In the years from 469 through 471, we have heard only of the royal caves (1, 17, 19, 20, and 29); and then, from 472 through 474, there was no excavating activity at all. But with 475 the site has a new beginning, and now Ajanta’s patronage burgeons once again.

By 475 the Asmakas had defeated the local Risika king, Upendragupta, and had returned in force to the region and the site. Now, except in the case of Upendragupta’s caves, a remarkable florescence began, which continued until the unexpected death of the emperor Harisena late in 477. I have dated his death, which so suddenly changed the world, to December 31, 477, only in order that we may make a clear distinction between “477”, a year of incredible creative accomplishment, and “478”, when everything fell apart.

The only loser in this productive period was of course the local king. Although his splendid caitya Cave 19, still not quite finished, had been hurriedly dedicated late in 471, the victorious Asmakas now made it out of bounds for worship; at least this seems evident from the fact that it shows absolutely no deposits of grime from the oil lamps that would have been used in the rituals of worship, while it is clear that the garland hooks over the pillars—some not even set in place—were never used. Even more revealing, the Asmakas now actually dishonored Upendragupta’s fine hall by cutting a pathway to their own complex (which lay beyond) right through the cells at the front of Cave 19’s courtyard.¹

It would appear that Upendragupta’s Cave 20, which would have been exquisite had it not been a victim of the Recession, was also now abandoned; the few cells that were fitted out appear to have been put into use only in the Period of Disruption. At that point, with the Asmakas no longer controlling the site, new donors eagerly added a plethora of votive intrusions to these previously abandoned sacred

¹ The left front cell was a monks’ residence; the right front cell had been converted to a cistern chamber. The “Asmaka pathway” was cut through both of them. Covered with debris in the 19th century, they are not shown on Burgess’ Cave 19 plan.
halls, clearly attracted by their continuing sanctity. But this is a matter relevant to our discussion of 479.2

It is clear that the Asmakas (perhaps grudgingly) allowed monks to continue living in Upendragupta’s spacious Cave 17. Such a decision was both practical and expedient, for housing was badly needed at the site; and at the same time, evicting the monks from their established quarters would hardly have been a good way for the conquerors to start their control of the site. Remarkably, when the Asmakas took over the site, although many cells were underway in the various caves, there were perhaps only two caves—Cave 11 and Cave 17 itself—that were properly fitted out for residence, and appear to have already been in use at that time.3 Furthermore, considering how thickly the shrine areas have been blackened by the smoke from the oil lamps used in worship, it seems evident that the Asmakas allowed worship as well as residence in Upendragupta’s fine vihara to continue, even though they made no attempt to complete the shrine’s abandoned program of decoration, either here or in Upendragupta’s abandoned Cave 20. The only “improvement” that was made, now that the cave was under Asmaka control, was to fit out Cells L5 and L6, obviously utilized for storage, making more secure doors by converting the older fittings to the D mode.4

As we might expect, as soon as the Asmakas took over the site, their own caves started to develop with a particular energy; and since work on their excavations had summarily stopped in 468 when the site was in an early stage of its development, there is now a striking disparity between the early and the later phases of their excavations. However, this mostly involves changes in the shaping of architectural features—pillars, doors, windows, pillars, etc—rather than shifts in decorative features. This is because all of these “superficial” decorative features date from 475 or later; not a single one was to be seen in any of the Asmaka caves at the time that work ended so abruptly in 468.

In the earlier years of work at the site, the planners of these Asmaka caves (as in many other excavations at the site) followed a convention

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2 As explained elsewhere, the Period of Disruption may have started in the last half of 478 in the “Vakataka” caves, since those caves were being abandoned by their patrons at about the mid-point of that year, during which, in the “Asmaka” caves, the established patronage was still continuing. See Volume I, Ch 10, 200–203.

3 The shrine of Cave Lower 6, extremely begrimed, may have been used for worship from 469; but it was not yet fitted out for residence.

4 For more extensive discussion, see Volume VI.