

INTRODUCTION

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

The Ajañṭā Caves are among India's most frequented tourist destinations. For native visitors the high season runs from the week of Diwali (in November) until late February -- the onset of the cultural, if not climatic, hot-season -- after which the caves are relinquished to those famed mad dogs and Englishmen. Each day during "season," Ajañṭā will be visited by several thousand tourists, ranging from Bengali school girls chaperoned on historical tours, to middle-class Bombay families exploring their state, to Gujurati farmers on pilgrimage, these last sometimes unable to afford even the 2¢ admission. Both during season and afterwards, foreign tourists make the excursion to these most extraordinary caves as well: euro-hippie travellers on the Goa-to-Manali drug trail, 5-star jet-setting Germans, Sri Lankan pilgrims, and the ubiquitous shutterbug Japanese.

Wherever these visitors come from and whenever they come, one feature of the Ajañṭā experience many share is that a hired guide will lead their tour through the caves. Besides drawing attention to Ajañṭā's celebrated masterpieces -- most famous among which are paintings of the "dying princess" and Padmapāñi's serene smile -- Ajañṭā's guides often provide their charges with a first introduction to Buddhist doctrine and history. In Cave 1, tourists learn

about the person of the Buddha. The colossal monolithic Buddha in the cave's shrine has the curious property that, when illuminated from diverse angles, it appears to have subtly distinct facial expressions. Illumined from the right, the edges of the Buddha's mouth curve upwards, from the left, he appears wrathful, and lit frontally from beneath, the Buddha seems to be seated in profound meditative equipoise. Led to Cave Upper 6, tourists learn of the Buddhist Dharma. Several cells inside this cave are fronted by "singing pillars," each of which resonates at a unique frequency when struck by the hand. To recreate the musical devotions this vihāra's residents may have once rendered to the Buddha, guides and visitors alike delight in playing the pillars. Since *Dharma* signifies theory as well as practice, in the interior of Cave 10's cavernous stūpa hall, tourists are told of the ancient split between Hīnayāna (here politely called Theravāda) and Mahāyāna Buddhisms: Hīnayānists worship stūpas, but not images; for the Hīnayānists the Buddha is a super-man, for the Mahāyānists a Supreme God, like Śiva and Viṣṇu. In Cave 16, the subject of the Saṅgha is often introduced. The main image in this vihāra sits upon a throne, with his feet flat on the floor, and incised into his left foot is a fairly large cavity. Tourists are told that this recess was cut by Ajaṅṭā's ancient artisans as a place for the tourists-of-yore to deposit offerings for the Buddhist monks. Thus the guides highlight the saṅgha's social role as a recipient of alms and source of merit . . . a role appropriated today by the tour-guides themselves.

Anyone familiar with the academic literature on Buddhism will recognize that for Ajaṅṭā's tour-guides, scholarship is not central to fulfilling their duties as

religious instructors. They have even been known to fabricate an altogether alternate history for the religion. During the year I lived by the site, I heard one tour-guide inform a bus-load of Italians that, because Buddhism was in decline in the 7th century, Harṣa, King of Kanauj, invited the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang to India to revivify the religion. According to this guide's tale, Hsüan-tsang's multifaceted programme included the first introduction of female goddesses to the Indian Buddhist pantheon as well as the initiation of the phase of work at Ajañṭā responsible for the site's most famous paintings. Although one may be astounded by such blatant disregard for facts, truth, history, and scholarship as we know them to be, the tour guide on the ground understands his job to be to provide a coherently narrative and engaging experience of the caves for the sightseers in his charge. A familiarity with the latest historical theories and the details underlying such theories plays no role when it comes to providing memorable stories for the slide-show back home. Success is measured instead by the guide's ability to use the solid remains surrounding him and his audience to breath life into his story, to make it compelling and memorable.

Ajañṭā's caves are a living memorial to Buddhism in India, a matrix from which that ancient religion is excavated at the site daily. However, this work is being undertaken by people for whom discussion of Buddhism is just another way to entertain sightseers. And even if Ajañṭā's guides sought to update the Buddhological dimension of their narrations, they would receive little help from the academic community. To date, no concentrated or systematic effort has been made to excavate Ajañṭā's Buddhist matrix by those most competent to the task,

scholars of the Buddhist religion. To be sure, the magnificent details of Ajañṭā's vihāras, stūpa halls and shrines have attracted the close scrutiny of generations of art-historians. One scholar, Walter Spink, has found such promise in the site that he affirms Ajañṭā to be "by all counts, the most minutely, as well as the most totally, analyzable site . . . in the world."¹ Spink makes this claim in regard to the wealth of data for reconstructing a chronology of Ajañṭā's motival and architectural developments. Given this site's riches, one wonders whether it also preserves a superabundance of information through which to analyze Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. But even if Spink's hyperbole cannot be applied to religious evidence at Ajañṭā, the work accomplished to date towards recovering Ajañṭā's Buddhism would not have exhausted even one of the world's less analyzable sites. If only to supplement the tenuous reportage of commentators at the site a thoroughgoing scholarly treatment of Ajañṭā's Buddhism is both desirable and necessary.

A study such as I present, which will read a single archeological site's architecture, paintings, sculptures, and inscriptions as indices of a complex and dynamic local form of Buddhism, has not been attempted by a scholar of Indian Buddhism. Accordingly, because of this project's novelty, beyond being simply an erudite version of a tour guide's narration, it offers an opportunity to review the field's regnant evidential and methodological assumptions. Tour guides are the dilettantes of memory, scholars its virtuosi. In the normative economy of recollection, the scholar sets the terms of the discourse, while the guides are expected

¹ Walter M. Spink. "The Archaeology of Ajañṭā," *Ars Orientalis*. 21 (1992): 70.

to disseminate those terms. At Ajaṅṭā, the seeds "Buddha," "Dharma," "Saṅgha," "Mahāyāna" and "Hīnayāna" are daily planted in the fertile meadows of the paying masses' imaginations. But because scholars of Buddhism have largely ignored Ajaṅṭā, one can be certain that the terms and concepts Ajaṅṭā's guides sow did not themselves germinate in analyses of the site's own artifacts. Instead (to extend this metaphor to its end), these categories have been uprooted by scholars from Buddhist literary sources which may have no demonstrable link to Ajaṅṭā, and have been transplanted at the site by local guides regardless of their applicability. This would seem to be a problem. But, the fact is, archaeological artifacts, paintings, architectural programmes, sculptures may not in themselves be materially adequate to the expression of discursive categories of the sort used in a tour-guide's narration. Though a picture is worth a thousand words, no picture can be expected to invent that speech. Might not these guides transplantations be a reasonable response to the often stony silence of Ajaṅṭā's artifacts? In sum, one issue that will run as a thread throughout this study is the methodological tension between 'textual' and 'archaeological' artifacts as adequate and appropriate sources for the reconstruction of local manifestations Buddhist religiosity like that found at Ajaṅṭā.

The complications facing Ajaṅṭā's tour-guides in their capacity as religious instructors are very much like those met by early Europeans who visited the site. As I will discuss below, because the West discovered Ajaṅṭā before it did Buddhism (that is to say, when Buddhism was known-of but little known), the site's first Western visitors had scant basis upon which to make determinations

concerning its icons, chronology, religious or cultural contexts. Instead, heeding Abel Rémusat's advice to the nineteenth-century Orientalist, they "sail[ed] ahead on the ocean of romanticism."² Their musings are now treated as quaint relics from a bygone day. In point of fact, one finds that an explosion of understanding followed upon the first dissemination of Buddhist literature in the nineteenth century.

Can one affirm then that categories known solely from textual sources are invaluable, even necessary, for the reconstruction of Ajaṅṭā's Buddhism? Only if, with the same breath, one cautions against a too hasty embrace of such categories. The naive application of concepts and doctrines derived from texts to Ajaṅṭā would make one like Wittgenstein's philosopher, who "always carri[es] a sheet of paper in his pocket on which the names of colors are coordinated with colored patches" so that if asked to fetch a red flower from the meadow he can do so."³ In this dissertation I intend to pick the flowers first. Checking their colors is but my second order of business. And finally, because the scholar's task ultimately is the normalizing and legitimation of discourses, the color-chart itself might be in for some changes. The tenets, principles, and ideals represented in textual sources may be adjunct to and highly fruitful for the analysis of Ajaṅṭā's archaeological material, but the former cannot not be allowed to determine *a priori* the significance of the latter. Red flowers may well make it in, but the

² Raymond Schwab. *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*. Trans. by Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 227.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *The Blue and Brown Books*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960): 3-4.

simple fact is, this study of Ajaṇṭā will be a mixed bouquet.

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It is a commonplace in Buddhist commentatorial literature for authors to begin their works with the explanation of their treatises' titles, often indicating how their entire subject matters can be understood through the title. This is a fine tradition, well suited to the form of the modern dissertation as well. *Setting the Three Jewels: The Complex Culture of Buddhism at the Ajaṇṭā Caves.*

Setting: Used metaphorically, this verb draws together the major foci of the title (the Three Jewels, Buddhism, and Ajaṇṭā) in a single image.

Three Jewels: The Three Jewels are the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, which may be characterized as symbols for Buddhist ideal, belief and practice, and community respectively. This dissertation will treat the act of taking refuge in the Three Jewels as *the* constitutional ritual of Buddhism: a Buddhist is someone who takes refuge in these Jewels. The Three Jewels, true to their metaphor, are gems whose many facets (doctrinal, ideological, institutional, mythical, practical) glint variously in the light of inquiry. Although these Jewels' many faces can never be wholly illumined -- indeed, there would be no magic in a gem evenly illuminated throughout -- all that is Buddhist can finally be reduced to a facet of one of the Three Jewels.

This placement of Buddhism's base-line in the ritual of taking refuge receives wide warrant within the Buddhist tradition. One finds the ritual thus used in one early canonical source like the *Sutta Nipāta*, as well as far more recently, in the apologist Walpola Rāhula's *What the Buddha Taught*. Somewhere

in the middle, the 13th century Tibetan hierarch Sa skya paṇḍita's *Inspirational Letters* provide this idea's clearest statement: "One does not enter the ranks of Buddhists until one has gone for refuge."⁴

Indeed, one can find in Buddhist literature hints suggesting that one cannot approach any of the individual Jewels unless one accepts all three. How might one approach the Buddha? One answer is found in the tale of the taming of the nāga king Apalāla, told in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, a crucial text for Ajaṇṭā.⁵ Very briefly indeed, this nāga attacks the Buddha, the Buddha counter-attacks, conquers Apalāla, and gives him to understand that he is destined for hell if he does not repent his ways. Apalāla, taking the hint, asks the Buddha what to do. The Buddha responds: "You must, in my presence, take refuge in the Three Jewels."⁶ How to approach the Dharma? To cite Sa skya paṇḍita again: "The [act of] going for refuge is the foundation of the Dharma."⁷ Finally, if we extend the Saṅgha beyond its restricted meaning of only the members of the Buddhist monastic community, to include all who take specifically Buddhist vows of restraint, we find a confirmation of this principle in Vasubandhu's stipulation that the taking of refuge must precede acceptance of Buddhist moral regulations:

⁴ *thog mar skyabs 'gro ma byas na, sangs rgyas pa'i kbongs su mi chud*. Sa skya paṇḍita. *Sulekha of Sakya Paṇḍita (skyes-bu-dam-pa-rnams-sprñ-wabi-yi-ge-bzbugs-so)*. Ed. by Madan Mohan Singh. (Patna: Bihar Research Society, 1971): 49.

⁵ See Jean Przyluski ("Le Nord-Ouest de l'Inde dans le Vinaya des Mūla-sarvāstivādin et les Textes Apparentés," *Journal Asiatique*. série XI, 4 [1914]: 510-512) for a translation from the Chinese. John Strong (*The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia*. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992]: 26-28) has an interesting discussion of this popular tale, and his end-notes provide references for locating its many textual redactions and artistic illustrations.

⁶ Przyluski. "Le Nord-Ouest de l'Inde," 512.

⁷ *chos kyi gzhi skyabs 'gro yin*. Sa skya paṇḍita. *Sulekha*, 49.

"the [act of] going for refuge is the threshold for the undertaking of all vows of restraint."⁸

Complex: This is an adjective, qualifying 'Culture.' Culture is complex because cultural meaning transcends the limits that any culture will place upon what it considers meaningful.

Culture: For the purposes of this dissertation, I am treating culture as the shared symbolic values that connect a random population into a society. The complex culture referred to in this dissertation's title is a culture in which the symbols that order and give meaning to social interaction cannot be treated as thoroughly or absolutely transparent either to a cultural insider or an outsider such as myself. Accordingly, the phrase 'Complex Culture' was added to this title for two reasons. First, these words indicate that my primary interest lies in the social dimensions of Ajaṅṭā's religious expressions, and second they signal the tentative and incomplete nature of this study, as of any study that addresses social phenomena.

Buddhism: As indicated above, within this dissertation Buddhism is to be understood as that which may be encompassed through the multi-valent symbols of the Three Jewels. These Jewels provide a reliable basis for working out what is and is not "Buddhist" at Ajaṅṭā, and simultaneously offer an ideal structure through which to explore and discuss the evidence found there.

Ajaṅṭā: I will treat this topic at greater length in the next chapter. For now

⁸ *śaraṇagamanāni sarvasaṃvarasamādeṣu dvārabhṛtāni*. Vasubandhu. *Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya of Ācārya Vasubandhu with Sphūṭārthā Commentary of Ācārya Yaśomitra*. Ed. by Dwarika Das Shastri. (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1987): 630.

suffice it to say that the Ajañṭā Caves are a set of 36 monastic residences, worship halls, and shrinelets hewn out of a sheer mountain scarp on a bend of the Waghora River in Western India, approximately 220 miles north-east by east from Bombay. Work at the site occurred in two phases, the first of which ranged from approximately 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E. According to the prevailing theory, the second phase covered the period between 462 and 480 C.E. My study will focus upon this second period exclusively. As I have already indicated, this site is unique in India for its wealth of archeological data touching on Buddhism, which includes evidence in the form of epigraphs, architectural programs, paintings, and sculptures.

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In the course of introducing this dissertation, I have touched upon two themes. First, although the Ajañṭā caves preserve a rich and well-preserved lode of evidence for reconstructing Indian Buddhism, this source has not been mined; second, a site like Ajañṭā is valuable because it provides scholars of Buddhism an opportunity to set textual sources side by side with archaeological for producing a fuller picture of Buddhism as a living local religion. In order to address both issues the dissertation is divided into two principal parts. The first division, entitled "Prolegomena to the Study of Ajañṭā's Buddhism," treats matters that must be addressed before I can begin the study of Ajañṭā's Buddhism proper. There are two prolegomena. Religion being preeminently a cultural and social phenomenon, one must explore matters religious within their historical contexts; this is the focus of the first chapter where I take the chronological

investigations of art historian Walter Spink as a *point d'appui* from which to reconstruct the historical events affecting Ajaṅṭā's patrons and their project. Moreover, if one would study Buddhism at Ajaṅṭā, the evidence must itself be delimited: what are the available sources and how can we use them? The dissertation's second chapter, therefore, explores the nature of archaeological and textual sources, and the type of information each may be expected to provide for the historian of Ajaṅṭā's Buddhism. Additionally, in this second chapter I select and elaborate a 'canon' of literary texts apropos to the reconstruction of Ajaṅṭā's Buddhism.

A sage has cautioned me that one must expect a work of this sort to be like slicing through the Gordian Knot: some problems are solved only by leaving many more loose ends. These sage words can assuredly apply to this dissertation's second half, wherein I attempt to elaborate the significance of the multivalent symbols of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha at Ajaṅṭā. Because this is a preliminary study, each chapter in this division attempts to illuminate its Jewel in a clear white light, without being overly subtle. "Saṅgha: Ajaṅṭā's Community and its Patrons" focusses upon two interrelated issues: who belonged to Ajaṅṭā's community, both lay and monastic, and how did these individuals come together as a community of patrons and recipients. In the course of this chapter we will find that a significant proportion of Ajaṅṭā's donors identify themselves by an epithet that may be interpreted as suggesting they were themselves blood members of Śākyamuni Buddha's own family. The chapter entitled, "Dharma: The Theory and Practice of Buddhism at Ajaṅṭā," explores the ideological

ramifications of this epithet, whereby I seek to recover the self-understanding of Ajaṅṭā's community as Buddhists. Finally, the third chapter of this division, "Buddha: Ajaṅṭā's Ideal Savior," investigates the relationship between the members of Ajaṅṭā's community and the Buddha himself. Taking its start from two incidents in the Buddha's life that are narrated in Ajaṅṭā's paintings, I examine what it means for the Buddha to have created, maintained, and purified a community of devotees through the performance of miraculous acts, and how those acts continued to hold meaning for a community founded one millennium after the Buddha's decease.

PART I:

**PROLEGOMENA TO
THE STUDY OF AJAṆṬĀ'S BUDDHISM**