

CHAPTER I

ON THE HISTORY OF A PLACE, AUSPICIOUS AND DELIGHTFUL

Ajañṭā, An Introduction

Before Ajañṭā's tour-guides begin their tales of history and art, the caves themselves present an eloquent tableau. This dissertation will attempt to set the Ajañṭā caves within historical and religious contexts, but the first, most prominent, and obvious truth about Ajañṭā, a peculiarity that impresses present visitors as much as it must have those of days gone by, is the caves' physical setting. I begin this introduction to the site, accordingly, with James Burgess' report of the visual impact Ajañṭā will have made upon visitors of all times:

The Ajañṭā caves are situated in the Indyādri or Ajañṭā range of hills, which supports the north side of the table-land of the Dekhan, and forms the great watershed of the feeders of the Godāvāri and of the Tāpī. From the northern face of the hills the streams run into the Arabian Sea, but from the plateau to the south they flow to the Bay of Bengal. Among these hills, 220 miles north-east by east from Bombay, is the small town of Ajañṭā The caves lie about four miles WNW of this, but to reach them the traveller must descend the ghāt to Fardāpur, about four miles to the NNW

About three and a half miles south-west from Fardāpur is the ravine of Lenāpur -- so named from the caves.¹ The road leading to them from Fardāpur, at best only a bridle path, lies at first in a southerly direction, but . . . we turn more to the south-west, up the ravine, gradually narrowing as we follow the follow the windings of [a] river, which we cross twice. The scenery now becomes more wooded, more lonely, and more savagely grand; and as we next descend into the bed of the stream, we see to the right a wall of almost perpendicular rock, about 250 feet high, sweeping round to the left in a curve of more than half a circle, into the hollow of which a wooded promontory -- surmounted by a coronet of rock -- juts out from the opposite side of the stream. The caves are thus excavated in the

¹ *Leñā* is Marathi for man-made, carved caves like those found at Ajañṭā; natural caves are known as *gubā*.

loft wall of the outer bend or concave scarp of the *cul de sac* thus formed. Above them the glen terminates abruptly in a waterfall of seven leaps, known as the *sāt kund*, the lower of which may be 70 to 100 feet in height, and the others 100 feet or more

The caves extend about a third of a mile from east to west round the concave wall of amygdaloid trap that hems in the stream on its north or left side. They vary in elevation from about 35 to 110 feet above the bend of the torrent. . . . The series consists of twenty-nine in all, namely, five Caityas or temples and twenty-four Vihāras or monastery caves; and for purposes of reference . . . they are generally distinguished by the numbers attached to them by Mr. Fergusson, beginning at the eastern end of the series, or that furthest down the stream

The Ajañṭā Caves must have been executed at a time when the religion enjoyed the highest patronage, and from their architectural style and the subjects of sculpture, we are led to assign some of them at least to an early age,--possibly one or two centuries before Christ, while none of them can date later than the seventh, and possibly not after the fifth or sixth century of the Christian era.²

Such are the Ajañṭā Caves (Fig. 1). Burgess' prose presents Ajañṭā with an air of awe and mystery, both of which stay with one even after living among the caves for many months. But, whereas the awe is an emotional reaction to the site's grandeur, the mystery can be viewed as a function of our many uncertainties regarding Ajañṭā's creation and history. Even the number of caves is not fully known. In 1874 James Burgess counted twenty-nine caves at the site. Presently one can reckon as many as thirty-six independent foundations, including monastic residences, stūpa halls suitable for communal worship, and independent shrinelets that receive little attention from tourists and almost none from scholars. The most recent discovery was of Cave 15a in the late 1950s, which was uncovered during an earthquake. Still more caves may lie under mounds of earth that fell in rock-slides centuries past.

Beyond uncertainties in the number of caves excavated at Ajañṭā, the dating of the site is still not settled. Burgess's description of Ajañṭā's geographical context hints at a certain chronological scheme for the caves' arrangement. But he did not formally analyze the site chronologically until the 1880 publication of *The Cave Temples of India*, co-

² James Burgess. "The Ajañṭā Caves," *Indian Antiquary*. 3 (1874): 269-270, 273.

authored with James Fergusson. In this later work, Ajañṭā is said to have been excavated in two phases, periodized through appeal to Buddhist terminology as “Hīnayāna” and “Mahāyāna” respectively. The recent work of Walter Spink has recast both the terms and the dates of Ajañṭā’s chronology. According to Spink, the so-called Hīnayāna phase spanned the first century B.C.E. to the first C.E. The second period, which he calls the “Vākāṭaka,” after the dynasty ruling the area at the time, was approximately 462-480 C.E. In Spink’s reckoning nothing was added to the site in the interval between these two terms of activity (he does not deny the possibility that the caves were inhabited or used), and the termination of the Vākāṭaka phase of activity is virtually coterminous with the full abandonment of the site by patrons, artisans, and monks alike.³ Thus all artifacts not deriving from Ajañṭā’s “Hīnayāna” phase are linked by Spink to the 18 year span of Vākāṭaka patronage. Those caves belonging to the earlier set are five in number: 9, 10, 12, 13, and 15a; the later excavations number thirty-one in total: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, lower 6, upper 6, 7, 8, 9a, 10a, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 23a, 24, 25, 26, 26 lower right, 26 lower left, 27, 28, 29, and the Ghaṭotkaca caves, which were donated by the same figure responsible for Ajañṭā’s Cave 16. Additionally during the later period, renovations, such as new plastering and painting, were carried out upon the early caves.

My study of Ajañṭā will focus upon the artifacts from this second period of work.

This dissertation takes as a fundamental presupposition that between the approximate

³ Some evidence of post-Vākāṭaka activity at Ajañṭā does exist, although none of it is Buddhist in nature. This evidence includes graffiti in Caves 17 (app. A, Nos. 80, 81, 82), 20 (app. A, No. 85), 26 (app. A, No. 97) and Ghaṭotkaca Cave (app. A, No. 99), all of which may be dated paleographically to the late 6th through 8th centuries. We also have the testimony of Hsüan-tsang (*Si-Yu Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World, translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (A.D. 629)*). Trans. by Samuel Beal. [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981]: vol. 2, 257-259; Thomas Watters. *On Yuan Chwang’s Travels in India (A.D. 629-645)*. [Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973]: vol. 2, 239-41), whose knowledge of Ajañṭā is dated by Vincent Smith to 641-2 C.E. (Watters. *On Yuan Chwang’s Travels*, vol. 2, 336). While we cannot be sure whether this Chinese pilgrim visited Ajañṭā personally, his familiarity with the site combined with his silence regarding any Buddhist community thereat harmonizes with the epigraphic evidence: Ajañṭā was known and visited in these latter centuries but was not a continuous monastic habitation.

years 462 and 480 C.E. Ajaṅṭā was occupied, supported, and excavated by a single community; a second presupposition is that the architecture, paintings, sculptures, epigraphs &c. of this single archeological site are representative of a complex and vibrant form of Buddhism characteristic of that local community. When I write “Ajaṅṭā” or “the site” or “the caves” I will generally mean those artifacts created during the time of Vākāṭaka activity unless I stipulate otherwise or unless it is clear that the site as a whole is indicated.

To further clarify my terms: “local community” here means a community of interest. It does not necessarily imply that all members of Ajaṅṭā’s community lived at or near the site, or even that all ever personally visited it. My conception of this community is modeled on Brian Stock’s idea of a ‘Textual Community,’ which for him involves “an individual, who, having mastered [a written text], then utilized it for reforming a group’s thought and action.”⁴ With the historical data at our disposal, there is little scope for considering Ajaṅṭā’s community as centered around a single charismatic individual. Instead, I hypothesize that the text around which Ajaṅṭā’s community formed was not written, but the site itself: Ajaṅṭā’s community includes those people whose thoughts and actions were re-formed vis-à-vis the Three Jewels through their participation at the site. This community broadly included monks and nuns, courtiers and royal advisors, artisans, and coolies, and patrons, running the gamut from simple monks, to travelling merchants, to local dignitaries, to a high minister of the King and the King himself.

To conclude this introductory section: I entitled my dissertation’s first division using an unfortunately pedantic term from Greek, because “prolegomena” are those subjects that must necessarily be treated before one can investigate one’s principle area of interest. For the study of Ajaṅṭā’s Buddhism, prolegomena include the questions of who was responsible for Ajaṅṭā? when did they create the site? under what circumstances? what

⁴ Brian Stock. *The Implications of Literacy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 90.

was it they created? Based upon Spink’s work, I have claimed that a community lived at and/or participated in the creation of Ajañṭā between the years of 460 and 480 c.e., and that this community was responsible for an identifiable set of artifacts. But both assertions are in need of substantiation. The present chapter will treat the first of these prolegomena: the political and historical context within which the Vākāṭaka period Ajañṭā caves were created; the next chapter will address the questions of sources and methodology. However, as a preface to these linked but separate studies -- the historical positioning of Ajañṭā, the methodological, and the evidential -- it will be valuable to first review prior scholarship concerning the site, to situate the present dissertation within a tradition of Ajañṭā studies.

A Review of the Scholarship

A significant bibliography of works on the Ajañṭā caves has accumulated since their “discovery” in 1819 by a company of officers from the Madras Army. According to local legend, these soldiers interrupted a Northbound trek through the Ajañṭā ghāṭ in order to hunt tigers. A local boy tendered his services to these strange men and led them to a tiger’s lair, now known as Cave 10. Whatever the truth of this story, a definite *terminus ad quem* for the caves’s modern history can be set at 28 April 1819, the date on which John Smith of the 28th Cavalry scratched his name over a Buddha painted on a pillar in Cave 10.⁵ Since that fateful day John Smith began writing on Ajañṭā, the bulk of literature has focused largely upon descriptions of the site’s paintings, sculpture, and architecture,⁶ identifications

⁵ Cf. app. A, No. 62.

⁶ General works on this topic include: James Bird. *Historical Researches on the Origin and Principle of the Bauddha and Jaina Religions*. (Bombay: American Mission Press, 1847); James Burgess. *Notes on the Bauddha Rock-Temples of Ajanta, their Paintings and Sculptures, and on the Paintings of the Bagh Caves, Modern Bauddha Mythology, &c.* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1879); James Fergusson and James Burgess. *The Cave Temples of India*. (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1969); Mukul Chandra Dey. *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta & Bagh*. (New York: George H. Dorna

of its narrative and iconographic scenes,⁷ and the setting of a chronology for the caves' excavation.⁸ In conjunction with this scrutiny of the caves' art-historical testimony, two additional bodies of work have collected, one to provide reproductions of Ajañtā's master-pieces for public consumption⁹ and a second that revolves around editions and

Company, 1925); Ghulam Yazdani. *Ajanta. The Colour and Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes Based on Photography*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1930-55); Stella Kramrisch. *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*. Ed. by Barbara Stoler Miller. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983): 273-307; Madhukar Keshav Dhavalikar. *Ajanta: A Cultural Study*. (Poona: University of Poona, 1974); Debala Mitra. *Ajanta*. (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1980).

⁷ See, for instance: L. A. Waddell. "The Buddhist Pictorial Wheel of Life," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. 61 (1892): 133-35; S. F. Oldenberg. "Notes on Buddhist Art Identifications of the Jataka-sculptures," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 18 (1897): 183-201; Heinrich Lüders. "Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamālā* and the Frescoes of Ajañtā," *Indian Antiquary*. 32 (1903): 326-28; Alfred Charles Foucher. "Lettre d'Ajañtā," *Journal Asiatique*. 17 (1921): 201-45; Marcelle Lalou. "Trois Récits du Dulva reconnus dans les peintures d'Ajañtā," *Journal Asiatique*. 207 (1925): 333-37; Yazdani. *Ajanta*; Dieter Schlingloff. *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings: Identifications and Interpretations*. (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988).

⁸ Chronological highlights include: Fergusson and Burgess. *The Cave Temples of India*; Wayne Edison Begley. *The Chronology of Mahāyāna Buddhist Architecture and Painting at Ajañtā*. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966); Philippe Stern. *Les Colonnes indiennes d'Ajanta et d'Ellora: évolution et répercussions (styles gupta et post-Gupta)*. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1972); Shiela L. Weiner. *Ajañtā: Its Place in Buddhist Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Karl Khandalavala. "The History and Dating of the Mahayana Caves of Ajanta," *Pathik*. 2.1 (1990): 18-21; Walter M. Spink. *Ajanta to Ellora*. (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, The University of Michigan, 1967); Walter M. Spink. "Ajañtā's Chronology: The Problem of Cave Eleven," *Ars Orientalis*. 7 (1968): 155-168; Walter M. Spink. "Ajañtā's Chronology: The Crucial Cave," *Ars Orientalis*. 10 (1975): 143-169, plates 1-16; Walter M. Spink. "Ajañtā's Chronology: Politics and Patronage." In *Kalādarśana*. Ed. by Joanna G. Williams. (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing in collaboration with the American Institute of Indian Studies, 1981): 109-126; Walter M. Spink. "Ajañtā's Chronology: Cave 7's Twice Born Buddha." In *Studies in Buddhist Art of South Asia*. Ed. by A. K. Narain. (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1985); Walter M. Spink. "Ajanta's Chronology: Solstitial Evidence," *Ars Orientalis*. 15 (1985): 97-119; Walter M. Spink. "Ajañtā's Paintings: A Checklist for their Dating." In *Dimensions of Indian Art: Pupil Jayakar Seventy*. Ed. by Lokesh Candra and Jyotindra Jain (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1986); Walter M. Spink. "Ajañtā in a Historical and Political Context," *Pathik*. 2.1 (1990): 5-17; Walter M. Spink. "The Archaeology of Ajañtā," *Ars Orientalis*. 21 (1992): 67-94; Walter M. Spink. "Reply to K. Khandalavala, A. Jamkhedkar, B. Deshpande," *Pathik*. 3.4 (1992): 16-25; Walter M. Spink. "A Scholar's Guide to the Ajañtā Caves," typescript.

⁹ John Griffiths. *The Paintings in the Buddhist Cave-Temples of Ajanta, Khandesh, India*. (London, 1896-97); Christiana Jane Powell Lady Herringham. *Ajanta Frescos, Being Reproductions in Colour and Monochrome of Frescoes in Some of the Caves at Ajanta, after Copies Taken in the Years 1909-11*. (Oxford, 1915); Yazdani. *Ajanta*; Madanjeet Singh. *Ajanta: Ajanta Painting of the Sacred and the Secular*. (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Amalananda Ghosh. *Ajanta Murals: An Album of Eighty-five Reproductions in Colour*. (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1967); Osamu Takata. *Ajanta*. (Tokyo: Heibonsha Ltd, 1971).

translations of Ajaṅṭā's numerous inscriptions.¹⁰

The lack of a significant bibliography concerning Ajaṅṭā's religion does not mean that these caves' importance for recovering ancient Indian Buddhism has gone unnoticed. James Burgess observed, "When we can read the history of Buddhism, as it is to be found in its immense literature, we cannot doubt but these pictures will throw much light upon it and by-gone times."¹¹ Indeed, the first published notice of the caves -- William Erskine's report read to the Bombay Literary Society on July 31, 1821 -- was attentive to their religious milieu. Entitled "Observations on the Remains of the Bouddhists in India,"¹² Erskine's report was one of the first systematic attempts to set criteria for distinguishing Buddhist, Jain, and Brāhmaṇical archaeological remains. Nevertheless, several of Erskine's own observations, and much of the earliest stratum of literature on Ajaṅṭā, clearly demonstrate that before the caves could realize the promise Burgess saw therein, at least

¹⁰ James Prinsep. "Facsimiles of Various Ancient Inscriptions," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. 5 (1836): 348-9, 556-561, plate ix, #4, plate xxviii, #9, #10, #11; Bird. *Historical Researches*; Bhau Daji. "Ajanta Inscriptions," *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 7 (1863): 53-74; Burgess. *Notes on the Bauddha Rock-Temples*; James Burgess and Pandit Bhagwanlal Indraji. *Inscriptions from the Cave Temples of Western India with Descriptive Notes, &c.* (Delhi: Indian India, 1976); James Burgess *Report on the Buddhist Cave Temples and their Inscriptions*. (Varanasi: Bharatiya Publishing House, 1975); John Allen. "A Note on the Inscriptions of Cave II," Appendix to G. Yazdani. *Ajanta*. vol. 2. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933); N. P. Chakravarti. "A Note on the Painted Inscriptions in Caves VI-XVII," Appendix to G. Yazdani. *Ajanta*. vol. 3. (London: Oxford University Press, 1946); N. P. Chakravarti & B. Ch. Chhabra. "Notes on the Painted and Incised Inscriptions of Caves XX-XXVI," Appendix to G. Yazdani. *Ajanta*. vol. 4. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955); Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi and P. Sreenivasachar. *The Ghatokaca Cave Inscription*. (Hyderabad: The Archaeological Department, Government of Hyderabad, 1952); Dinesh Candra Sircar. "Inscription in Cave IV at Ajaṅṭā," *Epigraphia Indica*. 33 (1959-60): 259-262; Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi. *The Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum vol. V. (Ooctamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1963); M. K. Dhavalikar. "New Inscriptions from Ajaṅṭā," *Ars Orientalis*. 7 (1968): 147-153; A. Ghosh. "Two Early Brahmi Records from Ajaṅṭā," *Epigraphia Indica*. 37 (1967): 241-244; Schlingloff. *Studies in the Ajaṅṭā Paintings*. See appendix A for Ajaṅṭā's and Ghatokaca's 99 inscriptions. This number for these sister sites' epigraphs is derived from my collection of materials based upon published sources and *in situ* investigations. The 99 include both readable and unreadable records, as well as inscriptions noticed by prior scholars that no longer exist due to time and wear. When time permits, I anticipate publishing this collection as a separate monograph with interpretive and historical notes.

¹¹ Burgess. *Notes on the Bauddha Rock-Temples of Ajanta*, 2.

¹² William Erskine. "Observations on the Remains of the Bouddhists in India," *Transactions of the Bombay Literary Society*. 3 (1823): 494-537.

some of the doctrines and mythologies particular to Buddhism, as well as a sense of its place in India's broader religious history, had to be disseminated within the wider scholarly community.

Although Erskine included Ajaṅṭā in his report on "Bouddhist remains" he does not comment directly upon this site's religious provenance. Nevertheless, through James Prinsep's reproduction of a conversation held at the caves in 1828 between one Mr. Ralph and a Dr. James Bird, we learn that Erskine may have believed these cave temples to belong to the Jains. During this 1828 trip to Ajaṅṭā, Dr. Bird (who "swore by" Erskine) had the caves' Jain provenance *confirmed* for him by a brahman who, unable to make any sense of the *brāhmī* inscriptions, supposed them to be written by the Jains.¹³

This confusion is clarified in Dr. Bird's subsequent publication on Ajaṅṭā, *Historical Researches on the Origin and Principle of the Bauddha and Jaina Religions*, which was composed soon after his encounter with Mr. Ralph, but not published until 1847. In this work, Bird bespoke the Buddhist provenance of the Ajaṅṭā caves. Nevertheless, Bird's descriptive accounts of individual caves makes clear that he saw Jaina iconography throughout the site: the shape of the Cave 19 (designated by Bird as No. 6. West) stūpa's cupola (*harmika*) suggested "the symbol of *Malli* or the 19th Jaina;"¹⁴ the antelopes on the front of the Cave 20 Buddha's lion throne represented "*Santi* the 16th Jaina saint;"¹⁵ the state of a shrine image's habilitation, whether it appears naked or clothed, indicated the sect allegiance of the cave's donor, "*Digambara* or *Swetabara*."¹⁶ In point of fact, the admixture of Jainism and Buddhism Bird found at Ajaṅṭā betokened what he called, the

¹³ Prinsep. "Facsimiles of Various Ancient Inscriptions," 560.

¹⁴ Bird. *Historical Researches*, 15.

¹⁵ Bird. *Historical Researches*, 15.

¹⁶ Bird. *Historical Researches*, 72.

“Jaina form of Buddhism.”¹⁷ That is to say, Bird imagined that our present-day distinction between Jainism and Buddhism is the product of an ancient schism in the Buddhist community: “Jains” are those Buddhists who “retain[ed] part of the Brahmanical mythology and distinction of cast,”¹⁸ whereas “Buddhists” are the heirs of those members of the more ancient continuum who split from Brāhmaṇism completely.

Another early visitor was Lieutenant James Edward Alexander, 16th Lancers, of the Order of the Lion and the Sun, who ventured to the caves in 1824. Like Bird, Alexander imagined a certain institutional continuity between the Jains and Buddhist in contradistinction to Brāhmaṇism. Yet he was also well aware of Ajañṭā’s Buddhist provenance. Still, Alexander’s musings are interesting, and not only for their regimental brass and Indiana Jonesesque intrigue. This lively report illuminates, in caricature, another possible pitfall in the study of Ajañṭā. To wit, Alexander’s appalling -- albeit understandable -- ignorance of Buddhist history resulted in a skewed perception of the site’s time of creation. Taking Ajañṭā as the production of Buddhism’s golden age in India, he opines that they must “be nearer three than two thousand years [of age].”¹⁹ For in Alexander’s opinion Buddhism was on the decline by the period of Alexander the Great’s conquest in 327 B.C. -- the Buddhists being subsequently scattered to Ceylon, Siam, Burma and China by the followers of Brahma “who are fond of glitter and shew, and who dazzled by the splendour of present rites, turned from these plain and unadorned figures of Buddha, to the mysterious Trimurti, and wonderworking Avatárs.”²⁰

The next stage of scholarship on the caves was carried out by scholars. The

¹⁷ Bird. *Historical Researches*, 17.

¹⁸ Bird. *Historical Researches*, 17.

¹⁹ James Edward Alexander. “Notice of a Visit to the Cavern Temples of Adjunta in the East Indies,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. 2 (1830): 366.

²⁰ Alexander. “Notice of a Visit,” 366.

archaeologists James Fergusson and James Burgess provided the first comprehensive and systematic surveys of Ajañṭā's art and architecture in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. By this date, Lieutenant (now General) Alexander's romp through Ajañṭā was accepted for the fun it was, and Bird's notions were held in disrepute. In three separate publications Burgess repeats that "the erroneousness of [Bird's] opinions on Buddhism is only matched by the inaccuracies of the drawings that illustrate it."²¹ And so these scholars eschewed the notion of an institutional continuity between Jainism and Buddhism: "All the caves there [at Ajañṭā] belong exclusively to the Buddhist religion without any admixture from the Hindu or Jaina forms of faith."²²

Indeed, Fergusson's and Burgess's work was carried out long enough after Brian Hodgson introduced the West to "Northern Buddhism" in 1837, and Burnouf published his landmark *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* in 1844, for stereotyped characterizations of Buddhism to have filtered into the discourse on Ajañṭā. These archaeologists treated Ajañṭā as realizations in stone of what they understood as canonical or normative Buddhist doctrines. Thus Burgess reflected, "The appearance of a colossal Buddha in the cell behind almost every vihāra, as well as his frequent representation in other positions, must at first site appear at variance with the spirit of Buddhist doctrine, which dispenses with all idolatrous forms."²³ On the positive side, the caves' sylvan setting was taken to confirm the doctrinally sanctioned longings of their resident-excavators. This we read in a winsome example of Victorian prose:

The perfect seclusion of this wild ravine, with its loft walls of rock, had attracted to it the devotees of Buddhism, perhaps nineteen centuries ago or

²¹ Burgess. "The Ajañṭā Caves," 274; Burgess. *Notes on the Bauddha Rock-Temples*, 1; Fergusson and Burgess. *Cave Temples of India*, 281. This last quip refers to the charming but monstrously inaccurate reproductions of Ajañṭā's statuary and paintings Bird includes as an appendix to his work.

²² Fergusson and Burgess. *Cave Temples of India*, 283.

²³ Burgess. "The Ajañṭā Caves," 274.

more, as a fitting solitude in which to form a retreat from the distracting cares of an overbusy, soul-contaminating world. Here, alone with nature, the venerated *bhikshus* might devote their time to contemplation and self-restraint and instruct their novices, until the long-yearned-for *nirvāṇa* should extinguish life's flame, and, releasing them from the power of matter, permit them to enter upon the enjoyment of perfected knowledge and *nirvṛtti* -- everlasting repose -- undisturbed, as they pictured it, by feeling, or care, or dream. Here, amid scenes of nature's primeval activity, where, through long ages, water had been exercising its potent energies in cutting a way through the solid rock, leaving on each side giant scarps -- lofty perpendicular walls of rock -- puny man, fired with a longing for true Rest, with untiring perseverance and astonishing boldness, chiselled out of the living rock these spacious pillared chambers, these long-deserted retreats and temples, that so excite our wonder and curiosity as monuments of ages whose history is shrouded in the mists of the remote Past.²⁴

Although we will want to consider the historical accuracy of Fergusson and Burgess's characterizations of Buddhism, as well as the analytic value thereof for excavating Ajaṅṭā's religious matrix, there can be no doubt that this advance in the general knowledge of Buddhism had a vast impact upon analyses of the caves. In 1843 Fergusson "would willingly give precedence"²⁵ to Bird's work, were it not so tardy in publication. Indeed, Fergusson believed that his work and that of Bird would complement each other, for Bird's "conclusions are drawn principally from the inscriptions and written authorities," while Fergusson's own were "arrived at almost entirely from a critical survey of the whole series, and a careful comparison of one cave with another."²⁶ Thirty-seven years later, in 1880, the good Dr. Bird is dispensed with, Fergusson's early archaeological approach and Bird's textual being fused in Fergusson and Burgess's monumental *The Cave Temples of India*.

A critical moment was reached when these two scholars appropriated categories from Buddhist textual tradition to serve as categories descriptive of strata in the

²⁴ Burgess. "The Ajaṅṭā Caves," 269.

²⁵ James Fergusson. "On the Rock-Cut Temples of India," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. 8 (1846): 31.

²⁶ Fergusson. "On the Rock-Cut Temples of India," 31.

archaeological record. That is, in 1843 Fergusson presented a relative chronology of the caves based upon his “critical surveys” and “careful comparisons.” In 1880, the relative chronology had not much changed, but now it is analyzed into two periods, the “Hīnayāna” (whose caves are “generally plain in style, and devoid of images of Buddha for worship”²⁷) and the “Mahāyāna” (whose caves’ essential characteristic is a “multiplications of images of Buddha”²⁸). Thus Fergusson, Burgess, and nearly all scholars who have subsequently written on Indian Buddhist caves take as a given that the hallmark of a later cave is the presence of a Buddha image, and that such caves were produced by and for Mahāyāna Buddhists.

Following the work of Fergusson and Burgess, the next stage of investigation focused upon identification of the narratives recounted in Ajaṅṭā’s singular paintings. Our two archaeologists were able to recognize some scenes from the Buddha’s life and famed personages from the pantheon such as Avalokiteśvara and Tārā. But the precise significance of many icons and most narrative paintings escaped them. In 1892 Waddell established that the series of concentric circles divided into compartments, known to previous observers as the ‘Zodiac,’ was in fact the *bhāvacakra*, the Wheel of Existence, known from contemporary Tibetan art. S. F. Oldenberg published several identifications of *jātaka* scenes based upon descriptions of the caves provided in Burgess’s *Notes on the Buddha Rock-Temples of Ajanta*. H. Lüders made a major contribution when he positively identified several verses painted in Cave 2 as coming from Ārya Śūra’s *Jātakamālā*; unfortunately almost nothing is known of this Buddhist text’s author or the circumstances of its composition. E. B. Cowell’s edition of the Pāli *jātakas* in six volumes of translations was published between 1895 and 1907. And it was only after this achievement that further

²⁷ Fergusson and Burgess. *Cave Temples of India*, 170.

²⁸ Fergusson and Burgess. *Cave Temples of India*, 297.

progress in the job of identification was made, when Albert Foucher visited Ajañṭā for several weeks in 1919 and assigned names to about twenty tales. Although Foucher used the Pāli *jātaka* collection to support his findings, there is no evidence that this anthology was known to Ajañṭā's community. Thus M. Lalou brought us a giant-step closer to that community when she determined that three of the paintings Foucher identified actually represented versions of these stories recorded in the Dulva, the Tibetan Buddhist *vinaya*. Ghulam Yazdani's four-volume *Ajañṭā* made good use of Foucher's findings as a basis for the most in-depth and detailed descriptions of the paintings still extant in the mid part of our century. Although Yazdani's explanations are often superb, one must beware of his descriptions of scenes and icons that are not based upon previous scholars' work. At the end of this line of scholars stands Dieter Schlingloff, whose work has shown that both the *Jātakamālā* and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* were better known at Ajañṭā than previously thought, as well as linking to the caves the *Lalitavistara*, Aśvaghōṣa's *Saundarānanda*, the *Kalpānamañḍitikā* of Kumāralāta, the *Divyāvadāna*, and a little known text found in Qyzyl, Central Asia, known affectionately as *MQR 1069*.

The most recent tier of scholarship on Ajañṭā has been dominated by Spink's meticulous examinations of the site's chronology. Other post-Burgess chronologers have included Philippe Stern, Wayne Begley, Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi, Sheila Weiner, and Karl Khandalawala. Joanna Williams' excellent summary of several of these scholars' chronologies should be consulted by anyone interested in pursuing the topic.²⁹ I would add the caveat, however, that Williams' analysis is highly critical, and reveals lacunae or questionable assumptions in each of these scholar's work, without herself venturing any positive solutions to these intractable difficulties. Williams shows herself to be less interested in arriving at a workable chronological framework for Ajañṭā's artifacts than in configuring

²⁹ Joanna G. Williams. *The Art of Gupta India: Empire and Province*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

this body of material as “representing the most distinctive Gupta regional substyle of the late fifth and early sixth centuries,”³⁰ making it an adequate source for her own work.

Towards a Relative Chronology

The preceding sketch of scholarship on Ajañṭā provides a background against which to address the first of the prolegomena necessary for recovering Ajañṭā’s Buddhism. A blueprint for the sequence of the Ajañṭā caves’ excavation and decoration is the *sine qua non* for any detailed discussion of the religious beliefs, practices, and expectations of those who paid for or resided at the caves. Without a chronology by means of which iconographic, artistic, and architectural developments can be gauged relative to each other, a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding Ajañṭā’s patronage would remain a distant goal. Patronage being a relationship of economics and politics as much as of religion, without knowing the events that affected the social lives of Ajañṭā’s patrons, one can little hope to fathom their religious expressions. This chapter will only concern itself with events on the macro-structural level, with politics, wars, and the like that affected Vākāṭaka society as a whole, not with the commonplace anxieties of human life -- infertility, poverty, demons -- that also doubtless shaped Ajañṭā’s patrons and their caves.

The investigation of Ajañṭā’s chronology and history will proceed in several steps. First I explain my reasons for accepting Spink’s work as a starting point, and present his reconstruction of Ajañṭā’s history. Following this treatment of Spink, I turn to the facts that may be gleaned from Vākāṭaka inscriptions and other evidence which provides documentary evidence bearing on Ajañṭā’s history. To preface my argument, I find that Spink takes a faulty piece of evidence -- a verse from Cave 17’s donative inscription read

³⁰ Williams. *The Art of Gupta India*, 186.

wrongly by V. V. Mirashi -- as the fulcrum of his historical reconstruction. It is not my intention to re-invent the wheel: this chapter is not meant to replace Spink's work, but to complement it. Although a revision of Spink's history is necessary, in my own reconstruction I attempt to preserve as much as possible the assumptions and facts which underlie Spink's representation of Ajañṭā's history. The final section of this chapter reconstructs a history for Ajañṭā parallel to that of Spink, albeit one which finds in the crucial verse from Cave 17 radically different implications than those proposed by Mirashi and elaborated by Spink.

Prior to Spink's chronology of nineteen years, the dominant temporal sequence for the Ajañṭā's caves was set by Fergusson and Burgess. These two scholars set the site's "Mahāyāna" period "between the years 500 and 650, with a very little margin either way before or after these dates."³¹ Fergusson and Burgess further subdivided this one hundred and fifty year span into two periods, earlier and later. Most notably, if one checks the individual caves the two include within each of these periods against a site map, one discovers that local position on the scarp was the dominant factor in their determination of this sequence. For Fergusson and Burgess, Caves 16 and 17 at the center of the Waghora's horseshoe, were the earliest "Mahāyāna" caves, Caves 1 and 26 at the periphery, the latest (cf. Fig. 1). Although the significance of this observation may seem arcane at present, it is an important point to which I will return.

The next scholar to seriously address Ajañṭā's chronology was Philippe Stern. This French scholar visited Ajañṭā in 1935, and taught a revised chronology based upon his findings at the École du Louvre, which he finally published in 1972. Attempting to be firm, even scientific, Stern pioneered a methodology known as motival analysis, described by Joanna Williams as follows:

³¹ Fergusson and Burgess. *Cave Temples of India*, 299.

Elements are isolated and placed in a convincing sequence of development in their own terms, on the supposition that it is more objective to deal systematically with parts than with the complex whole. That whole may, as a final stage, be dated on the basis of this relative sequence.³²

In fact, Stern limited his object of study to the developmental sequence of Ajañṭā's pillar forms, and he did not even attempt the "final stage," setting an absolute chronology.

Without getting involved in the details, here I would call attention to the fact that Stern divided the site's chronology into several subsets, with the felicitous result that the relative sequence of caves based upon columnar motifs is directly echoed by the caves' relative positions on mountain scarp.³³ Again, Caves 16 and 17 are among first in Ajañṭā's Vākāṭaka period.

Another post-Fergusson-&-Burgess chronologer was Wayne Begley. Unlike Stern, Begley was interested in establishing an absolute as well as relative framework for the caves. Begley rejected Stern's motival analysis. Instead, he focused upon "historical, inscriptional, and stylistic evidence,"³⁴ which led Begley to a chronology spanning one and one half centuries, between approximately 450 and 600 C.E.

Comparing these chronologies with each other, and with the starting point for the various caves on Spink's time-line (Fig. 2), one will discover that all more or less concur upon the relative order for the sequence in which the caves were *begun*. However, the more significant question is that of the progression of work within each individual cave after it was begun. Spink is the only scholar to have addressed this latter issue with any degree of sophistication. Like these other scholars, Spink recognizes a certain periodicity to the site. But, rather than establishing a base-line criterion for the inception of a cave, which is then treated as the only important chronological marker, Spink was the first to

³² Williams. *Art of Gupta India*, 6.

³³ Stern. *Les Colonnes*, 14.

³⁴ Begley. *Chronology of Mahāyāna Buddhist Architecture*, 3.

explicate the full course of each cave's development as an historical whole. Spink's methodology, a variation on "la méthode Stern,"³⁵ diverges from that of Stern in the range of detail its analysis incorporates. Not only does Spink draw on a wealth of material evidence, which includes the full range of motival and iconographical forms as well as technical features like wall thicknesses and ceiling heights, plaster types, door-frame features, and especially door hinges, but Spink is even further ranging than Stern in his treatment of pillar forms. Spink also diverges from Begley in that, by employing "la méthode Stern," he uses motival analyses to fathom the artistic and architectural material in their own depths before setting them within a historical context based upon epigraphic and textual gleanings.

The most crucial of Spink's discoveries was that "an analysis of the style and iconography of the Ajaṅṭā caves shows that the majority of excavations started [in the first years of work] were . . . executed in two clearly definable phases, one of which is distinctly early and the other distinctly late."³⁶ As an example of Spink's interpretation, let us compare his explication of the development of Cave 15 with that of Begley. Begley believed Cave 15 "may be the earliest Mahāyāna excavation."³⁷ But Begley was also confounded by an inability to explain why this cave's early features "appear[ed] in conjunction with some puzzlingly anomalous or later features."³⁸ Cave 15's porch door frame is a case in point (Fig. 3): the lintel, whose *candraśālās* are generally associated with the latest door frames, sit incongruously upon the heads of goddesses positioned as those found in the earliest doors. Comparing this door frame with that of Cave 16 (Fig. 4) and

³⁵ Walter M. Spink. Review article: "Les Colonnes Indiennes d'Ajaṅṭā et d'Ellora," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 94 (1974): 487.

³⁶ Spink. "Ajaṅṭā's Chronology: The Crucial Cave," 165.

³⁷ Begley. *Chronology of Mahāyāna Buddhist Architecture*, 93.

³⁸ Begley. *Chronology of Mahāyāna Buddhist Architecture*, 93.

Cave 23 (Fig. 5), agreed to be early and late respectively, one sees just how jarring this composition in Cave 15 is. Begley notes other similar discrepancies, but, having no interpretive scheme, thereafter ignores them. Spink's chronology was a breakthrough in that it provides an interpretation of why this cave's door looks like somebody carved the frame's lower half, stopped for a period of years, and then decided to finish the job using the site's latest idiom.

Cave 15 is by no means unique in having both early and late features as programmatic structural (as opposed to intrusive minor) elements. Let me explicate this point further, for the observation that many caves appear to have been worked upon in two distinct stages is the crucial discovery of Spink's relative chronology and the underpinning of his historical reconstruction. Attempting to explain the widespread phenomenon of individual caves at the site having both "early" and "late" features, Spink designates Cave 16 as the "crucial cave." This vihāra provides a linchpin for Spink's chronology because it possesses a detailed donative inscription, which attributes the cave's programmatic excavation and decoration to a single donor, the Vākāṭaka minister Varāhadeva. Unlike Begley, who used inscriptions largely for their paleographic content, for Spink the inscription is first a relative feature: "there seems every reason to assume . . . that the cave was essentially complete when Varāhadeva's donative record was written."³⁹ The inscription allows Spink to determine that all the major features of Cave 16 can be set within at most the span of a single man's adult life. If this cave can be shown to share in features determined to be morphologically early and late by comparison with counterparts elsewhere at the site, then Ajaṅṭā's entire chronology can also be set within the absolute span of a single man's adult life. To demonstrate that Cave 16 was begun near the start of the Vākāṭaka phase, Spink appeals to the cave's central position on the scarp -- it was the

³⁹ Spink. "Ajaṅṭā's Chronology: The Crucial Cave," 143.

“center [from which] the site gradually spread out as it developed”⁴⁰ -- and its “early” motival features such as the mimicry of architectural forms necessary to structural architecture -- beams and cross beams -- in the ceiling of the front aisle. More completely, “the form of its pillars, cells, doorways, windows, and many of its characteristically early paintings establishes its connections with other very early caves,” as does “the simple and ‘formative’ nature of its basic plan.”⁴¹ All this, according to Spink, “had often been noticed.” Indeed, Fergusson and Burgess, Stern, and Begley alike all position this cave near the beginning of their relative sequences of cave development. What sets Spink’s analysis of this cave apart, what makes his chronology short, is that he also finds some of the very latest motival elements in this same cave *as part of its programme*.⁴²

At this point I have claimed that Spink’s chronology provides better data than his fellow chronologers for reconstructing a history of Ajañṭā’s patronage because he alone interprets the internal development within individual caves. But I have enumerated only two stages in Cave 16’s (which is emblematic of the site’s) development. Spink can be far more precise. He explains,

Because the excavations of the Vākāṭaka phase at Ajañṭā . . . are so abundantly rich in forms and features, because the upper and lower limits are so close in time, and because of the many revealing connections with known historical events, the most practical and informative way to describe the development of the site, and to read its story, is year by year. Thus, I have divided the Vākāṭaka development . . . into nineteen separate annual levels.⁴³

More general and useful for this study is Spink’s analysis of the site into five distinct levels. He identifies these levels through “five very distinct points of rupture that can be found in

⁴⁰ Spink. “Ajañṭā’s Chronology: The Crucial Cave,” 150.

⁴¹ Spink. “Ajañṭā’s Chronology: The Crucial Cave,” 150.

⁴² See Spink “Ajañṭā’s Chronology: The Crucial Cave,” 150-156 for an enumeration of all Cave 16’s late features.

⁴³ Spink. “The Archaeology of Ajañṭā,” 70.

the overall development of the site;⁴⁴ each point of rupture denotes a “drastic temporal break . . . leaving a spectrum of unfinished or just-finished forms and features.”⁴⁵ This quinta-partite chronological scheme provides the framework for the examination of Ajañṭā’s history that follows. Accordingly, let us now review in synopsis these five stages in the history of Ajañṭā’s patronage. In point of fact, in line with the method of motival analysis, I will summarize Spink’s chronology twice. Presently, I treat the relative evidence through which Spink determines and divides the five periods; the second time around, I will read the history of Ajañṭā’s patronage as a story, reviewing Spink’s reconstructed absolute chronology which represents the relative evidence through the filter of epigraphic and literary sources.

Period 1) The first period is characterized by an exuberance of creative activity, during which the vast majority of caves were begun, and several nearly finished. In terms of patronage, Spink’s reading of the site suggests that each cave was individually funded by a single donor, a pattern that stands in stark contrast to the collective patronage found at the earliest Buddhist sites like Sāñcī⁴⁶ and Bhārhut⁴⁷ where individuals, religious-associations, and whole towns severally donated capital to be applied towards programmatic structural elements. This new pattern of patronage is indeed suggested by the site’s epigraphical evidence: every inscription recording the donation of a full cave presents its donor in the singular.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Spink. “The Archaeology of Ajañṭā,” 70.

⁴⁵ Spink. “The Archaeology of Ajañṭā,” 70.

⁴⁶ Vidya Dehejia. “The Collective and Popular Basis of Early Buddhist Patronage: Sacred Monuments, 100 BC-AD 250.” In *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*. Ed. by Barbara Stoler Miller. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992): 35-45.

⁴⁷ Heinrich Lüders. *Brāhmī Inscription from Bhārbut*. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, vol II, pt. II. (Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1963).

⁴⁸ Cf. app. A, Nos. 17, 67, 77, 84, 93, 98 for Caves 4, 16, 17, 20, 26, and Ghaṭotkaca respectively.

Period 2) Apparently something happened to the Vākāṭaka realm, either economically or politically, for the end of this period of efflorescence is marked by rushed and expedient work site-wide, followed by a general cessation of all activity at Ajaṅṭā. The only exceptions to this stoppage, seem to have been Caves 1, 17, 19, and 20. During this latter period, the last three were nearly finished, albeit in a rush, but ultimately remained incomplete.

Hiatus) Following this general interruption, the site seems to have gone into complete remission for several years. In line with his emphasis on the singularity of patronage and the presence of an overarching bureaucracy regulating the site, Spink observes:

Not a single image of any type whatsoever was added to any of the caves at the site during the Hiatus. This does not so much suggest the site's abandonment during this period -- except of course by the craftsmen, who could find no work there -- as it does its continued occupation and preservation of the insistent exclusiveness that had characterized the site's patronage from the start. How strong and how effective the administrative control was during this troubled time becomes clear when we contrast it with the total anarchy that reigned during the Period of Disruption, when the major patrons had lost their rights and privileges and anyone could put any image almost anywhere.⁴⁹

Periods 3 & 4) Following the hiatus, work started up again in earnest. After several years, however, the site seems to have suffered another sharp blow, for once again there is a period of rushed activity, culminating in the abandonment of most caves in a stage of incompleteness.

Period 5) Finally, whether it is because the Vākāṭaka bureaucratic structure fell away, or because the caves en masse were handed over to the Buddhist saṅgha, which willingly allowed individual donations within the caves, after the abrupt halt of the programmatic period, an intrusive phase began. The majority of minor iconic figures ranging haphazardly around the site date, as well as all non-programmatic donative

⁴⁹ Spink. "The Archaeology of Ajaṅṭā," 81.

inscriptions may derive from this second major division of Ajañṭā's history. This phase also ended abruptly. The site was abandoned, after which date (set by Spink as 480) "not a painting, not a piece of sculpture, not a cave, or a cell, or a cistern, nor a single donative inscription"⁵⁰ was created at Ajañṭā.

I have had the good fortune to spend several months at Ajañṭā with Walter Spink, during which time we passed many days discussing the fine details supporting his chronology. As a result of these encounters, I would affirm that Spink has come close indeed to realizing the general outlines of Ajañṭā's development revealed through "comparable morphological, iconographical, and technological features spreading horizontally throughout the caves."⁵¹ However, Spink has also used "inscriptions and the narratives of these times"⁵² to bring these physical remains to life. I avoided incorporating any of this story in my preceding elaboration of the relative chronology, for the tale Spink tells of Ajañṭā's history cannot be accepted as readily as the abstract developmental sequence upon which it is based. This history will be the focus of the next sub-section. In deriving this history, I will take the following as an accepted principle: "the history of the times depends upon the evidence of the caves just as much as the history of the caves depends upon that of the times."⁵³

Relative to What?

Evidence for dating the caves is sorely lacking. Positive data for setting an absolute chronology is found in only three places: Caves 16's and 17's dedicatory inscriptions link

⁵⁰ Walter M. Spink. "Before the Fall: Pride and Piety at Ajanta." In *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*. Ed. by Barbara Stoler Miller. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992): 67.

⁵¹ Spink. "The Archaeology of Ajañṭā," 70.

⁵² Spink. "The Archaeology of Ajañṭā," 70.

⁵³ Spink. "The Archaeology of Ajañṭā," 70.

them both to the reign of the Vākāṭaka ruler Hariṣeṇa,⁵⁴ and Hsüan-tsang reports that the famed Buddhist logician Dignāga often visited the site.⁵⁵ I will treat these facts below, as I attempt to erect an historical framework within which to study the Ajaṅṭā caves.

The starting point for any discussion of Ajaṅṭā's absolute chronology must be the regnal years of the Vākāṭaka king Hariṣeṇa. We know that Varāhadeva, Cave 16's donor, "became a counsellor of king . . . Hariṣeṇa;" and we know Cave 17's donor "whose store of merit is truly amazing . . . adorned the earth with stūpas and vihāras . . . while Hariṣeṇa . . . protects . . . [the land]."

Hariṣeṇa was the last known monarch from the Vākāṭakas, a lineage of kings who ruled large swaths of Central India following the dissolution of the Śātavāhana empire in the mid-third century.⁵⁶ There is little agreement among scholars as to the original home of

⁵⁴ Cf. app. A, No. 67, verse 17 and No. 77, verse 21.

⁵⁵ Hsüan-Tsang. *Si-Yu Ki*, vol. 2, 259; Watters. *On Yuan Chwang's Travels*, vol. 2, 240.

⁵⁶ An overview of Vākāṭaka historiography can be found in Shankar Goyal. "The Progress of Vākāṭaka Historiography." In *The Age of the Vākāṭakas*. Ed. by Ajay Mitra Shastri. (New Delhi: Harman Publishing, 1992): 397-308. For general histories of the Vākāṭakas see Ghulam Yazdani (ed). *The Early History of the Deccan*. (New Delhi: Oriental Reprint, 1982); Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*; Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and Anant Sadashiv Altekar. *The Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age, Circa 200-550 A.D.* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967); Nisar Ahmed. "A Re-examination of the Genealogy and Chronology of the Vākāṭakas," *Indian Antiquary*. ser. 3.4 (1970): 149-164; Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and K. K. Dasgupta (eds). *A Comprehensive History of India, Volume 3 Part I, (A.D. 300-985)*. (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1981). These works are all based upon the epigraphic evidence available up until 1963. Since that date numerous Vākāṭaka records have been discovered, whose contents are summarized in Ajay Mitra Shastri. "New Vākāṭaka Inscriptions." In *The Age of the Vākāṭakas*. Ed. by A. M. Shastri. (New Delhi: Harman Publishing, 1992): 227-268.

the Vākātakas,⁵⁷ or the meaning of this family name,⁵⁸ but epigraphic⁵⁹ and *purāṇic*⁶⁰ sources alike name Vindhyaśakti as the family progenitor (see Fig. 6 for the Vākāṭaka genealogy). Vindhyaśakti's son, Pravarasena I, is deemed the greatest of the Vākātakas: his campaigns appear to have expanded Vindhyaśakti's kingdom to such an extent that Pravarasena I was empowered to perform Vedic Vajapeya sacrifices, the Soma sacrifice seven times, as well as four Aśvamedha sacrifices, and to adopt for himself the highest imperial title, *Samrāṭ*. According to the *Purāṇas*, Pravarasena I had four sons, every one of whom became a king.⁶¹

Whatever the veracity of this report, we only know that Pravarasena I's unified Vākāṭaka empire was divided into at least two parts: one branch headed by Rudrasena I, the eldest son of Pravarasena's eldest son, Gautamīputra, who predeceased his father. The other branch, that of Hariṣeṇa, was headed by Sarvasena I. Rudrasena I's progeny ruled from first from Nandivardhana and later from Pravarapura, both in the present day Mahārāṣṭra state. The descendants of Sarvasena I had their capital in Vatsagulma,⁶² from

⁵⁷ K. P. Jayaswal. *History of India, 150 A.D. to 350 A.D.* (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990); Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākātakas*; Ajay Mitra Shastri. "The Vākātakas: Original Home and Some Other Problems." In *The Age of the Vākātakas*. Ed. by Ajay Mitra Shastri. (New Delhi: Harman Publishing, 1992): 1-20; S. V. Sohoni. "Original Territory of the Vākāṭaka Dynasty." In *The Age of the Vākātakas*. Ed. by Ajay Mitra Shastri. (New Delhi: Harman Publishing, 1992): 33-35.

⁵⁸ Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākātakas*; K. V. Ramesh. "On the Vākātakas and their Inscriptions." In *The Age of the Vākātakas*. Ed. by Ajay Mitra Shastri. (New Delhi: Harman Publishing, 1992): 27-32; Shastri. "The Vākātakas: Original Home and Some Other Problems."

⁵⁹ Cf. app. A, No. 67; P. V. Parabrahma Sastry. "Hyderabad Plates of Vakataka Devasena, Year 5," *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*. 13 (1986): 71-75; Krishna Mohan Shrimali. *Agrarian Structure in Central India and the Northern Deccan (c. AD 300-500): A Study in Vākāṭaka Inscriptions*. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987): 82-3.

⁶⁰ Frederick Eden Pargiter. *The Purāṇa Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age*. (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1962): 48, 50, 72-73.

⁶¹ Pargiter. *The Purāṇa Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age*, 50, 73.

⁶² For discussions of the meaning of *Vatsagulma* see Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākātakas*, 96 and Ramesh. "On the Vākātakas and their Inscriptions," 29.

whence it does not seem to have moved (see Fig. 7 for a map of the Vākāṭaka heartlands). I will discuss both branches after the names of their respective capitals.

Because the Vākāṭaka kings generally dated their records in terms of regnal years, rather than according to the known eras of Indian history (the Śaka or Gupta for instance), the absolute dates of their individual suzerainty are difficult to determine. Two anchors are available. First, Rudrasena II, a king of the Nandivardhana branch, took as his principal wife Prabhāvatīgupta, a daughter of the mighty Gupta monarch Candragupta II, whose rule can be set at least between G.E. 61 (=380 C.E.) and G.E. 93 (=412 C.E.).⁶³ The Vākāṭaka chronology can thus be affixed to a definite century, at least.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the regnal years of Rudrasena II are disputed, and so little is known of the other Vākāṭaka kings' regnal periods that this branch's chronology cannot be fixed without a margin of at least twenty-five years.⁶⁵ Further, even if this date were known with greater accuracy, the method of counting and calculating the generations of one branch of a ruling family to determine the chronology of the other is highly problematic, albeit one finds it often used in the writing of Indian history.

The second fact for setting a Vākāṭaka absolute chronology -- and a much better fact at that -- comes from the Hisse-Borālā stone-slab inscription.⁶⁶ Found near the sit of

⁶³ D. R. Bhandarkar, B. C. Chhabra, and G. S. Gai. *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, volume III (revised). (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1981): 52.

⁶⁴ Before this marriage alliance came to light, Fleet had dated Pravarasena II and Vākāṭakas to the seventh century (John Faithfull Fleet. *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, volume 3. [Varanasi, Indological Book House, 1970]: 16).

⁶⁵ Spink. "Reply to K. Khandalawala, A. Jamkhedkar, B. Deshpande," 21-24.

⁶⁶ V. B. Kolte. "Hisse-Borālā Inscription of Vākāṭaka King Devasena." In *Felicitation Volume* (=V. V. Mirashi Festschrift). Ed. by G. T. Deshpande et. al. (Nagpur: Vidarbha Samshodan Mandal, 1965); Sobhana Gokhale. "Hisse-Borala Inscription of Devasena, Saka 380," *Epigraphia Indica*. 37 (1967): 1-4; G. S. Gai and S. Sankaranarayanan. "Note on the Date of Hisse-Borala Inscription of the Time of Vakataka Devasena," *Epigraphia Indica*. 37 (1967): 5-8; Ajay Mitra Shastri. "Some Observations on the Hisse-Borala Inscription of Vākāṭaka Devasena." In *Umesha Mishra Commemoration Volume*. Ed by B. R. Saksena. (Allahabad: Ganganatha Jha Research Institute, 1970); Shrimali. *Agrarian Structure*,

ancient Vatsagulma, this slab records that Svāmilladeva, the executive officer of Rāja Śrī Devasena of the Vākāṭakas, set up a reservoir named Sudarśana for the benefit of all beings. This Devasena was Hariṣeṇa's father. But more importantly, this is the single Vākāṭaka record dated to a known era: Svāmilladeva's donation was made in the Śaka year 380 (= 457-8 c.E.).⁶⁷ We know further, from a copper-plate inscription found in Bidar, a northern district of Karnataka state, that Devasena reigned at least five years.⁶⁸

One more piece of historical evidence is available for anchoring Ajaṅṭā's history. According to Hsüan-tsang, "in the old days Jina (*or* Channa) Bodhisattva often stopped in this *saṅghārāma*."⁶⁹ This Buddhist figure has been identified as the famed logician Dignāga. In addition to the other tales Hsüan-tsang tells of bodhisattva "Jina" that would make this identification secure, the Jain scholar Siṃhasūri calls Dignāga by the name Dinna,⁷⁰ homophonous with Jina of the Chinese.

Dignāga's dates are not known with any accuracy. According to Siṃhasūri, Vasubandhu was Dignāga's personal teacher (*svaguru*). This tradition is also recorded in the Tibetan sources: the *Blue Annals* (1478 c.E.) place Dignāga after Vasubandhu in the lineage of Abhidharma masters;⁷¹ Bu-ston (†14th c.) presents Vasubandhu as Dignāga's

81; Shastri. "New Vākāṭaka Inscriptions," 246-7.

⁶⁷ When this record was first discovered a controversy raged as to whether it does indeed include the word *Śaka*. Consensus has been reached in the affirmative. See Shastri. "New Vākāṭaka Inscriptions," 246-7 for a recapitulation of that discussion.

⁶⁸ Sastry. "Hyderabad Plates of Devasena;" Shastri. "New Vākāṭaka Inscriptions," 248-251.

⁶⁹ Hsüan-Tsang. *Si-Yu Ki*, vol. 2, 259.

⁷⁰ Masaaki Hattori. *Dignāga, On Perception*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968): 3, n.9.

⁷¹ George N. Roerich (trans). *The Blue Annals*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988): 346.

principal teacher early in his life;⁷² Tāranātha (in 1608 C.E.) recapitulates Bu-ston's tale.⁷³ The textual record supports placing Dignāga after Vasubandhu, as Dignāga was clearly familiar with Vasubandhu's corpus, and composed an abridgement of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, the *Abidharmakośavṛttimarmadīpa*. However, none of the Chinese eye-witnesses make any mention of this relationship, although Hsüan-tsang and I-Tsing discuss both figures. In any event, Vasubandhu is generally dated (now-a-days) to c. 400-480 C.E.,⁷⁴ which would place Dignāga's active period to sometime after 450 C.E.

Because of the uncertain relationship between Vasubandhu and Dignāga, scholars have also investigated his position relative to several other major figures of Indian philosophy. Besides post-dating Vasubandhu, according to the major studies of Dignāga by Frauwallner and Hattori, Dignāga must ante-date Dharmapāla (c. 510-570), who cites him. Dignāga's life-span can be further narrowed through his position relative to the grammarian Bhartṛhari. Both Hattori and Frauwallner situate Dignāga as Bhartṛhari's junior: the Buddhist logician models one of his earliest works (the *Trikālaparīkṣā*) upon Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīyam*, and Dignāga cites this same text in his last composition, the

⁷² Bu-ston. *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet by Bu ston*. Trans. by E. Obermiller. (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1987): 149.

⁷³ Tāranātha. *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*. Ed. and trans. by Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990): 182.

⁷⁴ For several highlights in the literature concerning this major figure, who has variously been placed in the fourth century, the fifth century, and cleft into two -- a separate Vasubandhu for each century see Noel Peri. "À propos de la date de Vasubandhu," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient*. 11 (1911): 339-390; Erich Frauwallner. *On the Date of the Buddhist Master of the Law, Vasubandhu*. (Rome: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1951); Padmanabh S. Jaini. "On the Theory of Two Vasubandhus," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. 21 (1958): 48-53; Erich Frauwallner. "Landmarks in the History of Indian Logic," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sud- und Ostasiens und Archiv für Indische Philosophie*. 5 (1961): 129-134; Shri Ram Goyal. *A History of the Imperial Guptas*. (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1967): 214-6; Vasubandhu. *Seven Works of Vasubandhu, the Buddhist Psychological Doctor*. Ed. and trans. by Stephen Anacker. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984): 7-28; José Pereira and Francis Tiso. "The Life of Vasubandhu According to Recent Research," *East and West*. 37 (1987): 451-454; and Marek Mejer. *Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa and the Commentaries Preserved in the Tanjur*. Alt- und Neu-Indische Studien herausgegeben vom Institut für Kultur und Geschichte Indiens und Tibets an der Universität Hamburg, No. 42. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991).

Pramāṇasamuccaya.

Just as Dignāga's dates are established by reference to those of his teacher Vasubandhu, so Bhartṛhari's dates are delimited by reference to those of his teacher, Vasurāta. In point of fact, Vasurāta and Vasubandhu were known to each other: both belonged to the Gupta court's inner circle. According to Paramārtha, late in life Vasubandhu debated a grammarian named Vasurāta, who was also the brother-in-law of the Gupta king, Bālāditya. Moreover, Vasubandhu was the mentor of this same Bālāditya. These figures' involvement in Bālāditya's court provides an anchor for Vasubandhu's and Bhartṛhari's dates, since this Gupta emperor was probably Narasiṃhagupta I, whose reign may be dated to a few years starting in 469 C.E.⁷⁵ Because Vasurāta was Bālāditya's brother-in-law, Frauwallner suggests that Vasurāta "could not have been an old man"⁷⁶ when he debated Vasubandhu. Accepting Frauwallner's interpretation would force us to push Dignāga's period of activity to the early to mid-sixth century. But why could Vasurāta not have been an old man when he debated Vasubandhu? One cannot specify Vasurāta's age at the time of his debate with Vasubandhu. Nevertheless, it does seem certain that the literary productions of Vasurāta's pupil, Bhartṛhari, should not be placed earlier than the 450s-460s,⁷⁷ and thus neither should the works of Dignāga.

Finally, Hattori and Frauwallner further narrow Dignāga's date by noting that he attacked the Sāṃkhya teacher Mādhava in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. This same Mādhava is

⁷⁵ Goyal. *A History of the Imperial Guptas*, 317.

⁷⁶ Frauwallner. "Landmarks in the History of Indian Logic," 135.

⁷⁷ George Cardona (*Panini: A Survey of Research*. [The Hague: Mouton, 1976]: 298-9) offers an excellent review of the many opinions concerning Bhartṛhari's dates. Here, Cardona suggests that Bhartṛhari "lived no later than the fifth century." But, he also cites a tradition that would put the grammarian as early as the fourth century, for it is thought by some that Bhartṛhari is referred to in the work of a Mallavādin, a Jain logician traditionally dated to 357/8.

said, by Hsüan-tsang, to have debated Guṇamati, the teacher of Sthiramati (c. 510-570).⁷⁸ As the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* is considered Dignāga's final work, it could easily have been composed sometime in or around the first decade of the sixth century.

In brief, the dates of 480-540 C.E. suggested by Frauwallner⁷⁹ or 470-530 C.E. by Hattori⁸⁰ are approximate at best, and Dignāga could well have been born c. 440. In the end, this investigation of Hsüan-tsang's testimony only suggests that the caves were in use somewhere between the mid-fifth and mid-sixth centuries: this is the last of our *definite* chronological facts.⁸¹

So far we have established that Ajaṅṭā's Vākāṭaka period coincided at least in part with the reign of Hariṣeṇa, and that Dignāga visited the site frequently some time between 450 and 550 C.E. At the same time, Spink claims the ability to resolve Ajaṅṭā's absolute chronology into a nineteen year period, and to be able to date every piece of evidence to an (approximately) specific moment within that span. Accordingly, the remainder of this subsection has two tasks: to review how Spink narrows this temporal range by filling in the historical details, and to assess evidence through which he accomplishes this task.

The year 458 C.E. provides a non-controversial *terminus post quem* for Hariṣeṇa's accession, since the Hisse-Borālā stone slab of that date names his father, Devasena, as the ruler. And because the Cave 16 inscription suggests that its patron, Varāhadeva, was already a counsellor of Mahārāja Hariṣeṇa when he began this vihāra, Spink understands the site's history to have taken place fully within the period of Hariṣeṇa's reign: "The

⁷⁸ Hsüan-Tsang. *Si-Yu Ki*, vol. 2, 104-110; Watters. *On Yuan Chwang's Travels*, vol. 2, 108-9.

⁷⁹ Frauwallner. "Landmarks in the History of Indian Logic," 134.

⁸⁰ Hattori. *Dignāga*, 4, n. 21.

⁸¹ Hajime Nakamura (*Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes*. [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987]: 296) places Dignāga between c. 400 and 480 C.E., but it is not clear to me how he derived these dates and so I have not discussed them.

entrance of the great emperor Hariṣeṇa onto the stage of Indian history for his all-too-brief hour, and the fate that befell both him and the empire that he gathered, are part of the finally tragic story that Ajaṅṭā tells when we probe into it layer by layer.”⁸² More uncertain, but certainly possible, is Spink’s statement that Hariṣeṇa ascended the throne in 460. Spink agrees this date is arbitrary, but avers it is “not *very* arbitrary,”⁸³ being no more than two years off. Consequent upon this date, the strata of Spink’s short chronology are delineated thus: Phase 1) 462-468, Phase 2) 469- 471, Hiatus) 472-474, Phase 3) 475-476, Phase 4) 477, Phase 5) 479-480. By aligning the vicissitudes of Ajaṅṭā’s art to those of the empire under Hariṣeṇa’s suzerainty, Spink has made Hariṣeṇa’s biography a crucial factor in Ajaṅṭā’s chronology. If one assumes that Ajaṅṭā was excavated and decorated in this nineteen year period, the crucial question becomes, what were the historical triumphs and calamities whose traces are so evident in the multiple strata of Ajaṅṭā’s record?

Spink begins with the assumption that the Ajaṅṭā region was not among the territories governed centrally from Vatsagulma, but, instead, was “among the extensive feudatory domains inherited by the new Vākāṭaka emperor when he succeeded to power.”⁸⁴ Based upon this presupposition, he further suggests that the ruler of this locale was the Vākāṭaka feudatory responsible for Caves 17, 19, and 20;⁸⁵ following Mirashi, Spink names this territory as the kingdom of Ṛṣīka.⁸⁶ Based upon Mirashi’s translation of verse 10 from Cave 17’s dedicatory inscription, Spink proposes that shortly before the site’s

⁸² Spink. “Archaeology of Ajaṅṭā,” 69.

⁸³ Spink. “Archaeology of Ajaṅṭā,” 70.

⁸⁴ Spink. “Archaeology of Ajaṅṭā,” 72.

⁸⁵ Following Spink, I include Cave 20 in this list. But see my discussion in Chapter IV on Ajaṅṭā’s programmatic patrons for my reservations concerning this identification.

⁸⁶ See Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, 123. This identification is problematic, and probably wrong. The location of Ṛṣīka is not crucial for the present discussion, however. I will therefore accept Spink’s identification for the time being.

efflorescence of 462 the king responsible for Cave 17 engaged in and won a battle with the ruler of Aśmaka, another Vākāṭaka feudatory placed by Mirashi to the south-west.⁸⁷ For Spink's historical reconstruction, this pre-Ajaṅṭā dispute was to have major ramifications.

In fact, Spink portrays the site's development as a reflection of the relations and conflicts between the Ṛṣīka, Aśmaka, and Vākāṭaka kingdoms. Period 1 is initiated soon after dispute between this the kings of Ṛṣīka and Aśmaka. Period 2, characterized by rushed and expedient work, is said to have been occasioned by an Aśmaka attack against Ṛṣīka. The hiatus occurred when this conflict made the site uninhabitable. Period 3 was initiated by the resolution of this conflict, and ended with Hariṣeṇa's death, about which Spink suggests "considering the perverse machinations of the Aśmakas it may have been by poison or the knife."⁸⁸ Period 4 began with the site's patrons' realization that Aśmaka has designs upon the entire Vākāṭaka empire; these patrons therefore rushed their work towards completion. The final period, characterized by the loss of the site's bureaucratic structure, and consequent haphazard placement of intrusive imagery, began as the Aśmakas intensified their freedom-fight against the Vākāṭaka polity. The history of Ajaṅṭā Spink reconstructs based upon these few events can be summarized as follows:

- Period 1: Early 462-Late 468: Situated along a major North-South trade route, the region surrounding Ajaṅṭā is an object of contention between the Ṛṣīka dynasty to its north and the Aśmaka to its south. Some time before 462 the Ṛṣīkas take decisive control of the region, and with the support of the new suzerain, the Vākāṭaka overlord Hariṣeṇa, they enforce peace. Whereafter, the Ṛṣīka king (christened "Upendragupta" by Spink), Hariṣeṇa's prime-minister (named Varāhadeva), a monk named Buddhahadra with ties to the Aśmakas, and other patrons of unknown affiliation serially initiate the excavation of cave monasteries for Buddhist monks.
- Period 2: Early 469-Late 471: Aśmaka attacks Ṛṣīka. This conflict stops work on all caves except those sponsored by the Ṛṣīka king and Hariṣeṇa himself. Many workmen go to Bāgh several hundred miles to the north; the decorative motifs of

⁸⁷ Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, 123. Whereas the name of the region ruled by Cave 17's donor is not necessarily pertinent, the location of Aśmaka is important and is treated below.

⁸⁸ Spink. "Archaeology of Ajaṅṭā," 82.

Bāgh's earliest phase are the same as Ajaṅṭā's second.

- Hiatus: Early 472-Late 474: The R̥ṣīka/Aśmaka conflict heightens and all work at Ajaṅṭā stops. It is important to note that during this period not only did no programmatic work continue on the caves, but no intrusive Buddha images, no "graffiti" as it were, were added either. This highlights an important facet of Ajaṅṭā's patronage. Namely, as long as a donor maintained an interest in the cave for which he paid, that excavation was treated as his exclusive property, and was not available for alteration or decoration by anybody else. A clear demarcation can be made between "programmatic" and "intrusive" periods and iconographies at Ajaṅṭā.
- Period 3: Early 475-Late 477: Aśmaka wins this time around. Work resumes in earnest, this time under Aśmaka supervision. This period ends with Hariṣeṇa's probably sudden, probably unexpected, death.
- Period 4: Early 478-Late 478: The shock of Hariṣeṇa's death, the evident weakness of his successor, and the recognized ambitions of Aśmaka to destroy the entire Vākāṭaka empire impels Ajaṅṭā's patrons to hurriedly complete and dedicate their caves.
- Period 5: Early 479-Late 480: Aśmakan machinations devastate the Vākāṭaka polity; Hariṣeṇa's empire is rent in "civil war." Original patrons give up their control, enabling the monks and artisans still living at Ajaṅṭā, as well as travelling merchants, to commission images in the caves already excavated. Eventually, the long and bloody war renders the Ajaṅṭā pass impassable. The monks leave Ajaṅṭā in search of support, for the original patrons of the caves no longer maintain their establishments and travellers no longer come near. The site is abandoned.

In general one will notice three profound moments in Spink's telling of Ajaṅṭā's history: the creation, the hiatus, and the devastation. Spink's relative chronology highlights two periods of rushed work followed by major changes in motival usages and patronage patterns, the latter followed by a sudden and absolute cessation of work. The first period of rush is explained through appeal to Aśmakan bellicosity; the second is also blamed upon Aśmaka in part, but here the dominant theme is the dissolution of an empire after a great king's death. These two events are the preeminent determining factors in Ajaṅṭā's history, and both are reconstructed based upon evidence gleaned from the incised inscriptions on Caves 16 and 17. More specifically, Spink's narrative of Aśmaka aggression stems from a single verse, number 10, in Cave 17. His characterization of the site's final years, and sudden demise, relies upon parallels between information provided in Cave 16's

verse 18 and the eighth chapter of Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita*, which he treats as a crypto-historical recounting of the Vākātakas' downfall. In short, Spink's absolute chronology has been developed by his reading of a relative chronology into the framework of a history derived from these two verses. Let us see how they have been read, and how they might be read.

Spink has proposed a relative chronology according to which motival developments within Caves 17's, 19's, and 20's decorative programmes stop mid-way through the overall span of Vākāṭaka patronage, although none of these programmes was completed. Spink advances a history of Ajaṅṭā that accounts for these caves' premature termination by reading his relative chronological evidence in the light of Cave 17's dedicatory inscription. In short, Spink employs Mirashi's translation of one verse to substantiate a history of animosity between Cave 17's donor and the ruler of Aśmaka. Spink proposes (with supporting "horizontal" evidence) that, as this donor confronted and defeated Aśmaka some time before the site was begun, so the hiatus of 472 occurred when the Aśmakan king attacked and defeated Cave 17's donor. The only documentary evidence that could tie the Aśmakas to Cave 17's premature termination, the only direct evidence for *any* interaction between Cave 17's donor and Aśmaka, is verse 10 from Cave 17's inscription, which Mirashi has translated as follows:

9. [The donor's father] had two sons resembling Pradyumna and Sāmba. . . . The elder *of them* bore the title of king, while the second bore the appellation Ravisāmba.
10. Having subjugated prosperous countries such as Aśmaka [the two princes] whose prowess had become fruitful, shone like the sun and the moon.⁸⁹

Mirashi surmises that the two royal brothers, their prowess realized, defeated the Aśmakas and others in battle. For him the Aśmaka were definitely enemies of Cave 17 donor.

However, as I show in appendix B, Mirashi's reconstruction of this verse is erroneous. My new reading of this verse not only clarifies the Sanskrit, it also sheds new light on the

⁸⁹ Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākātakas*, 128.

relationship between Cave 17's donor and the Aśmakan king. However, in this case, clarification is tantamount to problematization: the precise nature of the relationship between these two figures is far more uncertain than that suggested by Mirashi. My reconstruction of this verse may be translated:

10. . . . after those two [princes] vanquished [an enemy] . . . whose life was cut short . . . [in] Aśmaka and [elsewhere], they shone (or governed) brilliantly like the moon and the sun.

According to this reading, we know that Cave 17's royal donor had an enemy or enemies whom he defeated, and we may even know *where* the fight happened, but from this inscription alone we cannot determine *who* that enemy was. A foe of this cave's donor may have been defeated on several fronts, in Aśmaka and elsewhere. That foe's identity, name, and title remain unknown.

This translation and interpretation of the dedicatory inscription in Cave 17 leads me to question one of the arguments behind Spink's telling of Ajañṭā's history. Without Mirashi's interpretation of this verse, there is no epigraphic evidence for a conflict between Cave 17's donor and the Aśmakas. Mirashi's reading of the inscription provides Spink with an important piece of evidence for his historical reconstruction. It is true, however, that Spink also appeals to art historical evidence. His principal art historical evidence for this hypothesis is that after the Hiatus "work was renewed vigorously in the Cave 26 complex . . . but nothing more was done on the splendid Cave 17-21 complex."⁹⁰ As I noted above, this claim can be accepted as correct. Nevertheless, I would argue that without the evidence provided by Mirashi's reading of Cave 17's verse 10, it becomes difficult to validate Spink's historical reconstruction. Without Mirashi's support, Spink's observation that "the conquest of the region by the aggressive Aśmakas"⁹¹ caused the Hiatus is no

⁹⁰ Spink, "Archaeology of Ajañṭā," 78.

⁹¹ Spink, "Archaeology of Ajañṭā," 78.

longer the most plausible hypothesis. Additionally, without an established pattern of enmity between the Aśmakas and Cave 17's donor one cannot quite understand the vituperous hatred which would stand behind the following observation: “now that the Aśmakas were in control [Cave 17 donor's] beautiful *caitya* hall [i.e., Cave 19] was never put into use. . . . [because] the rulers specifically disallowed all worship there, just as they never allowed any more work on . . . Caves 17 and 20.”⁹² Similarly, without a pattern of enmity, why would the Aśmakas have “banned the use of the standing Buddha with both arms raised, which [Cave 17's donor] had selected as the site's focal image?”⁹³ Spink proposes the Aśmakas controlled this iconography at the site because “the Aśmakas felt this hieratic image type was too closely identified with their old rival's power.”⁹⁴ As we cannot assert that Cave 17's donor and the Aśmakas *were* old rivals, let alone new, another interpretation may be warranted. Cakravarti and Chhabra have even suggested that the powerful king of Aśmaka mentioned in Cave 26's dedicatory inscription and the donor of Cave 17 were one and the same person,⁹⁵ though I do not see how this observation could coordinate with the general lineaments of Spink's chronology.

Before proceeding with my own reconstruction of Ajañṭā's history, however, I wish to emphasize two points that mitigate my stated doubts concerning Spink's work. First, the above critique is based upon a revised reading of Cave 17's inscription; it takes little account of the abundance and complexity of Ajañṭā's physical evidence. Yet, the site's art and architecture, not its inscriptions, stand at the heart of Spink's historical reconstruction. (See appendix D for a more detailed analysis of Spink's historical arguments on their own

⁹² Spink, “Archaeology of Ajañṭā,” 78.

⁹³ Spink, “Archaeology of Ajañṭā,” 79.

⁹⁴ Spink, “Archaeology of Ajañṭā,” 79.

⁹⁵ “Notes on the Painted and Incised Inscriptions of Caves XX-XXVI,” 115.

terms.) As my interpretation does not take into account the full range or ramifications of such evidence, room certainly remains for Spink's reconstruction as a competing theory. For instance, it seems that in the period after the Hiatus a passageway was cut through the cells in the Cave 19 caitya, making for an easier access to the Cave 26 complex which lay beyond:⁹⁶ my hypothesis does not explain the brutal violation of Cave 19 such a passageway represents. Nevertheless, I feel that the documentary evidence, both internal and external to Ajañṭā, gives a strong impetus towards reconstructing the site's history anew.

Second, insofar as the analytic distinction between relative and absolute chronologies has been suitably maintained in their elaboration, this new reconstruction of Cave 17's verse 10 has no necessary impact upon the length or elaboration of Spink's short chronology as a relative chronology. This is why, following Spink, I have emphasized the closed nature of the site as mirrored in the "crucial" Cave 16. As long as one accepts 1) that the dedicatory record was incised shortly before this cave's completion, and 2) that this cave's programmatic architectures and images can be traced to both the earliest and latest phases of the site's Vākāṭaka period, one will have to agree that Ajañṭā was created in the course of an eighteen, twenty, or twenty-five year span. The site's artifacts detail a history comprised of anxious periods of rush, fits, starts, and apparent catastrophes, and thus may still tell an intriguing tale, reflecting the triumphs and disasters of Hariṣeṇa's reign.

The Rocky Road to History

To recap, in the previous subsection we saw that an association of Ajañṭā's Vākāṭaka efflorescence with the reign of Hariṣeṇa sometime after 462 C.E. provides the only certainty for reconstructing Ajañṭā's history. We then found that Spink uses verse 10 from Cave 17 to document a set of stormy relations between the Vākāṭaka, Ṛṣīka, and

⁹⁶ Spink, "Archaeology of Ajañṭā," 79.

Aśmaka dynasties, filling out the relative, motival evidence these caves provide. But we have also found that Mirashi was mistaken in his editing of this verse, and thereby broke this linchpin of Spink's historical reconstruction. The present subsection will seek to fashion a new history for Ajañṭā. Although I will accept as many as possible of the remaining assumptions that underlie Spink's history, my revised reading of Cave 17's verse will result in a very different reconstruction of Ajañṭā's history.

Let us begin this new treatment of Ajañṭā's history with a closer look at the single definite linchpin of the site's history: Hariṣeṇa. What do we really know of Hariṣeṇa, in his day perhaps "the greatest ruler in the world?"⁹⁷ Direct information about this Vākāṭaka monarch comes from two sources: the paeon to him and his forbearers that comprises the first half of Varāhadeva's Cave 16 inscription, and the Thāḷner grant dated to year 3 of Hariṣeṇa's reign.⁹⁸ A third document apposite to events during Hariṣeṇa's reign is the eighth chapter of the Daṇḍin's early seventh-century classic, the *Daśakumāracarita*. Following the publication of an article by V. V. Mirashi, who read this chapter as an imaginative retelling of the dissolution of the Vākāṭaka empire after the Hariṣeṇa's death, the belief that there is a consonance between Daṇḍin's art and Vākāṭaka history has become an *idée reçue* among Ajañṭā's chronologists. Although one cannot but be suspicious about treating an ostensibly literary work as historical, Spink accepts this thesis, and thus, given the methodological parameters of my own reconstruction, it cannot be ignored.

⁹⁷ Walter Spink. "The Achievement of Ajanta." In *The Age of the Vākāṭakas*. Ed. by Ajay Mitra Shastri. (New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1992): 177.

⁹⁸ Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi. *Indological Research Papers, volume 1*. (Nagpur: Vidarbha Samshodhan Mandal, 1982): 78-87; Ajay Mitra Shastri. "Thalner Plates of Vakataka Harishena: A ReAppraisal," *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*. 11 (1984): 15-20; Shrimali. *Agrarian Structure*, 82-3; Shastri. "New Vākāṭaka Inscriptions," 251-253. While in India, I heard report that another Vākāṭaka copper-plate inscription had been found in Dhulia, near Thāḷner. There was further rumor that this record belonged to Hariṣeṇa himself. Unfortunately, though this rumor was known to several Vākāṭaka scholars and epigraphists, none had seen the record or could even confirm its existence.

Of these three sources, Varāhadeva's verses are the most informative. In addition to the common paeans of praise one would expect from a courtier's account of his lord, Varāhadeva recounts some of Hariṣeṇa's accomplishments as the Vākāṭaka king. In particular, verse 18 tells of Hariṣeṇa as a mighty conqueror indeed. . . perhaps. This last major Vākāṭaka ruler may have expanded his empire in every direction, to the north, east, south, and west alike (see Fig. 17 for a map of Hariṣeṇa's putative conquests). My interest in this verse is not with its reconstruction, but with the use of its translation. Accordingly, I will present Mirashi's transcription, and my own translation:

sa kuntalāvantikaliṅgakosalatrikūṭalāṭāndhra jān imān { | }
 [śaurya]viśrutān api svanirddeśa(guṇāti) { | | 18 | | }⁹⁹

18. [Hariṣeṇa] . . . those . . . of Kuntala, Avanti, Kaliṅga, Kosala, Trikūṭa, Lāṭa, Andhra, [who] celebrated for heroism as well as . . . extremely . . . to the qualities of self-government.

One will immediately notice from my translation that this verse, as it now exists, lacks a verb. This problem is akin to that explored in regard to the relationship between Cave 17's donor and Aśmaka: we know that Hariṣeṇa bore some relation to the countries named Kuntala, Avanti, Kaliṅga, Kosala, Trikūṭa, Lāṭa, and Andhra, or their kings, or their populace, but that relation's content is by no means certain. Bühler and Mirashi alike read this verse as claiming that Hariṣeṇa "[conquered]" these various lands.¹⁰⁰ This is one likely interpretation, perhaps the most likely. Nevertheless, it is a reconstruction without any direct confirmation in the available evidence. This is why I have left the verb out of my translation: however reasonable this interpretation is, the possibility remains that this verse simply delineates the range of territories Hariṣeṇa inherited from his father, or maybe even

⁹⁹ Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, 108.

¹⁰⁰ Burgess. *Report on Buddhist Cave Temples*, 127; Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, 110.

other countries with which he formed an alliance for some unknown purpose.¹⁰¹ This is a point of tension that must be recognized, if not resolved. For although Bühler and Mirashi acknowledge the tentativeness of their translations, Mirashi, and following him Spink, have taken the information contained in this verse as a firm basis for reconstructing the events surrounding Ajaṅṭā's last days.

Reading this verse according to the dominant interpretation, some scholars have found in this verse mere hyperbole, broad praises for a minor monarch. Whereas it is unlikely that Hariṣeṇa took full control over these various territories, there is no evidential basis for rejecting Varāhadeva's claims out of hand (whatever they may have been).¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ I make this latter suggestion, as it is indeterminate whether this verse's initial *sa* is a personal pronoun or the first element in the compound that follows.

¹⁰² See Goyal (*A History of the Imperial Guptas*, 11-15) on the basis for interpreting such celebrations of territorial conquests (*digvijaya praśasti*) in royal epigraphs. However, for an example of the dangers involved in a too-uncritical acceptance of this verse as falling into the genre of *digvijaya praśasti*, we can look to a recent article in which Shobana Gokhale fills the lacuna between °*āndhra*° and °*jān*° ("Epigraphical Evidence on Hariṣeṇa's Conquest from Kanheri." In *The Age of the Vākātakas*. Ed. by Ajay Mitra Shastri. [New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1992]: 269-78). Apparently viewing the martial nature of this verse as given, Gokhale boldly states that Hariṣeṇa "was the paramount ruler of the region extending from Malwa in the north to Kuntala in the south" (269). And she wonders why, as he was such a great conqueror, India's west coast is missing from his *digvijaya praśasti*. Accordingly, she proposes reconstructing the letters "parānta" into verse 18's lacuna. An ancient name for the coastal area south of the Tapti River, Aparānta (shortened to *parānta metri causā*) fits into the *Vaṃśastha* meter for the reconstructed reading: *sa kuntalāvantikaliṅga-kosalatrikūṭalāṅdhraparāntajān imān*. Gokhale claims that "according to the essentials of the *Vaṃśastha* metre no other name of a country suits between Andhra and Jānimān" (277).

Gokhale's final assertion is incorrect, for *Vidarbha* scans the same metrically. Be that as it may, however, Gokhale has so completely accepted this verse as a *digvijaya praśasti* that she fails to explain what the significance of this compound's final element would be given her suggested emendation. If one accepts Gokhale's *parānta*, there are two possible readings for the line's ending °*jānimān*. First this can be analyzed into °*jān*° (an accusative plural, meaning the inhabitants or people of) and *imān* (an accusative plural pronoun, "these"). In this reading, Hariṣeṇa has an unknown relationship to "these, the inhabitants of Kuntala, Avanti, Kaliṅga Kosala, Trikūṭa, Lāṭa, Andhra, and Aparānta." And though it would make grammatical sense to read this relationship as one between conqueror and conquered populace, culturally this interpretation seems unlikely. Within the Cave 16 inscription, Hariṣeṇa's ancestors are celebrated for vanquishing their enemies, for having their lotus-like feet kissed by rays from the jewels set in the crowns of other kings, for conquering all armies, and for humbling the lord of Kuntala, among other accomplishments. These other Vākāṭaka kings' glory little derived from their ability to subdue farmers and merchants. I would be surprised if Cave 16's poet celebrated Hariṣeṇa with lesser praise than his forefathers, or described the mere populace of the many realms mentioned as "celebrated for [heroism]" and interested in "self-government."

By reading °*jānimān*° as this longer compound's final element (as Gokhale seems to do), one complicates matters still further: °*jānimān*° is a nominative singular -- apposite to the subject of

Indeed, a copper-plate grant issued by Hariṣeṇa in the 3rd year of his reign suggests that he commenced these conquests early in his royal career. Found near Thāḷner, a town in what was once Traikūṭaka land commanding the north/south road over the Narmadā river to Avanti (another Hariṣeṇa conquest according to Cave 16), this copper-plate records Hariṣeṇa's grant of lands to Brāhmaṇas in that locale. In fact, reviewing the map I have provided (Fig. 7), which shows the relative positions of this record's findspot, of the Vākāṭaka excavations at Ajaṅṭā, Ghaṭotkaca, and Banaoti, and of the Vākāṭaka capital at Vatsagulma, it becomes clear that this east/west road would have been vitally important to the Vatsagulma Vākāṭakas, for it gave them direct access to the Tāpī river, the sea, and foreign trade. Hariṣeṇa may well have been one of the greatest kings of his day; he may have raised the Vākāṭaka family to the apogee of its power, established a domain from sea to sea, and fostered what, according to Spink's memorable hyperbole, "may well be mankind's most remarkable creative achievement."¹⁰³

Having reached such heights, Hariṣeṇa's empire seems to have fallen hard: there is contestable evidence regarding whether he had a son and successor, but the Ajaṅṭā caves themselves unambiguously bespeak a cataclysm of some sort, resulting in their rapid and full abandonment. As Spink's history cast the Aśmakas in the role of malefactors, first defeated by Cave 17's donor, and later liable for the period of hiatus, so Spink views that land's king as responsible for Ajaṅṭā's ultimate demise. Spink's reconstruction of the events related to the development of Ajaṅṭā's caves is in large part a reworking of ideas presented

the sentence, presumably Hariṣeṇa -- meaning possessed of (*mān*) wives (*jāni*) from these various lands. This latter reading leaves no scope for a claim, based upon this verse, that Hariṣeṇa conquered these lands. To have possessed such a glorious range of matrimonial alliances may well merit eternal celebration. However, it all but invalidates the possibility of reading this verse as possessing historical information parallel to that in the *Daśakumāracarita*.

If one does not reconstruct this lacuna with the name of yet another country, but instead a word meaning king that ends in °*ja* (not *rāja*, as this violates the meter), one retains the possibility of reading this verse within the *digvijaya praśasti* genre. This seems to me a reasonable tactic, albeit a reconstruction of this sort stands outside the scope of my study.

¹⁰³ Spink. "Reply to K. Khandalawala, A. Jamkhedkar, B. Deshpande," 17.

by Mirashi, who in a 1945 article set out to prove that the eighth chapter of Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita* retells the events surrounding the Vākāṭaka empire's fall. This chapter of the *Daśakumāracarita* concerns the demise of a King-of-king whose many feudatories turn on him due to Aśmaka perfidy.

Mirashi's argument was based upon his observation that the list of treacherous feudatories enumerated in the *Daśakumāracarita* was virtually identical to a list of territories found in verse 18 of the Cave 16 inscription. Conquered by Hariṣeṇa early in his reign (according to Mirashi's interpretation of Varāhadeva's verse), these lands were would have had a natural impulse to regain their individual sovereignty when the opportunity arose. In short, the *Daśakumāracarita*'s eighth chapter is likened to a docudrama telling the history of the Vākāṭaka empire after Hariṣeṇa's death. As Spink tells it, "Daṇḍin has changed the names of the players, but the 'playing-field' is the same, for nearly every territory mentioned in the Cave 16 inscription figures in Daṇḍin's account too, as do the domains that had been in Hariṣeṇa's empire from the time of his succession."¹⁰⁴ Here I will present an excellent summary published by B. Deshpande, inserting the equivalences to historical figures made by Spink and Mirashi:

The pious and benevolent king Punyavarma (≈Hariṣeṇa), who ruled over Vidarbha region was succeeded by his son Anantavarma (≈Sarvasena III, Hariṣeṇa's son), who was given to sensual pleasures and neglected his royal duties. His faithful and old minister, Vasurakshita (≈Varāhadeva), advised him to mend ways and study statecraft but Anantavarma was under the vicious influence of Viharabhadra, his companion in sensuous affairs. He turned a deaf ear to the advice of Vasurakshita and even insulted him.

Now Anantavarma became utterly careless about his empire and spent most of his time in pursuit of sensual pleasures. Vasantabhanu, the king of neighboring Aśmaka country, was clever enough to take advantage of this situation. A son of his minister Chandrapalita entered Vidarbha under false pretext that as a punishment for a quarrel with his father he had been banished. Anantavarma, the generous Vidarbha king, gladly granted him asylum.

Chandrapalita was a wily politician. Along with him came bards, dancers, singers, musicians, hunters, and a host of domestic servants, who

¹⁰⁴ Spink. "The Achievement of Ajanta," 183.

were spies in disguise. They kept the king busy with hunting, gambling, drinking bouts and sex orgies. The administration collapsed and chaos took over.

Now Vasantabhanu instigated Bhanuvarma, the ruler of Vanavasi region to invade Vidarbha, which he did and conquered some bordering districts of the Vidarbha empire. Anantavarma, now realizing his folly, tried to tide over the coming danger. He hastily gathered the remnants of his army and called his feudatories for help. Some feudatories responded to his entreaties and came to his succor. Vasantabhanu, the master-plotter, was first to come. A sanguinary battle was fought on the banks of Varada river,¹⁰⁵ Vasantabhanu very skillfully sowed the seeds of dissension among the feudatories of the Vidarbha king and turned his faithful allies like Virasena, the lord of Murala; Ekavira, the lord of Rsika; Kumaragupta, the lord of Konkana and Nagapala the lord of Nasikya against him. They betrayed their master and went over the [*sic*] Bhanuvarma. Anantavarma fell while fighting. Vasantabhanu grabbed the Vidarbha empire and the spoils of war were shared by the unfaithful feudatories.¹⁰⁶

Clearly, if one intends to treat this tale as an historical reflex, one must identify the evil Vasantabhanu, or at least the land under his personal dominion. Because Aśmaka is not named among the acquisitions Hariṣeṇa made during his campaign, Mirashi and Spink have assumed that it, along with Rṣika and Murala, were feudatory states already under Devasena's suzerainty at the time of Hariṣeṇa's accession.

The first point of clarification is that two lands called *Aśmaka* (also called by the Prākṛit Asaka, Assaka, and Aśvaka) are found in Indian literature and epigraphs. One, mentioned in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, and Kumāralāta's *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*, is located in India's north-west; Kern has identified this land with the Assakenoi mentioned by Greek geographers.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Kale's edition of the text (Daṇḍin. *The Daśakumāracarita of Daṇḍin*. Ed. and trans. by M. R. Kale. [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986]) represents the battle as having taken place on the bank of the Narmadā river. However, Mirashi located several manuscripts which use *Varadā* in place of Kale's *Narmadā* ("Historical Data in Daṇḍin's Daśakumāracarita," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*. 26 [1945]: 21 n. 1). As the Varadā river crosses through Vidarbha and thus makes more sense in context, I have followed Mirashi and accepted this variant.

¹⁰⁶ Brahmanand Deshpande. "Dating of Ajintha Caves in the context of Vakataka Decline," *Patbhik*. 3.4 (1992): 9-10.

¹⁰⁷ Ajay Mitra Shastri. *India as Seen in the Bṛhatsaṃhitā of Varāhamihira*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969): 69-70.

The precise locale of the southern Aśmaka is not definitively set. An early mention of this region is found in the *Pārāyaṇavagga* of the Pāli *Sutta Nipāta*, wherein a Brāhmaṇa is described as dwelling in the vicinity of Aḷaka, in the region of Assaka, on the banks of the Godāvarī river.¹⁰⁸ Later in the same text, several ascetics from this Brāhmaṇa's homeland become inspired to travel north to meet Buddha. The description of their itinerary begins: "firstly to Paiṭṭhāna of Aḷaka, then to Māhisatti."¹⁰⁹ This Paiṭṭhāna is the Sanskrit Pratiṣṭhāna, a city along the Godāvarī now called Paithan, just to the south of modern Aurangabad.

Mirashi (and Spink) takes this identification as the basis for where he would locate Aśmaka: Mirashi acknowledges Paithan as the capital of Aḷaka,¹¹⁰ and places Aśmaka to its south-west "between the Sātmālā range and the Godāvarī river"¹¹¹ (see Fig. 18). Among historians of India, Mirashi stands virtually alone in this opinion. For, just as the Pāli literature has preserved the name of Aḷaka's capital city, so too does it, along with the *Mahābhārata* and *Vāyu Purāṇa*, record the capital of Aśmaka, which is found variously named Potali, Potana, Podana, Pāḍana. Raychaudhuri has identified this city with the modern town of Bodhan, located along the Godāvarī river in the north of present day Andhra Pradesh.¹¹²

Raychaudhuri's identification is reasonable as the *Pārāyaṇavagga* places Aśmaka contiguous to Mūḷaka, and the *Cullakāliṅga Jātaka* claims that it borders Kāliṅga (the

¹⁰⁸ *so assakassa visaye aḷakassa samāsane | vasi godhāvarīkūle uñchena ca phalena ca | |* Bhikku J. Kashyap (ed). *The Khuddhakapāṭha-Dhammapada-Udāna-Itivuttaka-Suttanipāta [Khuddhakanikāya vol. 1]*. (Nālanda: Pāli Publication Board, 1959): 419.

¹⁰⁹ *aḷakassa patiṭṭhānaṃ puri mābissatiṃ tadā* Kashyap. *Khuddhakapāṭha*, 422.

¹¹⁰ Also called Mūḷaka, cf. Sircar. *Studies in the Geography*, 272.

¹¹¹ Mirashi. "Historical Data in Daṇḍin's Daśakumāracarita," 26.

¹¹² Hemchandra Raychaudhuri. *Political History of Ancient India*. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1953): 143-44; Sircar. *Studies in the Geography*, 189.

eastern coast between the Mahānadī and Godāvārī rivers, Fig. 17).¹¹³ Furthermore, within epigraphic records, Aśmaka has been paired with Vidarbha,¹¹⁴ with Ṛṣīka,¹¹⁵ and again in the *Jātaka* collection, with Avanti.¹¹⁶ Mirashi overlooks most of the available data, when he situates Aśmaka so far to the west. Instead, as one finds in Schwartzberg's invaluable *Historical Atlas of South Asia*, this region may be placed generally to the south of Vidarbha, to the south-east of Mūḷaka, to the north-east of Ṛṣīka, to the west of Kaliṅga, and to the north-east of Kuntala and other lands.¹¹⁷ Let me emphasize, Aśmaka is a territorial, not a political, designation, and the *Daśakumāracarita*'s presentation of Vidarbha's scheming nemesis as simply *Aśmakendra*, Lord of Aśmaka,¹¹⁸ leaves out this ne'er-do-well's dynastic or tribal appellation.

In this sub-section, I am attempting to reconstruct a history for Ajaṅṭā which, like that of Spink, assumes Cave 16's verse 18 is a *digvijaya praśasti* and that the *Daśakumāracarita* has a crypto-historical dimension, but which diverges from that of Spink in that it finds no documentary evidence for positing the Lord of Aśmaka as inimical to the

¹¹³ Edward Byles Cowell (ed). *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990): #301, vol. 3, 1-5.

¹¹⁴ Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi. "The Rāṣṭrakūṭas of Mānapura," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*. 25 (1944): 36-50; Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi. "Pandrangapalli Grant of Rashtrakuta Avidheya," *Epigraphia Indica*. 37 (1967): 9-24.

¹¹⁵ This is equivalent to the country of 'Asika' named in Burgess. *Report on the Buddhist Cave Temples*, 108.

¹¹⁶ Cowell. *Jātaka*, #532, vol. 5, 168. In this last instance, there is no implication that Assaka and Avanti share a border. This verse mentions four lands a king of Benares would fain conquer: Aṅga, Magadha, Avanti, and Assaka. Here, Avanti seems to be metonymic for the Vindhyan region in general, and Assaka for the south. Similarly, Bhaṭṭasvāmin's (date unknown) commentary on Kauṭīliya's *Dharmaśāstra* identifies Aśmaka with the entirety of Mahārāṣṭra (Sircar. *Studies in the Geography*, 190). Apparently, at its greatest extent, Aśmaka was held to be comprise Deccan plateau south of the Narmadā river.

¹¹⁷ Joseph E. Schwartzberg (ed). *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 21.

¹¹⁸ Daṇḍin. *Daśakumāracarita*, 200.

Vākāṭaka regime. Knowing the identity of Aśmaka and its ruler are key to recovering Ajaṅṭā's history. But because Varāhadeva does not mention Aśmaka, because the Cave 17 reference is unclear, and because the *Daśakumāracarita* lacks sufficient detail, the identity of this central figure will have to be recovered through an investigation of the archaeological evidence.

We have seen that the modern town of Bodhan was once considered the Aśmakan capital. Unfortunately, Bodhan is now better known for its massive sugar refineries than its history. The city has received no systematic archaeological investigation; any claims made here must be tentative. Sometime after the Pāli literature's composition, probably upon the breakup of the Śātavāhana empire in third century, the city once known as Podana fell to ruin. It is next heard of in the tenth century, under the name *Podana-Nāḍu*, when the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Indra III constructed a Vishnu temple named Indranārāyaṇa there, and raised the city to a provincial capital;¹¹⁹ in the Kalyana Cālukya period (11th century) it came to be known as *Bahudbhānyanagara* and was the site of some Viṣṇu worship.¹²⁰

Whoever the great and mighty King of Aśmaka mentioned in Cave 26's verse 9 might have been, Bodhan was likely not the center of his government. Of course, lack of evidence must not be taken as positive proof. But even if no data exists to confirm Bodhan itself as an important site in Vākāṭaka India, we have definite evidence that land in its vicinity was actively held and occupied by the Vatsagulma Vākāṭakas. According to the sparse historical data concerning Vatsagulma land-holdings, the area described as central Aśmaka had been associated with the Vākāṭakas well before Hariṣeṇa's rise to power. In addition to Hariṣeṇa's Thāḷner copper-plate, only three land-grant records have been

¹¹⁹ M. V. Rajagopali. *Andhra Pradesh District Gazetteers, Nizambad*. (Hyderabad: Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1973): 16; S. J. Mangalam. *Historical Geography and Toponymy of Andhra Pradesh*. (New Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1986): 73, 216.

¹²⁰ Rajagopali. *Andhra Pradesh Gazetteers*, 17; Mangalam. *Historical Geography*, 73, 158.

recovered from this branch of the Vākāṭaka family. One, Devasena's Indian Office Plate,¹²¹ is incomplete, but seems to have granted land to the north of Vatsagulma. That of Vindhyaśakti II, Hariṣeṇa's great-great grandfather, names one of that king's district headquarters as Nāndīkaḍa,¹²² which is identified with the modern Nanded, about seventy-five miles south of Vatsagulma, and 50 miles north-west of Bodhan. The last, the Bidar plate of Devasena, issued in the fifth year of his reign,¹²³ allows us to push the known limit of Vatsagulma Vākāṭaka territory even further south, for one must travel from Vatsagulma past Nanded another ninety miles before reaching Bidar. Most importantly, as the maps show, en route between Nanded and Bidar is Bodhan, the supposed capital of Aśmaka.¹²⁴ In short, by the early days of Devasena's reign, and possibly from long before, the only known capital of Aśmaka was situated well within the Vatsagulma Vākāṭaka heartland. And there is no evidence that during the Vākāṭaka period Bodhan would have been more than a provincial town.¹²⁵

Evidence from the Śātavāhana period and before names Aśmaka as a major, if not *the* major, territorial division of south India; its greatest extent is reached in Bhaṭṭasvāmin's commentary to Kauṭīliya's *Arthaśāstra*, wherein Aśmaka is equated with Mahārāṣṭra in its entirety.¹²⁶ In fact, not only is the city of Vatsagulma situated within the area demarcated as Aśmaka, but this branch of the family's heartland seems to be coextensive with the

¹²¹ Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, 101-2, plate 24.

¹²² Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, 93-100, plate 23.

¹²³ Sastry. "Hyderabad Plates of Vakataka Devasena, Year 5."

¹²⁴ Bodhan is approximately 57 miles north-north-east of modern Bidar.

¹²⁵ A parallel example can be found in the case of Vidarbha. The ancient capital of this territory is said to have been Kuṇḍīna, identified as the modern town of Kauṇḍīnyapura, along the Wardha (Varadā) river (Sircar. *Studies in the Geography*, 183). Nevertheless, this locale had no known import in Vākāṭaka days.

¹²⁶ Sircar. *Studies in the Geography*, 190.

territory almost universally attributed to Aśmaka. It seems likely, therefore, that the Aśmaka in which Cave 17's donor fought his enemies¹²⁷ was actually part of Hariṣeṇa's personal lands. *It is, in fact, possible that the great and powerful Aśmaka king to whom Cave 26's inscription refers is Hariṣeṇa himself.* The Aśmakas referred to in the Cave 17 and 26 inscriptions may be the Vatsagulma Vākātakas themselves. This line of thinking (albeit without reference to Ajaṅṭā) has already been proposed by D.C. Sircar.¹²⁸ Clearly, the political context of Ajaṅṭā requires further consideration.

Reconstructions and Resurrections

To write a new history for the site requires us to first turn to the Nandivardhana-

¹²⁷ Remember, this is only one possible interpretation of Cave 17's verse, albeit the one accepted for the purposes of my historical reconstruction.

¹²⁸ Sircar. *Studies in the Geography*, 188-190. Mirashi ("Pandrangapalli Grant," 14) disputes the equating of the Aśmakas with the Vatsagulma Vākātakas by appeal to Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* (10th c.E.), wherein that author writes: "within the Vidarbha [lands] is a city named Vatsagulma (*vidarbheṣu vatsagulmaṃ nāma nagaram* |)." Surely one cannot miss the proximity of Vatsagulma to Vidarbha; the fact that at some times the city was included within that greater territory comes as no surprise. But another literary source, far closer in date to the period under consideration, the *Kāmasūtra*, represents Vatsagulma and Vidarbha as two kingdoms, each with its own distinct sexual cultures: verses 5.5.32 and 5.5.33 distinguish between the *Vātsagulmaka* and the *Vaidarbha*, the lords of Vatsagulma and the lords of Vidarbha. Moreover, in the *Jayamaṅgalā* commentary to this verse, Vatsagulma is simply said to be "in the south (*dakṣiṇapathe*)". Other territorial divisions discussed in this section of the *Kāmasūtra* include Andhra, Aparānta, and Surāṣṭra. Vatsagulma and Vidarbha are again distinguished in verses 5.6.31 and 5.6.32. Of course, this does not prove the Vatsagulmas were the Aśmakas, but it does show that in Vākāṭaka times outsiders knew Vatsagulma to be distinct from Vidarbha.

This matter is further clarified by a contemporary source that *does* suggest the equation of Aśmaka with the Vatsagulma Vākātakas: a copper-plate grant found at Pāṇḍaraṅgapallī in the Sātārā district of modern Mahārāṣṭra (for the general locale see *Mānapura* on the maps). This grant characterizes a Rāṣṭrakūṭa ruler named Mānāṅka as having terrified the countries of Vidarbha and Aśmaka, and as the ruler of Kuntala (*santrastavidarbhbāśmakamaṅḍalaḥ* and *śrīmān[ku]ntalānāṃ pra[sā]stā* (Mirashi. "Pandrangapalli Grant," 20). This record is significant if only because it seems to present Vidarbha and Aśmaka as contiguous lands of equal stature, just as the *Kāmasūtra* suggests for Vatsagulma and Vidarbha. We have no means to date this inscription, save paleography. Based upon that chronometer, Mirashi places Mānāṅka in the second-half of fourth century, making Mānāṅka Vātsyāyana's near contemporary ("Pandrangapalli Grant," 16). Further, Varāhadeva's Cave 16 inscription tells that Hariṣeṇa's great-great grandfather, Vindhyaśakti II, fought the lord of Kuntala at almost precisely this time. It would seem that given the fact that Vindhyaśakti II held land that was traditionally typically located in Aśmaka (as shown by his Bāsim plate) and the fact that the *Kāmasūtra* clearly separates Vatsagulma from Vidarbha in this same general time-frame, the terrified *Aśmakamaṅḍala* of the Pāṇḍaraṅgapallī grant can potentially be identified as the land ruled by the Vatsagulma Vākātakas.

Pravarapura Vākātakas. Narendrasena, the penultimate monarch of that branch, left no evidence of his rule. But three copper-plate grants made by his son, Pṛthivīṣeṇa II, claim that under Narendrasena “his family’s Royalty was stolen away by a kinsman who had been previously schooled in the *guṇas*, [the six political expedients].”¹²⁹ That kinsman was likely Hariṣeṇa or his father Devasena. Looking at the map (Fig. 17), one will see that if Varāhadeva is to be believed about Hariṣeṇa’s exploits, he would have had to have captured Narendrasena’s Vidarbha before seizing Kosala.

Land grants from both branches of the Vākātakas lend further support to this reconstructed history. Almost invariably, these records start with an account of the donor’s royal lineage, typically beginning with Pravarasena I, the Samrāt, and greatest Vākātaka monarch. But Devasena’s Bidar plate, Hariṣeṇa’s Thālner plate, and Varāhadeva’s Cave 16 epigraph all commence with the name of Vindhyaśakti, whom they call the original righteous King of the Vākātakas (*vākātakānam ādidharmamahārāja*). This could be viewed as an attempt to legitimate the reuniting of Vidarbha and Vatsagulma/Aśmaka, through appeal to the time when the Vākātaka empire was single and whole.

A second measure of circumstantial evidence for the subordination of the

¹²⁹ *pūrvādhigataguṇavad-dāyādāpahrta-vamśaśrī* Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākātakas*, 81, l. 26-7; V. B. Kolte. “Māhūrzarī Plates of Pṛthivīṣeṇa II,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*. (1972): line 21-2; Shastri. “Māṇḍhal Plates of Pṛthivīṣeṇa II,” 177, line 17. I have standardized the Sanskrit. See Shastri (“Māṇḍhal Plates,” 173, n.1) for a discussion of the various possible parsings of this compound. I have deviated from his interpretation, in that Shastri reads *pūrvādhigata*, “previously acquired,” with *vamśaśrī*, “family fortune,” whereas I read it with the contiguous *guṇavad*. Shastri was forced into this reading because he saw *guṇavad* as meaning either virtuous (which would be an odd thing to say of someone who deposed your father) or as equivalent to *gauṇa*, meaning minor or secondary. He preferred the latter. However, the circumlocution of using *guṇavad* for *gauṇa* makes little sense, since this text is not versified. Instead, *guṇa* can also signify the six expedients a king uses in conducting foreign policy: “alliance, war, marching, halting, dividing the army, and seeking protection” royal policy” (Manu. *The Laws of Manu*. Trans. by Georg Bühler. [New York: Dover, 1969]: 241). These six are presented in the Laws of Manu 7.160-215, and are explicated at great length in Kauṭīliya’s *Arthaśāstra*, which devotes the entire seventh book to them (*The Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra*. Ed. by R. P. Kangle. [Bombay: University of Bombay, 1969]); see also P. V. Kane (*History of Dharmasāstra (Ancient and Mediaeval Religious and Civil Law in India)*. [Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968]: vol. 3, 223f.) for an elaboration of other sources on the subject. In the present context, this interpretation of *guṇa* is not only possible, but reasonable.

Nandivardhana-Pravarapura branch is found in the genealogies contained in Pṛthivīṣeṇa's copper-plates. Assuming that Devasena (or Hariṣeṇa) took Vidarbha, it would still not be unusual for the conqueror to set the conquered king back upon his throne as a feudatory. Indeed, this pattern of kingship must be assumed no matter who the conqueror was, for Narendrasena's son, Pṛthivīṣeṇa II, issued four known land grants, the first dated in year 2 of his reign, the last comes from an unknown date after year 17. These grants are valuable documents for they change over time, perhaps reflecting events during Pṛthivīṣeṇa's reign. His first grant simply names his father as Narendrasena, *without giving him any royal title*, but Pṛthivīṣeṇa calls himself Narendrasena's good son and a Vākāṭaka king.¹³⁰ Later grants, dated to the 10th and 17th years of his reign, elaborate the story, calling Narendrasena *mahārāja* and recounting that Narendrasena was honored by the rulers of Kosalā, Mekhalā, and Mālava before he lost the family business. These records also magnify Pṛthivīṣeṇa's own deeds, calling him one who has resurrected his fallen family.¹³¹ Pṛthivīṣeṇa must have had further hardships, for his final grant, undated, says that he was one who raised up his twice-fallen family.¹³²

Based upon Pṛthivīṣeṇa II's inscriptions, a history of the relations between the two Vākāṭaka branches may be reconstructed in outline thus. Narendrasena was the liege lord of several other kings early in his royal career, but later lost his domain to Devasena or Hariṣeṇa. Narendrasena was either killed or placed back on his throne in a subordinate position, such that when Pṛthivīṣeṇa II took his place as king, Narendrasena was treated as a family disgrace. Subsequently, Pṛthivīṣeṇa regained his kingdom, presumably by attacking his cousin Hariṣeṇa. Finally, Pṛthivīṣeṇa lost and regained his realm a second

¹³⁰ Shastri. "Māṇḍhal Plates," 166, line 15.

¹³¹ *magnavamśoddharty*. Kolte. "Māhūrzarī Plates, 193, line 26; Shastri. "Māṇḍhal Plates," 177, line 21.

¹³² *dvimagnavamśoddharty*. Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas*, 81, line 33.

time, only to lose it a third and final time.

With this hypothetical history in mind, the *Daśakumāracarita*, as a crypto-historical text, may profitably be seen as telling of *Narendrasena*'s fall. The virtuous Puṅyavarman becomes identified with Pravarasena II, a renowned king under whose reign this branch of the Vākāṭaka family reached its pinnacle. Puṅyavarman's weak-willed son, Anantavarman, will be equated with Narendrasena. Anantavarman's son, Pṛthivīṣeṇa, whose fictionalized history I did not relate above, would be the *Daśakumāracarita*'s Bhāskaravarman. The evil Aśmakas will be Hariṣeṇa's own family. In fact, the scheming Candrapālita could be equated with Hastibhoja, Varāhadeva's father and Devasena's prized minister. The Aśmaka plant, Indrapālita, who corrupted Anantavarman, could be Cave 16's Varāhadeva himself.

This cast of characters actually offers a close fit to three other details presented in the literary account. According to Daṇḍin, after the Aśmaka king wreaked havoc in Vidarbha through stealth, he incited a *vānavāśya* to attack Anantavarman.¹³³ This *vānavāśya* is said to have met Anantavarman and his fickle feudatories on the bank of the Varadā River. Finally, the text claims that the Aśmaka king gave the *vānavāśya* a small portion of the booty as a gift.¹³⁴ These three facts are significant, for they suggest facts known about the Nalas of Puṣkarī (see Fig. 17 or 18), a distinct historical enemy of the Nandivardhana Vākāṭakas.

To recover the identity of the *vānavāśya*, B. Deshpande has drawn attention to the literal significance of this epithet. As a secondary derivative of the word *vanavāsin*, forest-dweller, it could be used to describe the ruler of a forested region.¹³⁵ A secondary

¹³³ Daṇḍin. *Daśakumāracarita*, 200.

¹³⁴ Daṇḍin. *Daśakumāracarita*, 360.

¹³⁵ Deshpande. "Dating of Ajintha Caves in the context of Vakataka Decline."

derivative of this sort does not carry with it the same forceful connotation of kingship as the use of a royal epithet, albeit the two are semantically identical. In the *Daśakumāracarita*, secondary derivatives are not used to glorify any of Vidarbha's feudatories. Instead, those monarchs merit kingly epithets suffixed to the names of their respective lands: Vasantabhanu is called Aśmaka-*indra*; Avantideva is Kuntala-*pati*; Vīrasena is Murala-*iśa*; Ekavīra is Rṣika-*iśa*; Kumāragupta is Koṅkaṇa-*pati*; and Nāgapāla is Nāsikya-*nātha*.¹³⁶ Indeed, the term *vānavāsya* is found four times in the text, and no more grand royal title is ever used for this foe of Anantavarman. Deshpande, in turn, suggests that the forest dwelling spoilers of the Vākāṭaka kingdom should be equated with a family known as Nala, which came from the city of Puṣkarī, located in a heavily forested region.

Supporting this grammatical and topographical data, the geographical data also points to a viable identification of the Nalas of Puṣkarī with the *Daśakumāracarita*'s *vānavāsya*. If one accepts the *Daśakumāracarita* as a history, the conflict between the Vākāṭakas and *vānavāsya* would have occurred along the banks of the Varadā river, at the south-eastern limit of ancient Vidarbha (Fig. 18). According to this scenario, the Nalas would not have had to pass through any foreign lands to raid Vidarbha from Puṣkarī. By contrast, Mirashi posits that this *vānavāsya* was a member of the Kadamba family, whose capital, named *Vanavāsī*, was located far to the south-west of the Vākāṭaka heartland. It

¹³⁶ Daṇḍin. *Daśakumāracarita*, 200.

seems fantastic that an invading army could pass through Kuntala,¹³⁷ Ṛṣīka,¹³⁸ Aśmaka, and half of Vidarbha without challenge (see Fig.17). Because of the number of territories intervening between the Kadamba capital city and the Varadā river, Mirashi's identification of the *vānavāsya* with the Kadambas may be safely abandoned.

¹³⁷ The location of this territory was one of many points of contention between V. V. Mirashi and D. C. Sircar. Mirashi placed this land in "the Southern Maratha Country" ("The Rāṣṭrakūṭas of Mānapura," 41); Sircar placed Kuntala further to the south, but acknowledged that at times it extended as far north as the Southern Maratha County (*Studies in the Geography*, 188, 190). In other words, like many ancient Indian territories, Kuntala could be just about wherever an author chose to place it. In the inscriptions of the later Kadambas, Kuntala is the area around Vanavāsī (*Studies in the Geography*, 14); in the days of the Later Cālukyas it is in the Kṛṣṇāvarṇā basin (Mirashi. "Pandrangapalli Grant," 14); in the *Udayasundarikatbā*, Kuntala's capital is Pratiṣṭhāna on the Godāvarī River: the same city the *Suttanipāta* named as the capital of Mūḷaka, in Aśmaka. I have no desire to resolve this matter, and instead have chosen to follow Schwartzberg's *Historical Atlas* as the authority.

¹³⁸ The location of Ṛṣīka is of some interest, for Spink, following Mirashi, has named the donor of Cave 17 as the King of Ṛṣīka, and has identified Ṛṣīka as the territory in which Ajaṅṭā was located. Mirashi advances little tangible material for his placement of Ajaṅṭā in the country of Ṛṣīka (*Inscriptions of the Vākātakas*, 123-4). The evidence Mirashi cites is as follows: Varāhamihira places Ṛṣīka in the south; the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* alike couple Ṛṣīka with Vidarbha; the *Mahābhārata* also associates Ṛṣīka with Aśmaka; the *Daśakumāracarita* names both Ṛṣīka and Aśmaka, along with Mūḷaka, as feudatories of Vidarbha; and the Nāsik cave inscription of Puḷumāvi also mentions Asika (=Sanskrit Ṛṣīka), Asaka (=Sanskrit Aśmaka) and Mūḷaka together. Mirashi reasons further, that based upon the *Sutta Nipāta*'s "Pārāyaṇavagga," Mūḷaka can be unambiguously placed as the region directly south of present-day Aurangabad, with the ancient Pratiṣṭhāna (modern Paithan) as its capital; Vidarbha is generally agreed upon as the area now known as Berar, situated between the Varadā and Wainganga rivers. Thus, Mirashi claims that the Ajaṅṭā region must be ancient Ṛṣīka (now known locally as Khāndesh), for it is the only area abutting Vidarbha (on the east) and Mūḷaka (on the south).

However, these borders are very general, and there is specific evidence to place Ṛṣīka elsewhere. As I have just noted, there are a number of literary sources that place Ṛṣīka somewhere in the south. Mirashi only situates it more precisely by positioning it relative to Vidarbha, Mūḷaka, and Aśmaka. However, the Hāthigumphā inscription of Khāravēla, a king of Kaliṅga circa 1st century B.C.E., locates Asikanagara (the capital of Ṛṣīka) on the bank of the Kanhabemṇa river (D. C. Sircar (ed). *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*. [Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965]: vol. 1, 215, line 4). This compound has interpreted as referring to a confluence of two rivers. Which two is matter of contention, but none of the solutions come anywhere close to Ajaṅṭā. Sircar claims that the Kṛṣṇā river is "often mentioned as Kṛṣṇaveṇā or Kṛṣṇaveṇī" (*Studies in the Geography*, 59), thereby placing Ṛṣīka's capital far to the south (not Mirashi's north) of Mūḷaka. And, whatever other evidence there may be for this name, confirmation for Sircar's interpretation is found in an early sixth century inscription which uses Kṛṣṇabeṇṇa for the Kṛṣṇā (F. Kielhorn. "Chikkulla Plates of Vikramendravarman II," *Epigraphia Indica*. 4 [1896-97]: 196, line 19-20); this location of Ṛṣīka on the Kṛṣṇā's bank is also suggested by the Puḷumavi inscription, which seems to read from south to north Ṛṣīka, Aśmaka, Mūḷaka (Amarendra Nath. "Toponymy of Asaka and Asika," *Indica*. 27 [1990]: 89). An alternate view is offered by A. Nath, who claims that the *Kanba*° of Kanhabemṇa is the modern Kanhan river which flows just east of Nāgpur; the ° *bemṇa* is the Wainganga. This would place the Ṛṣikanagara well within central Vidarbha, and far from Ajaṅṭā. I do not intend to referee between Sircar and Nath. My only purpose for elaborating this point is to indicate the difficulty of calling the Ajaṅṭā's locale ancient Ṛṣīka, or the donor of Cave 17, the King of Ṛṣīka.

A third piece of supporting evidence comes from the inscriptions of the Nala kings themselves. The *Purāṇas* know of a Nala dynasty ruling in the heavily forested Bastar region.¹³⁹ These Nalas may have had as many as nine rulers, but we are interested in only three, the first of whom is known as Bhavadattavarman, who was followed by two sons, Arthapati and Skandhavarman. We know of Bhavadattavarman through a copper-plate grant issued on his behalf by his son Bhaṭṭāraka Arthapati.¹⁴⁰ The bequest is said to have been made on the occasion of Bhavadattavarman's pilgrimage to the holy Gaṅgā in Prayāga (Allahabad), to bless his marriage. Issued from Nandivardhana, once a Vākāṭaka capital, this grant was found in Ṛddhapur, a town along the Varadā river. If one intends to follow the *Daśakumāracarita*, one can explain the Nala's presence in Nandivardhana through reference to this detail: Daṇḍin's Vasantabhanu gave the *vānavāśya* a portion of the wealth taken from Anantavarman. Called *kośāvāhana*, this booty seems to have been treasure and livestock. It is doubtful that the *vānavāśya* received territory. Nevertheless, the newly victorious Devasena or Hariṣeṇa could well have had the magnanimity to allow his son to make a grant in his father's honor.

Even if the Nalas did claim a portion of Narendrasena's former kingdom, their dominion in Vidarbha did not last long. Arthapati issued a land-grant in his seventh regnal year from Puṣkarī, the Nala's ancestral home.¹⁴¹ Nor was any alliance between the Vatsagulma Vākāṭakas and the Nalas lasting. Hariṣeṇa is thought to have conquered Kosala and Andhra both, a swath which would have encroached upon Nala territory. Indeed, Arthapati's brother, Bhavadattavarman's younger son, Skandhavarman claims in his only known record, issued in the twelfth year of his reign, that he "reclaimed the lost royal

¹³⁹ Pargiter. *The Purāṇa Text*, 51, 73.

¹⁴⁰ Y. R. Gupte. "Rithapur Plates of Bhavattavarman," *Epigraphia Indica*. 19 (1927-28): 100-104.

¹⁴¹ D. C. Sircar. "Kesaribeda Plates of Nala Arthapati-Bhattaraka," *Epigraphia Indica*. 28 (1949-50): 16, line 1.

prosperity which had fallen into other hands and reseeded the deserted Puṣkarī.”¹⁴²

Thus far in reconstructing the history of the relation between the two branches of the Vākāṭaka family, I have suggested that Narendrasena was defeated by his cousin Devasena. Further, because the *Daśakumāracarita*'s historicity is an *idée reçue* for Ajaṅṭā's chronologers, I have shown how the events described in Daṇḍin's work can still be regarded as historical, where Narendrasena is Daṇḍin's Ruler of Vidarbha and Hariṣeṇa or Devasena is the nefarious King of Aśmaka. Although I do not want to belabor this matter any further, this interpretation fits the available facts with much greater fidelity than that of Mirashi.

Whatever the situation with the Nalas, and however distant from the *Daśakumāracarita* we stray, we know that by year 10 of Pṛthivīṣeṇa's reign he had restored the Royalty his family had lost during Narendrasena's inept reign. Although the year 2 inscription suggests a king of greatly diminished majesty, we cannot be sure whether Pṛthivīṣeṇa's restoration occurred before or after that year, for this grant's lackluster genealogy could be attributed to the fact that at that time a properly florid set of epithets not yet had been conceived. On the other hand, one might imagine that a prince who had just reclaimed his lands would make some mention of the fact, as he does in the grant for year 10. Whatever the case, it seems possible that the first period of disruption and hiatus at Ajaṅṭā was somehow connected with Pṛthivīṣeṇa reasserting his family's right to its territories.

Naturally no direct evidence exists for this hypothesis. The indirect evidence is two-fold. First, we know that Pṛthivīṣeṇa reclaimed his kingdom. If we assume, as we have, that the Vatsagulmas were the occupying force, this reconquest would likely have taxed the resources of both parties, and could surely account for the site's recession and

¹⁴² C. R. Krishnamacharlu. "The Nala Inscription at Podagadh; 12th year," *Epigraphia Indica*. 21 (1931-32): 156-7.

hiatus. In light of Ajañṭā's relative chronology, any reconstructed history must explain why Caves 1, 17, 19 and 20 seem to have been worked upon during Spink's phase 2, when all other excavations at the site had stopped. One potential explanation is that these are the only caves at the site attributable to royal patrons. Spink posits Cave 1 as Hariṣeṇa's, and we 17, 19 and 20 were excavated for a feudatory ally of Hariṣeṇa. If Spink is correct, these royal caves were the only ones exempt from the sumptuary restrictions that constrained others in this troubled time. It is further possible, then, that Caves 17, 19, and 20 did not start up again because their patron died in the fight, leaving no heir. Hence this king's wealth and lands devolved to his liege, Hariṣeṇa. This may not be correct, or convincing, but given the lack of any basis for assuming a war between Cave 17's donor and a nameless King of Aśmaka, this is no less fantastic a reconstruction. As the reader must have noticed by now, the paucity of continuous evidence does not allow India's history to be recast except in terms of possibilities and probabilities, offering much food for the imagination.

Prthivīṣeṇa II's "rebellion" did not necessarily entail the dissolution of Hariṣeṇa's empire. Once activity at Ajañṭā resumed in earnest, it continued for some years uninterrupted. In Spink's chronology, this third phase ends with an apparently unexpected, but crucial event: Hariṣeṇa's sudden death. There is no reason to deviate from Spink on this matter.

Ajañṭā's fourth phase is characterized by a flurry of rushed activity, occasioned by the patrons' realization that central India's pax-Vākāṭaka was soon to end in a maelstrom. Again, there is no cause for challenging Spink's estimation of these patrons' psychology as expressed in the artifacts they left behind. But, there is scope for questioning whether his explanation of the events that occasioned their anxiety is warranted. Spink proposed that Hariṣeṇa's death was the impetus which allowed the evil Aśmakas to bring about the

Vākāṭakas' downfall. If the Aśmakas were the Vatsagulma Vākāṭakas, this reconstruction is not viable.

If Ajaṅṭā's third period ended with Hariṣeṇa's death, but the site continued for several years yet, who ruled the Vatsagulma Vākāṭaka empire? The answer: Hariṣeṇa's son, Sarvasena III. Unfortunately, no inscription or genealogical list exists, stating conclusively that Hariṣeṇa had a son or that his name was Sarvasena. Instead, this last member of the Vatsagulma Vākāṭaka lineage must be resurrected through a careful, tortuous reading of several grants from the Kadamba dynasty, who ruled from Vānavāsī to the Vākāṭakas' south (see Fig. 19).

Let us begin with the only inscription to preserve this name, the Mūdigera plate of Siṃhavarman.¹⁴³ This Mahārāja of the Kadamba family claims to have been a feudatory of a Mahārāja Sarvasena. Literally, Siṃhavarman was "honored by Mahārāja Sarvasena with coronation."¹⁴⁴

This inscription raises as many problems as it solves, for Siṃhavarman does not give any further information through which to identify this Sarvasena. It is not even certain that this Sarvasena was a Vākāṭaka. Apropos this latter point, however, historians have universally taken the Sarvasena named in the Mūdigera plate to be a member of the Vatsagulma Vākāṭaka lineage because of this name's frequent use for members of this dynasty. But this presumption does not settle Sarvasena's identity, based as it is, on the acknowledgement that there are several Vākāṭaka Sarvasenas. If Siṃhavarman's lord was a Vākāṭaka, was it Hariṣeṇa's great great great grandfather Sarvasena I, his grandfather

¹⁴³ Ajay Mitra Shastri. "The Mūdigera plates of Siṃhavarman and Vākāṭaka-Kadamba Relations." In *Indian Archaeological Heritage: Sbrī K.V. Soundara Rajan Festschrift*. Ed. by C. Magarbandhu et. al. (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1991); M. J. Sharma. "Relations between Vākāṭakas and Kadambas." In *The Age of the Vākāṭakas*. Ed. by A. M. Shastri. (New Delhi: Harman Publishing, 1992): 51-56.

¹⁴⁴ *sarvasena mahārājena mūrddhā[bhiṣeken]ābhyarcchitaḥ* Sharma. "Relations between Vākāṭakas and Kadambas, 54. For a synoptic history of the Kadambas see Majumdar and Altekar. *Vākāṭaka-Gupta Age*, 235-246; Majumdar and Dasgupta. *Comprehensive History of India*, 363-366.

Sarvasena II, or a heretofore unknown son, Sarvasena III.

The first possibility can be rejected outright. In order to establish whether this Sarvasena was Hariṣeṇa's grandfather or his hypothetical son we have to determine the approximate years of Siṃhavarman's reign. To accomplish this one must know that Siṃhavarman was the great-great grandson of the Kadamba ruler Kākusthavarman and that a cousin of Siṃhavarman's, named Harivarman, was the great great great grandson of Kākusthavarman (fig. 19). This Harivarman issued a copper plate that can be dated through the grant's astrological data to "either Tuesday, the 22nd September 526 A.D., or Thursday, the 21st September 545 A.D."¹⁴⁵ This grant's modern editor deems the second date to be correct, and places Harivarman's accession in 538 C.E., far too late for him to be one generation younger than Hariṣeṇa's grandfather. Additionally, Siṃhavarman's son (or grandson, it is not clear which) was ruling Vanavāsī when it was sacked by the Cālukya Kīrttivarman I, who ruled circa 567-597.¹⁴⁶ Again, this fact makes it likely that there was a Vākāṭaka Sarvasena III, who ruled after Hariṣeṇa's death and who set Siṃhavarman upon the Kadamba throne.

We can now posit that after Hariṣeṇa's death, Sarvasena III took the mantle of Vākāṭaka kingship. Besides allowing us to posit with some certainty that Hariṣeṇa did have a successor, the relationship between Sarvasena and the Kadamba Siṃhavarman is important for understanding the end of the Vākāṭaka dynasty. Unfortunately, this connection requires yet another history lesson, including the names of more kings and dynasties: In days of yore, Siṃhavarman's grandfather, Kṛṣṇavarman I, overreached the bounds of his power, and was routed by the Pallava dynasty. As a result of this loss,

¹⁴⁵ K. N. Dikshit. "Sangholi Plates of Hari-Varman: The 8th Year," *Epigraphia Indica*. 14 (1917-18): 165.

¹⁴⁶ Majumdar and Dasgupta. *A Comprehensive History*, 414-416.

Siṃhavarman's father, Viṣṇuvarman, was forced to accept investiture from the Pallavas.¹⁴⁷ Viṣṇuvarman and his Pallava masters were later killed in battle by his collateral nephew Ravivarman, who seems to have made the Kadamba empire strong and whole.¹⁴⁸ This brings us to Siṃhavarman. Because prior to these Mūdigera plates no record from Siṃhavarman had come to light, scholars had assumed that the defeat of Viṣṇuvarman quieted the Kadamba family feud for a spell under Ravivarman's rule. Siṃhavarman's Mūdigera plate shows that was not the case. Apparently, with the aid of the Vatsagulma Vākāṭakas Siṃhavarman struck back at his father's conquerors, and established his own power base. Later, Siṃhavarman's son conquered the remainder of the Kadamba lands, and established himself as the sole Kadamba suzerain.

An alliance between Sarvasena III and Siṃhavarman might have contributed to the Vākāṭakas' and Ajaṅṭa's decline by further taxing the resources of that family, which had been in decline since the collateral branch under Pṛthiviṣeṇa reasserted its strength.

The latter half of Hariṣeṇa's reign or initial years of Sarvasena III's saw additional troubles. These can be reconstructed through epigraphic records found in territories which Varāhadeva named as Hariṣeṇa's conquests (according to the accepted interpretation of his verse). The Traikūṭakas had been a powerful family in April of 457 C.E., when King Dahrasena noted in a land-grant that he had performed an Aśvamedha.¹⁴⁹ The next Trikūṭaka grant dates to 14 October 490 C.E., and represents Dahrasena's son, Vyāghrasena, as "lord of Aparānta and other prosperous countries acquired by his arms and inherited."¹⁵⁰ If Hariṣeṇa had ever taken these lands, they were now lost. Similarly, Varāhadeva

¹⁴⁷ Majumdar and Dasgupta. *A Comprehensive History*, 364.

¹⁴⁸ John F. Fleet. "Sanskrit and Old Canarese Inscriptions," *Indian Antiquary*. 6: (1877): 30.

¹⁴⁹ Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era*. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, volume IV. (Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1955), vol. 1, 24, l. line 2.

¹⁵⁰ Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era*, vol. 1, 28.

associates Hariṣeṇa with Avanti. But the Barwani plate of Subandhu dating to 486 C.E.,¹⁵¹ and the Bāgh copper-plate issued by the same king of Māhiṣmatī in southern Avanti,¹⁵² give one no reason to believe that Subandhu was under Vākāṭaka hegemony. Moreover, if Vidarbha was lost to Hariṣeṇa because of Pṛthivīseṇa's reassertion of sovereignty, then geography dictates that Kosala was lost as well. As for Andhra, the early Viṣṇukuṇḍin King Mādhavarman II (c. 475-525) married a Vākāṭa[ka] princess according to the Chikkullā plates, albeit we do not know from which branch.¹⁵³ However, Mādhavarman II claims to have performed eleven Aśvamedha sacrifices,¹⁵⁴ and is believed to have conquered much of Mahārāṣṭra,¹⁵⁵ perhaps filling the lacuna left by the Vākāṭaka decline.¹⁵⁶ Additional notices of a post-Vākāṭaka chaos in the region, which may or may not name figures actually responsible for that empire's demise, include the Thāḷner plates of Bhānuṣeṇa a Kumbhakarṇa chief,¹⁵⁷ and the Malhārā plates of Ādityarāja of the Muṇḍaputras.¹⁵⁸ Finally, although I introduced the Nalas as possibly the *Daśakumāracarita*'s forest-dwelling enemy of Vidarbha, it is also possible that this family had a hand in the Vākāṭakas' *final* demise. For, despite whatever equivocations I offered in that discussion, the copper-plate issued by Bhaṭṭāraka Arthapati on behalf of Bhavadattavarman *was* issued from

¹⁵¹ Mirashi. "Historical Data in Daṇḍin's Daśakumāracarita," 17-19.

¹⁵² Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era*, vol. 1, 19-21.

¹⁵³ Kielhorn. "Chikkulla Plates of Vikramendravarman II," 96, line 10.

¹⁵⁴ Kielhorn. "Chikkulla Plates of Vikramendravarman II," 195, line 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ajay Mitra Shastri. *Early History of the Deccan Problems and Perspectives*. (Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1987): 132-137.

¹⁵⁶ See Shastri *Early History of the Deccan*, 122-131 for a recent study of the Viṣṇukuṇḍin chronology.

¹⁵⁷ Ajay Mitra Shastri. "A Note on the Thalner Plates of Bhanushena," *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*. 12 (1985): 53-58.

¹⁵⁸ Ajay Mitra Shastri. "The Malhara Plates of Adityaraja: A Re-appraisal," *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*. 4 (1977): 30-41.

Nandivardhana, the Vidarbha Vākātakas' one-time capital.¹⁵⁹

With the present data, we can never know how the Vākātika lineage, and Ajaṅṭā, ended. The site suggests that this finale did not come as a matter of slow attrition of power and resources, but as the result of a cataclysm. Whatever may have been the cause thereof, it is possible that Pṛthivīṣeṇa II also suffered, for the undated Bālāghāṭ copper-plate introduces a new element into its celebration of this king: he is no longer the *magnavamśsyoddhatṛ*, one who raised up his fallen family, of the year 10 and 17 grants, here he is *dvimagnavamśsyoddhatṛ*, the rescuer of his *twice*-fallen family. How long Pṛthivīṣeṇa managed to support that family is not clear. There is no indication that he was followed by an heir. And Mirashi has called attention to the fact that even this Bālāghāṭ grant was “unfinished:” it lacks both the seal and the proofreader’s mark of approval typically accompanying these grants, though a space was clearly left for the latter.¹⁶⁰ Like the artifacts at Ajaṅṭā, this grant suggests that the Vākātika regimes were finished off in a final, sudden, and irreversible catastrophe.

In conclusion, Spink’s relative chronology of Ajaṅṭā based upon a motival analysis established five levels of patronage. Based upon inscriptions from Ajaṅṭā and surrounding territories as well as the *Daśakumāracarita*, I have reconstructed a narrative to connect those levels. In Ajaṅṭā’s pre-history, Devasena or Hariṣeṇa conquers the collateral branch of his family, and takes their lands for himself; he makes additional conquests at this time as well. The donor of Cave 17 may assist the Vākātika lord in these campaigns. Some time in the peace after these events excavation at Ajaṅṭā begins after a several century hiatus. This is Spink’s phase 1. Spink’s phase 2 starts when Pṛthivīṣeṇa II, Hariṣeṇa’s cousin, reasserts his sovereignty, and threatens or even begins to war on the Hariṣeṇa. The hiatus

¹⁵⁹ Gupte. “Rithapur Plates of Bhavattavarman.”

¹⁶⁰ Mirashi. *Inscriptions of the Vākātakas*, 80.

signals the height of this inter-Vākāṭaka violence, which ends in a stalemate: Pṛthivīṣeṇa regains control over Vidarbha; Hariṣeṇa is weakened though not routed. Work starts up again at Ajaṅṭā, beginning phase 3, which ends with some sort of catastrophe, perhaps Hariṣeṇa's death. According to Spink, Phase 4 is a time of hurried consolidation. Patrons might have perceived that the kings of Traikūṭa, Andhra, Avanti, and so on were planning to take advantage of the Vatsagulma Vākāṭaka's weakened state. Finally, the Vākāṭakas are overthrown; chaos engulfs the region, the site falls to pieces after a brief spurt of intrusive, haphazard patronage by resident monks and artisans.

This is only one possible history. It is the story I will tell when discussing Ajaṅṭā's Buddhism. I have balanced the need for a narrative to tell about the cave's progressive development with the paucity, intermittent nature, and truly wide latitude for interpretation of the available data through which that story is reconstructed. That this scheme also attempts to account for the swath of history suggested in the *Daśakumāracarita* is a sop to those who swear by this text's historicity. The *Daśakumāracarita* is admittedly compelling insofar as it offers a consistent narrative within which to rehearse this rather incoherent data. Nevertheless, its worth as an historical document is by no means incontrovertible. As soon as this text begins to contradict other, better, data it must be discarded as mere story. Needless to add, in terms of provisionality, the *Daśakumāracarita* is no less (in)secure than the reconstruction of Vākāṭaka history presented here.