It is one of the bitter truths of history, that war, despite its ravages, often stimulates cultural—and specifically technological—progress, getting things done and often getting them done better, even if for some darker purpose than would have been the case had the world gone on more innocently in its accustomed ways.

Ajanta itself, as I shall try to show, was a “beneficiary” at certain points in its development of the incessant series of conflicts that it suffered during its remarkably brief life. Furthermore, it was, ultimately and ironically, war that caused its traumatic final fall, and at the same time preserved it for an amazed future.

Of course, we must recognize that the urgent inauguration of the Vakataka renaissance at Ajanta, starting in the early 460s, unquestionably depended upon peace. When the great emperor Harisena succeeded to the Vakataka throne after the death of his father Devasena, he was happily the beneficiary of an already large empire consisting of his own central domains in western Vidarbha, along with Risika (where Ajanta lies), Asmaka, a large feudatory domain lying to the south of Risika, and Anupa, lying to the north. Ultimately Harisena, between the time of his accession in about 460 and his sudden death at the end of 477, would dramatically expand his domains in central India from the western to the eastern sea. However, the untroubled inauguration of the site took place before his incessant political expansion raised him, by the end of his reign, to his status as the premier emperor of India, outdoing the declining Guptas with his achievements during the roughly eighteen year span of his rule. Harisena’s political ascendancy, and the cultural expansion that Ajanta itself so clearly mirrors, was in fact in large part due to war, although Harisena astutely took advantage of marriage alliances and of diplomacy as well.

In the early 460s, although war was surely soon to come, the new emperor’s world was blessed with peace. This is evident, because a startlingly

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1 For the evidence that Harisena was quite possibly assassinated, see Spink, *Ajanta*, I, 185–187.
2 According to the *Dasakumaracarita*, trans. Kale 1966, 349, “He was an expert in the employment of the six expediens in foreign politics” and had a multitude of other royal virtues. The account cannot of course be taken at face value.
ambitious “public works” project such as Ajanta’s new development, and the rival undertakings at the similarly ambitious rock-cut site at Bagh, could never have taken place without the benefits of concord. This is the more true when we realize that the unprecedented surge of pious and prideful (both selfless and selfish) activity at Ajanta, where at least twenty caves were started in the first five years, was initiated by the most important personages in the empire. Those known through fortunately surviving epigraphic records are: Varahadeva, Harisena’s Prime Minister, “being extremely devoted to the Buddha” (Cave 16 inscription, vs 21) sponsor of the central Cave 16; Upendragupta, the rich and piously profligate king of Risika itself and patron of the elaborate caves 17, 19, 20, and 29, whose aim was to “expend abundant wealth…covering the earth with stupas and viharas” (Cave 17 inscription, vs 25,22); the great monk Buddhabhadra, responsible for the development of Ajanta’s whole western extremity and an untiring money-raiser, whose task appears to have been much simplified by his claim that he and the powerful minister of Asmaka “had been connected by birth throughout many previous existences” (Cave 26 inscription, vs 9). Finally the emperor Harisena who, nominally a Saivite, did not himself sponsor a cave at the site until some five years had passed, in the end outdid all of his lesser courtly patrons with his sumptuous Cave 1, the most beautiful of all of India’s remaining viharas. At the same time extensive undertakings were developing at Bagh, in the peaceful region of Anupa, where one of Harisena’s sons was viceroy.

The world of the early 460s was a radiant one, sponsored by the peaceful relationships between these various feudatory powers. However, by 468, dark clouds were appearing in the unsuspecting sky. By the end of that year, Upendragupta, king of Risika, perhaps for political reasons, or perhaps because he was offended by the obvious plan of the Asmakas to outdo the offerings of his own kingdom, suddenly threw the rival Asmakas out of the site. The usages of war would now begin.

We know that the Asmaka expulsion was sudden, because if they had been allowed only a few weeks or even days grace, they could have brought their major Buddha image, ready to be carved in the already prepared stupa in their great caitya hall, Cave 26, to a hurried completion and dedication. But this was not done; their expulsion was peremptory. They were, in effect, already in a state of war.

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3 The rushed dedication in early 469 of the Buddha images in Caves 6L, 7, 11, and 15 prove the signal importance of getting the Cave 26 shrine image finished and dedicated—even though this could not be done due to the Asmakas’ expulsion.