THE HIATUS (472–474): THE PERIOD OF CONFLICT AND ASMAKA TAKEOVER

At the end of 471, the local king, attacked by the returning Asmakas, apparently was forced to flee from the region. It was at this point that the patronage of his own caves ended abruptly, while at the same time work stopped on every other cave as well. It seems clear that this was a period when the Asmakas, having been expelled from the site a few years earlier, were coming back in force.

I have suggested that the “war” between the local king and the invading Asmakas occupied some three years—the interruption of work at the site being referred to the years from 472 until the end of 474. This is necessarily an estimate. However, since Ajanta’s “Short Chronology” is indeed so short, and so much had to be accomplished, I would hesitate to say that this Hiatus in patronage activity occupied more than three years. In fact, it may well have occupied only two years, or possibly even one, for we really have no way to judge how long such a war, and the dramatic shifting of the control of the site, took. What we do know, however, is that some dire conflict did indeed take place at this point, and that when it was finished the world had changed. And happily, it had changed for the better! The next few years, under Asmaka control, were the most active and productive of all at the site. However, this newly radiant world, starting in 475, provided only a brief “millennium”. With the death of the emperor Harisena, late in 477, it rapidly and dramatically fell apart, as we shall see in due course.

It might be noted that this period—the Hiatus—or the Recession just before, must have been the time when Cave 4 suffered the dramatic collapse of the ceiling of its spacious central hall. In fact, this sobering event was directly related to the vastness of the cave itself; for the patron, the well-established viharasvamin Mathura, had grandiose conceptions. His cave, with eight pillars flanking every aisle, is by far the largest at the site; and as a consequence, as it turned out, the very spaciousness of the cave was what could be called, quite literally, its downfall. What happened was at a certain point in the course of its excavation, the ceiling collapsed, due to the fact that a major geological flaw—caused by an unhappy stratification of the lava (basalt) at the site—existed above the ceiling. In fact, the excavators knew about this flaw when
they started the cave, for it can be seen at a “safe” three or four feet about the porch. However, although such flaws general continue into the scarp on a roughly horizontal plane, in this particular case the flaw angled downward as it continued its course within the cave. Thus by the time the excavators had reached the center of the hall, the space between the excavated ceiling level and the treacherously angling flaw above had got so thin that part of the flawed ceiling no longer held. And so it fell; and then, as a consequence, the worried planners, or the patron himself, decided to raise the whole ceiling up to the plane of the flaw, to avoid any further rock fall.1

By analyzing this fascinating situation, we can tell that the rockfall did not occur until after the excavation was temporarily abandoned, due to the Recession, at the end of 468. We can tell this because the ceiling continues on its angled upward course (mentioned above as a result of the excavators’ early incompetence), right up to the rear of the shrine. Indeed, the central block—already an obsolete feature—intended for the Buddha image in the shrine was being exposed at the time, the excavators having actually started to open up the space on either side. We can in fact see how far they got before the Recession occurred, because of the preliminary cut at the upper right, the farthest point in the ceiling reached in 468. We should also note that when the excavators of this early ceiling were cutting the stone away around the tops of the shrine antechamber pillars, they blocked out these pillars with the relatively simple shafts characteristic in 468. Had they been working in this area in 475 they would certainly have reserved matrix on the pillars so that the bracket-goddesses (always intended as features in such caves after 475) could be cut. This is but one clear evidence that the original ceiling was cut right past these antechamber pillars at its established high level; in fact the pillars themselves were clearly heightened, as were the more rearward pillars in the cave, in response to the rising ceiling.

Therefore, we know that the crash of the ceiling did not take place prior to 468; at that point it was still intact, even if dangerously unstable. The original excavators did not know this, because they of course could not see the perniciously downward-directed flaw. It is clear too, that when work started on the cave again in 475, the first task was to clean

1 See also discussion in Volume Five, Ch 5, (Cave 4); also Spink 2004 (in Bakker 2004).