A Flexible Concept of Finish: Rock-Cut Shrines in Premodern India

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Abstract

India has a rich tradition of monuments cut from living rock, ranging from cave-shrines with a single façade to entire monolithic temples with both an interior and an exterior excavated from a mountainside. At a rough count more than eleven hundred caves and monoliths exist at some forty-five sites, created by Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains over a span of a thousand years. And to those accustomed to the modern concept of finish, half of this vast range of rock-cut monuments appears incomplete. No doubt explanations revolving around singular historical circumstances satisfactorily explain some of this incomplete work. This article, however, addresses the significant number of unfinished works that seem unexplained by specific historical circumstances, and proposes that the concept of “finish” was flexible. The patron’s prime aim was to create a monument that was usable and functional, with a fully carved-out sanctum and a complementary iconographic program. Once the sanctum was ready for consecration and worship, many, if not most, patrons appear to have been unconcerned with the finish of the overall structure. If the subsidiary areas of a shrine came to fruition at the same time as the sanctum, all well and good. If not, as long as the sacred myths were clearly readable by devotees, figures within a panel could wait forever to be released from the rock of the mountainside, and the panel’s framing pillars could remain but roughly sketched out. With worship initiated, such details assumed and retained a low priority, even when the structure continued in worship for centuries after its initiation. It appears that “finish” was a flexible concept with regard to the rock-cut monuments of premodern India.

The Unfinished, Stone, Stone Carvers, and Tools

Throughout the premodern period stone was the chosen medium for the construction of sacred monuments on the Indian subcontinent, due in large measure to its durability. Great store was set by the resilience and permanence of stone, as seen in the sentiment expressed in an inscription at the rock-cut monastery of Kanheri, where a donor claims to have erected a Buddhist hall of worship, a caitya, which would endure for a kalpa, or cosmic era. A considerable proportion of India’s impressive stone monuments, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain, display to some degree what one might describe as a lack of finish. Such “unfinished” work is evident in structures built by quarrying blocks of stone and placing them one upon the other to create the final result, but it is far more widespread in India’s lengthy and rich tradition of rock-cut monuments, ranging from “cave-temples” to entire monolithic temples with both an exterior and an interior, all cut from the living rock. It is these rock-cut monuments that are the focus of this essay.

In the context of stone carving the word “finish” can hold a variety of meanings. It implies, for instance, bringing a stone monument to completion, so that none of its component parts is lacking or deficient. A finished cave or rock temple is thus one which has all of its requisite parts—gateways, halls, porches, shrine, roofs, towers—and also carved imagery appropriate to its dedication. According to the 19th-century connotation that we have inherited, “finish” also implies that the whole monument, including its accompanying decorative and figural carving, is crafted to a state of refinement in which nothing rough or inadequate remains. An additional association of the word “finish” is the achievement of a state of finality, the arrival at an end point. Temples, monasteries, and other sacred architecture, often received, in response to an upsurge of devotional fervor, additional gifts well after their initial construction; such offerings of lamps, images, jewelry, or supplementary halls testify to the continued use and relevance of these monuments. In this essay the word finish will be used in its first two meanings: (1) including all necessary parts of a monument together with its planned iconographical sculpture, and (2) crafting these to a state of refinement and finesse. This might seem to be a universally acceptable view of monuments, yet we shall see that it seems to have been largely irrelevant in premodern India.

It is useful to begin by distinguishing between rock-cut monuments in which work was abandoned at so early a stage of excavation that they may hence be
termed unusable, and those where work was carried to a stage sufficiently more advanced that the monument was usable even though major areas remained unfinished. Numerous examples exist of the category of unusable “abandoned” monuments. At the Buddhist Ajantā caves in the Deccan plateau, for instance, work began on residential vihāra Cave 24, where the rock cutters began to work on the shrine to be located in the cave’s rear wall extracting entire channels of rock from front to rear. They stopped work before beginning the shrine or reaching the floor level. So too with Ajantā’s Caitiya 29, where the main arched window was outlined and the rock cutters had excavated some forty feet into the hillside at the level of the base of that window—and then had abandoned work.

A number of similar examples occur in the many groups of Buddhist caves at the site of Junnar (near Pune, Mahārāstra Province). For instance, the caitya that is the focus of the Budh Lenā monastic complex remains incomplete and unusable. A variety of explanations might account for such abandoned work, including the carvers coming upon poor strata of rock, or an unexpected underground spring of water, or specific events such as the death of a monarch, dynastic upheaval, or war, all of which could have brought about the abrupt withdrawal of funds. A comparable scenario of unfinished work is apparent at the famous Hindu site of Māmallapuram, south of Chennai in Tamil Nādu, which may well qualify as the single most important site of unfinished stone working anywhere in the world. Monoliths excavated from individual boulders of stone at Māmallapuram, such as the Pidāri ratha or the Valaiyankuttai ratha, remained unusable. Work started from the very top of these boulders and proceeded downward, but ground level was not reached; no interior shrine was hollowed out, nor is there any access to these structures short of setting up a ladder or clambering up their sides. Caves with the most preliminary cutting may also be seen abandoned at Māmallapuram. This article does not address structures that were clearly abandoned at a preliminary stage of construction, leaving them unusable for either ritual worship or monastic habitation. Our focus will be rock-cut monuments that present us with usable, presumably consecrated shrines whose architectural details and sculptures certainly appear unfinished. The explanations we propose here are unrelated to singular historical events; they are of a more generic and hence a more universally applicable nature.

A range of rock-cut monuments located across the Deccan plateau, as also in south India, suggests that our present-day concepts of finish do not apply to sites sanctified for ritual use in premodern India. Many rock-cut monuments that appear in various ways incomplete according to the universally accepted modern concept of finish appear to have been unworriedly utilized for ritual worship by those who commissioned them. This applies as much to a Buddhist caitya hall at the Kanheri caves near Mumbai, cut initially in the 2nd century CE, as to the magnificent Hindu Cave-Temple 29 at Ellora, known popularly as the Dhūmar Lenā, cut some four centuries later, with its twenty-foot-high central linga shrine and its set of six monumental relief carvings depicting the legends of Śiva.

With India’s largesse of richly sculpted and finely finished monuments, it is not surprising that most art historians acknowledge incomplete works but find them of little interest. In fact, the corpus of art-historical literature on India reveals only two articles devoted to the subject of unfinished work. In a thoughtful and probing analysis Joanna Williams considers both Ajantā and Māmallapuram as examples of interrupted patronage and the resultant lack of incentive to continue work on structures that had already garnered merit for their initiators. Referring to both rock-cut and structural monuments, Williams speaks of “a tolerance for abortive efforts, which only remind us of the vagaries of life.” Instead of calling it a “lack of care,” she suggests that a positive description might be “freedom from a compulsive concern with achievement.”3 She also points out the pertinent fact that a temple could “work” whether or not carving details were finished. Samuel Parker, the second author to address the question of the incomplete, considers both rock-cut Māmallapuram and the structural expanded temples of south India. Quoting the ethnographic study of E. Valentine Daniel on modern Tamil house building, he speaks of the modern builders’ “rule of incompleteness,” according to which each vertical level of building should retain something incomplete when the next stage begins, and all levels remain incomplete when the house is considered finished.4 But, the silence of ancient texts on this subject, plus the oddity of such an idea to contemporary stone sculptors, lead him to reject “an aesthetic of incompletion.”5 Parker also points out that “Tamil temples grow outwards over the centuries,” so that “there is always leftover, unfinished architectural business following any round of construction.”6 Such an analysis might perhaps also be extended to the expansion of rock-cut sites such as Kanheri or Ellora, where new rock-cut shrines were added over a period of several hundred years.

The thrust of this essay, however, is quite different. Setting aside abandoned monuments, we find in various
parts of the Deccan dozens of individual rock-cut structures that contain areas of unfinished in the dual sense of the term as defined earlier—they neither have all their component parts, nor are they uniformly crafted to a state of refinement. Some monuments have inconvenient access to their entranceway, as in the Buddhist caitya at Bedsā, where the mass of rock in front of the cave has only an uneven passageway cut through it. Others have circuituous, even dangerous, access, like the narrow tunnel and precipitous steps leading to two of the three entranceways of the Hindu Dhūmar Lenā cave at Ellora. These monuments also lack finish in the sense of refinement. The veranda of the Bedsā caitya opens into a cell at either end; one doorway is neatly carved and squared off, with regular door jambs, whereas the doorways opposite is lacking such basics as clear verticality, straight edges, or a level doorstep. Such lack of finish and refinement is also seen in some of the large sculpted panels that complete the iconographic program of the Dhūmar Lenā cave at Ellora. The monumental sculpted tableau to the left of the only easily accessible entranceway, depicting Śiva dispatching the demon Andhaka, lacks such finish. Obvious marks of the point chisel appear across the lower section of the panel, and an entire section of the background needs to be cut further back to fully release some of the sculpted figures. Instances of such lack of finish are widespread and recur at site after site, and may not be put down either to practical geological reasons or, we believe, to external events centering upon a monarch’s or other patron’s political fortunes and socioeconomic circumstances. Nor do these incomplete monuments belong to the category of shrines where work was intended to be long ongoing.

We may assume that a patron commissioning a monument intended to see it finished to his satisfaction, so as to bring him esteem from his peers as well as karmic merit, or punya. Inscriptions frequently speak of the patron’s pride in producing an especially fine monument. The Buddhist caitya hall at Kārle is one such instance. Along the left end of its spectacularly carved veranda are carved the words of a 1st-century banker, seth Bhūtapāla, who “completed this mountain-mansion, the finest in Jamudvipa [a term used for the Indic peninsula].” Varāhadeva, minister of the 5th-century Vākātaka emperor Harisena, described Ajantā Vihāra 16 as his cave on the mountain, “clothed in the brilliance of Indra’s crown, adorned with windows, doors, beautiful picture-galleries, ledges, statues of the nymphs of Indra and the like,… ornamented with beautiful pillars and stairs and with a temple of the Buddha inside.” In like vein feudatory prince Upendragupta spoke of Ajantā Vihāra 17 as a “jewel of a monolithic temple.” Although the acquisition of spiritual merit was clearly the aim of these various donors and patrons, the production of a superbly adorned monument to arouse admiration of their peers was also important. To argue that “completion… entails putting an end to something, and thus, the question itself is intriguingly misplaced” may not be helpful with rock-cut monuments.

The most sustained and probing work on rock-cut architecture comes from the scholar Walter Spink, who has transformed our understanding of the rock-cut monastery of Buddhist Ajantā through an extensive series of articles published over the past forty years; these are currently being collected into a series of volumes published by Brill. No article on rock-cut architecture in India can be complete without at least a bare summary of Spink’s work. Spink knows the caves at Ajantā like the back of his hand, and has investigated a variety of their characteristics, from major ones like the solstitial patterns of the 5th century that explain the precise angle and location of Ajantā’s two important 5th-century caitya halls, to seemingly minor but telling matters like the socket holes for door fittings in the caves’ monastic cells. He has proposed detailed reconstructions of what he sees as the original, aborted plans for certain caves, and how these were (or might have been) altered to adjust to periods of hiatus and recession caused by the unstable Vākātaka political scenario. His knowledge of Ajantā is encyclopedic, but his valuable insights into rock-cut interventions at Ajantā have, unfortunately, been obscured by his controversial use of the Daśa-kumāra-carita, an historical romance composed two centuries after the caves, to bolster arguments regarding the minutiae of his “short” chronology, as well as by his confident estimates of the time taken to complete work at Ajantā. A few of these assessments follow: “We figure that a typical elaborate doorway could be decorated by one man in 18 months”; “Thus 100 men could do all the major doorways in six months”; “The detailing of the large pillars—there are some 400 at the site—would take 100 men about one year, as would the carving of the major image groups”; “…we calculate that 100 men (supported by attendants) could have accomplished all of the work done at the site in 18 years and 6 months.” These estimates have not been backed up by analytical experiments, and hence remain mere guesstimates.

As a practicing sculptor who has worked with sandstone, marble, limestone, and basalts, one of the authors would like to emphasize that the workability and malleability of stone are complicated matters. It is true that, at the start of a rock-cut project, the work of removing
large masses of stone to clear interior spaces bears some similarities to sheer manual labor. At this preliminary stage the point chisel, held between a $45^\circ$ and a $60^\circ$ angle to the stone, is hit by the hammer to remove the larger masses of stone and create the rough forms. When creating flatter surfaces, however, and fashioning the many exquisitely refined forms seen in these caves, the basic carving technique is to cut the stone away in layers—a much more time-consuming process. The 16th-century Italian master Benvenuto Cellini likened this to peeling an onion, and it is interesting to note that many stone sculpting websites borrow this same phrase to describe the process. This layered technique is visually evident in any number of partly complete caves, at a variety of sites, where a series of adjoining architectural surfaces reveal that layer after layer has been carved away, whether with a point chisel or a flat chisel, in order to create a flat wall. As the carvers approached more closely to the final form, whether merely the wall of a caitya or the body of a figural image, the tool marks are seen to lie closer together, indicating that the tool was held at a lower angle to the stone and hit more lightly by the hammer. One need but peruse an essay titled “A Query and a Response” in one of Spink’s Brill volumes to appreciate that time calculations are indeed a tricky issue!\(^\text{14}\)

Before turning to focus on specific monuments, it will be useful to reestablish and reiterate a few basic points about the process of creating those shrines within those mountainsides:\(^\text{15}\) the nature of the rocks being carved,\(^\text{16}\) and the tools and techniques used to carve them. Rock-cut monuments required the stone carvers to remove vast amounts of stone from a hillside so as to leave behind the “negative space” of a shrine. As the previously cited inscriptions suggest, such shrines were intended by the patron and his group of artists to be completed in both senses of the word “finish.” A study of abandoned caves, as well as of those that display a degree of unfinished work, indicates that the prime thrust of excavation was to isolate the shrine from the surrounding hillside and to clear away the vast masses of rock around it so as to provide a path of access for devotees. Other workers focused on creating the open spaces, aisles, and courtyards that were required within the monument. Three of the four monuments we shall consider here are carved from what is loosely termed Deccan Trap; this is an igneous rock, the result of a “stupendous outburst of volcanic energy resulting in the eruption of thick lava flows . . . till 1000s of metres of thick, horizontally-bedded sheets of basalts resulted.” It is not homogenous in character and “the term denotes many igneous rocks of widely different nature”;\(^\text{17}\) it does not seem to have a grain and is amazingly free of faults, lending itself well to the carving of entire monuments into the mountainside. Deccan Trap is a stone that is relatively soft and easy to carve. The fourth monument addressed here, however, is carved from granite, the very hardest of igneous rocks.

The primary stone-carving tools possessed by Indian stone cutters were point chisels of differing sizes, flat chisels with both broad and narrow cutting edges, and round-headed chisels. The stone carvers used this small range of tools in a wide variety of ways to produce the desired results. Rock-cut monuments from the 1st century BCE (the Buddhist cave at Bhaja, near Pune, Mahârâstâ Province, for instance) to the 9th (the Ellora Jain caves) and 13th centuries CE (a late Jain rock-cut image at Ellora) reveal that Indian stone cutters used the point chisel for all preliminary stone cutting. Unfinished surfaces reveal that such preliminary work began with heavy point chiselling, followed by several levels of finer point chiselling. The flat chisel was then employed to obtain a finished surface, which also reveals several levels of work to achieve the smooth surface the stone carvers desired. At most sites the surface was considered finished at the end of repeated flat chiseling; polish, which would have been achieved with abrasives, was not common among rock-cut shrines. Rather, it was customary to achieve a smooth surface by rubbing across the surface of the stone with a flat chisel. On the granite at Mâmallapuram the point chisel alone was used, both for roughing out and for finishing; no attempt was made to create the smooth, polished surface to which granite readily lends itself.

The body of unfinished rock-cut work suggests that the stone carvers may have been divided into four teams. The first team was responsible for the preliminary work of simply opening up the interior spaces for the shrines. They would have worked closely with the second team, comprising stone cutters who roughed out the overall forms of the various units of the interior, though none of the decorative details. Members of this second team would, for example, work the stone for a column into a square mass with broader, rectangular roughed-out forms at top and bottom for subsequent conversion into its capital and base.\(^\text{18}\) The third team carved architectural details into the rough forms left by the second team of stone cutters; they created the bases of the columns, shaped their lengths, and carved the capitals, probably finishing everything that was part of the cave’s architectural decoration. The fourth team comprised sculptors, who were responsible for all of the figurative relief sculptures.

Several abandoned caves with sculpted façades and
incomplete interiors confirm that, while the rough stone cutting was still in process, teams of carvers began refining and bringing the façade to an appropriate stage of finish. For instance, Junnar’s Budh Lenā caitya, mentioned earlier as having an unusable interior, has an elaborately carved façade whose decoration includes a large lotus whose seven petals, each housing a figure, were arranged in a fan-shape within a “blind” caitya window. Supplemeting the stone carvers would have been auxiliary teams: workers to remove the stone waste produced by the carvers; scaffold builders, since scaffolding, probably made from bamboo (as it still is in India), would be required wherever the surface to be carved was higher than the carver’s reach, and because changes occurred continuously during excavation of a rock-cut shrine, the scaffolding would need to be changed and moved frequently; blacksmiths to sharpen tools that became dull in the process of carving even the relatively soft Deccan Trap, reheating, hammering back into shape, and tempering them. Additionally, major undertakings would have required teams of carpenters, plasterers, and painters.

A monument was considered “finished” when its ritual program was complete; the patron could then consecrate the sanctum image and thereby initiate its ritual use. This essay proposes to demonstrate the existence of such a flexible attitude toward finish by focusing on three shrines in the Deccan, one Buddhist, the second Hindu, and the third Jain, as well as on a granite Hindu shrine from Māmallapuram in the south. We suggest that many patrons lost interest in the monument’s architectural and decorative details once the shrine had been consecrated. Since the diminishing of interest generally begets the diminishing of payment, the stone cutters and sculptors were left with no compelling reason to neat up areas of rough cutting or to finish sculptures according to today’s concept of completion. Whatever may have been the precise reason for the “unfinished”—and it probably differed from one to another of these individual shrines—it appears that once the shrine was prepared for consecration, the monument was considered functional and thereby acceptably complete. Finish was a flexible concept.

The Kanheri Caitya

Buddhist monastic establishments including caitya halls for worship and vihāras for monastic residences became an established part of the vocabulary of Buddhist rock architecture from the 1st century BCE. One of the most extensive of such monasteries, cut into a low outcropping of hills at Kanheri, within Mumbai’s Borivli Park, was begun in the 2nd century CE when the Sātavāhana monarchs ruled the area. It remained in use for several centuries thereafter, as attested by later additions and alterations to earlier caves, as well as by its subsequent expansion when an entire new set of caves was excavated. Cave 3 at Kanheri is a caitya that adheres to the standard model for a Buddhist chapel, in which a set of columns follows the apsidal plan of the cave around a rock-cut stūpa to divide the interior into a nave and side aisles. It was customary for the exterior façade of rock-cut caityas to be given the appearance of a multi-storied building, with a centrally placed large, arched caitya window, originally fitted with a screen of wooden ribs which filtered the light that entered the cave’s interior. By the mid-1st century the lower portion of that façade wall bore auspicious images of mithunas, or loving couples, while the interior columns had each acquired a pot-shaped base standing on a stepped platform and a capital consisting of an inverted bell, a fluted abacus within a boxed frame, and crowning animals and riders.

Cut over a hundred feet into the mountainside, Kanheri’s Caitya 3 is the product of two distinct phases of work. The first phase of rock cutting, itself subject to interruptions, occurred during the 2nd century; in the 5th century the cave underwent major sculptural alterations and additions. This caitya poses questions regarding the consecration of what might be regarded in some ways as an inadequately finished cave. The 5th-century additions, which reveal the compulsion felt by the Buddhist monastic community to update the cave in Buddhological terms, further emphasize a disregard for and a degree of flexibility toward finish.

When work began on the Kanheri caitya, a spacious courtyard with two attached columns was created, beyond which a rock-cut screen was opened up to give access to a veranda; a large semicircular opening was created in the upper section of the veranda’s façade wall for conversion into a caitya window. Sculptors appear to have added the figures of loving couples along the lower wall of the façade (Fig. 1), while the rock cutters focused on the interior. Commencing at the front of the cave as was customary, the stone cutters and sculptors completed the first six octagonal columns on each side: each column rises from a pot-shaped base upon a stepped platform and terminates in a bell-shaped unit, a stepped unit, and animal and rider capitals. At Kanheri the animals and riders are carved in relief upon a block of stone that formed the capital unit; at some other sites themes other than animals with riders adorn these block capitals. The sculptors then worked on the capitals of the next five columns on the left, numbers 7-11, completing the bell, framed abacus, and carved...
capital blocks. It was the usual and logical custom for the sculpting to begin at the upper levels of a cave and move downward, thereby reducing the need for scaffolding. But before the sculptors who carved the capitals of columns 7–11 could turn their attention to these columns’ bases, or begin carving the capitals of the corresponding columns on the right side, work on the cave stopped, presumably due to a shortage of funds.

Work recommenced some years later under new patronage but with—it would appear—reduced funds. The first priority was to bring the caitya to completion by cutting the stūpa and its parasol away from the surrounding living rock, completing its decoration, and consecrating the cave so that worshippers might congregate to adore the Buddha. According to these new limitations, columns 7–11 on the left with already finished capitals were left with no decoration on their bases, so that the octagonal columns rise straight out of the rock floor (Fig. 2). At the same time the corresponding columns 7–11 on the right were created as plain octagons, with neither capital nor base. The remaining columns, which follow the shape of the apse around the stūpa, are plain octagons, as is customary in all caityas.

A badly abraded inscription on the right-hand gate-post of the caitya veranda partly explains the incomplete...
columns, and when intact may have revealed the circumstances of work stoppage and renewal. Its intact portions say only that a work stoppage was followed by renewed patronage by two merchant brothers, Gajasēna and Gajamitra, who saw to the completion of the cave in the reign of the Sātavāhana monarch Yajñāśri Sātakarni, who ruled circa 174–203 ce. The inscription further specifies that an ascetic, a monk, five reverend monks, a lay worshipper, and a merchant financed the completion of the further work described above. The wording seems to indicate that the further, or renewed, work was initiated by Gajasēna and Gajamitra, and received an added infusion of funds from certain monastics, a layman, and another merchant. The inscription also refers to an overseer, a stonemason, a polisher, and perhaps a bricklayer, all of whom “made” and “completed” the new work. On the opposite gatepost Gajamitra and Gajasēna recorded their donations to Buddhist establishments at a number of other sites, including Sopārā, Kalyān, and Paithān.24

Once these inscriptions had been added along the inner face of the two gateposts of the veranda, where they were readily visible to those entering the cave, the stūpa was likely to have been complete, the cave considered ready for consecration and the caitya to receive devotees. Inconsistency in the carving of the interior columns, explained by the interruption in the work, clearly did not bother the devotees. The unquestionably preliminary stage of cutting apparent in the caitya’s large arched window, though, is intriguing. This window, intended to dominate the façade, normally displays rich and expert adornment, as it usually takes pride of place against the richly carved, multistoried surrounding rock façade. Here the arch has been left as a roughly cut

Fig. 2. Buddhist caitya. Kanheri. View of columned interior. 2d c.
semicircle against a blank wall—the caitya window in its most initial stage—and no attempt whatever to transform the surrounding façade walls into the appearance of a lavishly decorated mansion (Fig. 3). The fact that the sculpting of the interior pillars had already begun and several were completed, while the more exterior arched caitya window remained as yet uncarved, confirms that the main thrust of the excavation was directly inward—to outline, carve, and finish the object of worship, the stūpa. Abandoned caityas, such as Junnar’s Budh Lenā, confirm that with ample funds sculptors worked simultaneously on exterior and interior. If, as at Kanheri Cāitya 3, funds were limited, the first priority was without doubt the completion and consecration of the stūpa so that the cave could receive devotees for ritual worship; the completion of the caitya window on the exterior took decidedly second, if not third, place.

Even more intriguing to our investigation is the subsequent history of the caitya, which tellingly reveals the irrelevance of our modern expectations regarding finish. During the reign of the Traikūṭaka dynasty in the late 5th and early 6th centuries, the monastic establishment at Kanheri was expanded by the addition of several new caves, so that the original monastery of 8–10 caves now became the area’s largest, with a total of about 118 excavations. Kanheri’s Cāitya 3 was brought up to date in Buddhological terms by sculpting two monumental, deeply cut relief figures of the Buddha, roughly 23 feet high, one at each end wall of the veranda (Fig. 4). In addition to these two towering Buddhas, several other smaller Buddhist images were added at random along the veranda walls, their irregular placement indicating a lack of coordinated planning; they were probably votive offerings from individuals. Such updating of Buddhist
iconography was apparent at a range of other sites, including Kārlē, Ajanṭā, and Nāsik. Earlier Buddhist excavations that had begun either when the Buddha image had not yet been introduced or were in the earliest stages of introduction, now had anthropomorphic imagery added to them. Clearly, it was important to Buddhist patrons to rework caves whose absence of Buddhist imagery revealed the older ideology; the addition of images rendered those caves appropriate to contemporary Buddhist theology. Astonishingly, at Kanheri this interest in iconographic updating went hand in hand with total disinterest in “finishing” the arched caitya window, which should have visually dominated the caitya façade. The original roughly outlined semicircular opening remains exactly as the preliminary stone cutters left it in the 2nd century, without any sculpting whatsoever. The 5th-century patrons thought it fit to update by adding a few additional Buddha images along this front wall, just below the crudely cut arched window, but the window itself they left as incomplete as it had been in the 2nd century (Fig. 5). Clearly, ideological updating, as in the Kanheri caitya, had nothing to do with “finish” as we think of it today.  

Dhūmar Leṣā: Śaiva Cave 29 at Ellora

Cut some four centuries later than the original Kanheri caitya, the Hindu Cave-Temple 29 at Ellora demonstrates...
strates a comparable flexibility toward “finish” in the context of a usable cave. The expansive and vibrantly sculpted Dhúmar Lenā cave at Ellora, which measures approximately 150 feet square and reaches 18 feet from floor to ceiling, has three open entranceways, on the west, north, and south, each flanked by large sculpted panels. The focus of the cave is a massive linga shrine located toward the rear end of the cave along its east-west axis (Fig. 6). This square shrine that extends from the floor of the cave right up to its ceiling stands upon a stepped base. It has a doorway on all four sides; each doorway is flanked on both sides by a monumental door guardian and a smaller female attendant whose headgear reaches just above the waist of the male guardian. These figures are fully and finely finished in all their details. The male guardians, clad in dhotis, with sturdy torsos adorned with a sacred thread and

Fig. 5. Buddhist caitya. Kanheri. 5th c. random addition of small Buddha images below main caitya window.

necklace, stand resting their weight on one foot; each places one hand upon the dhoti’s elaborate folds, which form a horizontally pleated band across the hips, while holding a rosary and lotus flower in the other hand. Matted locks of hair are arranged in a towering chignon above their heads, and just above the nape of the neck is a small, circular, halo-like *siras-cakra*. Carved on the wall behind each of their heads is an additional oval halo suggestive of their semidivine status. A disc-shaped earring in one elongated earlobe and a *makara* earring in the other, together with armlets, bracelets, and anklets, complete their adornment; the flesh of the neck forms three horizontal folds, a sign of beauty. The female attendants, exquisitely formed, are also finished down to the last detail. Each wears a translucent skirt, whose presence is indicated by a wavy line along the ankles with the skirt folds hanging down one side. A scarf-like upper garment is wrapped around one arm and floats vertically, to be held by the hand extended downward. Their long hair is drawn into an elaborate bun on top of the head and adorned with strings of beads; a tiara-like band encircles the forehead. Adorning each attendant are large disc-shaped earrings and elaborate armlets, bracelets, necklaces, and anklets; the upraised hand holds a *cauri*, or fly whisk. A set of steps on all four sides of the sanctum lead up to the slightly higher level of the shrine, which contains a rock-cut *linga* upon a rock-cut *pitha* pedestal. The shrine is totally finished, from its smooth lowest half-moon step and its curved stone baluster to the full release from the rock of the entire form of all eight door guardians and female attendants, and the fine detailing of their drapery and jewelry (Fig. 7).

The cave itself has three wide, veranda-like entryways, each flanked by two panels, one on each end wall of the open entryway, and it is on these panels that we find unfinished work. Each of the 6 panels carries a grand relief from Shaiva mythology within a space some 20 feet across and 18 feet high, and each panel reveals some level of curtailed work. As one repeatedly encounters deeply cut-out heads with partially extracted bodies, one might conclude that carving generally began with the faces and headresses and continued, more perfunctorily, with the torso and lower limbs. Alternatively, the heads might be the work of a master carver who started each panel with the most important portion; once he had extracted and finished the heads, lesser artists moved in to complete the bodies,
perhaps resulting in the scenario we see here. Additionally, the central areas of a panel are often complete and the surrounding portions still uncarved; occasionally the uppermost register is finished while the lower, more marginal areas still need work. We find too that the treatment of space differs from one panel to the next, as indeed does the stylistic treatment of the figures. The inevitable conclusion seems to be that different artists, or sets of artists, were working simultaneously on all six panels.

On the left panel of the main, western, entranceway, a dynamic image of Śiva defeating the demon Andhaka (“Darkness”) cuts a dramatic diagonal across the available space, providing the viewer with a grand panoramic view of Śiva’s great feat (Fig. 8). As with the other five panels, the panorama unfolds within a shallow niche framed by pilasters; curiously, whereas the pilaster to the left is finely fluted and fully complete, that on the right has been left rough and not yet fluted. The left two-thirds of the panel is occupied entirely by the figure of the eight-armed god, who stands in a commanding posture, with one leg planted at a 45° angle to the ground and the other raised and placed upon a rocky outcrop. Two upraised hands brandish above his head the flayed skin of the elephant-demon, Gajāsura, and one left outstretched hand wields the sword that impales the demon Andhaka. The tiny skewered figure of the hapless demon is finely detailed, with hands raised above his head and joined in the [anjali] gesture of adoration, indicating his submission to Śiva; the demon’s proper right foot, now damaged, once rested upon a lotus amid a formation of cirrus-like clouds. With one right hand Śiva holds upside down the figure of a second hapless demon, not detailed like Andhaka and apparently not finished. In his remaining hands Śiva holds a skull cup, a striking serpent, a sword, and other

Fig. 8. Śiva destroying the demon Andhaka. West entrance of Cave 29, “Dhūmar Leṇā,” Ellora. End 6th c.
weapons, and he wears a garland of human heads. The artist has cut away the stone around Śiva’s dynamic figure at varying depths, creating not a flat background but one that relates differently to the different parts of his form. It is cut away most deeply between his two uppermost arms and around his head, which is thus dramatically highlighted; the shallowest background is along the proper right of Śiva’s body. The rock between and around Śiva’s legs is cut away to three different and uneven depths, suggesting that this portion of the background was never completed. Additionally, the rocky outcrop on which the god plants his raised foot has been left with the marks of the point chisel, the preliminary tool, and with none of the finer flat chiseling that would create a smoother finish.

Having dealt with the most important part of his relief, the artist then turned to the remaining third of the available space. There he placed Śiva’s consort Pārvatī, who sits watching Śiva dispatch the doomed Andhaka. It is here that we encounter astonishingly perfunctory cutting. Pārvatī’s body has been partially extracted from the rock of the mountain, but her head, the proper right of her face, her headdress, and her shoulders barely emerge. Releasing Pārvatī from the surrounding rock face, rounding out her shoulder, giving depth to the background, and completing the delineation of her drapery and ornaments seem suddenly to have become irrelevant to the artist (Fig. 9). We must assume that at this point the shrine was considered complete. Notwithstanding the casual treatment of the lower part of Śiva’s limbs and of his background space, as well as the preliminary outlining of the pilaster framing the panel on the right, the artist had successfully focused the viewers’ attention on the god and his feat. It would appear that the patron decided it was time to consecrate the linga and inaugurate the cave for ritual worship, ignoring as irrelevant the panel’s lack of a uniformly high state of refinement.

Far more finished is the opposite panel of the western entryway, showing Rāvana attempting to shake Mt. Kailāsa, upon which Śiva and Pārvatī are seated at ease; the rough point chiselling of the panel’s “frame,” however, is certainly noticeable (Fig. 10). Śiva and Pārvatī are exquisitely detailed, and the rock surrounding their heads is deeply cut away, creating a dense shadow that adds dramatic effect. Yet Pārvatī’s shoulder on the side away from Śiva seems perfunctorily finished; the surrounding rock was not cut back to even half the depth of the rock surrounding the other shoulder. In fact, an entire portion of rough stone above Pārvatī’s left shoulder was not cut away; since it was surely not intended to remain, the sculpting is clearly incomplete. To the left of the head of Rāvana, shown kneeling and imprisoned within the rock that forms Mt. Kailāsa, the artist intended to place three frolicking monkeys; two he finished, but the third is only a head, with the body not yet detached from the surrounding rock. Śiva’s dwarf gana attendants frolic on either side of Rāvana, and a charming detail shows one impudently bending over and raising his behind toward this powerful demon imprisoned by Śiva within the mountain.

The panels flanking the northern entranceway to the Dhuṃar Lenā are the least complete in the cave. Dancing Śiva is an extraordinarily unskilled, almost heavy-handed carving (Fig. 11). The sculptor has deeply detached Śiva’s head from the rock, so that it stands out and draws attention to itself; the clumsily additive upper arms separate the head from the rest of Śiva’s body. Subsidiary flanking figures who watch Śiva’s dance are clearly incomplete. At the right of the panel, the lower half of Pārvatī is barely detached from the surface, and the rock on which she is seated carries rough and randomly placed marks of the point chisel. Śiva’s bull mount, standing to the left, is even more perfunctorily
carved; his head and hump are partly shaped and his raised left leg is outlined, but the rest of him is still submerged in the rock. Additionally, a great deal of uncarved rock, and thus unused space, exists around Śiva, in stark contrast to the small, fully finished figures of the dikpālas, the guardian deities of the eight directions, lined up in two groups of four along the uppermost register of the panel. The compositional technique seen in this tableau is decidedly unsophisticated.

On the opposite panel of the northern entryway Śiva’s manifestation as the sage Lakulīśa occupies a large keyhole-shaped space at the center, with the ample surrounding rock left blank and untouched (Fig. 12). Seated in the lotus posture, Lakulīśa has his right hand in the vyākhyāna gesture of teaching; his left hand holds his attribute, the lakula rod, which has been entirely detached from the rock face along much of its length. On either side of the lotus stalk below are a nāga and two nāginīs, all emerging hip upward from the watery depths.28 Absent here are Lakulīśa’s four pupil-devotees and the various gods watching this manifestation; only the Lakulīśa image, sitting upon a central lotus seat, has been delineated. This panel suggests a different attitude toward the compositional usage of space and the planning and distribution of images along an expansive wall. It is also possible that this panel was among the latest begun, and was still in this preliminary stage when the cave was ready for consecration.

One panel flanking the southern entranceway to the cave bears a magnificent tableau featuring the marriage of Śiva and Parvati (Fig. 13). Standing Śiva, with the rock face cut deeply away along the entire length of his body, takes Parvati’s hand in the marriage ceremony, as Brahmā, seated at lower right, acts as officiating priest. Beyond him, watching this divine marriage, stands Viṣṇu, while behind Parvati are her parents. At the upper left and right of the panel are the manifold gods who attended this magnificent event, including the dikpāla guardians of the directions, each upon his
particular animal vehicle. Little was left unfinished in this panel, except for some rock that remains around and above the figures of Pārvatī’s father and mother, Himavat and Mēna.

The sculptor of the opposite panel of the southern entryway, which depicts Śiva and Pārvatī, flanked by their respective attendants, seated comfortably in their mountain abode of Kailāsa, has composed his panel differently—divided into two clearly demarcated horizontal registers (Fig. 14). Pārvatī and her attendants, featured in the right half of the upper register, are totally finished, but the same cannot be said of Śiva in the left half. The god sits with his right elbow resting on his raised right knee, but his arm is not completely

Fig. 12. Lakulīśa manifestation of Śiva. North entrance of Cave 29, “Dhūmar Lenā,” Ellora. End 6th c.

Fig. 13. Marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī. South entrance of Cave 29, “Dhūmar Lenā,” Ellora. End 6th c.
detached from the rock and, inexplicably, a great deal
of the stone in this area, surely an important section of
the relief, remains unworked. Additionally, the carving
of Śiva’s standing attendant is somewhat perfunctory:
his head is clearly delineated, but his torso and lower
limbs are roughly indicated and barely extracted from
the rock. Beyond is uncarved stone, which could have
accommodated another attendant; it contrasts with the
many celestials crowded into the uppermost register to
watch the divine couple, all of whom are finely finished.
It would appear that the sculptor(s) began at the top of
this upper segment and worked downward; they also
began at the center and worked toward the right, where
they finished Pārvatī and her attendants, and finally
moved to the left part of the upper register, where much
of the stone was left unworked. The lower register,
which depicts Śiva’s bull mount and his playful gaṇas,
is similarly finished toward the center; playful details
include one gaṇa biting the bull’s tail, while a second
audaciously bends over and sticks his behind into the
air right beside the bull in a gesture that mimics the
posturing gaṇa beside Rāvana in one of the panels at
the western entranceway. The figures of Brahmā and
Viṣṇu, to left and right of the bull, lack detailed defini-
tion, and the two rows of auspicious pots placed one
upon another to enclose this lower segment are merely
incised into the rock.

One additional sculptural feature of the Dhūmar Lenā
requires note. The eastern face of the mountainside,
immediately outside the northern and southern entrance-ways, features a rectangular niche that holds an image of a standing goddess. In the northern direction, on the rock beyond the pilaster that encloses the Lakulıśa panel, is an image of the river goddess Yamunā (present-day river Jumna), standing upon her recognizable tortoise mount and accompanied by a female attendant whose diminutive size emphasizes her secondary status. The goddess is deeply cut, fully rounded, and complete in her elaborate ornamentation and drapery, as is her small-scaled but richly decorated attendant. By comparison with the loving care and attention lavished on the carving of these two figures, one monumental and the other less than a third its size, the rough, perfunctory outline of Yamunā’s tortoise mount (Fig. 15) is astonishing.30

A final question concerns the nature of access to the Dhúmar Lenā. The cave itself has three entrance-ways, each with wide steps extending the full distance between the two central pillars; flanking seated lions guard the stairway. The only truly accessible entrance, however, is at the western end, where a broad, stable shelf was created in front of the cave, apparently from the waste and rubble extracted during the process of rock cutting (Fig. 16); the approach to the other two entrance-ways is distinctly unsatisfactory. At the northern entrance-way a certain amount of rock has been extracted to create a degree of open space immediately beyond the northern steps, but only an exceedingly narrow tunnel-like passage-way has been cut through the remaining mass of standing rock so as to reach the exterior. This passage is too constricted to allow a carriage of any sort to pass through, nor even a palanquin, which would require space for its bearers on either side (Fig. 17). Equally problematic is the southern entrance-way, whose sculpted panels are the cave’s most complete. The only access to this entrance is via an exceedingly steep rock pathway, with steps cut into it, leading up to the cave from the pool far below, which is known locally as Sītā’s Bath. No wide or stable space seems ever to have existed along this southern side, restricting the entryway to those willing to dare the precarious pathway. Equally curious is the thin and unevenly jagged rock screen that “encloses” the cave in this direction (Fig. 18). If cut away—and this would require minimal effort—the cave would have an expansive view of the surrounding Ellora countryside, including some of the site’s other caves, and also of the dramatic waterfall that plunges down some 200 feet to form Sītā’s Bath. If the architect intended to cut it away, we can only assume that the patron withdrew funds as soon as the cave was inaugurated for worship, obliging the workers to pack up and leave. If there was any intention to provide grand access to the Dhúmar Lenā through three avenues, that plan was not realizable on the south and was never seriously pursued on the north, where it would seem easy enough. It appears that the patron decided that the practical and easy access he had provided at the western entryway was sufficient, and decided to leave the southern and northern entrance-ways as they were. He had created a shrine with a series of recognizable monumental myths from Śiva legends, together with a sanctum that was consecrated and ready. The Dhúmar Lenā’s sponsor apparently had a flexible approach to the issue of “finish,” as did the rock carvers he employed and the devotees who gathered there to extol Śiva.

Jain Cave 30 at Ellora: Choṭā Kailāsa

Cave 30 at Ellora is known widely as the Choṭā Kailāsa, or Little Kailāsa, as it is seen as a lesser version of Ellora’s famed Kailāsa Cave-Temple 16, which is generally believed to have been completed in the reign of Krśna I (757–773) of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa dynasty. Like the famous Śaiva Cave 16, the Choṭā Kailāsa is a monolithic temple created by extracting it entirely from the rock of the mountainside. The first process would have been to cut three trenches in order to isolate a central mass of rock that was then carved from the outside to create the external shape of a temple and hollowed out on the inside to create interior chambers. The resulting temple consists of a vimāna (a sanctum and its tower, the śikhara) preceded by an attached mandapa (hall) with an entrance porch and two side porches (Fig. 19). The courtyard-
like rock enclosure containing the temple measures roughly 80 feet across and extends 130 feet into the hillside. It is entered through a mass of rock, a rudimentary gatehouse through which a visitor approaches the Chotā Kailāsa, in a manner that parallels entry to Ellora's Kailāsa Cave-Temple 16. Like its famous cousin, this monolithic temple too has caves cut into both side walls of the enclosing mountainside. There are two major differences: the Chotā Kailāsa is a Jain rather than a Hindu cave, and its exterior is drastically unfinished compared to the relatively finished perfection of the Hindu Kailāsa.

Visitors approaching Cave 30 might quite possibly walk past it without stopping to enter, seeing only a huge, rudely cut mass of rock with a passageway of sorts through it; nothing is squared; nothing is neatly outlined; nothing suggests walking in (Fig. 20). If they persist and do walk in, they will find that the floor, the side walls, and the ceiling of the passageway are totally uneven. The right side wall, intended to house five Jain images, holds two empty niches closest to the exterior, followed by three seated images of Jinas complete with attendants and flying celestials. The corresponding wall on the left is in a far more rudimentary state. The only complete niche, the farthest from the exterior, holds an image of the seated Jain goddess Cakreśvarī; the rest of the wall does not even show preparation to receive sculpted images. Emerging into the temple “courtyard” and looking back at the “gatehouse” is a disconcerting experience due to its complete lack of architectural definition (Fig. 21). Even more perplexing is the drastically uneven nature of the rock floor of the inner courtyard, which has not been levelled but exists largely as a series of channels of fluctuating depths around varying parts of the “temple.” It is readily apparent that the stone in this area of the Ellora hills is riddled with fault lines: this particular spot was an unfortunate choice for an ambitious excavation.

The most finished portion of the temple is the mandapa with its three porches; the least complete are the exterior walls of the sanctum itself. The mandapa has acquired its basic form, and its decorative scheme
of niches enclosed by pilasters has begun to be outlined; toward its rear, however, only the uppermost portion of these pilasters has taken shape, confirming the top-down process of rock carving. The curved overhanging eaves are adorned with a series of ornate floriate scrolls that flow downward; several are fully detailed, but others remain as raised areas roughly outlined by the stone cutter and awaiting the sculptor’s attention. Even the frontal overhanging cave first seen by the visitor stepping through the gateway display this uneven treatment, since the central motif was left as a mere rough stone block showing point chisel marks. Flying celestial couples adorn the upper levels of the walls of the mandapa, and a large, fully open lotus projects above its flat roof.

Along the exterior of the sanctum the lower walls reveal an utterly preliminary stage of rock cutting. The exterior left wall remains as an uneven mass of rock with the rough working steps that the stone cutters and carvers utilized to reach the upper levels. To shape the walls of the sanctum, these rough-hewn utilitarian steps, together with the uneven mass of rock on which they are located, would have been cut away. But this stage was not reached, and nowhere around the vimāna has rock cutting reached ground level; walking around it demands close attention to the uneven floor levels so as not to turn an ankle (Fig. 22). Uneven masses of uncut rock, representing work in process, are seen also on the wall joining the sanctum and the mandapa. A few niches have been begun on this joining wall, with large projecting blocks of stone left in place for later conversion into sculpted imagery.

The temple’s śikhara has been worked upon by sculptors, and down the center of all four sides are

Fig. 19. View from above of flat-roofed hall and broken śikhara tower above sanctum. Cave 30, “Choṭā Kailāsa,” Ellora. Ca. 8th c.
projections; the prominent projection along its front, known as a sukânaśa, houses a mini-shrine at the level of the mandapa roof (Fig. 19), which contains a fully finished and elaborately carved image of a Jina seated on a lion throne and flanked by caurī-bearing attendants. The current ragged profile of the sikhara appears to be a by-product of the very poor quality of the stone in this particular location along the Ellora outcrop. It would appear that the hillside’s faulty rock strata became evident only after work had begun on this ambitious temple. One assumes that during the process of carving the lines of breakage were not apparent or were ignored as minor. It would appear that soon after the sikhara was fully carved and completed, its topmost sections sheared away, resulting in its present uneven profile.

It seems likely that the poor condition of the stone, apparent today even to the untrained eye, was in part responsible for abandoning work on all sections of the temple’s exterior. Thus far, apart from lamenting the sorry state of the unfinished Cave-Temple 30 at Ellora, nothing seems to merit especial comment.

 Visitors who have viewed the rudimentary cutting of the exterior, however, are in for a surprise when they walk into the Choṭā Kailāsa, since the interior of both the sanctum and the pillared mandapa are fully finished. The Choṭā Kailāsa sanctum measures 14 feet by 11 feet and holds a finely finished image of a Jina, seated in the lotus pose upon a lion throne, with his palms resting one within the other in the gesture of meditation, and flanked by attendants bearing fly whisks.
and garlands. A large halo is carved on the rock wall directly behind him, a triple parasol hovers above his head, and the leaves of a sacred tree are carved behind the parasols. Additionally, a pair of cymbals, played by disembodied hands, is carved above the Jina. In her study of Ellora’s Jain caves, Lisa Owen points out that the representation accords with textual descriptions of a Jina in a *samavasara*, the celestial assembly hall where each Jina preaches his first sermon, and that the portrayal includes the eight attributes that mark such an event. These comprise the lion throne, halo, triple parasol, sacred tree, fly whisks held by attendants, celestial flowers, divine sound, and celestial drums. Two seated Jinas with attendants occupy the right wall of the sanctum; seated goddess Cakreśvari and a seated Jina are featured on its left wall. The sanctum’s door jambs, which feature standing attendants along the base, are richly adorned with figural and decorative carvings, and a figure of a meditating Jina on the lintel above proclaims the shrine’s affiliation.

The hall leading to the shrine is roughly 36 feet square and creates an effect similar to that seen in the *mandapa* of Ellora’s great Hindu Kailāsa. Its sixteen columns are arranged in four groups of four, one group in each corner of the *mandapa*. This grouping of the columns emphasizes the cruciform effect of the broad passages intersecting along the two axes, one leading from the front porch to the shrine and the other from the left to the right porch. The columns vary in form: some are square below, octagonal between, and taper to a neck from which the capital expands outward; others are octagonal throughout with chamfered corners.

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**Fig. 21.** Gatehouse viewed from interior courtyard. Cave 30, “Choṭā Kailāsa,” Ellora. Ca. 8th c.
Fig. 22. Roughly blocked-out right-side wall of sanctum and uneven flooring of courtyard. Cave 30, “Choṭā Kailāsa,” Ellora. Ca. 8th c.
and the same expanding capital. All are more or less finished. The two columns immediately in front of the shrine doorway carry a finely carved, double-arched makara tōrana with a central image of a Jina to re-emphasize the shrine’s affiliation (Fig. 23). Additionally, the interior side walls of the mandapa carry sixteen large-scale Jina images, some standing, others seated. They are carved in relief against the four bays created in each quarter of the side walls by the arrangement of the columns. The front porch doorway leading into the mandapa has finished sculpted door jambs and a lintel above that is carved with the architectural forms of the kūtās (square temple units) and sālas (barrel-vaulted structures) that form the basic units of the southern-style temple. The tall door guardians flanking the doorway each lean on a club and stand facing each other as if to keep track of entering visitors (Fig. 24).

The Choṭā Kailāsa presents us, then, with another example of a temple that was ritually complete, even though parts of it, in this case the exterior, are drastically unfinished. With the sanctum image of the Jina ready for ritual worship, the Jina image within the sūkanāsa of the śikhara complete, and its pillared mandapa ready to receive devotees, it appears that the Choṭā Kailāsa was consecrated and used for worship by the Jain community. The patron of this shrine did not even level the drastically uneven and ankle-twisting flooring around the temple. Apparently it was felt that there was no reason to walk around the temple—there was little to see. The route was to be directly along the central axis to the shrine and its sacred consecrated image. Once again, it would appear that the main intent was to produce a temple that could be consecrated and would attract devotees. Judging from the exterior of the Choṭā Kailāsa, a high degree of flexibility could be extended...
even to the basic finish of a shrine’s exterior and to its very architectural integrity.

Finish continued to have low priority at the Choṭā Kailāśa in the centuries that followed: while images, sculpted and painted, were added to several Jain caves, the exterior of the Choṭā Kailāśa was left in its present incomplete condition. Ellora continued to be a site of Jain pilgrimage into the 13th century, when a monumental rock-cut image of Jīna Pārśvanātha, carrying an inscribed date equivalent to 1234/35 CE, was commissioned. This later image was carved into the Ellora hillside, around a bend in the scarp, not far distant from the existing Jain caves. Additionally a bas-relief Jain image, carved on a loose slab found within the monolith, has an inscribed date equivalent to 1247 CE on its pedestal, suggesting that the Choṭā Kailāśa continued in worship into the 13th century. Yet at no time during this period of worship of some four centuries did any donor come forward with funds to level the floor around the temple, finish the exterior walls of the hall and the sanctum, or, indeed, cut and carve the gatehouse exterior or interior in order to make the entrance to this temple inviting, or at least respectable looking. The roof of the front porch still displays traces of plaster and paint, indicating that the main approach route for devotees was embellished and ready. The shrine was usable; low priority was accorded to the “finish” of even the basic exterior of the monument.
The final example addressed here is at Māmallapuram, a major center of granite carving in south India during the time of the Pallava rulers (r. Ca. 580–728). We have chosen to discuss this site for two reasons: first, to extend the discussion beyond the relatively soft stone of the Deccan plateau to South Indian granite, the hardest of stones used for building, and second, to demonstrate that the concept of finish was not flexible only in the Deccan plateau, as might perhaps be assumed from the examples cited thus far, but seemingly extended across the subcontinent. The site of Māmallapuram presents multiple challenging problems pertaining to its many largely unfinished monuments, all of which merit attention. Here, however, we shall restrict our discussion to the monolithic shrine known as the Draupadi Ratha, the first and smallest of a group of monoliths known as the Five Rathas. This little west-facing shrine appears to have been modelled on a thatched-roof hut, here transmuted into granite, with finely delineated floriate arches that scroll down the corners of its roof (Fig. 25). Seemingly it is borne on the backs of alternating lions and elephants, and it is reached by finely cut steps. (Lions alternating with elephants also support the proximal Arjuna Ratha, and the two sets of animal supports share a rock platform.) A set of finely cut steps leads up to the platform, and a second set of steps leads from the level of the platform to the shrine’s interior, against whose back wall a well-finished image of the four-armed goddess Durgā stands upon a lotus, with kneeling male worshippers ready to offer their heads or their long locks to the deity (Fig. 26). Flying celestials, in the form of pot-bellied dwarfs partly resembling the gana attendants of her consort, god Śiva, occupy the rear upper corners of the shrine wall. As is appropriate to a goddess shrine, female door guardians (dvārapālikās) standing within...
niches flank the neatly finished entranceway, which is adorned above with an ornamental archway (törāṇa). One dvārapālikā, poised sideways and holding a spear, is fully finished, whereas her companion, who faces forward and holds a recurved bow, shows perfunctory treatment of the lower portion of her feet, the bow, and the floor of the niche within which she stands. The sanctuary itself, however, is complete.

Centered in each of the three exterior walls of this little temple is a niche with flanking pilasters and a double-arched, curved makara törāṇa. In each niche an image of goddess Durgā stands on the severed head of the buffalo-demon she has vanquished. It is when we turn to consider the treatment of this imagery that the flexibility attached to the concept of finish by the stone carvers and by the patron of the Draupadi Ratha makes itself evident. Only the rear, eastern wall carries an image that is more or less complete. Here, four-armed Durgā, wearing a conical crown, holds a conch shell in one rear hand and a discus in another. She raises her front right hand in the abhaya gesture of protection and rests her front left hand against her hip; meanwhile her feet are planted on the frontally portrayed severed buffalo head. The rectangular niche within which she stands is neatly outlined, as are the flanking pilasters and the double-arched, curved törāṇa above; only the buffalo head lacks definition (Fig. 27). On the south and north side walls of the shrine we find that the framing pilasters of the niche and its törāṇa are complete on one, but rudimentary and unfinished on the other; curiously, the fully framed niche carries a roughly blocked-out image of the goddess, while the incomplete niche encloses a more or less finished goddess.

It is the south wall niche that displays fully finished pilasters and a fine double-arched foliate törāṇa, but an image of Durgā within has merely been blocked out by the stone cutter and not been touched by the sculptor (Fig. 28). Additionally, only the upper border of the niche itself is clearly cut. As we look downward we notice that the stone cutter has left the lower segment as a mere rectangular block, not defined by the stone sculptor, who also failed to cut away part of the block to create a buffalo head. The roughly blocked-out stone surface carries vertical, horizontal, and diagonal strokes of the point chisel, indicating the varying angles at which the stone cutter positioned himself and his chisel in order to achieve this preliminary stage of his work.
The north wall’s Durgā niche presents us with the reverse. The goddess is detailed down to her hips, although her two rear hands have not been fully released from the rock; her lower limbs are more or less outlined down to the rectangular block on which she stands, but on this block the buffalo head has not been outlined. And the left pilaster of the niche, as well as the double-arched torana above, remains merely blocked out with a variety of point chisel lines that bespeak the preliminary nature of the work (Fig. 29).

The reason for the almost diametric contrast between the south and north wall niches may be that one carver specialized in sculpted imagery, and another, working at the same time, specialized in architectural detailing, i.e., the figure sculptor working on the north wall, the carver of architectural detail on the south wall, intending to change places when each had finished his particular task but somehow failing in their intention. If such is the explanation, then Indian carvers were specialized much like carvers in the West. A good example of this in the West is provided by the large reliefs on the façade of the Orvieto Cathedral in central Italy, which dates from the first half of the 14th century. Along the upper parts of these reliefs all the plant forms are complete but the figures remain unfinished, suggesting that there were two groups of carvers at Orvieto, each specializing in different elements of the carving. The difference between Durgā imagery on the Draupadiratha’s north and south walls might similarly be read to suggest that Indian carvers were trained as specialists and worked in alternation.

It remains possible, however, that a single carver was responsible for both the figure and its framework. If so, the carving of the north and south wall niches of the Draupadi Ratha suggests that there was no single set procedure that the stone cutters and stone carvers were required to follow. If such freedom was given to the carvers to work as they saw fit, then it is possible that some of the areas of unfinish in the rock-cut sculptures we have encountered resulted from such freedom; when the sculptor felt that he had carved enough to make the image or story clear, he was free to stop.

Either way, the seemingly complete Draupadi Ratha at Māmallapuram displays the same flexible attitude toward finish as we have seen in the three Deccan plateau monuments considered above. Here too the sanctum itself was ready for consecration and thenceforth for worship. Apparently whoever was responsible for the shrine—whether patron or carver(s)—decided that the Durgā images on the shrine’s outer walls were sufficiently readable by devotees so that carving them to a uniform level of refinement was of marginal importance.

Finish and the Issue of Intentionality

This preliminary exploration of the concept of finish is prompted by the significant number of “usable” rock-cut monuments in India, dedicated to different faiths, all of which display substantial sections of incomplete work. Our brief exploration has focused on four individual monuments, located at three different sites several hundred miles apart, to propose that a patron’s prime concern was completion for ritual use rather than overall perfection of sculptural imagery, decorative carving, or even architectural form. The question of intentionality is complex, multifaceted, and problematic, and can never be entirely resolved, since the ancient craftsmen (and patrons) left us no diaries or other written records and few drawings. The intention to complete these sacred monuments, however, is abundantly clear from several excavated shrines with incomplete interiors, which bear inscriptions incised along their verandas or other frontage that specifically record the gift of the shrine to a monastic community. It seems safe to say that incomple

Fig. 29. Durgā within niche on exterior north wall. Draupadi Ratha. Māmallapuram. Ca. 7th c.
was not an aesthetic choice in the Indic context, as it was with, say, post-15th-century Western artists like Michaelangelo or Rodin. Rather, the rock-cut monuments of the subcontinent, all created in a sacred context, suggest that incompleteness was a by-product of two viewpoints: a compulsion to bring a shrine and its adjuncts into ritual use as soon as possible, combined with a decidedly casual attitude toward aesthetic precision of detail. It is useful also to acknowledge that rock-cut monuments maintain a structural integrity and stability even when left substantially incomplete, since they are part of the living rock of a mountainside; incomplete structures built by piling stone upon stone could not possibly manifest comparable integrity. It is the many “unfinished” rock-cut monuments of the subcontinent that emphasize the degree of flexibility attached in premodern India to the concept of finish. It would indeed appear that patrons, rock carvers, and devotees all subscribed to the view that it was the ritual completion of a shrine that was all-important. Finish of the sanctum and its enshrined image took first place, and not the apparently irrelevant minutiae of eaves, walls, pillars, and moldings, nor details of the more significant figural sculpture, nor indeed the basic integrity of architectural form.

Notes

This essay arises from an ongoing collaborative project titled “The Unfinished: Indian Stone Carvers at Work,” undertaken by the authors with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Vidya Dehejia is the Barbara Stoler Miller professor of Indian Art at Columbia University, New York; Peter Rockwell is a practicing sculptor, a consultant on stone conservation, and the author of The Art of Stoneworking: A Reference Guide (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Unless otherwise specified, “left” and “right” refer to viewer’s left and right.

1. J. Burgess, Report on the Buddhist Cave Temples and their Inscriptions. Archaeological Survey of Western India, vol. IV (London: Trubner, 1883), pp. 75–76. In Kanheri inscription no. 4, on the right gatepost of caitya 3, the brothers Gajamitra and Gajasena claim that this caitya will endure for a kalpa.

2. This is a topic that will be dealt with in an independent essay, currently titled “The Rhythm of Construction,” which is part of our ongoing project.


5. Ibid., p. 66.

6. Ibid., p. 71.

7. Senart, Epigraphia Indica 7, p. 48f., no. 1: Jambudipamhi utamam śelaghara parinithāpitam.


9. Ibid., p. 258.


11. Walter Spink’s many projected volumes on Ajantā are part of a Brill series titled Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section Two: India, ed. J. Bronkhorst. Vol. 1 in the series appeared in 2005, and currently we are awaiting the release of vol. 6.


15. Vidya Dehejia raised some of these issues in passing in her 1972 book, Early Buddhist Rock Temples (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972); more recently S. Nagaraju, in his expansive Buddhist Architecture of Western India (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1981), has dealt with the subject. But art historians interested in process are rare. Quite understandably, both Geri Malandra’s Unfolding a Mandala: The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), and Lisa Nadine Owen’s PhD dissertation “Beyond Buddhist and Brahmanical Activity: The Place of the Jain Rock-Cut Excavations at Ellora,” University of Texas at Austin, 2006, are focused on entirely different topics, comprising imagery, iconography, and sacred context.

16. Confusion appears to persist about the nature of the stone known as Deccan Trap.


18. We cannot be certain that this second stage was executed by a second team of carvers; possibly these still basic geometric forms represent a second phase of work by the first team of carvers.

19. Parker, “Unfinished Work at Mamallapuram,” p. 60 refers to a temple as being “ideologically complete.” We know little about the exact details of early consecration rites and must often extrapolate from later texts on ritual practice.

21. The caitya interior itself extends 86 feet into the mountainside; preceding it are a wide veranda and a spacious courtyard for which a considerable amount of rock was cut away before beginning work on the interior.

22. The large rounded bulge on the aisle side of columns 7–11 suggests that the stone cutters who roughed out these columns had already made allowance for pot-shaped bases. In the new, tighter financial situation that followed, with instructions to complete the cave without employing sculptors, these columns were cut down into plain octagons along the visible nave side, but the stone cutters did not bother to cut away the stone bulge on the darkened, barely visible, aisle side.

23. With the stūpa largely blocking these columns from view, time spent on them may have been considered superfluous. Perhaps, too, decorated columns might have been thought of as distractions from the solemn presence of the stūpa. Certainly the columns following the shape of the apse around the stūpa, whether at Našīk or Kārle or at any other caitya with decorated columns, are all plain octagons.


25. I disagree with S. Nagaraju, who suggests in “The Kanheri Caitya Hall and Its Foundation Inscription” (see n. 21) that the open caitya window was left in its original crude state because such windows had gone out of vogue. The 5th-century caityas at Ajantā—19 and 26 as well as the incomplete caitya 29—all reveal decorative caitya windows, as indeed does Ellora’s caitya No. 10.

26. The description of this cave begins with the shrine, placed off-center toward the eastern, rear wall. The visitor then moves clockwise within the cave, looking at the sculpted panels to left and right of the main, western entryway and proceeding to the northern and thence to the southern entryway. It is not appropriate to enter here into a discussion on the exact date of this cave. Please note that the various sculptures in the cave are not adequately treated in any published work, therefore the detailed analysis.

27. It is intriguing to note that one of these heads is covered with curls, so as to look remarkably like a Buddha head minus its cranial protuberance, the usnīsa.

28. They remind us of parallel imagery in a Buddhist context, where the stem of the Buddha’s lotus seat is likewise flanked by nāga and nāgini figures.

29. A comparison of the treatment of this same episode in two other caves at Ellora, the Rāvan kā kai (Cave 15), and the Rāmeśvara (Cave 21), indicates that it was customary to portray this story in two distinct horizontal levels.

30. The corresponding niche on the rock face outside the cave on the southern side confounds our expectations by not featuring an image of the companion river goddess Ganga standing on her fish-cum-makara mount. Instead, it carries an image of an unidentified goddess with a hamsa (goose) beside her, accompanied by attendants and flying celestials.

31. This is the general, though not universal, practice evident at rock-cut sites in India.


33. One of the sixteen images appears to have been omitted.

34. This is today enclosed within a simple white-washed brick enclosure. See also Owen, “Beyond Buddhist and Brahmanical Activity,” pp. 252–257.

35. The single “drawing” we have found thus far in rock-cut monuments is at the Ambā-Ambikā caitya, where one veranda seat bears a roughly incised floor plan. A major example of workshop drawings, if they may be termed so, occurs at the incomplete temple of Bhōjpur, near Bhopal, where inscribed drawings are found on the flooring of the plinth fronting the temple as well as at the adjacent quarry sites. For Bhōjpur, see forthcoming work by Adam Hardy.

36. Examples include the inscription on the façade of Junnar’s Budh Leñā caitya and a series of records on the veranda wall of Junnar’s Ambā-Ambikā caitya, as well as records at Našīk and elsewhere; see “The Placement of Inscriptions on Unfinished Monuments,” in our planned volume.