CHAPTER FIVE

A DETAILED GUIDE TO THE AJANTA CAVES

Cave 1

When the Vakataka emperor Harisena began his sumptuous cave in about 466, a little later than those of his courtiers and subjects, he had to locate it at the out-of-the-way eastern extremity of the site, where the rock was particularly flawed. This was because all of the more ideal locations in the curving scarp had already been taken. If the emperor had arrived a little late, it was probably because he, like his family in general, was Saivite. But even so, as Ajanta’s fame rapidly grew he could see the political and social advantage in “getting in on the act”; and he did this with fervor, sponsoring the most splendid vihara in the whole of his expansive territories.

Despite its “left-over” location, the placement of his new cave had certain virtues. It was the very first excavation to be encountered by travelers to the site as they came up into the deep valley. One can believe that here, just as in other major caves, an impressive stairway would have once have led up to its courtyard from the river below. And because the slope of this cliff into which it was cut was rather gradual, the excavators had to cut it way back for it to have sufficient height to contain the cave’s façade. This provided another almost unexpected advantage—it made the courtyard very deep, truly “imperial” in size. It would have ideal for ceremonies, if Time had thus allowed.

Cave 1’s prestigious patronage is announced by both the quality and the quantity of its unique facade decoration to say nothing of its unprecedented winged format, created by pillared complexes on either side. The facade’s lavish ornamentation, which far outdoes the work on any other vihara at the site, is but a small piece of the evidence supporting the hypothesis that the excavation was the donation of the great Vakataka emperor, Harisena, even though (having been neither completed nor dedicated) it has no inscription telling us that this is the case.
The beautiful projecting portico, still half-intact in the 1880s, later collapsed completely and (beautiful bracket figures and all) was thrown into the riverbed below in some ill advised (or misunderstood) cleanup campaign; the rushing waters of the monsoon flood have left no trace of it. Fortunately the main porch colonnade, although much warped by the excavators in response to geological realities has not suffered significantly from the serious rock flaws that caused the portico’s collapse; its beautiful pillars survive largely intact. Their richly and symmetrically varied shaft designs, their high square bases, their exuberant detailing, and even the impressive technical control in their carving, support our relatively late dating of Harisena’s direct involvement in the site, for by then his craftsmen were able to draw upon much that had been done and learned over the course of the previous half-decade.

In cutting the beautifully designed pillars in Cave 1 and the later excavations which reflect its influence, Ajanta’s excavators were able to keep fine control by starting with a roughly-out square format, and then cutting that at the corners to an octagonal format, and then to sixteen, or thirty-two or even (inside the cave) to 64; or, by smoothing off the divisions, they could achieve a perfect circle. More rarely, pillars at the site move not from 4 to 8 to 16 to 32 and even 64 facets, but by multiplying the octagonal divisions of the shafts by 3 instead of 2, the carvers developed divisions of 24 and then 48 facets.

At the same time, compared with the later pillars that they in turn influence, Cave 1’s pillars are more attenuated, and also slightly narrower at the top, thus subtly reflecting the continuing impress of their tall tapered octagonal forebears in the caves excavated a few years before. The pilasters also look backward—here to those on the facade of Cave 19—and, with their restrained medallion designs, begin a trend that follows an increasingly elaborate later course. The pairing of a padma (lotus) in one on the right and a sankha (conch) in the other is typically auspicious as well as decorative, suggesting connections with the wealth-bestowing sub-divinities—the padmanidhis and sankhanidhis—found elsewhere at the site.

The insistent “royal” focus that we shall see in Cave 1’s interior can also be found in the lively facade friezes, with their skillfully

1 Following the same step by step system, the “kumbhas” at Elephanta have 128 flutes.