CHAPTER THREE
DEFINING FEATURES

Introduction

At great monuments throughout the world stylistic developments generally proceed slowly. This is true not only in the case of the architectural forms, but also with regard to sculptures and paintings, and in the evolution of certain technological features. Indeed, at vast complexes like the temples of Angkor, Central Java, the cave complexes in China, the great European cathedrals, or the buildings on the Athenian acropolis we generally follow the course of development from decade to decade; and in some cases we must depend upon even longer temporal divisions to clarify the course of evolution. In India too things seldom change in a rush. Protected from a too urgent future by the forces of convention and tradition, artistic forms move with a notably deliberate speed from the sculptures of the Calukyas and the Pallavas, to those of the Cholas, and beyond.

However, when we turn to the caves at Ajanta, and the related Vakataka undertakings at Aurangabad, Ghatotkacha, Banoti, and Bagh, things change on a persistent and consistent schedule that can—indeed must—be laid out on a year to year basis, if it is to be properly understood. It is the specificity of this remarkably precise evolution that we shall explore.

Since the courtly patronage of the later (main) phase at Ajanta, from its inauguration in about 462 to its rapid collapse with the flight of its founding patrons in 478, occupied only about seventeen years, we have a clear and limited time-span within which the site’s many developments took place. And since, happily, by virtue of the monolithic nature of the monument, a remarkably large percentage of the architectural and sculptural features of the site have been preserved—even the paintings being to a degree protected by their lithic context—we can follow the development at Ajanta and other related Vakataka sites in a way no longer possible at

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1 I have argued that the period of consistent patronage at Ajanta might be as little as 15 or even 14 years. See Spink, *Ajanta*, I, 37–48. “A note on the dating of Ajanta’s Vakataka phase.”
other monuments. However, this alone does not explain the quite amazing rapidity of the site's evolution.

*The Origins of Ajanta’s Main Phase: 462–480*

When we recognize the ambitiousness of Ajanta's Vakataka phase as an undertaking, and the evident administrative controls that appear to have governed its growth from the very beginning, it is hard to believe that the site's exuberant early development could have taken place without a good deal of prior planning up in one or more of the major cities. Chief among these must have been Vatsugulma (modern Basim), the capital of the Vakataka’s western (Vidarbha) branch, while the major regions (Risika, Asmaka, Anupa) under the emperor Harisena's direct control must also have been involved in the plans that were developing.

Of course, it is possible to believe that one or more prescient devotees, attracted by the presence of the two impressive Hinayana caitya halls at Ajanta, would have taken the lead by starting a simple cave or caves (like Cave 8 or 11 or 15) in their proximity, in the hope of newly energizing the long-dormant site. Although a number of attempts have been made to date these caves earlier than the start of Ajanta’s main phase, when we carefully analyze the many stylistic or technological features of such caves, we find that there are no features whatsoever in these presumably “earliest” caves that cannot also be found in what we could call the lowest strata of the ultimately more developed caves. What seems evident is that a great number of the site’s excavations, both major and minor, were begun in an initial burst of activity, starting in 462 and with everyone eager to get into the act at once.

In explaining Ajanta’s sudden renaissance in the early 460s it seems reasonable to suppose that major courtly patrons ruled the site from the first, and that lesser donors, taking advantage of whatever opportunities were offered, settled for what they could get both in terms of space and in terms of the available workers. It is no surprise that Varahadeva, the Prime Minister, took the most prestigious central location, dominating the whole ravine, or that the local king, Upendragupta, was able to utilize the immediately adjacent portion of the cliff for his caves 17 and 19, or that the great monk and entrepreneur Buddhabhadra was able to reserve the site’s whole western extremity for his ambitious cave complex. Nor is it surprising that the excavations created by these three major patrons include many of the ‘earliest” features that we can identify, just