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Cave Architecture of India

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Caves in ancient India were places of special relevance. Aside from offering natural shelter, they were regarded as *loci* of supernatural powers and spiritual enhancement. Located at the *nexi* of sacred geographies and often associated with local deities, caves were favored abodes by hermits and renouncers. Elaborate rock-cut architectural structures were created for ascetics to use during the Maurya period (322–185 BCE) with King Ashoka (304–232 BCE) being the first to endow man-made caves to the Ajivika ascetics at Barabar Hill. The four Barabar caves located in a rocky outcrop in the Gaya district of Bihar preserve distinctive plans with rectangular spaces attached to a circular, hut-shaped room at one end. The cave interiors are plain and flawlessly polished in a manner that alters light and sound. The only decoration appears at the entrance of the so-called Lomas Rishi cave where a portal motif with an architrave embellished by elephants and *stupas* is engraved in the living rock (Fig. 1).

During the second and first centuries BCE, rock-cut structures for ascetics were also created in Orissa in the Udayagiri and Khandagiri hills. These caves consist of simple series of cells with decorations above the entrances representing trees, elephants, and figures reminiscent of types seen in Shunga terracotta plaques. The Hathigumpha cave at Udayagiri carries a famous inscription by the local king Kharavela. From this time onwards, simple rock-cut complexes also began to develop in Gujarat, in a prosperous area involved in long-distance trade where both Jain and Buddhist religions thrived. The early caves at Junagadh, among others, include simple cells opening on porches with minimal ornamentation that takes the form of auspicious emblems.

Between the second century BCE and the second century CE, a surge in Buddhist patronage led to the establishment of many Buddhist rock-cut sites in Maharashtra along the western edge of the Deccan Plateau. These excavations were large and elaborate and typically included monastic residential caves along with an apsidal hall destined for worship. Called *chaitya-griha* or *chaitya* hall in the votive inscriptions, this sacred space presents a row of columns running parallel to the walls and a rock-cut *stupa* placed at its end. The caves at Bhaja were among the earliest in western Deccan (second c. BCE). The *chaitya* hall was finished with wooden elements such as beams inserted in the rock vault and a wooden façade now missing, and rock-cut images of arches and balustrades with *mithunas* or couples frame the entrance. The monastic residences at Bhaja consist of series of cells equipped with stone beds; they open on small rectangular porches, generally undecorated, with the exception of cave 19 where carved in low relief are figures riding an elephant and a horse-pulled chariot, possibly the Vedic gods Indra and Surya. Buddha images do not appear in the early caves of western Deccan (second c. BCE–2nd c. CE) generally associated with the Hinayan tradition, and the figural decorations in this phase consist mostly of images of *mithuna* or couples such as those at Bhaja or guardian *yakshas* like those at Pitalkhora (Figs. 2, 3, and 4).

Buddhist cave architecture in western Deccan soon emancipated itself from the use of wood, and most *chaitya* halls came to be entirely carved out of living rock. The *chaitya* hall at Karle has an ornate stone façade and an interior with elaborate pillar bases and capitals, while the Ajanta *chaitya* hall no. 10 was embellished by vivid paintings. Sometime during the first century CE, well-planned

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Fig. 1 (a) Lomas Rishi cave, general view and (b) entrance to the cave (By Harry Falk)

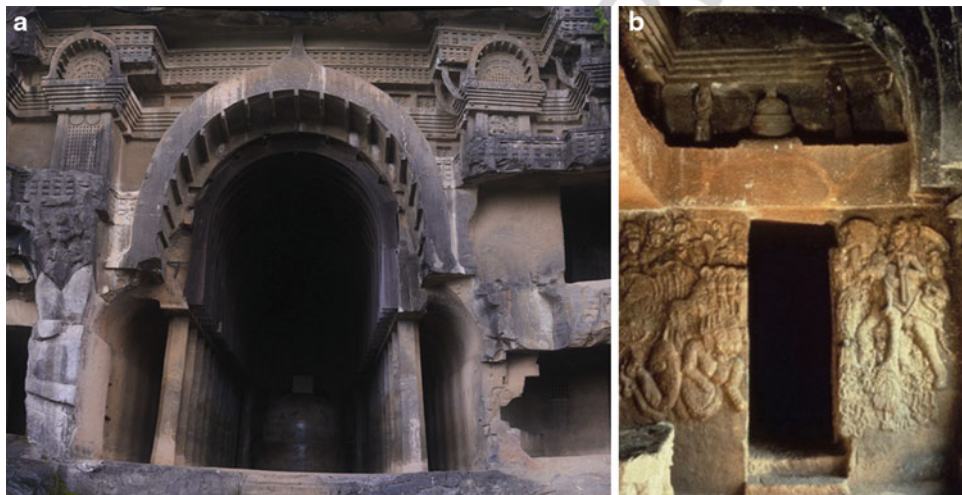


Fig. 2 (a) Bhaja, *chaitya* hall, and (b) cave 18

monasteries, with rock-cut cells aligned along three sides of a square court, were introduced in Buddhist cave architecture; caves 3 and 10 at Nasik bearing inscriptions of the Kshatrapa king Nahapana and the Satavahana rulers constitute excellent examples of such square *vihara* cave types (Fig. 5).

Buddhist rock-cut monasteries in western Deccan were often supported by gifts of traders and craftsmen, as suggested by in situ votive inscriptions, and the sites benefited from the wealth brought to the area by thriving Indian Ocean trade. The caves, called *lena* in the inscriptions, grew in clusters around important passes along the edges of the plateau (Sahyadri Range), near trading routes, not too far from urban centers, and often in areas where agricultural land was readily available. The Buddhist caves at Bhaja, Karle, and Bedsa were grouped along the Bor Ghat pass; the large four clusters of caves at Junnar (Tuljalena, Manmodi, Shivneri, and Lenyadri) overlooking fertile land were also situated in proximity of the Nanaghat pass. The caves at Pitalkhora, Ajanta, and Aurangabad were strategically located along major internal trade routes, while in coastal Konkan flourished the Kondivte, Kuda, and Kanheri caves. The latter, located near the ancient port of Kalyan, experienced an unusually long period of activity. Stylistically related to the earliest Buddhist



Fig. 3 Pitalkhora, Yaksha

sites in western Deccan are also the caves at Guntupalli in Andhra Pradesh (ca. second c. BCE) that include a round *chaitya* hall similar to the one from Kondivte in Maharashtra.

The fifth century marked a renewed interest in patronage of rock-cut architecture in northwestern India. Most relevant are the Vaishnava caves at Udayagiri in Madhya Pradesh realized under the Gupta dynasty and the major expansion of the Buddhist caves at Ajanta undertaken by the Vakataka king Harishena and his entourage. At Ajanta two more *chaitya* halls and 20 additional *viharas* (monasteries) were created at the end of the fifth century, and they were all embellished by elaborate paintings of *jatakas*, *avadanas*, and other Buddhist images that survive only in part. By this time the Buddha image had become the focus of worship at Ajanta: aside from sculptures in *chaitya* halls each *vihara* at the site included a cell with a larger than life sculpture of the Buddha seated on a throne placed on axis with the entrance. Buddhist patronage continued well into the sixth century at the nearby site of Aurangabad where new architectural layouts were developed. Smaller caves were created, with or without side cells, that included a square central shrine with a Buddha image surrounded by a corridor for circumambulation as in caves no. 2, 5, 7, and 8 (Figs. 6 and 7).

Buddhist caves in western Deccan experienced a slow decline beginning in the sixth century, as patronage in the region shifted to the creation of Shaiva rock-cut temples – most notably the ones at Elephanta in Konkan and at Ellora in the Aurangabad district. The unfinished great cave or cave 1 on the Elephanta Island took rock-cut architecture to monumental proportions with its huge, rectangular hall including colossal pillars, multiple points of access, as well as *linga* shrines. Elephanta cave 1 is best known for the monumental relief of a three-headed Shiva (usually labeled as Sadashiva)

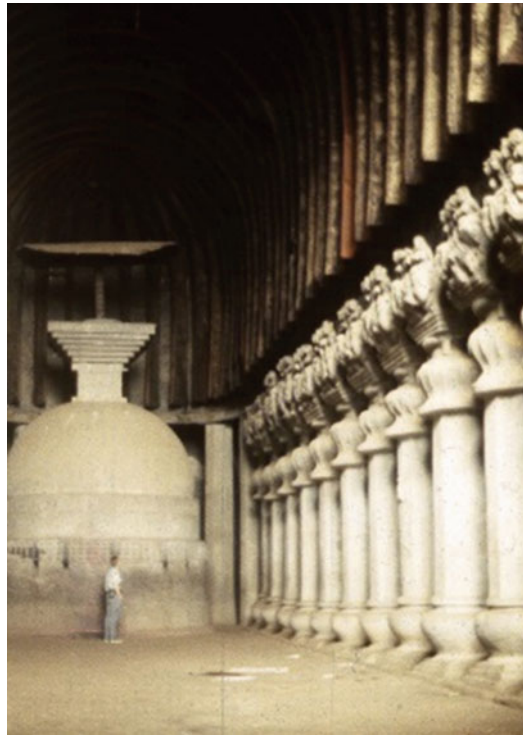


Fig. 4 Karle, *chaitya* hall

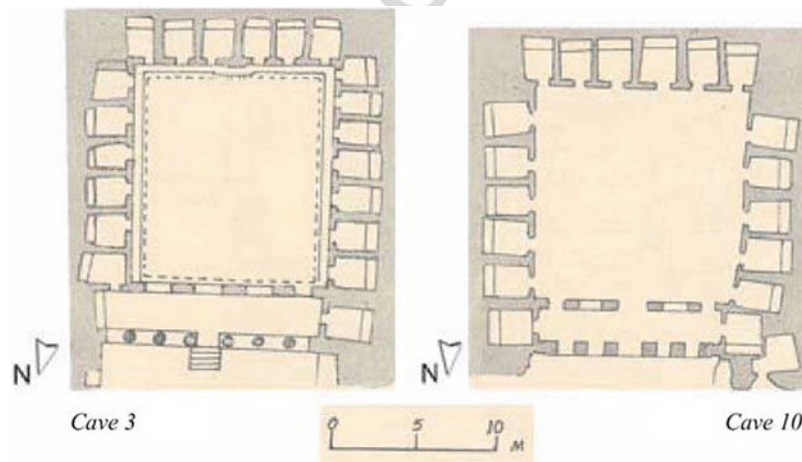


Fig. 5 Nasik, caves 3 and 10, plans after Gethin Rees, <http://www.ancient-asia-journal.com/article/view/aa.10209/47>

77 dominating the south wall and for the large tableaux depicting other forms and feats of the god
 78 carved on the remaining rock walls. It is also during the early sixth century that a first group of caves
 79 dedicated to the god Shiva was established at Ellora. These excavations are stylistically linked to the
 80 Elephanta cave as exemplified by cave 29 also known as Dhumar Lena. It is not until the eight
 81 century, after more Buddhist caves had been cut on the southernmost edge of the Ellora cliff (caves
 82 2–12), that the spectacular rock-cut Kailash temple (cave 16) was created under the Rashtrakuta king
 83 Krishna I. This rock-cut structure is covered by elaborate carvings and echoes the shape of Shiva's

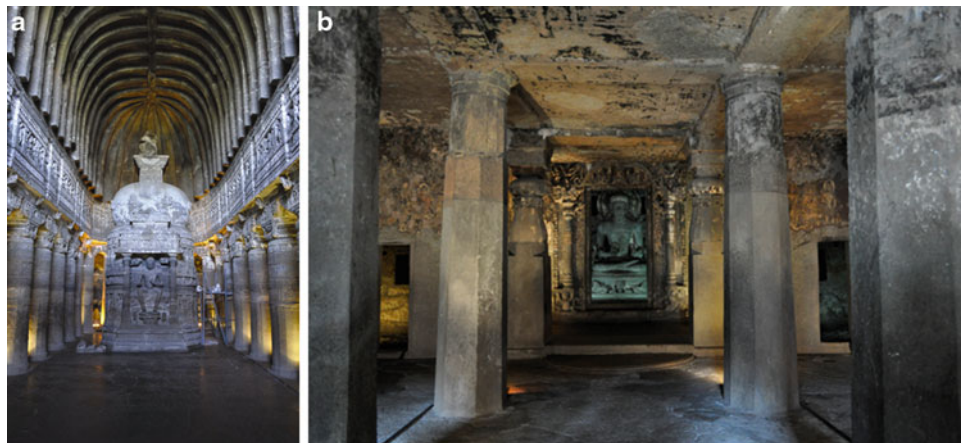


Fig. 6 (a) Ajanta, *chaitya* hall 26, and (b) cave lower 6 (By Nicholas Morrissey)

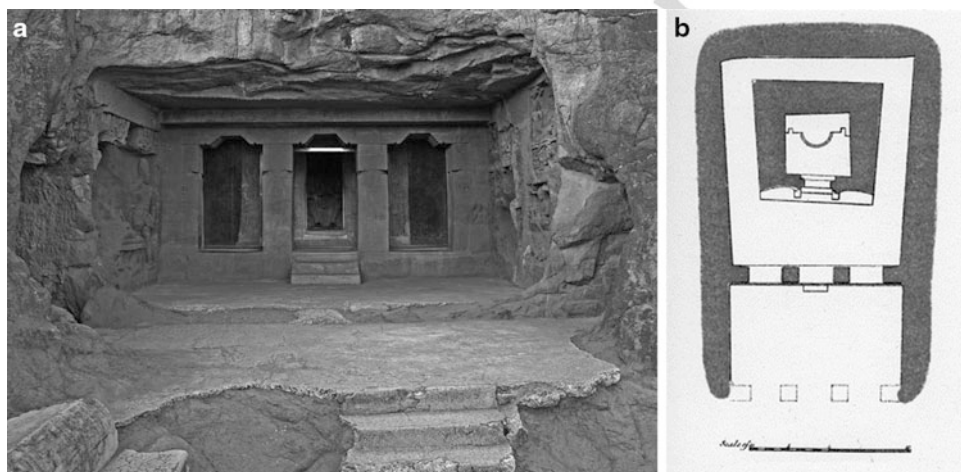


Fig. 7 (a) Aurangabad cave 2, view and (b) plan

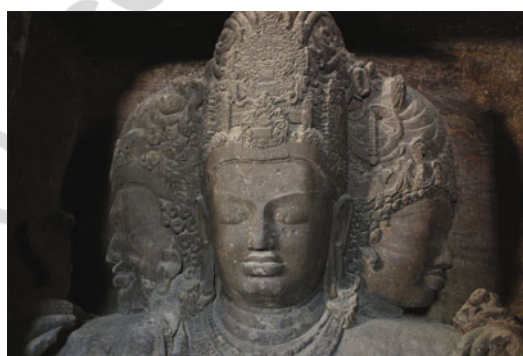


Fig. 8 Elephanta, Sadashiva

84 mountainous abode; it stands completely free from the rock cliff, where multistoried pillared halls
 85 and rectangular chapels are excavated all around. In the ninth century Ellora was also occupied by
 86 the Jains who cut a few more elaborate caves (caves 30–34) on the northern edge end of the site
 87 (Figs. 8, 9, and 10).



Fig. 9 Ellora, cave 29, Dhumarlena



Fig. 10 Ellora, cave 17, Kailasanatha (By Lisa Owen)

88 The Deccan was the heartland of cave architecture, and the Chalukya kings continued the tradition
89 of rock-cut temples at Badami and Aihole in Karnataka, where caves were cut between the end of the
90 sixth and the eight century. The four Badami caves, three Hindu and one Jain (no. 4), have simple



Fig. 11 Badami, cave 3, porch



Fig. 12 Mahabalipuram, Arjuna, and Draupadi Rathas

layouts that include a shrine, a rectangular pillared hall embellished with sculptures, and a porch or *mandapa*. They seem to be stylistically related to the earliest Hindu caves at Ellora; in particular, Badami cave 3 dated by an inscription to 578 is akin to cave 21 at Ellora (also called Rameshvara). The small Ravana Phadi cave dedicated to Shiva at Aihole seems to bridge, in terms of style and design, the rock-cut tradition of the Deccan with that of Tamil Nadu (Fig. 11).

Under the Pallava dynasty cave architecture blossomed in Tamil Nadu, along the southeast coast of India. The most impressive are the Hindu caves and monolithic rock-cut temples at Mamallapuram dating to the seventh century CE. The caves are many and modest in size; they generally include a shrine that opens directly onto a small porch embellished by sculptures of Hindu

100 gods. The most remarkable are the so-called Varaha, Trimurti, and Mahishasuramardini caves.
 101 Among the nine freestanding monolithic temples, five are clustered together and are known today
 102 as the five Rathas. These unfinished monuments replicate different building types in the living rock,
 103 and the four that appear to be aligned (the so-called Draupadi, Arjuna, Bhima, and Dharmaraja) were
 104 originally carved out of a single boulder. Each temple, dedicated to a different Hindu god, is
 105 intricately carved on the outside and is associated with sculpted *vahanas* or divine animal; the
 106 interiors are barely roughed out or simply unfinished (Fig. 12).

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