The first Vakataka excavators at Ajanta, facing the idiosyncrasies of the rough scarp rising above the ravine, must have been staggered by the immensity—even the novelty—of the task before them. Remarkably, none of them had ever carved a cave before. In fact, there are not even any remains of stone temples upon which they might have worked in the Vakataka realm, for the few fine temples in and around Ramtek were all made some decades before; indeed, the same is true of the few sculptures from Mandhal. This being the case it is not surprising that the excavators depended almost exclusively on the old Hinayana caves at the site as precedents; but even so they still had to learn their craft anew.

Their tools were simple, but effective. It is clear from the manner in which the rock has been reamed out in the grosser excavation work—where masses of rock were cut away as major areas were opened up—that two men were involved in such cutting, just as is sometimes done today. One worker would hold a very large pointed chisel and the other would rhythmically bring a sledge down upon it; the downward point by point path of the chisel in great arcing swathes is easily seen in areas that happen to have been left unfinished. Far less hazardous for the hands was the work done with chisels held by a single person. The most common type of all had a flat cutting edge about half an inch wide, the cuts typically made in parallel sequences. The walls of the caves, and the surfaces of pillars, doorways, and windows, after being roughly exposed, were most often finished in this way; although when images and decorative carvings were later created a pointed chisel was often used.

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1 There is a strong but simple cave at Patur, shown to me by Dr. A. Jamkhedkar. This can be seen as an important prototype; perhaps preceding Ajanta’s main phase by a few decades; the find of a figure of Parvati from Patur (probably dating from the first half of the fifth century) might support such an assumption. (See Jamkhedkar 1991, 90, figure 8; in Khandalavala 1991). On the other hand, the simplicity of the design of the unfinished cave makes it difficult to date; it is at least conceivable that it is a simple local form, created by a patron aware of what was being undertaken at Ajanta.

As soon as such excavation work started, it created certain demands, which the site’s enlarging workforce had to handle. The most basic task would have been the removal of the excavated material, consisting of both large chunks of stone and great quantities of debris. Happily, disposal was a simple task, because the deep ravine was at hand and could accept whatever was offered, large or small. Such support crews—possibly comprised wholly or in part of women, as is often the case today—would have been at the bottom of the employment ladder. By contrast, good blacksmiths must have been in great demand, for even though the forged iron chisels were very hard, it was surely necessary to temper them with fire many times during each day. Such blacksmiths are a necessary fixture today too, when stone temples are built or restored.

It may seem surprising that chisels and hammers, as if dropped or lost, have never been found in the area around the caves. Perhaps their very value protected them. However, there are a few instances where chisel points have been discovered broken off in the stone. One example, in Cave 1, found a few years ago, excited such interest among the attendants that it mysteriously disappeared. Another still is in place in one of King Upendragupta’s caves, but it seems best not to disclose its location.

Evidence of what the chisels were like is quite well provided by a number of broken chisel blades which were used as wedges in some of the site’s door latches, to better hold the teak pegs in place. A few others were pulled out by an enthusiastic visitor some years ago, but unfortunately without keeping any record of their location. The clearest example is still to be seen in the right rear cell of Cave 11. Two similarly broken chisels fragments apparently helped to secure the applied (now broken) wooden projection in the doorway of Cell R4 in Cave 1; they have both been removed but the channels made when they were driven in are preserved.

We can assume that the excavators were beginning to expose most of the caves listed above in 462, but because they were still so inexperienced and because there was often so much of the cliff-face to be cut away, it is unlikely that work progressed very fast in this initial year. Perhaps a few fronting pillars and portions of the porches were being roughed out by this time, but in general the work at the site must have still been in its very preliminary stages. Work would have speeded up in the following year; and as we shall see, some serious problems will start to be evidenced at that time too.