(This is an abbreviated guide, to provide an overview. Visitors should walk directly toward Cave 26, but would benefit from a few comments about the caves they pass on the way, and will see more thoroughly on their return. The information about each cave given here is intentionally brief. A much more detailed guide follows in PART II.)

The first cave you will pass, Cave 1, was sponsored by the great Vakataka emperor Harisena himself; not surprisingly, it is the most splendid vihara at the site. Significantly, its iconographic program focuses significantly upon the theme of kingship. Although it was Harisena’s power and his approval that made Ajanta’s fifth century renaissance possible, he did not start his own cave until nearly half a decade had gone by and all the best spaces were gone. This explains his beautiful cave’s low priority location, at the extreme eastern end of the site, where the nature of the scarp offered many problems. Because the great emperor suddenly died, his cave was neither finished nor dedicated; but because it was never used for worship, its painted decoration has been remarkably preserved; and although these paintings are justly famous, one should equally marvel at the rich sculptural ornamentation, hardly rivaled elsewhere at the site.

Cave 2 was started just before Cave 1, in the mid-460s, but work on it broke off in the “Recession” caused by the local king’s fear of an attack by the aggressive Asmakas. Although Cave 2 was started as a simple monastic dormitory, without any thought of a shrine, by 466 every patron at the site was planning to make his excavation a residence for the Buddha, not just for the monks. This new requirement of adding a shrine to what was originally intended as a mere dormitory continued in Cave 2 for the next year or two, until work on the cave was suddenly cut off by the local conflict that caused the Hiatus. Although Cave 2 was roughed out early, all of the more elaborate work on it was done after 475, providing a fine example of Ajanta’s lavish late mode. Adjacent to the emperor’s cave, it has been suggested that it was sponsored by one of the ladies of his
court. Although this would be hard to prove, the cave’s iconographic program does emphasize stories involving noble and powerful women.

Cave 3 was started very late, in 477, in a still-available stretch of rock up above the earlier Caves 2 and 4. Barely penetrated, it was abruptly abandoned late in that same year, when Harisena died.

Cave 4, the largest vihara at the site, was sponsored by the rich but much-aflicted Mathura, one of the numerous inaugurators of Ajanta’s renaissance in the early 460s. 1 Its old-fashioned porch colonnade reflects its early beginnings. Between 469 and 474 when, by good fortune, the cave was abandoned, part of the hall ceiling collapsed due to a geological flaw, and much time had to be taken up with architectural adjustments. Mathura, still active, hurriedly finished and then inscribed his huge Buddha image by mid-478. This was the moment when, due to the aggression of the Asmakas, the “Vakataka” (as opposed to the “Asmaka” patronage of the site ended, shortly after Harisena’s death.

Cave 5 and the two storied Cave 6, like most of the Vakataka caves, were begun in the early 460s and were still underway when time ran out a decade and a half later. The evolution of forms that took place during this interval is evident in the difference between the primitive doorway and window forms of Cave Lower 6 and the late types eventually added to Cave 5 in the very year (477) in which Harisena died. Cave Lower 6, earlier than the upper story, was the only cave at the site ever finished, while the ambitious Cave Upper 6 is still in a very rough condition, even though the patron was able to rush its fine image to an expedient completion immediately after Harisena’s death. By mid-478, and continuing through 480 (the “Period of Disruption”), uninvited new devotees took over the latter cave, filling it with literally hundreds of intrusive Buddha images—all private votive donations.

Cave 7, with its expensive facade, was intended to be one of the grandest excavations at the site, when it was begun at the start of the Vakataka renaissance. However, because of many problems, it ended up as little more than a large porch opening onto a modest shrine, the necessary residence cells being located expediently, wher-

1 See Cohen 1995, #17; see also Sircar, 1959–1960, 259–262, where the inscription is dated (incorrectly) to about 525 A.D. Sircar refers to the donor as Mathuradasa. Although I have occasionally used this earlier translation in earlier volumes, this was inadvertent; Cohen’s translation as Mathura is surely the correct one.