury objects imported into Gandhara that can be linked to areas in the vicinity of Aurangabad testify to the existence of such contacts. The town of Ujjain, a stronghold of Mahākṣatrapa power, must have played a key role in international trade as a distribution point for goods coming from the Western Deccan and destined for various markets.

As we begin to form a better picture of the international networks in which the Ajanta-Aurangabad area was involved around the beginning of the Common Era, we should not forget that the region of Andhra Pradesh was also related through trade to this part of the Western Deccan. Several inscriptions from Buddhist caves in the western Deccan indicate that there was a significant influx of donors from the Amaravati area. Thus it should not surprise us that religious structures, such as *caityas*, that were ubiquitous in the early cave sites of the western Deccan show conceptual affinities with comparable constructions found at Buddhist sites in Andhra Pradesh.

One of the major puzzling aspects of the Buddhist caves at Aurangabad is the lack of a sizeable monastic residence established at the time the complex was created. It is possible that a *vihāra* existed at the margin of the western group of caves in proximity of the *caitya* no. 4, where the rock cliff has since collapsed. Even if this structure did exist,