

**CH. 11: THE FIRST INITIATED UPĀŚRAYA—CAVE 8**

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**INTRODUCTION**

BASED ON the research in the last three decades, it will not be wrong to say that Ajantā Cave 8 (Figure 87) was a trailblazer of its times. However, as the site collapsed after the death of Hariṣeṇa it was also abandoned along with other caves on the site. After the site’s rediscovery in early nineteenth century, many caves of Ajantā received a lot of attention. Yet the fate of this cave was never to rise. Scholars neglected it, the site authorities neglected it; what is worse, it was abused for decades as a power generator room of the Archaeological Survey of India (Figures 88–89). It received a bit of attention only in the recent decades when some scholars found the cave to be of paramount

importance to understand how the site developed in the fifth century phase.

The cave is located right next to the Sātavāhana-period stūpa temple, Cave 9 (Figures 12, 90). Its situation and loss of façade makes it impossible to be seen properly in a panoramic photograph of the site (Figure 1). Notably Burgess did not make any ground plan for this cave.<sup>29</sup>

### HISTORIOGRAPHY

Regarding the antiquity of the cave, we have a spectrum of views:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> c. – 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE (Fergusson and Burgess 1880, 289)
- 'Mahāyāna period' (Jadhav 1987, 249–54)
- Late 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE (Dhavalikar 1992, 203–07)
- Circa 462–475 CE (W. M. Spink 2007, 127–31)

Which of the above is most agreeable? After examining all the facts and data at the disposal of today's researcher, it appears that Spink's dating of the cave is most convincing. There is every reason to broadly agree with Jadhav, Dhavalikar, and Spink collectively that the cave was the first to have been inaugurated in the fifth century phase of Ajantā. One may go a step further to add that the edifice may also probably have been the first major cave excavated anywhere in India between the third to fifth century CE. In

spite of its dilapidated condition, there are aspects that suggest that the cave was a turning point in the larger history of Indian rock cut architecture.

For a re-appraisal of this cave, I begin with the mention of Fergusson and Burgess who for the first time offered a description of the cave, although the description was no longer than two paragraphs. In spite of the brevity, there was a grave blunder contained about the cave's date and relative importance, which contributed much to our ignorance and to the reason why we undermined the value of the cave for nearly two centuries. The 'Hīnayāna' identification was perpetuated in later literatures on the subject, and remained unchecked for long. Later authors on the Ajantā did not provide any space for this cave. It was summarily ignored from study. The reason was not only the initial neglect by Burgess but also the extensive damage the cave has suffered in the course of time, so much so that it appears impossible to imagine or reconstruct how the cave must have looked originally.<sup>30</sup>

The next author who made any description of the cave was Jadhav who for the first time was able to identify the importance of the cave. The third description in the historiographical scale is seen by Dhavalikar who highlighted several crucial features, which were earlier ignored. Subsequently, it was Spink whose detailed research on this and other caves has brought forth much revealing facts. In

the end, I present some of my observations. It will be seen that these recent studies have now correctly identified the cave as a fifth-century edifice that should no longer be grouped along with the Sātavāhana-period caves. We shall also find out that the cave was probably the first excavation of Ajantā's fifth-century phase.

*For Burgess it was a 'Hīnayāna' cave*

Let us analyse whether Burgess was so injudicious as to recklessly identify the cave as a Sātavāhana-period edifice or whether there are features that lent themselves easily for being mistaken as 'Hīnayāna'. The following are some of the reasons why the cave was identified as a Sātavāhana-period edifice: (a) The cave is situated right next to the Sātavāhana period *caitya* temples (Caves 9 and 10). (b) The elevation on the cliff is the same as that of the Sātavāhana period caves. (c) In terms of the size and dimensions the cave lends itself to the easy perception of being at par with the modest Sātavāhana residential caves 12, 13, and 15A (Figure 26). (d) Like the Sātavāhana period residential caves it is *astylar*, that is, without pillars. It is generally the case that Sātavāhana period *vihāras*, even at other sites, are without pillars (with the noted exception of one at *Konḍāṇe*). (e) The perceived lack of sculptures, carvings, paintings, and a shrine is a major factor of its grouping with the Sātavāhana period caves, as such items are not found in them.

Austere practices demanded plain and unpretentious interiors without lavish decorations. On the other hand, most of the fifth century residential caves at Ajantā and elsewhere have shrines, decorations, architectural elaborations, and paintings. (f) The cave has lost its façade. Therefore, in the absence of a visible façade, it was assumed that there was no façade as such that are seen in the fifth century caves, and no façade as such are indeed visible in the Sātavāhana period caves. The residential caves of the former period are marked by simplicity and austerity; designs are minimal or non-existent, because in the earlier phase the residential caves had a focussed purpose, that is, cave dwelling. Embellishment was unnecessary. It was indeed in the fifth century phase of Ajantā, as we shall see in the chapters ahead, that the very *raison d'être* of the residential caves was transformed from strictly residential motives to the additional objective of worshipping. Thus, shrines were *later* added to the residential halls of the fifth century phase. (g) The perceived absence of painting work in the cave also contributed to the cave's identification as a Sātavāhana period cave since it is the fifth century caves on the site where paintings are mostly seen. Conversely, from the residential halls of the earlier phase paintings were perceived to be missing.

*For Jadhav it is 'Mahāyāna' cave*

Jadhav studied the cave in detail. He recorded a detailed physical description that was long due. He is the first one who detected that the cave was wrongly identified as a Sātavāhana period edifice. He submitted that the cave in fact holds the key to understanding the transition of Buddhist art and architecture from the Sātavāhana to the Vākāṭaka period. He suggested that the edifice is crucial to understand the circumstances, which caused the overall revival of excavation activities at Ajantā in the fifth century. Jadhav also prepared a ground plan, and stated that his plan of the cave (Figure 22) was the first ever. This, however, is not true as it was Robert Gill (Gill 1876) who first made a ground plan (Figure 21).

The most remarkable observation of Jadhav consists in the fact that he noted the existence of a shrine at the rear of the hall. Although no image is found there, Jadhav further noticed the existence of a monolithic platform raised high from the floor abutting the rear wall of the shrine. This monolithic platform could be nothing else than an altar. The altar runs along the entire length of the shrine's rear wall. No trace of any monolithic image, however, is found there. Jadhav conjectured that the altar probably had a unique arrangement of enshrining a portable image. The image that might have been installed there would have been a Buddha

figure of wood or stone. The conjecture may at first appear outlandish in the case of Ajantā, since there is no other such example we know of at the site. However, at Kanherī we have found exactly the same arrangement in one cave. At the end of that cave, which looks rather like just another residential *vihāra*, there is a modest shrine, and a monolithic altar of similar kind. On this altar, early archaeologists were able to find a wooden Buddha image, which is now housed in the Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai. Another remarkable observation of Jadhav was the notice of cisterns, one on the front left corner outside the hall and another on the symmetrically opposite side (front-right corner of the hall). Unfortunately, the *vihāra*'s exterior portions have now been cemented; hence, no trace of the cisterns is visible. The cistern helps us to understand the location of the cave's front wall, which is now totally perished beyond leaving any trace. Through the cistern, we can locate the front wall, and thus we know that the hall was quite sizable. Perhaps, the cistern existed on ends of a porch, which might have been there. To Jadhav the cisterns indicated a 'Mahāyāna' signature, since most of the Mahāyāna caves at Ajantā have their own cisterns. This was not a rule for the Sātavāhana period caves though. Lastly, I may mention that in spite of such a detailed study, Jadhav refrained from assigning any date to the cave. He simply called it a 'Mahāyāna' edifice. However, whether the cave was an early or late undertaking in

the fifth century phase of Ajantā, Jadhav makes no such clarity.

*For Dhavalikar it is a 'Late Hīnayāna' cave*

Dhavalikar proceeded in the same direction, except that he identified the cave as a 'Late Hīnayāna' monument. His observations contain many notable features. He argued that the edifice could be called neither a 'cāitya' nor a 'vihāra'; it can be neither labelled 'Hīnayāna type' nor 'Mahāyāna type'. He has extensively studied the western Indian cave architecture, and has classified many sites, caves, and types as what he calls 'Late Hīnayāna Type' (Dhavalikar 1984). It is within this larger framework where he locates Cave 8 of Ajantā. This in itself is not very surprising given the kind of constructions he has made about this theme. What is remarkable is that he identifies Ajantā Cave 8 as 'the missing link' between the so-called 'Hīnayāna' and 'Mahāyāna' types/ periods. He finds the cave a crucial one to understand the factors of the revival of excavation activities at Ajantā in the fifth century CE. He wondered why Cave 8 did not provide for a stūpa shrine, since the very first attempts to carve a shrine inside a residential cave had all invariably a stūpa shrine rather than image shrine. Numerous examples have been studied and ground plans included in (Dhavalikar 1984). In this context, I have gathered some data of the residential caves that have shrines in them to

learn which ones have the image shrine and which ones have stūpa-shrine; these are all pre-fifth century sites of western India (Table 9). As can be seen there are indeed some examples of image shrines before the examples of Ajanta caves and the Kanheri one. They need to be studied to learn what kind of sects and beliefs were operational, and how do they connect to Ajantā.

In the example of Ajantā Cave 8, instead of a monolithic version of the stūpa shrine, the installation of a portable Buddha image in the shrine's altar indicates the possibility of a transitional phase from the stūpa-shrine type to the image-shrine type, as suggested by Dhavalikar. However, this is not tenable, as we shall see ahead. Nevertheless, what is remarkable in Dhavalikar's study is again the fact that he was able to distinguish that due to the presence of the image-shrine Ajantā Cave 8 can never be called a Sātavāhana edifice. At the same time, he noted that because the shrine image is not monolithic it is not like the other 'Mahāyāna' caves of Ajantā. Therefore, the edifice cannot be strictly placed in the same time bracket as other Ajantā caves of the fifth century. To solve the issue in his study, Dhavalikar took recourse to the theory of evolution and formulated that the cave must be dated *after* the 'Hīnayāna' period and *before* the 'Mahāyāna' period of Ajantā. Thus, Dhavalikar decided to fit the cave within his larger matrix of the 'Late Hīnayāna'

type and period. Accordingly, he assigned the cave to 'late fourth century' CE, and refrained from giving any precise date. The most enigmatic factor in his formulation is his placement of the cave in 'the Vākāṭaka period.' Why must he do so, he gives no explanation.

Dhavalikar's conclusions have serious problems. They arise from a series of assumptions. First is the assumption that Buddhism, Buddhist practices, beliefs, and observances followed a linear evolutionary pattern in the course of time. The second assumption is that there was uniformity across India as regarded the question of Buddhist practices, beliefs, and observances. The third is the assumption that cave architecture followed a linear progression or development from the supposed archaic to the supposed sophistication. The fourth is the assumption (not his fault, it is a baggage scholars have carried since long) that 'Hīnayāna' and 'Mahāyāna' were a matter of fact. The fifth is the assumption that architecture reflected this supposed contrast between the two. The sixth is the assumption that the symbol and the image, i.e. the stūpa and the image, necessarily a duality—that one could either only have been an adherent of the stūpa or the image—and that both could not co-exist; that both were never one and the same, at least for some followers or sects.

Latest advances in Buddhist studies, epigraphy, and archaeology inform us that such sweeping assumptions can no longer be made. The case of Cave 8 brings the fact to sharp relief, especially when we take notice of the results of Spink's meticulous study of that cave.

*For Spink it is a 'Vākāṭaka' cave*

Spink's larger study of Ajantā describes various phases of developments for each cave. According to his study, Cave 8 had no shrine whatsoever when it was first excavated according to the original plan. He says that none of the residential caves at Ajantā had any such provision in the beginning. It was after certain years of the site's development, when most of the fifth-century caves were already begun and developed to varying extents that the idea of adding a shrine inside the *vihāras* was introduced on the site; and this, according to his timeline, happened in the year circa 466 CE (W. M. Spink 2007, 127-31). It was about this year that the shrine of Cave 8 was also added.

According to Spink, what probably started as a small, austere residential cave in c. 462 CE gradually transformed into a larger residence-cum-temple cave. This happened during what he calls a sudden burst of patronage and creative energy that had dawned upon the site of Ajantā during the rule of Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa. Like other caves of the fifth-century

Ajantā, he provides it the period of circa 462-480 CE. Spink attributes the expansion of Cave 8 to the (temporary) abandonment of the adjacent Cave 7 during the periods of 'recession' and 'hiatus.' He also explains the damage to the cistern of Cave 7 because of this expansion. The most remarkable notice of Spink is a fact never noticed by any other scholar, and this notice has the potential to dramatically change the level of our understanding of what really happened in that cave and why. It is a physical proof extant on the site that seems irrefutable and compelling. There is actually a precarious stretch of 'red bole' at the cave's lower level that is evidently not suitable for carving out an image. Therefore, a separately carved image was brought in and installed in the newly constructed shrine in circa 466 CE. This is not surprising once we carefully and meticulously examine the various kinds of evidence in other fifth century residential caves that suggest that in a specific year of the site's development (Spink's circa 466 CE) the shrine of Cave 8 was excavated along with those in the other residential caves that were being 'converted' into Buddha temples. However, this is not the sole proof. Most people will not believe, but they will one day, that the door fittings in all the caves of Ajantā offer themselves as reliable and stratified evidence of dating and development within the larger story of the site's gradual development.

The presence of 'B-type' door fitting (Figure 226) in one of the cells, and the cutting of further cells, are indicative of rework in circa 468 CE. Then, the cave lay temporarily abandoned until frenzied patronage resurfaced in circa 477 CE. It was then that the excavation was completed and interiors were coated with a redbrick mix. Spink notes that the use of ground brick plaster is not found anytime earlier than circa 477 CE. He suggests that the plasterwork was carried out by an individual patron in circa 478 CE. There are also signs of decorations and murals on the walls and ceilings that may have been introduced at an earlier stage. The presence of large holes on the walls and ceilings suggest the use of wooden holders and iron hooks, and indicate the presence of a square central area in the cave.

Thus, in Spink's remarkable study of the caves we are able to see how Cave 8 is just another of the excavations that were planned and started together with negligible gaps of time, and when begun the cave had no special feature of its own; there was no provision of any shrine. The portable Buddha image is attributed to the lack of suitable monolithic rock quality at the rear of the shrine. Because Spink's observations are based on evidence and deductive analysis it invalidates Dhavalikar's conclusions that had seen it as a 'missing link,' and a 'late Hīnayāna' monument of 'late fourth century' CE.

**FRESH OBSERVATIONS***Original plan*

We have two available plans of the cave: one by Robert Gill (Figure 21) and the other by Jadhav (Figure 22).

Unfortunately, none of the two plans is to the scale. Still however they give us a fair idea of the shape of the cave with the arrangement of the hall, cells, and shrine. Gill's plan is a testimony of the fact that the damage on the cliff had already taken place by nineteenth century. From these plans, we are able to notice the startling factor that the plan is unique. The hall is not square; there are aisles along the left and right walls formed not by pillars but by rock beams, but there is no such aisle at the rear; the rear wall is not straight but follows a very unusual pattern with the central areas of the hall being much deeper than the areas on the sides of the rear wall. Traces of a porch are also indicated in Jadhav's plan. The shrine is so deep inside a deep shrine antechamber that its arrangement along with the depth and dimension of the other cells forms a floral matrix; in other words, the cells and shrine together make a centripetal design with a centre. It is as if the cave has a circle as the geometric basis, and not a square as is the case of other residential caves. The underlying circular

basis of the cave's plan is very unlikely a product of chance.

The complex planning is baffling in the context of cave architecture. In fact, it has not come to our notice that any other residential cave of any era or region has this basis of square and circle, that is, a floral geometric grid around which the dimensions and the extents of the hall, surrounding cells, and the shrine are so deceptively arranged.

One cannot expect this complexity and sophistication in a Sātavāhana or pre-Vākāṭaka period cave. Such a complex and comprehensive geometric basis is only observed in some larger cave-complexes of Ajantā and other sites of later periods.

It appears unlikely that the cave in question had such a plan from the very beginning. Given the kind of function that the cave initially had, i.e. it was essentially made as an adjunct to the Sātavāhana period stūpa temples (Caves 9 and 10); it was aimed to serve as a purely residential cave. For this purpose, this complex planning was neither required nor desired.

What we are suggesting is that we have another ground that suggests that the cave had not begun with such a plan. The present plan is the result of later adaptations, which Spink has indicated based on a set of various factors.

Then, what might have been the original plan? If we look closer at the plan, it is possible to figure out the original plan that was smaller, simpler, and of the usual square type. In all likelihood, the original plan resembled rather like cave 13 or 15A: straight walls on right angles with cells carved on them. The locations of the rock beams are where the original sidewalls might have been situated. There were apparently three cells on each of the left, rear, and right walls—and these cells must have been smaller. No shrine was likely there. The hall, thus, was much constricted and smaller. Let us understand this in detail and try to reconstruct the cave's story of development and gradual changes.

I agree with Spink that the cave was the very first edifice started in the fifth-century phase. A late beginning could not have been positioned there, for, more ideal locations with better rock quality would have been preferred. At the same time, it is understandable that the area would not have been left unoccupied until late. Therefore, the very location of the cave suggests its early beginning. In this context, we must also take in view the aspect of the cave's proximity to the Sātavāhana period Cave 9. Began as a purely residential cave, its physical adherence to the stūpa temple Cave 9 speaks for its purpose of cave dwelling for the

monastics that were expected to live here, particularly during *ċaturmāsa*.

Sacred spaces or pilgrim sites—whether Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, or Islamic—require residential arrangements not only for the officiating priests or clergy but also for the visiting laity, pilgrims, or devotees. Needless to argue why sacred spaces invite and necessitate residential structures around them. Buddhist *saṅghārāmas* had and still have elaborate residential arrangements in all regions and eras. We must not overlook to study Ajantā from this angle. We shall find that every residential cave there (when they began) was attached functionally, if not always physically, to a particular stūpa temple. Thus the earliest stūpa temples there (Caves 9 and 10) had dedicated residential adjuncts. The later stūpa temples (Caves 26 and 19) also had their own dedicated halls of residence. Table 10 is suggestive of the case.

As can be seen, in the beginning when the caves were planned and begun the residential caves were attached functionally to one or the other stūpa temples. It was only after circa 465-466 CE that things changed. The new idea to 'convert' the residential halls into temples by adding a shrine at the rear was a dramatic change that drastically changed how things happened at the site. Our current understanding reveals that for the makers the choice between

stūpa or image shrine was merely a matter of stylistic choice; there was no real distinction as modern scholars have portrayed. A careful study of Ajantā inscriptions suggests that there was no theological distinction between the stūpa and the image at Ajantā. The words 'stūpa' and 'caitya' were used interchangeably, which stood for the image as well as the stūpa. Even iconographically, it is most obvious, since the caves 26 and 19 both are stūpa and image combine, that is, a fact scholars have unwisely overlooked.

After the above précis it would not be difficult to surmise why Cave 8 was located right next to the stūpa temples of caves 9 and 10, and why was it first planned as a purely residential unit, and why was it excavated on that low level, which wasn't obviously the right choice of location given the kind of less ideal rock quality there. The very fact that the cave was excavated there in spite of the bad quality of rock additionally informs us that the workers/monks at the time were not as experienced as to judge the quality of rock from the outer surface of the cliff. It was indeed a mistake to excavate a cave there, which is in part the reason why the cave has suffered so much of damage. Of course, Cave 7 or any other fifth-century cave did not yet exist. They were not probably planned yet, or were still in the planning stage somewhere 'in the capital' as Spink says—

or right here by the Saṅgha at the *saṅghārāma*, in my understanding.

The above deductions may further be supported by another mode of probing. This is by asking why the first cave of India in nearly three hundred years was being planned as a residential unit and not as a stūpa temple. Rock cut temples with image shrines like caves 1, 2, 16, and 17 did not yet exist anywhere in the landscape of India. A survey of other sites would suggest that a new undertaking after a prolonged period of lull would invariably have been a stūpa temple to which residential halls would be assigned and excavated. Why was this cave then, after the centuries of lull at the site, planned as a residential unit rather than a stūpa temple? There can be just one logical answer. The stūpa temple caves 9 and 10 of the Sātavāhana period, excavated some five centuries earlier, now required more adjuncts that are residential. To answer this need, cave 8 was planned and excavated right next to Cave 9.

However, why now, in circa 462 CE (going by the dating of Spink)? It is a crucial question that may answer why immediately a vast number of caves were initiated on the hill, and why most of them were begun simultaneously in the decisive year of circa 462 CE.

It is but natural to surmise, given the fact of the exuberant energy and flow of patronage that made possible the

initiation of so many ambitious caves on the site, that something decisive had happened in these crucial years so that the centuries of lull was now broken, and all of a sudden the *saṅghārāma* was busy with ambitious architectural projects. One must now think beyond the obvious, which is, beyond the obvious reasoning that more residents had come up to the site needing more rooms for lodging. What about the timing of this need? In other words, why did not the need ever come up during the last four centuries on the scarp?

When we reason further, we shall have just one probable answer. That is, it were these years, it was this era, the era and dominions of the Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa, that provided for the first time the climate where the Buddhists felt encouraged to initiate such undertakings. For, clearly Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa was ruling over the region at this time, as the inscriptions of Ajantā tell us. No wonder why this Hindu king has been eulogised so much in the Buddhist context of Ajantā. It is not just Ajantā, in our view (Spink and Singh) the initiatives for new *saṅghārāmas* were started in other regions too—all within the dominions of Vākāṭaka Hariṣeṇa. These sites are Banoṭī, Aurangabad, and Bāgh. The credit, however, cannot be given to the entire Vākāṭaka race, for such Buddhist monuments did not come up in the reign of earlier or later Vākāṭaka kings. Those kings of earlier times are noted for patronising Hindu temples alone.

We must therefore conclude that even if Hariṣeṇa did not directly involve at the site of Ajantā he certainly allowed the developments to take place. He was probably a tolerant Hindu to say the least. This is how, indeed, the golden age came to be.<sup>31</sup>

The above line of reasoning answers yet another question. The question is: was the site of Ajantā dead or alive during the period of lull? The answer is it was never dead. Had the site been dead, the renaissance there would not have taken place. Monastics must have kept coming there to dwell in Caves 12, 13, and 15A. They must also have been dwelling in the brick monastery just across the river Waghur at the site. The brick monastery had many stūpas and residential chambers unearthed during a recent excavation by Archaeological Survey of India (Archaeological Survey of India 2006). The laity and traders must have been visiting here, as the site was and still is situated at the cross road of two highways known as Uttarāpath and Dakṣiṇāpath in the ancient times. Prayers and congregations must have been going on in the stūpa temples.

#### *Site selection*

Some additional observations may be made about the site selection for Cave 8. No other fifth century cave existed when the site selection for Cave 8 was being made. Apart from the Sātavāhana-period stūpa temples, i.e. Caves 9 and 10,

there were the modest residential caves of the same period, i.e. Caves 12, 13, and 15A. All of these residential caves were located on one side of the stūpa temples. The other side, on the east, had no excavation at all. That is why when the need for more adjuncts for these stūpa temples was felt the best location could only be found on the eastern side. This location had the additional advantage of closer staircases for climbing up and down the ravine. We shall not be surprised if there was a *torāṇa-dvāra* before the stūpa temples of Caves 9 and 10. There might also have been a *prākāra*, i.e. an enclosure wall before the frontcourt. This would have been a necessity, a protection measure, especially from wildlife. Evidence of such *prākāra* or enclosure walls is still preserved before several other caves of Ajantā. Because of the extensive landslide much of these are permanently lost. There must also have been a small flight of steps emanating from the riverbed. Traces of some steps are preserved before Cave Lower 6. One entrance gate would have been sufficient for accessing all of the Sātavāhana period caves as also for the new Cave 8. Soon, however, bigger caves of the fifth-century phase were to acquire separate flight of steps, and exclusive entrance gates of their own. The fashion of individual entrance gates for each cave actually emanated from the fact of a real requirement when the next cave that was begun on the cliff, i.e. Cave 26 had no readily available approach from the ravine. An approach by digging a rather

long flight of steps from the ravine below was necessary. And following this, when other caves were begun on different locations of the hill, they too needed to be conveniently approached from the ravine; thus, they too were provided with separate flight of steps from the ravine. Ultimately, it became a fashion, a norm, a rule of sorts to supply each cave with an exclusive and independent stairway from the ravine.