The minister Varahadeva’s difficulties would suggest that the privileges accorded to the royal donors, with whom he was of course closely associated, might also have been balanced by a good portion of pain during the course of the few years from 469 through 471 when the royal caves alone were underway. This is particularly evident when we study the evolution of the efforts of the local king, Upendragupta. On the positive side, the old competition for workmen was now a thing of the past; it was a buyer’s market, and the planners of Upendragupta’s insistently splendid caves could pick and choose from among sculptors and painters now highly skilled and, in this pervasive Recession, eager to please. Ajanta, after its few years of preparation and sometimes difficult struggle, was now ready to “take off”; and the technical skills and esthetic discipline evident in his sumptuous caves, “which cannot even be imagined by little-souled men” (Cave 17 inscription, vs 25) stand as splendid witness to an art coming exuberantly into its own.

Although the monumental Cave 17 was started so early that its whole interior space shows a typically “early” misalignment, by 469, when developments were concentrated exclusively in the royal caves, its excavation and decoration was progressing with speed as well as with improving discipline. It does, however, show one particular (and appropriate) inconsistency: the modes used for cell doorway fittings keep evolving, starting with the still ill-considered A mode (probably cut in 467) in the more forward area of the cave, and then progressing to the far more practical B mode in 468/469. Then, in 479 and 471, the still more functional C mode had evolved, and was used in the latest cells at the rear of the cave. The only later additions in the cave during the period of Asmaka rule involved better securing cells L5 and L6 by converting their fittings to the more practical and secure D mode sometime after 475. This would appear to be a purely practical decision, to make the cave, which the Asmakas had taken over, more useful.

It is worth noting that just before Upendragupta had lost his control of the region in late 471, carved niches (never carved prior to 470) were
added at the rear of the latest cells in Cave 17, as if they were included in the contract for the fitting out of these latest cells.  

For all of the vigor and the care seen in its development, Cave 17 also reflects the mounting concerns of the local king who, having rid the region of the Asmakas at the end of 468, now was increasingly and rightly concerned about the likelihood that they would soon return with revenge on their minds. This almost certainly explains why, compared with the lavish efforts that the emperor Harisena put into Cave 1, with its rich burden of expensive and time-consuming sculptural decoration, Upendragupta by 470 and 471 was consciously limiting the work of the carvers to little more than the creation of the very elaborate shrine doorway and the fine Buddha image itself. Everything else is painted; and whereas the painting, done by a plethora of hands, perhaps in the interest of speed, is more often than not of high quality, it could certainly have been accomplished far more swiftly than the sculptural forms in Cave 1.

We know that the painting was going on at the rear of Cave 17 in 471, because time suddenly ran out at the end of that year before the shrine could be properly decorated. By then Upendragupta’s concern that he might not get his cave done before the Asmakas’ return is manifest, since the walls at the cave rear were never properly smoothed before being heavily plastered over and then painted. Indeed, it is conceivable that the whole cave, which took a long time to cut, was painted in a single year, as may well have been the case in Caves 1 and 2 also. However, it may well have been painted in stages, starting a year or so earlier—the porch, in particular, being completed while the cutting of the interior was still underway.

Upendragupta obviously lavished his major efforts upon the “Gandhakuti” or “perfumed hall” to which he refers in the inscription in Cave 17. Happily, in this beautiful hall we have an achievement comparable to that of the emperor Harisena’s in Cave 1. Indeed, the connections between them clearly are immediately revealed in the elaborate carving

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1 The four cells at the rear all have C mode door fittings and probably all date to 471 (rather than 470), because cells R6 and L6, both with unfinished door fittings, would have been underway very close in time to the rear cells. Cells L2 and L3 have B mode fittings, but may not have been fitted out until the last minute, in 471; this would explain why they have niches, which appear not to have come into use at the site until that late date.