By the beginning of 479, with the Vakataka’s imperial world about to fall apart due to the internal subversions and the external aggressions of the Asmakas and the other feudatories who were joining with them, Ajanta’s history undergoes a turbulent sea-change. The patrons connected with the threatened Vakataka court had now all fled from the site, and although sometime in 478 the Asmakas had declared themselves lords of the region, they too now had to leave, because military priorities were taking precedence over spiritual needs.

At this point the previously established administrative controls at the site were no longer operational. Now, with the ruling Asmakas gone, even Upendragupta’s beautiful caves were given a new lease on life. Although the Caiyta Cave 19’s interior had been completely filled with images belonging to Upendragupta’s original program of work, the frame of the façade, the right and left walls of the court, and a few other areas were now covered with a hotchpotch of votive images, often of high quality, and often provided with hooks or holes for hooks, which must have been used for garlands. Three fine sculptured Buddha images were now also added to Cave 20, while other intrusive images, now missing, may have been painted on the porch walls. Although the shrine image itself, although dedicated, had never been properly finished in 471, the new donors made no improvements to it; indeed, one suspects that here, as in most of the other caves, their devotions were directed to their own private votive offerings alone. Upendragupta’s Cave 17 also has a scattering of intrusions on the wall of the cistern at court right, as well as a fine intrusive Buddha triad cut beneath Upendragupta’s dedicatory inscription.¹

The two complex Buddha groups that have “appropriated” the central space in Cave 19’s two pillared court cells give clear evidence of having been supplied with some kind of fitted-in wooden platforms,

¹ The roof above the right cistern has long since collapsed, resulting in the displacement of some of the intrusive seated Buddha images.
surely for use in making offerings. Intriguingly, it is clear that a similar fitted-in platform was once set up in front of the impressive intrusive Buddha triad at the left of the court in Cave 17, while still another was probably inserted in front of the large intrusive Buddha in the left rear of the hall of Cave 20. Since such “worship platforms” are found only in the caves originally sponsored by Upendragupta, it is tempting to think that now, with the sudden departure of the Asmakas, he or members of his family were able to “reclaim” their previous rights.

Although the “intrusive” devotees, during the Period of Disruption, appear to have been most concerned to make and worship their own donations, it would hardly be surprising if they honored the many shrine Buddhas at the site as well, even though these were the offerings of previous patrons. There is a rather clear suggestion that they did indeed do this in Cave 19, for the plaster and paint around the (now-missing) garland hook at the center of the front aisle ceiling in this splendid cave shows distinct signs of damage. Since there is no evidence that Cave 19 was ever worshiped during the heyday of the site, it seems likely that this damage occurred during the Period of Disruption, when the beautiful cave was no longer “out of bounds”.

Although it seems reasonable to assume that other caves—or more specifically, their shrine Buddhas—were honored as well by the new host of devotees that flooded into the caves during the Period of Disruption, there is little clear evidence that this was the case. The only clear evidence for such continued usage appears to be in Cave 2. In that highly decorated cave, as noted above, there are no less than six painted ceiling medallions leading from the front of the cave to the shrine ante-chamber, and all of these show very considerable signs of breakage at their central points, even though the iron garland hooks have long since disappeared, presumably taken out for various uses by the residents of the area.

Since the Cave 2 Buddha was not finished and dedicated until time was already rapidly running out, it is not likely that the damage around the hook holes was done in 478; in fact, it is unlikely that the Buddha image was ever significantly worshiped until the Period of Disruption.

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2 For the curious manner in which the standing Buddha’s flanking both of these groups have “balanced” gestures, as if their mudras have been adjusted for esthetic reasons, see Volume V, Ch 5, 243, and Volume III, 158.

3 See Volume III, Cave 17, 126–7.