

Ajanta's Evolution





Enigmatic Bodhisattva Attendant of Ajanta Cave 20

The Bodhisattva image in Ajanta Cave 20 embodies an enigma: despite its incomplete carving, the figure has been painted. This discrepancy invites rigorous contemplation: Why was the decision made to paint before the carving was concluded? Evidently, the notion of a 'flexible finish' (Dehejia and Rockwell 2011) was not a consideration for the artists. Our research suggests that the Hunnic Invasion III, around AD 469, necessitated a hiatus in activity, leaving this cave temple in silence for approximately eight years. Subsequently, circa AD 477, amidst the upheaval brought on by the Invasion V by the Early Alkhan Huns, there was a precipitous effort to consecrate the site, resulting in the unfinished image being painted.

Ajanta's Evolution

From Sāvakayāna to Bodhisatvayāna
Amid Hunnic Turmoil

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To

the late Rizwana Khan, Patna;
Prof. Ratan Parimoo, Baroda;
the late Prof. Walter Spink, Michigan;
the late Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, New Delhi;
the late Dr. P. Banerjee, New Delhi;
Prof. Dieter Schlingloff, Leipzig; and
Prof. Monika Zin, Leipzig.

Your presence in my journey is a cherished gift.

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Preface

Welcome to the exploration of *Ajanta's Evolution*, a scholarly work that connects a spectrum of disciplines. This detailed study harmoniously brings together insights from Bauddha art, architecture, history, archaeology, epigraphy, and narrative literature, alongside focused analyses in Gandhāran studies, Eurasian studies, Indology, Iranology, Sinology, and Central Asian studies. It spans ancient history from the earliest times until the fifth century AD, traversing the chronologies of dynasties such as the Guptas, Vākātakas, Aulikaras, Parivrājakas, Traikūtakas, and the Alkhan or Alchon Huns. Moreover, it sheds light on significant Bauddha rock-cut monuments across India, with a particular emphasis on the Ajanta Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Designed for both students and advanced scholars, this work provides a scientifically grounded exploration of this fascinating subject matter. The author has attempted to follow the most relevant scientific principles ensuring clarity and reliability. The work is intended to complement the author's recent publications from 2018 onwards. Some of them are available freely on Internet.

Footnotes are judiciously employed to trace the origins of ideas and direct readers to valuable sources, though not all evidence and illustrations are presented within these pages. While many references and pieces of evidence may not be directly cited herein, this book serves as a guide, directing readers to sources where primary evidence can be uncovered. Acknowledging that this approach may necessitate diligent research by readers, it is through this commitment to rigorous investigation that the narrative presented here will uphold the highest standards of scientific inquiry. Readers are invited to explore the evidence, whether referenced directly or indirectly, promising a revelation that has remained concealed since the creation of Ajanta—a new account of why the caves were never completed and abandoned, and the contexts behind the art that has puzzled modern scholars for centuries. This book represents a fusion of ideas and research, not solely dedicated to proving one thesis but equally concerned with exploring possibilities. Within its pages, the word 'was' may occasionally prompt contemplation of 'might be' or 'could be.'

Instead of repetitively using 'Buddhism,' the term 'Bauddha¹ Dharma²' is employed. Terms such as Sāvaka and Śrāvaka, both denoting a hearer or disciple, are used interchangeably, with the former favoured in all temporal contexts up to *circa* AD 467 to align with the proposition

¹ Burgess rightly mentioned that the 'adjectival are formed in the Indian language by lengthening the vowels, thus from Śiva is formed the word Śaiva, denoting anything relating to Śiva or a member of the sect devoted to him; so, from *Vishṇu* is formed *Vaiṣṇava*; from *Buddha*—*Bauddha*; from *Jina*—*Jaina*; and from Śakti—Śākta. "Buddhist" has, however, been generally used throughout this work [his work] instead of Bauddha, as it has from long use become so much more familiar to English ears than its more correct Indian synonym. — J.B.' (Fergusson and Burgess 1880, xx).

² The use of the term 'Dharma' instead of 'Buddhism' is increasingly prevalent in contemporary research, as evidenced by Skilling (2013, p. 69)

suggesting Sanskritisation of Ajanta and the shift in Yāna (Vehicle) that occurred from *circa* AD 468 onwards. Thus, ‘Sāvaka’ is used in Part I, while ‘Śrāvaka’ is used in Part II.

The spelling ‘Bodhisatva’ is favoured over ‘Bodhisattva’.³ All historical dates are presented as ‘*circa/ca.*’ (approximately) within the Christian Era (AD/BC), except where specifically noted otherwise. Due to specific considerations, the notation switches to BCE and CE in the Plates section. Illustrations, plans, drawings, or charts derived from the contributions of other scholars are duly credited, ensuring that all such content is properly attributed. All remaining content is original and the product of the author’s research.

Variations in spelling of historical figures, places, and names are addressed by referring to authoritative works, prioritising the Archaeological Survey of India (1964, II: 357–379), Nagaraju (1981), Bakker (2019, 669–700), Bakker (2020, 120–128), and Balogh (2020, 431–437). Significantly, the term ‘stupa’ is written in roman typeface as it has been integrated into English lexicons, while other non-English terms such as ‘*cetiya*’ or ‘*caitya*’ are italicised because they are not found in English dictionaries, hence, they must be treated as foreign words.

Unless specified differently, the primary focus of all ideas and propositions in this book centres on the Ajanta caves. Peripheral discussions extend to a broader context, encompassing: (a) rock-cut architecture and sites across various creeds, (b) Bauddha rock-cut architecture specifically, and (c) the geographical regions of western India, middle India, and the Deccan.

This book focuses on ancient India, referring to regions within present-day India. It’s important to note that this terminology is anachronistic; the territories in question were neither unified under a single entity nor known as ‘India’ during the time periods in question.

The term ‘*madhyadeśa*’, translated as ‘middle India’, is used to denote an ancient geographical concept. Historical sources vary in their descriptions of its boundaries. In this context, we do not attempt to precisely define ‘*madhyadeśa*’ but rather employ the term in its traditionally imprecise sense.

Should readers detect any errors or inconsistencies in my previous publications, I encourage them to regard the information presented in this work as the most current reflection of my knowledge.

It is hoped that this expedition through the mysteries of Ajanta proves as exhilarating for the reader as it has been for the author.

— RKS

³ This preference is informed by the research findings presented by Gouriswar Bhattacharya (2010).

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Finally, my family—my wife, Padma, my son, Karttikeya, and my daughter, Priyamvada—have been my support system, enabling me to pursue this work even amidst challenging times.

The merit of this work is a testament to the contributions of the above individuals and institutions. However, any shortcomings in the book are my responsibility alone. The views expressed are entirely my own.