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**Part II**

# **Case studies of World Heritage Sites in India**

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## 5 Monumentality, nature and World Heritage monuments

### The rock-cut sites of Ajanta, Ellora and Elephanta in Maharashtra

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The inscription of sites in the UNESCO World Heritage List is a complex process tied to political and economic equilibria, as eloquently argued by Lynn Meskell.<sup>1</sup> In recent times, much discussion has highlighted the elusive boundaries surrounding the categories of cultural and natural heritage as applied to sites included in the World Heritage List. It has been noted that the duality implied by the juxtaposition of culture and nature is a product of Western processes, especially unfit to capture South Asian realities where profound and continued interactions exist between man and landscape.<sup>2</sup> The most recent addition to the World Heritage List in India, the Khangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim, reflects an increasing effort to bridge the categories of nature and culture within the UNESCO practice.<sup>3</sup> This is the first mixed site of cultural and natural relevance in South Asia, inscribed because of its biodiversity and landscape dotted with caves, rivers and lakes sacred to the local Buddhist tradition.

This chapter focuses on the rock-cut sites of Ajanta, Elephanta and Ellora in Maharashtra, India, inscribed decades ago in the World Heritage List due to their outstanding cultural relevance.<sup>4</sup> The elaborate architectural designs and visual ornamentations of these unique monuments carved on rocky cliffs still stand today as a testament to the impressive skills of unknown artists. UNESCO recognised the artistic value of these ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Jain sites while overlooking their deep religious and historical interconnectedness with the surrounding landscape. Re-evaluating epigraphic, architectural and artistic evidence extant at the caves, will demonstrate that the natural milieu was integral to the conception of these rock-cut temples, and that human activity at these sites was shaped by nature, rather than

superimposed onto it. As we consider the monuments at Ajanta, Ellora and Elephanta only on the basis of their built environments, or better to say “carved environments”, we obliterate their very essence and compromise their intended meanings.

When it comes to a site like Ajanta (which was cut in the ravine of the Waghora river between the 1st century BCE and the 5th century CE), or any other rock-cut World Heritage monument in Maharashtra, the deep interrelations between the natural environment and the man-made interventions are immediately apparent if not obvious: the siting of the monuments and the medium employed for the realisation of the *viharas* (monasteries) and *chaitya* (shrine) make for a complete integration of architecture, history and nature (figure 5.1). Yet the relationship between the caves and their natural environments is not only physical and appears to be embedded into the conceptual fabric of the monuments. All evidence contemporary with the cave



*Figure 5.1* View of the Ajanta caves.

Source: Courtesy of the author

sites indicates that these rock-cut structures were not conceived as simple mountain hermitages. Rather, they were intended to evoke palatial abodes in mythical paradises where the natural landscape, conjuring heavenly gardens, defined the parameters of this conceptual and visual metaphor. By re-establishing in historical terms the interconnectedness of human activity and nature at these cave sites, the inadequacy of their current classifications on the World Heritage List becomes apparent.

Caves have always played a key role in the Indian religious imaginary, and have been especially important in the practice of ascetic life across many religious traditions. The interaction between the practitioner and the untamed natural environment was seen as conducive to the attainment of a superior state of mind.<sup>5</sup> Within the Buddhist tradition, the importance of caves is illustrated in the well-known episode of the *Indasalaguha* told in the Pali *Sakkapanna sutanta*, where the Buddha himself engaged in ascetic exercises in the Indasala cave located near Rajgriha (Rajgir), surrounded by the forest and wild beasts.<sup>6</sup> The god Indra, also referred to as Sakka, visited him while in the cave to seek answers to 42 questions about the nature of existence. Indra sent ahead his divine musician, Pancasikha, and then personally met the Buddha, who extended his life by many cosmic cycles.

Depictions of the *Indasalaguha* story are frequently found in early Indian art: at Bharhut, in the 1st century BCE, the scene was represented on a *vedika* pillar that was re-cut at a later time (Figure 5.2).<sup>7</sup> In the image labelled “*Idasalaguha*”, the wilderness and the environment are prominently emphasised: the scene is dominated by a natural, large *guha* or natural cave with a rocky floor, with vivid images of wild animals and jagged boulders above; some of the details of the representation are lost due to later reuse of the carving. Remarkably, in all later depictions of *Indasalaguha* throughout the 1st centuries CE, we witness a progressive transformation of the natural cave (*guha*) into a domesticated locale.

In the *Indasalaguha* episode depicted at the beginning of the Common Era on a pillar of the north *torana* (gateway) of the Sanchi stupa, the barren cave in the wilderness appears to be an elaborate rock-cut *chaitya* hall, obviously making reference to those cut in the basaltic rock of the western Deccan (Figure 5.3). At Sanchi, not only did the artists substitute an image of a natural cave with that of a man-made rock-cut *chaitya* hall, but they also transformed the surrounding landscape into a controlled natural environment. The mountainous setting is still suggested by the bulky blocks of stone, yet nature is represented as tamed and mannered: to the right of the *chaitya* hall we see two



Figure 5.2 Indasalaguha, detail of *vedika* pillar, Bharhut stupa, after Cunningham, *The Stupa of Bharhut*, 1878, plate XXVIII.

Source: Acc. no. 68604, Neg. no. 483.34, American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon



Figure 5.3 *Indasalaguba*, detail of *torana* pillar, Sanchi stupa.

Source: Courtesy of the author

mythical beasts crouching amidst rocks, and on the upper left side two tamed felines pose for the viewer. There is little evocative of a challenging wilderness here, and this shift from *guha* to *chaitya* and from wilderness to garden, may invite us to reflect on the important role played by nature in association with these rock-cut monuments. As the Buddhist caves take the shape of elaborate architectural structures, the surrounding landscape is framed accordingly and loaded with new meanings and cultural connotations.

Let us begin by examining some of the rock-cut monuments contemporary with the Sanchi reliefs to shed light on the particular relationship between monuments and nature. By the 1st century BCE, when the Satavahana rulers controlled much of the Deccan, a large number of rock-cut monasteries were established in the hills of the Western Ghats. These man-made caves were always set in proximity of water resources and were immersed in a lush natural environment that included forests and animals. Buddhist sites located on the rugged basaltic cliffs of the Deccan plateau surprisingly did not include simple *guhās*, or natural rock shelters, but rather consisted of elaborate structures carved in the living rock that evoked urban milieus.

The living rock came to be a pliable medium in the hands of the capable stone cutters who created ornate residential units and palatial apsidal halls. At the site of Bhaja, one of the earliest in western Deccan established in the 1st century BCE, the *chaitya* hall displays a very elaborate and un-natural-looking façade topped by balconies and arches with overlooking couples (Figure 5.4). This rock-cut version of a multi-storied wealthy mansion, befitting an urban setting, seems to be completely out of context on a steep cliff surrounded by jungle. The monastic cells cut on either sides of the *chaitya* are integrated within this evocative choreography that contains no references whatsoever to forest hermitages. The façade of the *chaitya* complex at Bhaja is reminiscent of the cityscape captured in an episode of the life of the Buddha depicted on the east gate of the Sanchi stupa.<sup>8</sup> In the left part of the crossbeam illustrating the Great Departure, we can see elaborate buildings within the city walls that include mansions with balconies, arches, ladders and onlookers similar to the architectural ornamentations on the Bhaja façade.

Donors' inscriptions from the western Deccan caves may indicate how such imposing rock-cut structures and their locales were framed in contemporary views. A donor epigraph carved on a wooden rib of the *chaitya* hall at Bhaja clearly identifies the structure as a *pasada* (palace).<sup>9</sup> The same term *pasada* also appears in a roughly contemporary Buddhist inscription from the site of Bharhut, on a *torana* pillar known as the Ajatasatru pillar. It is carved on the dome of a building depicting a worship scene of the Buddha's headdress relic in the Assembly Hall of the Devas in the Trayastrimsa (Figure 5.5).<sup>10</sup>

The label "Vijayanta Pasada" identifies the structure as the legendary Vijayanta palace of the gods located in Trayastrimsa heaven. Not surprisingly, the Vijayanta palace looks very much like the *chaitya* hall in Bhaja with its horseshoe shaped portal, rounded roof, and





Figure 5.4 Karle *chaitya* hall.


Source: Courtesy of the author

tall, multistoried structure with balconies and alcoves from which on-looking devas emerge. Given the strong visual link between the Vijayanta palace from Bharhut and the palatial architecture from Bhaja, I suggest that the Bhaja's donors who referred to the *chaitya* as being a “*pasada*” intended to erect a structure that recreated the legendary deva's abode. The *chaitya* hall was conceptually associated with the palace of the god Indra where the relics of the Buddha were worshipped, and the couples represented on the Bhaja façade were intended to represent devas and not ordinary beings. By extension, the mountain on which the caves were cut became the mythical Mount Meru, with Trayastrimsa heaven located atop, and the natural surroundings of the caves came to be identified with the legendary gardens of the god Indra who presided over this particular heaven. The Trayastrimsa was the second heaven in Kamadhatu that



Figure 5.5 Worship of the Buddha's headdress in the Assembly Hall of the Devas, detail of *Torana* pillar, Bharhut stupa.

Source: Courtesy of the author

still maintained a physical connection with the rest of the world; it had a magical garden populated by trees that could heal, rejuvenate, enhance fertility or keep evil spirits at bay 

Evidence from other early sites in the western Deccan confirms that rock-cut structures were intended to evoke lavish milieus associated with gods and heavenly gardens. The *chaitya* at Karle also seems to

reproduce complex urban architectures and includes a very ornate porch and façade populated by life-size loving couples, or *mithunas*, while the interior is decorated by sumptuous pillars with pot-shaped capitals crowned by elegant animals and riders (Figure 5.6).

These architectural features are not just extravagant creations of the rock carvers from the western Deccan – in the reliefs carved on the east gate of the stupa at Sanchi we see similar elements (Figure 5.7). In Sanchi, elaborate pillars identical to those in the Karle *chaitya* hall occur in images of palaces worthy of the gods like the one we see here, where a royal figure surrounded by courtiers appears seated in *lalitasana* and protected by a parasol. Scholars have proposed that this image from Sanchi may in fact represent Trayastrimsa heaven.

An inscription from the *chaitya* hall at Karle confirms that donors consciously alluded to the *chaitya* as Indra's palace in Trayastrimsa heaven. A record inscribed in the porch mentions the establishment of a rock mansion, the most excellent in Jambudvipa, and makes reference to Vijayanti, perhaps not a town in Konkan as suggested in

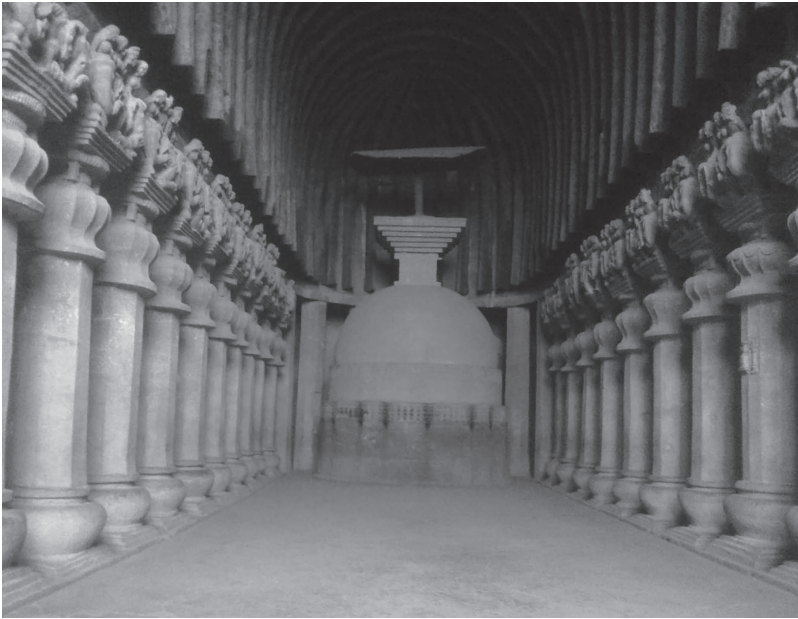


Figure 5.6 Bhaja, *chaitya* hall.

Source: Courtesy of the author

readings of the inscription, but rather an allusion to the legendary palace of the Trayastrimsa heaven located at the epicentre of Jambudvipa.<sup>12</sup> If these caves are replete with visual and epigraphic suggestions to heavenly palaces, then the natural environment shaping their very



*Figure 5.7* Indra's heaven, detail of *torana* pillar, Sanchi stupa.

Source: Courtesy of the author

essence becomes the legendary garden of Indra's heaven described in texts as a beautiful place with magical trees, chattering monkeys and chirping birds.

Such literary topos dominate the epigraphic records from the Buddhist caves at Ajanta, which consist of 26 units cut in the basaltic rock of the Deccan plateau between the first BCE and the fifth CE (Figure 5.1).<sup>13</sup> The earliest core of the site around *chaitya* halls 9 and 10 was significantly expanded in the 5th century under the patronage of the Vakataka king Harishena and his entourage. At this later time two more *chaitya* halls (19 and 26) and 20 more *viharas* were carved in the living rock and embellished by elaborate paintings of scenes from the *jatakas* and *avadanas* or narratives related to the previous life of the Buddha, and other Buddhist images that survive only in part.

The Ajanta monastic complex was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List (no. 242) in 1983 because it fulfilled the selection criteria nos. i, ii, iii and vi.<sup>14</sup> Ajanta's inclusion in the World Heritage List was based solely on the historical value of the human activity that transformed the exceptional ravine into a monastic site. Yet it is the siting of the Ajanta monastery in a lush paradise-like environment that defines the very essence of the architectural interventions, all suggestive of divine abodes. An inscription by the patron Buddhadrada in *chaitya* hall 26 describes the natural environment of the caves as a celestial garden. The epigraph reads: 'This cave has been established . . . on the top of the mountain which is frequented by great yogins, and the valleys of which are resonant with the chirping of the birds and the chattering of the monkeys'.<sup>15</sup>

Remarks made by Harishena's minister, Varahadeva, in verses 24–27 of the Cave 16 inscription at Ajanta also evoke the cave's architectural beauty in terms of Indra's paradise:

[The dwelling] ornamented with windows, doors, splendid verandahs, railings and images of the Devakanyas and delightfully arranged pillars with *Chaitya-Mandira*. . . . A large reservoir of water and [adorned] by the abode of the chief of serpents and others. . . . Warmed in summer by the heat of the sun, and fit for enjoyment at all seasons . . . [as] the dwelling of Indra and the bright caves of Mandara . . . in the mountain to which none is equal in greatness . . . [he] made with love, pleasure and expansive modesty . . . a cave brilliant with the radiance of the crown of Indra.<sup>16</sup>

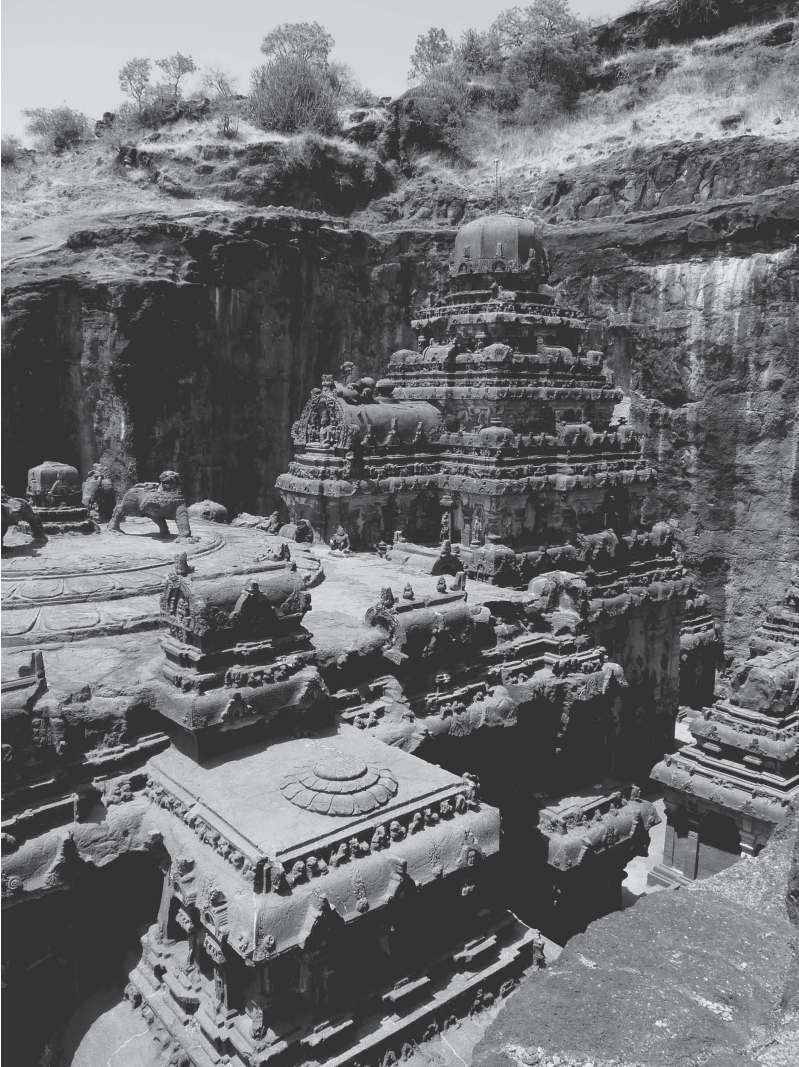
Here cave 16 is clearly equated to Indra's palace in paradise, and the landscape as a heavenly garden completes this literary allusion.

Note that the very terms *viharas* and *mandapas* occurring in Buddhist inscriptions to identify the caves are commonly found in Sanskrit poetic literature in association with courtly gardens.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of convergence of culture and nature that constitutes the conceptual framework of the Ajanta caves is also apparent at the cave monuments of Ellora and Elephanta in Maharashtra. Visual references to heavenly landscapes are recurrent at these two major rock-cut sites that reverberate (in/through?) the mythical geography of India. The cave temples of Ellora were inscribed in the World Heritage List (no. 243) at the same time as Ajanta, based on criteria i, ii and vi.<sup>18</sup> Ellora comprises 34 caves, including Hindu, Buddhist and Jain spanning from the 6th to the 10th centuries CE.<sup>19</sup> The first group of caves was established in the 6th century CE by Shaiva patrons and appears to be stylistically related to the Elephanta caves; in the 7th century the Buddhist occupied the southernmost edge of the cliff with caves 2 to 12, and in the 9th century the Jains created more elaborate caves (30–34) on the northern edge end of the site.

The best known cave at Ellora is undoubtedly the spectacular 8th-century CE Kailashnatha cave (no. 16) carved out of the living rock as a free-standing temple at the time of the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I (Figure 5.8). This rock-cut temple is covered by elaborate carvings and echoes the shape of Shiva's mountainous abode; it stands completely free from the rock cliff where surrounding multistoried pillared halls and rectangular chapels are excavated. In this particular case, the oneness of nature and the cultural intervention is evident and needs no explanation. The identity between the temple and the cosmic mountain Meru or Mandara is unmistakable and the monument appears to be *svayambhu*, naturally manifesting itself out of the living rock.

This perception is confirmed by an inscription. The well-known Rashtrakuta grant of Karka Suvarnavarsha dated to the 812 CE informs us of the identity of the patron of the Kailashnath cave, King Krishna I.<sup>20</sup> The grant overtly praises the temple dedicated to Shiva as *svayambhu*, and the patron's involvement in the creation of the monument is associated with the wondrous qualities of the gods. The inscription also explicitly compares the cave to a heavenly structure where the best of immortals move in celestial *vahanas* (mounts). Much like at Ajanta, the natural environment is not merely in the background at the site of Ellora's Kailashnatha cave but also shapes the very essence of the architectural intervention: it epitomises the siting of paradise where mansions of the gods are located.



*Figure 5.8* View of the Kailashnatha from above, Ellora.

Source: Courtesy of the author

Nature defines the *raison d'être* of the cave monuments perhaps nowhere more than at Elephanta. The suggestive landscape of this island located off the coast of Mumbai is home to the beautifully sculpted Great Cave dedicated to the god Shiva at the beginning of the 6th century CE (Figures 5.9 and 5.10). Generally overlooked are the six minor Shaiva caves at Elephanta carved on the western and eastern slopes on the island and an early Buddhist stupa now in ruins near the top of the hill.<sup>21</sup> Elephanta was inscribed in the World Heritage List (no. 244) based on criteria i and iii, which refer uniquely to the superb sculptures of the Great Cave, in particular the so-called Sadashiva image, which refers to one of the identifications proposed.<sup>22</sup> The natural environment which historically empowered the cave site is completely overlooked in the UNESCO report. Yet it was its uniqueness that endowed the Great Cave with “cosmic relevance”: the island in the Indian Ocean carries clear allusions to Jambudvīpa, the Rose Apple island surrounded by concentric oceans of salt, and beyond to the whole universe identified in Hindu cosmology as a closed egg floating on cosmic water. In essence, the power of this monument lies



Figure 5.9 Elephanta, view of the harbour.

Source: Courtesy of the author





Figure 5.10 So-called Sadashiva, Great Cave, Elephanta.

Source: Courtesy of the author

almost completely in its natural surroundings, and much less in the ability of the skilled artists who crafted the wondrous images of Shiva in the Great Cave.

This makes apparent how natural elements, as much as historic interventions, define the essence of the rock-cut World Heritage Sites of Ajanta, Ellora and Elephanta. Through a re-examination of the epigraphic and architectural evidence available at several rock-cut sites, it is possible to retrace the original meaning attached by patrons to cave temples and their natural environments. Nature empowered these monuments in the religious imaginations of the devotees, transforming the Buddhist and Hindu caves into pavilions within divine gardens. This integral relationship between monasteries, temples and their surroundings begs us to reconsider the absolute value placed on the distinction between cultural and natural heritage when considering the rock-cut monuments of Maharashtra. It is almost as if, while assessing the heritage value of the Taj Mahal, one would completely overlook its surrounding gardens therefore obliterating the very meaning of the monument intended as a visual metaphor of paradise.

## Notes

- 1 Lynn Meskell, 'UNESCO's World Heritage Convention at 40: Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation', *Current Anthropology*, 2013, 54(4): 483–494.
- 2 Denis Byrne and Gro Birgit Ween, 'Bridging Cultural and Natural Heritage', in Lynn Meskell (ed.), *Global Heritage: A Reader*, Somerset: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 94–111.
- 3 UNESCO World Heritage Center, 'Khangchendzonga National Park', <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/242> (accessed on 30 April 2017).
- 4 Ajanta and Ellora were inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1983 while Elephanta was inscribed in 1987. UNESCO World Heritage Center, 'Ajanta Caves', <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/242>; 'Ellora Caves', <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/243>; 'Elephanta Caves', <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/244>, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/> (accessed on 30 April 2017).
- 5 Phyllis Granoff, 'What's in a Name? Rethinking "Caves"', in Pia Brancaccio (ed.), *Living Rock: Buddhist, Hindu and Jain Cave Temples in the Western Deccan*, Mumbai: Marg, 2013, pp. 18–29.
- 6 Thomas W. Rhys Davids, *The Digha Nikaya*, Vol. II, London: Pali Text Society, 1903, pp. 263–275.
- 7 Alexander Cunningham, *The Stupa of Bharhut*, London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1879, p. 128 no. 92, plate XXVIII.
- 8 Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art*, London: Phaidon, 1997, pp. 52–53, Figure 34.
- 9 S. Nagaraju, *Buddhist Architecture of Western India*, New Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1981, p. 329, no. 3.
- 10 Alexander Cunningham, *The Stupa at Bharhut*, London: WH Allen & Co., 1879, p. 137 no. 65, plate XVI.
- 11 Akira Sakadata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins*, Tokyo: Koei, 1997, pp. 25–67.
- 12 James Burgess and Indrajī Bhagwanlal, *Inscriptions From the Cave-Temples of Western Deccan*, Bombay: Governemnt Central Press, 1881, p. 28, no. 1.
- 13 For a comprehensive history of Ajanta see Walter Spink, *Ajanta: History and Development*, Vols. 1–5, Leiden: EJ Brill, 2005–2014.
- 14 UNESCO World Heritage Center, 'Ajanta Caves'. The inclusion of the Ajanta caves in the World Heritage List was motivated by the following selection criteria: i. to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius; ii. to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture and technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; iii. to bear a unique testimony or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which has disappeared; vi. to be directly associated with ideas, beliefs and artistic works of outstanding universal significance. UNESCO World Heritage Center, 'The Criteria for Selection', <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/> (accessed on 30 April 2017).
- 15 I use here the rather poetic translation of the Ajanta Cave 26 inscription published by Spink, *Ajanta: History and Development*, Vol. 1, p. 420.

- 16 Burgess and Bhagwanlal, *Inscriptions From the Cave-Temples of Western Deccan*, p. 72.
- 17 Daud Ali, 'Gardens in Early Indian Court Life', *Studies in History*, 2003, 19(2): 221–252.
- 18 UNESCO World Heritage Center, 'Ellora Caves' and 'The Criteria for Selection'.
- 19 On the various phases of occupation at Ellora, see M. K. Dhavalikar, *Ellora*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005; Geri Malandra, *Unfolding a Mandala, the Buddhist Caves at Ellora*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993; Lisa Owen, *Carving Devotion in the Jain Caves at Ellora*, Leiden: EJ Brill, 2012.
- 20 R. G. Bhandarkar, 'The Baroda Copper Plate', in N. B. Utgikar (ed.), *The Collected Works of Sir R.G. Bhandarkar*, Vol. III, Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1927.
- 21 For a scholarly overview of the site of Elephanta, see George Mitchell, *Elephanta*, Mumbai: India Book House, 2002.
- 22 UNESCO World Heritage Center, 'Elephanta Caves'.

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