Chapter two

Regarding important time chart changes

Even though I stand by the overall reliability of my Time Chart, constructed nearly forty years ago and changed very little since that time, I have long felt that I have allowed too little time (473–478) for the period of exuberant activity that began, after the Hiatus, with the takeover of the site by the aggressive Asmakas. Although it would be difficult to extend the consistent patronage of the site beyond 478—for one must allow a few years for the Period of Disruption and important political developments during the years that follow—it is not only possible, but reasonable, to start this crowded period of post-Hiatus activity at 473 rather than 475. This allows an extra two years of late activity at Ajanta, making a total of a full five years of vigorous development before all patronage activity at the site, notably in the “Vakataka” caves but in the “Asmaka” caves as well, was profoundly disrupted by the almost immediate impact of Harisena’s death late in 477.1

Given the need to fit all of the Vakataka developments at Ajanta into the short span of time that I have proposed (462–478), our expansion of the site’s late phase of activity has another advantage. It reduces the Hiatus—the period when the Asmakas took over local control from the local king—to a single year, namely 472. What would seem to justify using this shorter span is that this was after all a limited local conflict, between two feudatories, carried on with the full knowledge (and perhaps even the approval) of their overlord Harisena.2 So to consider it as a conflict of one year (or even less)—assignable to 472—would seem to be a highly justified “correction” in the Time Chart.

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1 Although all of the caves at the site were nominally under the control of the Vakataka emperor, it is convenient to call those at the western extremity the “Asmaka” caves. The remainder; more loyal to the emperor in any case, I identify as the “Vakataka” caves, utilizing quotation marks to distinguish this special usage, as in Spink, Ajanta, I, where I first discuss the “Vakataka” caves in Chapter 11, and the Asmaka caves in Volume 12.

2 The limited and local character of the Asmaka/Risika conflict is suggested by the fact that it did not disturb the development of the Bagh caves in Anupa, where a second son of Harisena was viceroy. Although the Asmakas eventually destroyed the Vakataka imperium, Dandin’s Dasakumaracarita makes it clear that they were a pernicious force at court, cloaked in the guise of friendship. See discussion in Spink, Ajanta, I, 128–132.
In my previous studies, I have noted how remarkable it was that “intrusive” donors did not leave any “uninvited” images whatsoever in either the “Asmaka” or the “Vakataka” caves during my (originally) proposed three-year hiatus. I assumed that this was because the site, even in such a time of troubles, was protected by some overarching (presumably imperial) administrative authority. However, if the shift of control to the Asmakas lasted only a single year—and perhaps only a matter of days or weeks—we can understand how the site’s caves were perhaps safe from such unwanted incursions merely by virtue of the very rapid transfer of power.

I have argued that the aggressive Asmakas, after rejecting the overlordship of the weak new Vakataka emperor (Sarvasena III) in 478, had effectively destroyed both the “Vakataka” and the “Asmaka” patronage at the site by the end of that same tragic year—leaving the site to the pious attentions of a host of “uninvited” local devotees and monks. However, this sudden collapse of courtly patronage in 478 was only true at Ajanta itself. As Pia Brancaccio has convincingly argued, the Asmakas continued the proud and vigorous development of their own caves at Aurangabad, a city that in fact was probably the center of their political power.3 Indeed, one might easily conclude that the Asmaka patrons and their artists were vying to outdo the decorative abundance that characterizes the highly developed latest work at Ajanta. In fact, with so many artists essentially unemployed at Ajanta after the crisis of 478, it is reasonable to assume that these by-now highly skilled artisans were now invited (or in some cases even forced) to work on the developing new caves of the Asmaka conquerors. The demand for experienced sculptors, in particular, could have been very heavy, given the compulsion for an almost excessive sculptural elaboration; and this call for Ajanta’s now bereft craftsmen could help to explain why so much got done at Aurangabad in the frenzied context of 479–480, when the threat of war must have been on everyone’s mind.4

Like the “reduction” of the Hiatus to a single year (472), the excavation and decoration in Caves 1, 3, and 4A at Aurangabad throughout 479 and 480 also allows more time, even if only at Aurangabad, for the vigorous

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4 To translate my revised dating of late developments at Aurangabad into graphic terms, I have extended the lines representing the continuation of work in Aurangabad Caves 1, 3, and 4A up until 480, the point at which, in my opinion, work suddenly ceased because of the call of war.