In early 469, when the images in the four relatively minor caves discussed above were being rushed to completion, as if by a special agreement with the local king, work on the Prime Minister’s impressive Cave 16 was also continuing. But this work was obviously done under great pressure, involving not only time-saving shortcuts but often a decline in quality. Just why the powerful minister, perhaps the chief architect of Ajanta’s renaissance, who proudly claims in his inscription to have “governed the country righteously” (Cave 16 inscription, vs 20) could not bring his own cave to completion in this very period when work was continuing on the royal caves, is something of a mystery. That he felt seriously pressed is evidenced by the fact that he gave up the whole project (for the present) after what would appear to be less than a year of work. Furthermore, throughout the course of the work done in 469, he ordered continual shortcuts, as we shall see.

Until the start of the Recession and the breakdown of communication between the opposing rulers of Risika and Asmaka, Varahadeva’s Cave 16 had progressed vigorously and authoritatively. Indeed, later in 468, just before the Recession struck at the beginning of 469, the fine painting of the porch pillars and lateral porch ceiling areas had begun, while the minister’s sculptors had created the beautiful figures on the porch doorway. However, the high quality of these undertakings stands in almost shocking contrast with most of the allied work begun in early 469. As if suddenly no one had time, or no one cared, the beautifully carved porch doorway is slathered with a reddish two-tone design bereft of significant detail. The same painter hastily completed the sloppily executed medallion painted at the center of the porch ceiling. The square frame of the medallion is painted thinly over some of the earlier ceiling design, so we know that this central section is later than the much finer lateral portions. This was not the normal procedure, but can be explained by realizing that in 468, when the porch ceiling was started, the scaffolding put up for the porch doorway obscured the central area of the porch ceiling.

One might also note that a similarly unconventional and unhappy rush is evidenced by the treatment of the left aisle doorway, which still had not been recessed at the back when its reveal and the adjacent
wall to the left was plastered and then painted—obviously in 469. The painting on the wall—the Descent of the Buddha—is so beautiful that one might wish to ascribe it to 468 rather than to the troubled 469. However, this is not possible, given the fact that the aisle doorway in question was not finished before the plastering and painting was undertaken. However, even though the times were troubled and work had to be hurried, this painter retained his high standards; so one should not come to any single or hasty conclusion about the quality of work necessarily being affected by external pressures.

This area is revealing in another regard too. It seems clear that the abnormally high aisle doorways cut in both Cave 16 and Cave 17 were not included in the authorized plan made up in the capital, but that they might have been heightened at the site to allow more light into the cave. In any case, when the Descent scene was to be placed in this area in Cave 16, it did not fit. It must have been laid out (perhaps sketched on cloth) by some artist or planner who had no idea that the original aisle doorways had been extended in height. Then when it was time to put it on the wall, a significant portion of the composition extended over what was now empty space. Rather than have to redo the composition (which must have been officially authorized), workers filled in the “missing” space instead by inserting a stone slab (there were notches cut to hold it on either side) and filling the area above it with mudplaster. This filler has, understandably, long since fallen away, so that certain painted forms just above the once-filled spot now are partially missing: for instance, the halo of the Buddha seen just over the space in question lacks a body beneath.

Interestingly, the same problem, and the same solution, is very visible in the heightened left aisle doorway of Cave 17, as well as in the treatment of the Wheel of Life on the adjacent wall to the left.1 These have been discussed in detail elsewhere.2

While this first fine and then (generally) bad work was going on in the Cave 16 porch in 468 and 469 respectively, the same situation was to be seen in the cave’s interior—that is, in the front aisle of Cave 16. In 468 (or possibly 467) work had begun on this most elaborate and impressive carved ceiling at the site. Although only a portion—that in

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1 There is no right aisle doorway in Cave 17, an anomalous “window” taking its place.
2 Volume V, Ch 5, Cave 17, 216/218.