

1. TĪRTHA AND MAṄḌALA: THE PLACE, THE PEOPLE, THE GODS

The Place

In September 1683, the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb and his court at Aurangabad were embroiled in a series of campaigns against the native Marāṭhā rulers of the Deccan. Aurangzeb's chronicler recorded the progress of these campaigns in sober detail, pausing in his account of military and political maneuvers only to mention important tombs of the Muslim faithful. When the account turns to the region around Aurangabad and nearby Daulatabad, however, the narrative takes a remarkable direction. At this point, the court historian felt compelled to describe something extraordinary:

A short distance from [Daulatabad] is a place named Ellora where in ages past, sappers possessed of magical skill excavated in the defiles of the mountain spacious houses for a length of one *kos* [mile]. On all their ceilings and walls many kinds of images with lifelike forms have been carved. The top of the hill looks level, so much so that no sign of the buildings within it is apparent (from outside). In ancient times when the sinful infidels had dominion over this country, certainly they and not demons (*jinn*) were the builders of these caves, although tradition differs on the point; it was a place of

worship of the tribe of false believers. At present it is a desolation in spite of its strong foundations; it rouses the sense of warning (of doom) to those who contemplate the future (end of things). In all seasons, and particularly in the monsoons, when this hill and the plain below resemble a garden in the luxuriance of its vegetation and the abundance of water, people come to see the place. A waterfall a hundred yards in width tumbles down from the hill. It is a marvelous place for strolling, charming to the eye. Unless one sees it, no written description can correctly picture it. How then can my pen adorn the page of my narrative?¹

In this account, the chronicler surpassed his usual attention to detail, leaving us with an outstanding early view of Ellora's power and fascination. The account of neither a passive observer nor an unthinking repetition of local legend, this remarkably dense eyewitness portrait is suffused with key elements of Ellora's physical and spiritual presence that made it a prominent religious and political center for centuries before Aurangzeb took over the region.

At first, the reference to "sinful infidels" might incline a modern reader to doubt the objectivity of our writer but the formulaic reference to non-Muslims actually reinforces

the positive impression Ellora made on him. If he understood that this site once belonged to the “infidels,” if he knew that it was a place where “false believers” worshiped, if he could easily see the many images with “lifelike forms” on the ceilings and walls, why, then, did he bother with it at all? And why was he careful to point out, contrary to local tradition, that it must have been those *people*, not demons, who built the caves? What he noticed might have horrified or disgusted his fellow believers; many similar temple sites were devastated by faithful Muslims who were offended by the graphic, anthropomorphic imagery of Hindu and Buddhist shrines.

But he was not disgusted. Instead, despite barriers of religious difference, this Muslim court historian seems to have apprehended Ellora’s special power. First, he notices a most magical and essential quality: that from a distance, the site appears to be simply a hill in which, it turns out, entire “buildings” are excavated. Then, there is his surprise that, despite its strong foundations, it is a “desolation.” Next, there is its effect: it “rouses the sense of warning to those who contemplate the future.” Perhaps this is simply a fatalistic observation based on the desertion of Ellora by its past worshipers, that nothing can remain alive forever. However, for such thoughts to arise, the observer must have been engaged in an activity essential to the ancient purpose of the site: contemplation. Only in this framework does the conclusion of the passage make sense. Here, we are told that Ellora is a marvelous place for strolling, “charming to the eye.” Luxuriant foliage and the hundred-yard long waterfall, precious displays of the ghats’ post-monsoon glory, emphasize its physical attractiveness, a charm chosen for and designed to promote reflection.

Through a “nonbeliever’s” eyes we are given a rare view of Ellora’s spiritual power. If it could make such a strong impression on a disinterested observer, how much stronger must its impact have been on those devotees who came piously to worship in the more than thirty Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain shrines! Perhaps without knowing the reason, Aurangzeb’s chronicler sensed Ellora’s vitality as

one of the special religious centers of India, a *tirtha*, a sanctified space perceived to be particularly conducive to crossing from the mundane to the spiritual world, to communicating with the gods. This chapter will explore the elements of physical location, political context, and religious ideas that contributed to Ellora’s development as a *tirtha*, a religious center with special spiritual overtones that for the past fourteen hundred years has exerted a powerful impact on visitors of many faiths, and that has attracted patrons and worshipers of three major religions, including the Buddhism that will be the focus of this book.

Geography and Travelers’ Accounts

A basic factor in Ellora’s evolution as a sacred site is its location on an ancient route that even today connects Paithan (ancient Pratiṣṭhāna, a major center of trade) on the Godavari River with Aurangabad, and then continues north to Maheshwar (Māhiṣmatī) on the Narmada and Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh (both regional political and religious centers). This well-traveled route is marked by hill passes and river fords, large commercial towns and ancient sites, that skirted the steep scarps of the hilly plateau region of the northwest Deccan.²

Numerous inscriptions in Buddhist cave sites throughout the Western Deccan of the second and third centuries specifically attest to the travel by Buddhist monks and nuns, and lay devotees, from site to site throughout the region. At the same time, dedicatory inscriptions from the secular community demonstrate the close connection between religious and commercial activity. Monasteries depended on donations from the laity and, although sacred sites would not have been located at the center of towns or cities, they were close enough to trade routes to permit relatively easy access both by itinerant monks and local patrons.³ Although we have no comparable inscriptions that record Buddhist patronage at Ellora, given its ease of access it seems likely that the centuries-old practice of lay-monastic circulation and cooperation applied there, too.

Located within sight of a route traversed

by worshipers, traders, and travelers, from which the caves can easily be seen, Ellora was never entirely forgotten. In the tenth century, it was well enough known to attract the interest of al-Masudi, a resident of Baghdad, who visited India in 915–16. In his travelogue, *Les Prairies d'Or*, al-Masudi describes

. . . the great temple named Aladra [Ellora], where Indians come on pilgrimage from the farthest regions. The temple has an entire city dedicated to its support and it is surrounded by thousands of cells where devotees consecrated to the worship of the idol dwell.⁴

From this we can see that at the beginning of the tenth century Ellora was still a vibrant community drawing visitors from many faiths and, according to this account, from all over India. We now know there were not “thousands” of cells around the caves, but otherwise this description corroborates historical records and the evidence at the site itself that show it was in active use at least as a Jain religious center, patronized by the later Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings, who controlled the Deccan from the eighth to tenth centuries when al-Masudi made his visit. His account affirms its familiarity among national and international travelers who, responding to its appeal as a *tirtha*, were able to visit in times conducive to trans-regional journeys. As will be discussed below, Rāṣṭrakūṭa control of the Deccan seems to have encouraged regional interaction that, from the late seventh century onward, would have a profound effect on the development of Buddhism at Ellora.

Although we do know that the caves continued to attract visitors, by the thirteenth century Ellora seems to have lost an organized religious community and political support. The *Līlācaritra*, an Old Marathi work compiled in 1278, describes the visit to the caves by the famous Maharashtrian saint, Cakradhāra, who visited the caves not for worship, but to seek a place of refuge.⁵ In these anecdotes, Cakradhāra and his disciples witness strange sounds and frightening visions. A disciple asks the saint how such a structure came to be. He answers, the whole mountain is hollow; no one knows its entrances and exits. This description hints at the

arrangement of the caves, connected to their wings by “internal passages.” Yet, the implication that the site was a maze of underground passages shows that three hundred years after al-Masudi described it as a thriving pilgrimage center, Ellora could be associated with fantastic stories that suggest the end of active use—and understanding—of the site.

Meanwhile, the strategic importance of the area did not diminish. In the late thirteenth century, Yādava kings built a fort along this route, so desirable for military purposes that Muslim invaders from the north subsequently struggled to conquer it. The fort, Devagiri, was taken over by Sultan Qutb ud-dīn Muḃārak in 1317. In 1327 Muhammad bin Tughluq moved from Delhi to establish a dual capital of his Sultanate at Devagiri, which he renamed Daulatabad and expanded in order to control movement along the road. Even today, on the way from Aurangabad to Ellora and points north, travelers must pass through the gates built into the perimeter of the imposing fortification.

Another “outsider,” the Muslim historian, Firishtah, confirms Ellora’s continued strategic position in the early seventeenth century. During a dispute over the betrothal of a Gujarati princess, he wrote, she and her entourage took flight from Gujarat to the Deccan. Halting near Daulatabad (an easily defensible location), 300 hundred of the troops defending her “went without leave to see the caves of Ellora.”⁶ Although this account sheds little light on the use or condition of the site, it does reflect its fame and the ease with which travelers could visit.

Later in that century, the road was still in use. The seventeenth-century traveler Jean de Thévenot, the first European to journey there (1666), described the difficulty of travel on the road up to the plateau near Daulatabad. He wrote, “I chose rather to run some little risk than to miss an opportunity of seeing those pagodas, which are so renowned all over the Indies,”⁷ but he also commented on how smoothly the road had been worn into the rock from which it was cut. In addition, he described a retaining wall three feet thick and four feet high, designed to prevent travelers and their conveyances from falling over the cliff. Such features suggest a heavily used

road; it may have been difficult to reach from the coast, but inland the way was apparently well known and well used.

Ellora was easier to reach, than to understand. Thévenot duly noted the numerous "pagods," the mile long extent of the site, and the prominence of "heathen" saints. He was even guided through the caves by a "brahman" who pointed out figures and told stories about them. Unfortunately, Thévenot did not understand the stories, confessing: "seeing he understood nothing of the Persian tongue, nor I the Indian, I could make nothing at all of it."⁸

In the next century, Ellora's attraction to travelers did not diminish; neither did understanding increase. The Venetian Niccolao Manucci, whose history of the Moghuls reached Paris in 1701 or 1702, attributed the excavations to the Chinese:

Signs of the presence of the Chinese are not wanting in Hindustan. These are found chiefly in the country of the Dacan (Dakhin), where there is a hill called Alura (Ellora), twenty-four leagues distant from Aurangabad, towards the west. At that place there are several caves dug out by pickaxes, forming lovely open courts, halls, rooms, cells having corner-stones ornamented with various Chinese figures, and some reservoirs of natural water provided with many steps. In one of these halls there are thirteen statues, sculpted out of the live rock. Each one has its own special form. . . . As they are so cleverly done, and their appearance somewhat Chinese, many say that they were executed by the ancient Chinese.⁹

By the early nineteenth century, Ellora had become an important stop for travelers out to experience picturesque and romantic adventures in India. The route was difficult enough to be exciting but, well-worn by years of administrative and commercial travel, it was actually easier to travel than routes that led to other major ancient sites. J. B. Seeley's *The Wonders of Ellora or the Narrative of a Journey to the Temples or Dwellings Excavated out of a Mountain of Granite at Ellora in the East Indies* (1825) exemplifies the detailed and imaginative accounts that emerged from such visits.¹⁰ This genre of travel writing is important less
4 for the information it provides than for the

attitude toward the site it conveys. Seeley approached the caves with the combination of curiosity, awe, and holiday spirit still experienced today by the thousands of tourists who visit Ellora each year, drawn as were their predecessors for the past thousand years, by its ease of access, extraordinary scale, and a spirit that touches believers and nonbelievers alike.

The People

As the development of Ellora's Buddhist *maṇḍala* is explored, questions of patronage, or at least political context, and chronology will emerge. Unfortunately, Ellora's Buddhist patrons remain anonymous. Given evidence from other cave temple sites in this part of India, noted above, the obvious attraction of Ellora to later rulers, and what we know about the development of other key religious centers such as Banaras for Hindus, or Bodhgaya for Buddhists,¹¹ it is unlikely that a *tīrtha* of such complexity as Ellora could have developed without support from wealthy and powerful patrons. Such patronage was essential to maintain and protect the religious community and to guarantee an allocation of resources to support it; this was in fact one of the duties of a traditional ruler in ancient India, and continued to be an activity favored by the powerful into modern times. For Ellora, where there are no written records of any patronage before work began on the mid-eighth-century Rāṣṭrakūṭa caves, this context must be established by analogy to similar sites, and by using material that pertains, if indirectly, to the probable circumstances of patronage during its early phases. The summary, below, of political conditions surrounding Ellora is critical to establish both a chronological framework and a picture of the context in which its Buddhist caves developed.

Many other cave temple sites from the first century B.C.E. onward in the Deccan are associated with inscriptions that provide considerable information about the political context of support for these establishments. In most

cases, major donative inscriptions were incised, even where, as at Ajanta, a nearby Buddhist cave site of the late 400s, contemporary painted inscriptions were added as well. So the absence of significant carved inscriptions from Ellora's earlier phases seems to reflect a genuine absence of major donative records. Even if there were painted inscriptions, it is doubtful that these would have been used to record the most important donations. This suggests that Ellora's artisans and residents relied on a different kind of support, less directly connected to proclamations of royal beneficence than at comparable sites in the Deccan or beyond where, for instance in eastern India, the Pāla dynasty was well known for its sponsorship of major Buddhist centers. Support for Ellora's Buddhist caves, at least, seems to have been somehow "looser" than for their predecessors, not tied, for instance, to the prestige of a local ruler. This point is important because such a situation may have been conducive to the influx of ideas from outside the region. Thus, Ellora, usually regarded simply as the end of a local tradition, in fact reflects developments seen in a much wider range of Buddhist centers across central and eastern India even as it represents the culmination of the political and religious collaborations required to produce works on such a massive scale.

The site developed in three major phases, an early Hindu phase (ca. 550 to 600), a Buddhist phase (ca. 600 to 730), and a last phase (ca. 730 to 950), which comprised both Hindu and Jain excavations sponsored by the Rāṣṭrakūṭa dynasty, the only known ancient patrons of Ellora.

Politics and Chronology: Vākāṭakas, Kalacuris, Cālukyas, Rāṣṭrakūṭas

The conditions that made possible the development of a complex cave temple site had evolved many years before Ellora was begun. Its most significant predecessor is Ajanta, as innovative in its day as Ellora was to be 150 years later. At Ajanta, in the latter part of the fifth century, more than twenty Buddhist cave temples were excavated, clearly the result of support of politically powerful pa-

trons, local ministers of the ruling Vākāṭaka dynasty, a Hindu empire whose activities stretched northward to Gupta territory and southeast toward the earlier Buddhist centers at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda (in what is now Andhra Pradesh). Major dedicatory inscriptions place work on Ajanta in the period between 465 and 485;¹² they show that these Buddhist vassals could sponsor work semi-autonomously at Ajanta, in the center of the Vākāṭaka Empire. This situation provides an important model for a hypothetical reconstruction of patronage at Ellora a century and half later.

Ajanta presents another important point of comparison for Ellora's development. Much of the Ajanta style can be explained in terms of more or less local or regional developments, combined with considerable influence from Buddhist iconography at northern sites such as Sarnath. However, there are also clear sources of influence from major Buddhist centers to the southeast, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, demonstrating continued travel and exchange of ideas throughout the Deccan plateau in the Vākāṭaka period.¹³ Such exchanges cannot be traced to specific political events, yet the physical evidence preserved in the caves illustrates the persistence of cultural interchange that took place in the midst of political struggles of various dynasties and their feudatories. Ellora probably developed under similar circumstances, its environs controlled by a local dynasty loosely allied to a major ruling empire, enjoying interchange with religious and commercial communities throughout the Deccan.

Ellora's first phase, from ca. 550 to 600, was Hindu, perhaps the result of patronage by the Kalacuri dynasty, which emerged after a period of dynastic struggle that followed the decline of Vākāṭaka power around 500. Since the Kalacuris may have sponsored Ellora's first cave temples, which share significant features with the Buddhist caves, the background for their activities is important to establish.

At the turn of the fifth century, a Hindu dynasty known as the Traikūṭakas apparently controlled the coast near modern Bombay. This is indicated by several records, including a 494/5 inscription from the Buddhist caves at

Kanheri, which refers to the “augmenting kingdom of the Traikūṭakas.”¹⁴ But an inscription, dated to 533, refers to the Traikūṭaka capital as “Anuriddhapura of the Kaṭachchuris,” suggesting that the Kalacuris had established themselves by this time.¹⁵ Like the Vākātakas and Traikūṭakas, the Kalacuris were Hindus, devotees of Śiva in his form of Lakulīśa, to whom the main excavation of the great Śiva temple at Elephanta, off the coast at Bombay, was dedicated. Silver coins of Kṛṣṇarāja, the most important Kalacuri king, have been found in Nasik District and on the islands of Bombay and Salsette; more important, large numbers of copper coins of Kṛṣṇarāja have been found on Elephanta island.¹⁶ These finds, together with the Śaiva affiliation of the Kalacuris mentioned in inscriptions, strongly suggest an association between the Kalacuri king, Kṛṣṇarāja, and Elephanta’s Śaiva excavations and, moreover, that the Kalacuris controlled the region along the coast near Bombay. It is more difficult to determine how far east that control extended. They may have actually controlled the Ellora region as well, and sponsored Ellora’s earliest Brahmanical caves,¹⁷ as suggested by sectarian evidence from the caves themselves. For example, Cave 29, an early Hindu cave temple, is dedicated to Lakulīśa and is most comparable architecturally and iconographically to the Elephanta Śiva temple. Since Kṛṣṇarāja ruled in the period ca. 535 to 575, and, assuming he patronized major religious edifices of his time, both caves should be ascribed to the mid-sixth century. Kalacuri power continued through the end of the sixth century, declining only with the defeat of Kṛṣṇarāja’s grandson, Buddharāja, by the Cālukya king, Maṅgaleśa, in 601.

This conquest marks one of the most significant changes in political and cultural activity in the Deccan for the entire classical and early medieval period. From 601 onward, the period during which Ellora’s Buddhist caves developed, political influence from the southern Deccan began to extend northward, through Maharashtra, reaching at its greatest extent into the Gangetic plain. Yet material traces of this shift from a northern to a southern focus of power are visible only in isolated stylistic similarities between Ellora’s earliest

caves and contemporary monuments of the Cālukyas.

The beginning of the end of Kalacuri power is marked by a 601 inscription of the Cālukya king, Maṅgaleśa, which reports that he set out to conquer northern territories and defeated king Buddha, who is identified as the Kalacuri ruler Buddharāja, grandson of Kṛṣṇarāja, and son of Śaṅkaragaṇa.¹⁸ However, since two inscriptions of Buddharāja, dated 609 and 610, follow the 601 record of Maṅgaleśa, it is clear that by this time Cālukya power was not well established in the northwest Deccan.¹⁹ It was not until 634, with the accession of the Cālukya king, Pulakeśin II, who made numerous conquests in the north, that Cālukya control was truly established over Maharashtra.²⁰

Cālukya activities were not limited to wars and conquest. At home in their late sixth century capital of Badami (Karnataka), the Cālukyas sponsored major excavations of cave temples. Maṅgaleśa dedicated the excavation of Badami Cave 3, in an inscription dated 578; the other caves of this group can also be placed in the period between 560 and 580, and thus, were contemporary with excavations being carried out under Kalacuri patronage (or at least political control) further north at Ellora.²¹ By the early seventh century, the Cālukyas had expanded their temple building activities to structural sanctuaries. The inscription of Pulakeśin II of 634 is associated with one such temple, the Meguti temple at Aihole.

Returning to the situation at Ellora, it seems likely that it was in the period around the initial Cālukya conquest of the Kalacuris in 601 that the first Hindu phase of work ceased. Although direct dynastic patronage may not have been necessary to develop the site, probably a stable political environment was. Thus, in the turmoil of the years from 600 onward, Hindu patronage ended with the excavation of Cave 14, the cave iconographically most similar to the Badami Hindu caves. During the next century, work began and continued on the Buddhist caves, perhaps as a result of monastic movement inland from the coast following the Cālukya disruption of Kalacuri activities.

During the period from ca. 600 to 730,

when Ellora's Buddhist caves were being excavated, political events in the Deccan focused around the growth of Cālukya power, their struggles with the Pallavas to the southeast, and the emergence of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas who, under Dantidurga, conquered the Cālukyas around 750.²² The Rāṣṭrakūṭas became the major political force of the mid-eighth to ninth centuries in the Deccan and, at Ellora, drew upon the skill and experience of artisans, who knew both Maharashtrian and southern architectural techniques, to produce the Kailāsa temple, the culmination of ten centuries of cave temple architecture.

Looking at the situation in the mid-600s, it is important for developments at Ellora to describe as specifically as possible what Cālukya sovereignty meant. By 634, Cālukya power was firmly established in former Kalacuri territory along the coast. The inscription praising Pulakeśin's accomplishments also states explicitly that he "acquired the sovereignty over the three Mahārāṣṭrakas with their nine and ninety thousand villages"; these probably included Maharashtra, Konkani, and Karnataka. He is also said to have subdued a Rāṣṭrakūṭa Govinda, a figure whose family was to be important in this area later in the century (see below).²³ However, there is little direct evidence that the Cālukyas closely supervised all of Maharashtra. Epigraphical evidence suggests instead that while they were often concerned with coastal Maharashtra, they generally ignored the inland regions, including the area around Ellora. For instance, even in the early 700s, local coinage was still called "Kṛṣṇarāja-rūpakas," illustrating the persistence of a regional, pre-Cālukya medium of exchange.²⁴

What was the impact of the Cālukyas on Maharashtra in the seventh century? The Satara copper plate of 617 records a grant by Viṣṇuvārdhana I, son of Pulakeśin II, of a village to a group of brahmins.²⁵ This village has been located in modern Satara District, where the plate was found. Cālukya donations were also made further north in Nasik District. For example, the Lohaner plates of Pulakeśin II, dated in 630, record a grant by Satyaśraya (Pulakeśin) of a village to a brahman who lived in Lohanagara, or modern Lohaner.²⁶ This evidence suggests that the Cālukyas pa-

tronized Brahmanical activities in the western part of Maharashtra in the period up to 630.

From around 630 to 680, when Ellora's Buddhist caves reveal increasing connections to iconography outside Maharashtra, it appears that this region was left largely to local governance. We have no records of Cālukya activity here for the following fifty years while the attention of the Cālukyas was turned toward their adversaries in the south, the Pallavas.²⁷ However, the records of the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang, who travelled in South India in 641 and 642, shed some light on the political geography of the mid-seventh century Deccan. According to Hsüan-tsang, the king of Maharashtra was Pulakeśin and his capital (not named in this account), "borders on the west on a great river." It was 1,000 *li* (about 167 miles) from Bharukaccha (Broach). This capital has not been conclusively identified, although it should probably be identified with modern Nasik, northwest of Ellora.²⁸

Late in the seventh century, when Ellora's latest Buddhist caves with a new iconographical scheme were initiated, the Cālukyas reasserted their interest in Maharashtra. Members of the royal family and their feudatories continued to control the region from Gujarat south to modern Thana District and east to the ghats, as donations for the support of Hindu activity attest. The Nasik plates of Dharaśraya Jayasimhavarman, dated 685, record his grant of a village, Dhonḍaka (modern Dhondegaon, northwest of Nasik), in the Nasik region, to a brahman.²⁹ A grant of Vijayāditya, dated in 696–97, records the gift of a village called Jamalagrāma in the western region of the Cālukya country (near modern Morkhande in Nasik District), to three brahmins.³⁰ And, perhaps closest of all to Ellora, Vijayāditya may have issued a grant on copper plates, from Elāpura in 705–06, giving a village called Bahmanavata (Brahmansvata) to Keśavasvāmin of Kollagar.³¹

Taken together, the epigraphical evidence and Hsüan-tsang's account indicate that Cālukya control of Maharashtra in the mid-seventh century centered on Nasik, but the extent of this control remains unclear. The Elāpura grant of Vijayāditya could suggest that it extended to Ellora, but the more nu-

merous Cālukya grants in the Nasik region seem to reflect sporadic activity by the ruling dynasty, in support of a Brahmanical population, calculated to reaffirm its power in a largely independent region. At Nasik itself, for example, there is no material sign of Cālukya influence on or additions to the Buddhist cave temples that had been used up to the last decade of the sixth century. The Cālukyas or their feudatories may have been Ellora's nearest neighbors to the west during the seventh century, but their impact seems to have been more political than cultural.³² If Cālukya records were all the evidence available for this period, it would appear that there was no Buddhist activity at Ellora in the seventh century.

If the Cālukyas and their coastal feudatories were not directly involved in the Ellora region, could there have been another dynasty that was responsible for its remarkable continuity for well over a century? Looking east (the direction from which its new Buddhist ideas seem to have arrived), records most relevant to this development come from inscriptions of an early branch of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa dynasty that, in the next century, would conquer the Cālukyas, take over the Deccan, and make Ellora its capital. These early Rāṣṭrakūṭa records have been found in northeast Maharashtra, an area hitherto ignored in the search for information about Ellora's history. During the second half of the seventh century, this family seems to have been located in the region around modern Akola and Amraoti Districts, as attested by three copper plate inscriptions of a king, Nannarāja, dated in 693, 709, and 731.³³ The inscriptions record grants of village lands and give Nannarāja's Rāṣṭrakūṭa genealogy, tracing it back to a grandfather, Govindarāja, who probably lived in the period 630 to 655.

These dates are crucial, since they make it possible to identify this Govindarāja with the Rāṣṭrakūṭa Govinda mentioned in the 634 Cālukya inscription of Pulakeśin II. It has been inferred that Pulakeśin first subdued Govinda, then made members of Govinda's Rāṣṭrakūṭa family his feudatories. However, since neither Nannarāja nor his ancestors possessed royal titles or titles typical of Cālukya feudatories elsewhere in the Deccan,³⁴ it is

possible that these Rāṣṭrakūṭas were Cālukya feudatories only until the death of Pulakeśin, after which time they ruled independently.³⁵ This would fit the evidence from Maharashtra where Cālukya inscriptions are not found after 630, and where cultural activity such as cave temple excavation proceeded without obvious Cālukyan influence or support. Moreover, a connection has been shown between the language of Nannarāja's records and that of earlier grants of the Kalacuri kings Śaṅkaragaṇa and Buddharāja.³⁶ This suggests that these early Rāṣṭrakūṭas looked more to local or regional precedents than to more distant Cālukya examples as they sought means to establish their power.

There is some evidence that Nannarāja's family extended its activity into the Ellora region. This is suggested first by a controversial inscription incised on the rear wall of a cell connecting Caves 26 and 27 at Ajanta.³⁷ Although its decipherment is difficult, there is no dispute over the reading of Nannarāja of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa family in the second line.³⁸ Furthermore, the third line of the inscription mentions a Vajraṭadeva, who can be identified with Vajraṭa, known from other inscriptions of the late seventh century and later as an enemy of the Cālukyas.³⁹ When paleographic analysis is combined with historical evidence from the inscription, it seems most likely that the inscription should be assigned to the late seventh century,⁴⁰ placing the early Rāṣṭrakūṭas at least as far west as Ajanta in the middle of Ellora's Buddhist phase in the mid-600s.

Adding further strength to the argument that an early branch of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa dynasty was present in the Ellora region in the seventh century is the discovery in a field near Aurangabad of a set of copper plates mentioning a hitherto unknown Rāṣṭrakūṭa king, Karkarāja. Ascribable on paleographic grounds to the seventh century, the plates mention several individuals with typical Rāṣṭrakūṭa names: Svāmīrāja, Durgarāja, Karkarāja, Govindarāja, and a Mahārāṣṭrakūṭa.⁴¹ These plates suggest, then, that a branch of this dynasty was indeed in the Ellora region during the period when the Buddhist caves were being excavated. Yet even in this case, there was no direct connection between politics and pa-

tronage at the caves as the last phase of Buddhist activity commenced in the late 600s.

It was in the early eighth century, after nearly two centuries of religious development, that Ellora itself became a center of political power, when around 735 the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Dantidurga succeeded in taking over the Cālukya Empire, moving north from a base in the Canarese-speaking region called Laṭṭalura in their inscriptions, modern Latur in Osmanabad District, about 125 miles southeast of Ellora.⁴² Dantidurga ruled from 735 to 757, so his ancestors probably occupied Latur during the seventh century while the family of Nannarāja controlled the area further north, from Aurangabad to Akola Districts. Further west, Cālukya power still extended to Nasik District.⁴³ For example, the 685 Nasik plates of Jayasimha, son of Vikramāditya, record the prince's total defeat of the army of Vajjaḍa (possibly the same Vajraṭa mentioned in the Ajanta Cave 27 inscription) in the country between the Mahi and Narmada rivers. And, as noted earlier, Ellora may have been mentioned in an inscription of the Cālukya king Vijayāditya, who recorded at "Elāpura" in 705–06 a donation of land. If Elāpura is the same as Ellora, not entirely certain from the context of the plates, the record would suggest that the Cālukyas had become concerned about their control over the area.⁴⁴ The concern was justified; it was during this period that Dantidurga consolidated his power as a feudatory of the Cālukyas and began active patronage of Hindu excavations at Ellora as he moved to establish his own empire.

Its strategic position on a major thoroughfare and its attraction as a *tirtha* must have contributed to Dantidurga's move to Ellora. This apparently occurred while he was still a Cālukya feudatory, since his titles listed in a grant issued from Elāpura (Ellora) in 741–42 are those borne by important Cālukya feudatories but not by independent rulers. Dantidurga's involvement as an emperor with Ellora is confirmed by an important inscription carved on the front wall of a detached shrine in front of Cave 15, a Śaiva temple. Written around 750, this inscription reports that Dantidurga had defeated the Cālukya king, Kīrtivarman II, and conquered Kāñcī,

Kaliṅga, Kośala, Śrīśala, Mālvā, Lāṭa, and Tañka. The formulaic nature of the list disguises its importance. The consolidation of control over these areas to the east included places with which Buddhist Ellora was already interacting. Maharashtra is conspicuous by its absence from this list, otherwise a formal repetition of similar Cālukya lists that had included Maharashtra in rosters of conquered territories. In this case negative evidence, that is, the absence of Maharashtra from the list of conquests of Dantidurga, may be helpful in understanding the political situation at the beginning of the eighth century. Since Dantidurga's records do not refer to his conquest of Maharashtra, it seems likely that Rāṣṭrakūṭa control, first held by Nannarāja's family, and then by Dantidurga, was never a matter of dispute.⁴⁵

With Dantidurga's consolidation of Rāṣṭrakūṭa power, Ellora for the first time was associated directly with a ruling dynasty. Three inscriptions record this association, offering scant historical evidence compared with the massive scale of the caves themselves. In his Ellora plates of 741–42, Dantidurga records the gift of a village to certain brahmans from Gujarat. Most important, Dantidurga made this gift at Elāpura, after bathing in the Guheśvaratīrtha.⁴⁶ This provides the first direct evidence that the *tirtha* was used for ritual purposes by the royal family. Although he still did not bear the full titles of a king, and does not yet mention conquering the Cālukyas, Dantidurga was already making gifts of territory to private citizens, the traditional prerogative of a ruler, further signifying well established Rāṣṭrakūṭa regional authority.

Because of its location on the west wall of the exterior hall ("Nandimaṇḍapa") of Cave 15 at Ellora, the Daśavatāra inscription (named after the cave's popular name) is the most reliable piece of historical evidence about the site, and the only one connected physically to the caves.⁴⁷ Incised near the end of work on Cave 15, the inscription mentions a visit by Dantidurga to the caves. Since he was active in the period 735–757, this provides an important, if not absolutely firm, date for excavation of Cave 15, and a *terminus ante quem* for work on the Buddhist caves

which on stylistic grounds are clearly earlier than Cave 15.

The inscription records in formulaic, laudatory detail Dantidurga's genealogy. Dantidurga, the last named Rāṣṭrakūṭa in the record, is described as having made Vallabharāja (that is, the Cālukya king, Kīrtivarmān II) his tributary. According to the inscription, Dantidurga went to the caves with his army. Thus, as do the slightly earlier Ellora plates of the same king, the Daśāvatāra inscription suggests that early in his reign, Dantidurga took refuge there not only for ritual purposes, but also to rest his troops and, we may only infer, to oversee work on the new excavations he was sponsoring. Also implied in this description is a social and economic system sufficient to support his activities, for example, artisans to carve the stone, villagers to provide food and services for the royal retinue, troops, and brahmins he chose to favor.

Direct Rāṣṭrakūṭa patronage of excavations at Ellora is documented only in a later, oblique reference to Dantidurga's uncle and successor, Kṛṣṇarāja, who ruled ca. 757–772. In a genealogical sequence recorded in the 812 plates of another Rāṣṭrakūṭa ruler, Karkarāja II, issued from Baroda,⁴⁸ Kṛṣṇarāja is described as one who possessed a certain friendliness towards brahmins; he was the one by whom:

... was caused to be constructed a temple on the hill at Elāpura, of wonderful structure,—on seeing which the best of immortals who move in celestial cars, struck with astonishment, . . . [say] . . . 'This temple of Śiva is self-existent; in a thing made by art such beauty is not seen,'—a temple, the architect-builder of which, in consequence of the failure of his energy as regards [the construction of] another such work, was himself suddenly struck with astonishment, saying, 'Oh, how was it that I built it!'⁴⁹

Here, finally, is a clear association of a major political patron and a magnificent Śiva temple, identified as Cave 16, popularly known as the Kailāsa temple. Of course, Kṛṣṇarāja received the credit for causing a temple to be built but we cannot be certain that he initiated the excavation or that it was completed dur-

ing his reign. It has even been suggested that the temple area had been blocked out long before the Rāṣṭrakūṭas arrived at Ellora, and while most work may have been completed during Kṛṣṇarāja's reign, some additions were made into the ninth century.⁵⁰ In any case, this is the most direct evidence extant for patronage, politics, and chronology at Ellora. Moreover, although it pertains to a mid-eighth-century Śaiva excavation, it is also important for understanding Ellora's latest Buddhist caves which, as will be discussed in the next chapter, share certain stylistic elements with the Kailāsa temple.

The Baroda inscription is also valuable because it refers to the artisan responsible for creating the great temple at Elāpura. Such recognition is unprecedented in records from Maharashtra, but is paralleled in an inscription on the Virupaksha temple at Pattadakal, a Cālukya dedication, which describes the architect, Sūtradhāri Gunda, as the greatest artisan of South India.⁵¹ It is noteworthy that medieval legend also preserves a record of an architect who built a great temple at Ellora.⁵² According to this legend, a Maṇikeśvar cave temple was built by Queen Maṇikāvati, wife of a king of Alajapur, to commemorate the miraculous cure her husband achieved by bathing in a tank at Mhaisamala (near Ellora). She took a vow for the god Ghṛṣṇesvara that if the king were cured, she would build a temple in honor of Śiva, and would fast until the temple was completed. Although it seemed impossible that a temple could be finished quickly enough for her to survive the fast, the king found an artisan, Kokasa, a resident of Paithan near Aurangabad, who was able to completely carve the *śikhara* (multi-storied roof) of the temple in a week. The queen's vow was thus fulfilled, and the temple was named in her honor. Adding historical veracity to this legend, inscriptions of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries mention sculptors who were members of the family of a Kokasa, suggesting a possible link between the Maṇikeśvar legend and a historical family of artists who may actually have worked on excavations at Ellora, possibly even descendants of those who created the earlier Buddhist caves without the benefit of direct royal patronage.⁵³

Sacred Geography: Ellora as a Tīrtha

As noted above, Ellora functioned as a *tīrtha*, a place of special sanctity where communion with the gods and passage from the secular to sacred sphere occurs most easily. History shows that as a *tīrtha* it attracted visitors from distant lands, religious communities of several faiths including Buddhists, and a major dynasty that made Ellora its capital in the mid-700s. To explain this attraction for kings and artists, and to establish the context in which its Buddhist caves could develop in circumstances more “cosmopolitan” than at other Buddhist sites, requires an examination of its location not in geographical or political space, but in the sacred space delineated by India’s extensive system of sacred sites or *tīrthas* and the tradition of pilgrimage, *tīrtha-yātra*, to them.

Better known for its thirty-four Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain excavations, Ellora is also recognized as the site of Ghṛṣṇeśvara *tīrtha*, one of the twelve pan-Indian *vyotirliṅgas* (*liṅgas* of light) of Śaivism.⁵⁴ A temple for the worship of Ghṛṣṇeśvara is located in the village, about a mile west of the caves.⁵⁵ Although it does not rank at the top of important pilgrimage sites,⁵⁶ the presence of the *tīrtha* together with cave shrines of three major religions, make the site and the area around it particularly rich and complex. Yet, Ellora has not often been the focus of discussions of pilgrimage in India that tend to emphasize major religious centers. These centers hold claim to unique events or activities that have granted them special sanctity: according to the epics, Krishna’s home is Brindavan, the Buddha’s enlightenment came at Bodhgaya, *śrāddha* (offerings to ancestors) is performed most propitiously at Gaya. Pilgrimage to these places is often the model or ideal behind pilgrimage to places further down the scale of “*yātric*” importance.

There are, of course, natural limitations on the number of original or central pilgrimage sites (there is only one Bodhgaya), and pilgrims may face a variety of impediments in traveling to them. It should not be surprising that regional, subregional, and local sites have developed, and in India in fact, outnumber

those “original” ones of national or international importance. Travel to these regional sites “can be regarded as a complex surrogate for the journey to the source and heartland of the faith,”⁵⁷ where “reduplicative shrines,” may imitate major pilgrimage centers. This phenomenon of spatial transposition or regional substitution has often been noted in the context of Indian pilgrimage to sacred sites. The substitution can work in both directions. Thus, it has been said, “all the *tīrthas* on earth are in Kāshī”;⁵⁸ worship at Kāshī (Banaras) is equivalent to worshipping at all sacred sites on earth. Or, in the opposite direction, a devotee of a Maharashtrian saint would argue that one should “stay in Maharashtra because every place worth going to is there”;⁵⁹ in other words, one can find sites in Maharashtra equivalent in holiness to those elsewhere in India. In this way, regional sites can substitute for national ones.⁶⁰

Ellora exemplifies such transformations, effected by the interaction of geography, politics, and religion, that create an important regional *tīrtha*. It must then be viewed within the context of the universal sacred systems to which its architecture, sculpture, and religious practice refer. Its sacred location and existence were determined, first by the presence of a constant source of water. The caves were developed to integrate the presence of seasonally active streams into the arrangement of its temples. Cisterns were also cut outside certain caves (3, 7, 12, and 23) to trap water for refreshment and ritual use. From this perspective, it is no accident that both the earliest Hindu and Buddhist caves were the ones excavated closest to the most active streams, that have worn horseshoe-shaped gullies into the scarp. Water was essential for sustenance, for ritual, and for properly placing the site in spiritual geography; it links Ellora to key religious sites throughout India.⁶¹ As we know from Aurangzeb’s chronicle, the waterfalls would have been visible to earlier travelers, as they were to later ones, and, it may be inferred, to those searching for a propitious temple site. (See Fig. 12) And an undated masonry tank with well carved stone steps has been found above the surrounding hills, underscoring and repeating at this particular site the pan-Indian concern for water.⁶²

The earliest reference to Ellora as a *tirtha* comes from epigraphical records of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas, who conquered the Cālukyas and took control of the Deccan in the mid-eighth century. In the 742 C.E. copper plate inscription of Dantidurga, that king is associated with Elāpura and with *guheśvaratīrtha*, although no temple is mentioned.⁶³ Later, in the 812 C.E. Baroda inscription of Karkarāja II, a miraculous Śiva temple at Elāpura (most probably the Kailāsa temple, Cave 16) is ascribed to the reign of Dantidurga's successor, Kṛṣṇarāja I.⁶⁴ These records reveal key information about Ellora's development as a *tirtha*. Patronage of the caves had been taken up by the most important dynasty of the Deccan, one that chose to support Śaiva excavations at a place already in the mid-700s explicitly referred to as a sacred site: *guheśvaratīrtha*, the *tirtha* of the "Lord of the Cave." It is possible furthermore to infer that Elāpura had been known as a *tirtha* for some time before the Rāṣṭrakūṭas moved there, since the name appears in the 742 inscription that precedes by several years most of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa work at the site. Kṛṣṇarāja's Kailāsa temple, explicitly referring to Śiva's abode in the Himalayas, expresses clearly the view of Ellora as a *tirtha* for his worship, a Mount Kailāsa in Maharashtra, where Śiva could descend in response to prayers offered at the temple.

The sacred nature of the site eventually came to extend beyond the caves themselves. The shrine of Ghṛṣṇeśvara in Ellora village probably preserves a later form of the name Guheśvaratīrtha mentioned in the 742 Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription. The modern temple marking the *tirtha*, erected near the stream that flows from the falls above Cave 29, is even visible from Cave 21, itself a Śaiva temple.⁶⁵ (See Fig. 13) Purāṇic and other textual references show that long after the Rāṣṭrakūṭas left Ellora, its recognition as a *tirtha* continued. Despite the absence of a formal religious community in the medieval period, the site achieved continued recognition as a *tirtha* in Hindu religious texts as it was absorbed into a broader system of sacred sites. Elāpura is mentioned in chapter 22 of the *Matsya Purāṇa*, which places great emphasis on the Narmada region;⁶⁶ it is included in a list added to the *Purāṇa* of holy places where

śrāddha (rites for the ancestors) should be performed.⁶⁷ Moreover, Elāpura is mentioned as one of the fifty Śākta *pīṭhas* (centers) listed in the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century *Jñānārṇava Tantra*.⁶⁸ Ellora—the site and the village—never became as complex as southern temple towns. Yet, it is possible to infer from the growth of the *tirtha* itself that this development depended on and then reinforced the concentration of resources across an entire region and a division of labor that depended on those resources, analogous to the triangular system of sacred kings, religious systems and local productive relations that transformed places like Tanjavur or Puri into a thriving urban, religious centers.⁶⁹

As noted earlier, Ellora was in fact a Śaiva site more than a century before the Rāṣṭrakūṭas moved there. Its earliest excavations, of the late sixth century, were also dedicated to Śiva. Cave 29, located next to the most active waterfall, is clearly based on the architectural plan and iconographical program of the Śiva temple on Elephanta island.⁷⁰ It emerges from the surrounding ocean as Mt. Kailāsa rises from the Himalayas. Unnamed in ancient records, these early Hindu caves mark the first steps in the recognition of a major *tirtha* there.

For a century the situation changed when, around 600, Buddhists took over the southern end of the site. Forced inland by political disturbances on the coast, Buddhist patrons must have been attracted by a reliable water supply, and by resources and protection visible both in the active patronage of the Hindu caves and at the Buddhist community in the nearby caves at Aurangabad. In establishing their community at Ellora, its later Buddhist patrons and artisans may also have considered its similarity to Bodhgaya, one of the most important Buddhist sites, where Buddhist and Hindu interaction was well known. While the Hindu analogy between Ellora's Kailāsa temple and the mythological Mt. Kailāsa is clear, the significance of the antecedents of the Buddhist temples requires more elaboration.

Among many others, probably the best known example of coexisting Śaiva and Buddhist use of a sacred area is Bodhgaya in eastern India. There, the legend of the founding of the Mahābodhi temple attributes its recon-

struction to a worshiper of Maheśvara (Śiva), who rebuilt a *vihāra* (a Buddhist monastic residency) near the *Bodhi* temple (which marks the site of the Buddha's enlightenment) on the instructions of Śiva himself. Later, King Śaśāṅka cut down the tree and meant to replace the statue of Buddha in the *vihāra* with one of Maheśvara.⁷¹ Near the Mahābodhi temple, a relief with images of the Hindu gods Surya, Lakulīṣa, and Viṣṇu was found, inscribed in the twenty-sixth year of Dharmapāla (809–10) with a dedication of an image of Mahādeva.⁷² When the Tibetan Buddhist monk Dharmasvāmin visited Bodhgaya in 1234–36, he claimed to have seen an image of Maheśvara drawn on the door, which had been erected to protect the Mahābodhi image from the depredations of Turushka invaders.⁷³

No similar legends explain the situation at Ellora; literary accounts refer only to Hindu activities there. Yet the juxtaposition of Buddhist and Śaiva (and later Jain) shrines, of generally separate periods, is another instance where adherents of different religions competed for or shared space that may have been viewed as a reduplication of more sacred places: Mount Kailāsa for Hindus, Bodhgaya for Buddhists. We may conclude that recognition of the sanctity of certain places could be more important than the distinction among various sects or even major religious traditions. Ellora's position in the Śaiva systems of *jjyotirliṅgas* and *śrāddha* centers did not prevent the development of Buddhist temples. On the contrary, its Hindu prestige and strength as a *tīrtha* may have encouraged use by other, non-Hindu communities.⁷⁴

Just as the Kailāsa temple refers explicitly to another sacred place, Ellora's Buddhist images also suggest a direct analogy to an equally important place, Bodhgaya. The main shrine images in the later Buddhist caves depict the Buddha holding his right hand in *bhūmisparśamudrā*, the gesture of touching the earth (see chapter 4 for detailed discussion of these images). This *mudrā* symbolizes the event of his enlightenment, which took place at Bodhgaya. The meaning of these images was emphasized by the addition of small images of Bhūdevī (the earth goddess) and Aparājītā at the base of the Buddhas' thrones. In the Bodhgaya enlightenment story, Bhū-

devī rises to attest to the Buddha's integrity as he faces Māra's attack.⁷⁵ The image of Aparājītā, trampling on the back of Gaṇapati, and thus surmounting the surmounter of all obstacles, condenses the lesson to be learned about the power of enlightenment and of the Buddha himself.⁷⁶ It is most important to note that such images are unique to Ellora as a "southern" site, but have been found at several places in eastern India, including Bodhgaya itself.⁷⁷ (See Fig. 170–173) The precision of the Ellora compositions strongly suggests that worship in the shrines would have been viewed as a substitution for or transposition of worship at Bodhgaya.

At the end of Ellora's history, in a Jain context, Ellora's nature continued to be acknowledged as a *tīrtha* sacred enough to transpose to the caves one even more sacred. The Jain excavations, following the major Rāṣṭrakūṭa Hindu work, are attributable to political as well as religious causes. Amoghavarṣa I (814–878) was a convert to Jainism and, following his predecessors, he used the site to express his own faith, sponsoring several impressive Jain excavations at the northernmost end of the scarp.⁷⁸ There, at a later period, a large image of the *tīrthanikara* (Jain saint) Pārśvanātha was carved; an inscription on the image dated in 1234–35 records the donation of the image by a Cakreśvara. According to this record, he made "many huge images of the lordly Jinas . . . and converted the Charanādri thereby into a holy *tīrtha*, just as Bharata [made] Mount Kailāsa [a *tīrtha*]."⁷⁹ Again, the regional substitution of a local *tīrtha*, Ellora, for the heavenly one, Cāraṇādri or Kailāsa, is explicit.

Ellora as *tīrtha* was powerful enough to embody key places in the greater spiritual systems of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. And while work ceased with the Jain caves, recognition of the *tīrtha* did not end. As we know, in the seventeenth century Ahalyabai Holkar sponsored a rebuilding of the Ghr̥ṣeśvara temple which replaced one used even earlier. Contemporary practice continues to affirm Ellora's place in living systems of Śaiva and Buddhist pilgrimage, as tourists and pilgrims alike travel to the Ghr̥ṣeśvara temple and to the caves. Today, ocher-robed monks from Southeast Asia worship Buddha images

while devout Hindus make offerings to images of Śiva in the caves and at the temple in the nearby village, continuing a tradition that goes back to the sixth century.

Ellora as a Tantric Buddhist Center

With a centuries-old tradition of Buddhist rock-cut architecture behind it, under political conditions that both offered protection from direct conflict and opened the region up to influence from other parts of India, and with a growing stature as a *tīrtha*, the stage was set for Ellora to “take off” as a Buddhist center. Its Buddhist caves have usually been explained in terms of the tradition of the fifth- and sixth-century Mahāyāna Buddhist monuments at Ajanta, Kanheri, and Aurangabad.⁸⁰ But here, this regionally distinct tradition was opened up to a broader range of developments that characterized the growth of Buddhist centers throughout India during the seventh and eighth centuries.

Following the decline of patronage at Ajanta in the last quarter of the fifth century, Mahāyāna Buddhism continued to receive sporadic support, reflected both in traditional and innovative iconographic additions to caves at Kanheri and Nasik, and in the inception of new sanctuaries at Aurangabad. Coincident with Cālukya conquests along the west coast around 600, Buddhism at inland sites in Maharashtra seems to have received a surge of support, perhaps the result of a migration of Buddhist monks, artisans, and patrons from the coast under pressure from Cālukya disturbances there. But it was at Ellora, already beginning its history as a *tīrtha* under its earlier Hindu patrons, that this increased investment in Buddhist monuments resulted in the culmination of the traditions of western Deccani Buddhist rock-cut architecture.

Through the sixth century, this tradition focused on worship of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form, the focal point of nearly every shrine at Mahāyāna sites throughout Maharashtra. However, during this time, new Buddhist concepts were evolving, as tradi-

tional Mahāyāna worship was transformed into the beliefs, rituals, and images characteristic of tantric Buddhism.⁸¹ The Buddha was still the center of worship, but could be visualized in a number of varying emanations, with new hosts of attendant deities added to his retinue. A new body of texts called *tantras* developed to record the esoteric and functional (as opposed to philosophical) details of religious practice, describing for example, the laying out of sacred diagrams (*maṇḍalas*) and the performance of initiation rituals within them.⁸² Common to all were rituals—designed to result in “quick” enlightenment—that also made use of such physical guides to worship and visualization as *mantras* (verbal formulae) and *mudrās* (symbolic hand positions). Although intended to guide preparations for ritual initiations, the texts describing *maṇḍalas* also provide an invaluable record of iconography, showing how images appeared and where they were to be located in a sacred enclosure. Their importance in the transmission of tantric teachings is reflected by the traditional account of the introduction of esoteric Buddhism into Japan by Kobo-daishi (Kukai). Upon his return from extensive study in China in 806, he brought with him hundreds of Sanskrit texts, statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and *mahāmaṇḍalas*, *dharmamaṇḍalas*, and *samayamaṇḍalas*, painted on orders of Kukai’s teacher, Hui-kuo.⁸³ The production and display of *maṇḍalas* became a key element in the ritual apparatus of Shingon temples, flanking the altar in the inner sanctum.⁸⁴ The significance of this use of the *maṇḍala* will become apparent when, in chapter 2, Ellora’s first *maṇḍala*, flanking the central shrine image of its earliest Buddhist temple, is considered.

In the later Tibetan canon, the tantras were divided into four general classes each headed by a different emanation of the Buddha: *kriyā* (action) *tantras*, with Amitāyus presiding; *caryā* (performance) *tantras*, with Vairocana-bhisambodhi presiding; *yoga* (yoga) *tantras*, with Sarvavid Vairocana presiding; and *anuttarayoga* (supreme yoga) *tantras*, with Guhyasamāja Akṣobhya presiding.⁸⁵ The first two, often called *Mantrayāna* Buddhism, exemplified by teachings recorded in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, fo-

cused on correct recitation of magical formulae, worship of relics, buildings, and numerous deities, repair of *stūpas*, and similar themes that extended relatively easily from the older, Mahāyāna tradition. The difference was how the incantations and rituals were used. Now, the *primary* purpose was the rapid achievement of enlightenment (Buddhahood), not the benefits that were hoped to accrue to others when special prayers were recited in Mahāyāna tradition. In both the *kriyā* and *caryā tantras*, the Buddha is the historical Śākyamuni, still visualized in various “historical” roles, such as preaching the first sermon or defeating Māra and achieving enlightenment at Bodhgaya. It was this form of esoteric Buddhism that blossomed in Japan in the ninth century. By contrast, the latter two, often called *Vajrayāna* Buddhism after the *vajra* that symbolizes the adamant state that these practices will engender, taught that Buddhahood was attainable through highly ritualized series of consecrations described, for instance, in the *yoga tantra* text, the *Sarvathāgatātattvasaṃgraha*, which is said to be promulgated by Śākyamuni as Vairocana. In this text, the Buddhas of ten directions escort Śākyamuni to the highest heaven. After he achieves five stages of enlightenment, he becomes Vairocana, and only then descends to defeat Māra, when he preaches the doctrine in a place of gods or a heavenly park or heaven. In the *anuttarayoga* texts, such as the *Guhya-samājatantra*, consecrations are ritualized performances of intercourse, introducing new erotic and horrific aspects of the Buddhist pantheon. It is important, however, to note that these teachings were not entirely independent. Thus for example, *maṇḍalas* of the *yoga* and *anuttarayoga* classes retain elements of *maṇḍalas* described in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, a tantra of the *kriyā* class.

How could such new ideas find expression in the “old” style of the rock-cut monasteries? During the seventh and eighth centuries, the teachings of tantric Buddhism were spreading rapidly both throughout India and beyond to Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. The popularity of *tantras* and worship of the deities they embody varied from region to region. The *kriyā*, *caryā*, and *yoga tantras* were spread through Southeast and East Asia,

while the popularity of the fourth, the *anuttarayoga tantras*, was restricted largely to Tibet.⁸⁶ In this context, the significance of Ellora’s Buddhist caves emerges, including some of the earliest known sculptural representations of tantric deities whose images were to proliferate in later centuries in the international world of Buddhism.⁸⁷ Compared with the art of later Buddhism, Ellora’s tantric images often appear to be unrefined or even experimental. In some cases, the unpolished quality of the sculptures seems to suggest that they are “sketches” of forms the artisans were unaccustomed to rendering in stone. This is not so surprising when Ellora’s chronological and geographical positions are considered. Its seventh-century tantric imagery is extremely early; images with like iconographic features appear with frequency only in the art of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries elsewhere in India.

The struggle to express this new vision of Buddhism is illustrated at Ellora where early tantric deities are portrayed with increasingly complex iconography as its Buddhist phase approaches its end. Even the earliest of its Buddhist caves differ significantly from those at earlier sites, although certain key elements (a *stūpa* in the apsidal *caitya* hall, Buddha images, and attendants in the shrine areas, pillared halls, etc.) remained. However, as the next chapters will explain, important iconographic and programmatic differences between the earlier and later caves imply a development of tantric ideology and practice. A new array of Bodhisattvas, female figures, and others multiply in the later Buddhist residence and worship halls. This pantheon, always celibate, but including prominent female deities, is similar to those described in *kriyā* and *yoga* tantric texts, although no text known to us today completely explains the layout of the caves. Neither do other monuments thus far studied match its iconography and programs detail for detail. Ellora is a unique and valuable exhibit of tantric Buddhist art in its earliest stages.

The presence alone of an extended list of Bodhisattva and female images would suggest that Ellora was influenced by nascent tantric teachings. By analogy to the spread of esoteric teachings from China to Japan, we

might well expect evidence of *maṇḍalas* somewhere at the site.⁸⁸ As John Huntington has shown for nearby, and nearly contemporary Aurangabad Caves 6 and 7, the layout of these late sixth-century caves may well have been determined by *maṇḍalas* similar to the *garbhadhātu-* and *vajradhātu-maṇḍalas* of Japanese esoteric Shingon Buddhism. However, there is no direct evidence at Aurangabad that such *maṇḍalas* existed at the site—not surprising when the historical records show so clearly that most were transmitted in drawn or painted form on perishable paper or cloth. In this context, Ellora is particularly exciting because no inference is needed to determine whether *maṇḍalas* were used at the site—rock-cut *maṇḍalas* are preserved *in situ* to confirm the assumption that should be made based on the new iconography, that a complex of tantric teachings operated to determine the layout of the caves. Like a diagram in a museum, the relief *maṇḍalas* point out what we should expect to find in full-scale sculptures within the temples.

Apart from its sculptures, evidence for sectarian affiliation at Ellora is extremely sparse.⁸⁹ The only Buddhist inscription at the site is located in the balcony of the Cave 10 *caitya*: it merely records the widely distributed credal formula that begins “*ye dharma hetu*” Its letter style places it in the late seventh or early eighth century, but beyond this it does not help to determine the dates or beliefs of the people responsible for the Buddhist excavations there.⁹⁰ We might also expect an obvious source of information on mid-seventh century Buddhism to be the description of Maharashtra found in the travelogue of Hsüan-tsang. Unfortunately, he did not describe Ellora, although he did discuss religion in Maharashtra generally. According to him, there were one hundred monasteries and five thousand priests who practiced both Mahāyāna and Hinayāna Buddhism; there were also one hundred Deva temples that housed many “heretics” of different beliefs.⁹¹

The key to this puzzle may lie outside Maharashtra. While Ellora continued the local cave temple tradition, its Buddhist iconography, especially in the later Buddhist caves, is linked to developments seen further east at roughly contemporary sites such as Sirpur,

Bodhgaya, and Ratnagiri. While the diffusion of iconography and style within Maharashtra has been accepted without question, little attention has been paid to the mechanism(s) that brought tantric ideas—being developed in eastern and central India—to Ellora. Legends about the lives of famous tantric teachers hint at a possible answer to this question.

In medieval Tibetan texts, our best source on the history of tantric Buddhism, we find strands of a story that link a famous tantric teacher with Vidarbha (eastern Maharashtra) and Orissa, bringing close to Ellora our picture of the growth of Tantrism. In these stories, a teacher named Saraha (also known as Rāhulabhadra) either belonged to Uḍḍiyāna, or was born in Vidarbha (eastern Maharashtra), or, according to Taranātha, was associated with Candanapāla of Oḍviśa.⁹² Taranātha, the premier Tibetan historian of Buddhism, wrote that in this Candanapāla’s time, while Saraha was still a brahman, Viṣṇukalpa, king of Oḍviśa (Orissa) built one hundred and eight Buddhist temples and made them centers for Mahāyāna teachers of the time. In Taranātha’s version of the story, Saraha, alias Rāhula, went to Nalanda, a major international Buddhist university, where he was ordained. However, another Tibetan source says that he was converted to Mantrayāna by King Chove Sukalpa of Orissa, and that he performed the *mahāmudrā* ritual (a tantric ritual) in Maharashtra. According to the account that placed Saraha’s birth in Vidarbha, he converted the people of Vidarbha (to tantric Buddhism, we may assume).⁹³ Finally, Rāhula/Saraha may be more firmly linked to Orissa by the appearance of the name Rāhularuci, described as a *mahāmaṇḍalācārya* and *paramaguru* (teacher of the great *maṇḍala* and chief guru), in an inscription on a seventh- or eighth-century image found at Khadipada, Balasore District, Orissa.⁹⁴ Here, Rāhularuci’s title *mahāmaṇḍalācārya* underscores the importance of the *maṇḍala*’s teaching in Buddhist identity of this period. Moreover, the inscription demonstrates a case where a teacher is clearly known as an instructor in the worship of *maṇḍalas*, from a place (Orissa), which we know shared significant iconographic systems with Ellora, at a similar time.

The “Maharashtra connection” continued into the next generations of tantric teachers. Saraha’s disciple was Nāgārjuna who, according to one medieval Tibetan source, is said to have been born a brahman in Vidarbha in Maharashtra. He went north for his Buddhist education, where he was instructed in *Kālacakra* (one of the most esoteric tantric rituals) by Saraha at Nalanda. Nāgārjuna then moved to the southeast, living sometimes at Ghaṇṭaśāila and sometimes as Śrīparvata (Nagarjunakonda) in Andhra Pradesh. It was from this region that he later brought the *Mahākālaratna* (a tantra of the *anuttarayoga* class) and other *tantras* from Dhanyakaṭaka *vihāra*.⁹⁵ In the next generation, Nāgārjuna’s most famous student, Nāgabodhi, was also from Śrīparvata.⁹⁶ And Nāgabodhi’s disciple, Vajrabodhi, is supposed to have been born in Central India around 670; he studied at Nalanda, but turned to Tantrism when he traveled in west and south India. It was Vajrabodhi who brought tantric teachings to China, where he died in 741.⁹⁷

Although few points in this patchwork history can be substantiated, and there are few facts to help create order from the disparate strands of legend, certain aspects of the legends seem to be consistent. First, if Vajrabodhi lived around 700, then two “student-generations” earlier, Saraha would have been teaching in the mid-seventh century. This seems to fit together with the general date of the Khadipada inscription. Second, the tradition makes a very clear connection between early tantric teachers and Orissa, as well as a less certain connection between them and eastern Maharashtra (Vidarbha). Although these associations do not carry the strength of historical data, they should not be ignored or discounted entirely. At the very least, they may be the vestiges of poorly documented behavior that supply a tantalizing hint of an explanation for the religious development at Ellora, during a time when tantric teachers could circulate from the center to the peripheries of the Buddhist world, spreading their teachings within the space of a generation to establishments across India and beyond.⁹⁸

If such legends as these offer only fragmentary glimpses of the diffusion of tantric ideas, its concrete manifestation can be seen in

the Buddhist caves themselves, whose tantric iconography might be viewed as an artifact from the time when several key figures were first systematizing and disseminating their teachings, and perhaps even seeing them rendered permanently into stone monuments. Ellora’s spirit as a *tīrtha*, already recognized by the early 700s when its latest, most elaborate Buddhist caves were being created, may have helped attract one of these men, who saw the potential to create an unprecedented Buddhist monument, as Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings were to do for Brahmanical worship at nearly the same time. Was it Saraha, known to have converted the people of Vidarbha, who arrived supplied with an array of *sūtras* and *maṇḍalas*, as Kukai did in Japan in 806? Ellora itself remains the only “text” that might provide an answer.

The Maṇḍala at Ellora

In the next chapters, it will be demonstrated that a *maṇḍala*, a schematic diagram portraying deities in a set order, provides a guide to the organizational scheme of Ellora’s Buddhist caves from earliest to latest. As noted above, use of *maṇḍalas* to guide meditation was a primary characteristic of tantric Buddhism. The rock-cut *maṇḍalas* found both in the earliest Buddhist excavation, Cave 6 (Fig. 29), and in the latest, Cave 12 (Fig. 199, 212, 213) offer compelling evidence of the tantric affiliation of the site.

Their presence has profound significance as the external, permanent manifestation of a complex of practices used by tantric Buddhists to achieve rapid enlightenment. As cosmological diagrams that could also be drawn on cloth, paper, or stone, and, recorded in tantric texts, they preserve the outline of cosmological beliefs that shaped rituals and meditations long since vanished. They are much more than the diagrams we see and, in fact, may be defined in a number of ways. Thus, the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* (a major text of tantric Buddhism), defines the *maṇḍala*, in the words of the Buddha speaking to the Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, “A *maṇḍala* is what gives birth to

all Buddhas and has incomparable and most excellent flavor." A commentator, Śubhakarasiṃha, adds that *maṇḍala* means "circle," it is that which gives birth to Buddhas, the seed of Bodhicitta, and also it is *ghee*, that is, an essence, that which is most refined and clarified.⁹⁹ At the same time, it is a sacred ground, which an initiate approaches in carefully orchestrated steps, and into which the gods are invited to descend. It is "the whole universe in its essential plan, in its process of emanation and reabsorption."¹⁰⁰

The conception of the *maṇḍala* as a diagram is extended into a visualization of concrete architectural space, and was transformed into actual temple architecture and sculpture. The universe-in-the-*maṇḍala* is thus described and represented as a palace and, at the same time, the *maṇḍala* as a whole is conceived as being located in a *kūṭāgāra*, a three-storied eaved palace resting on top of mount Sumeru. In the Tibetan tradition, one of the first steps in using the *maṇḍala* is the ritual of "Generation of the Residence," containing the *kūṭāgāra* with seats for deities. The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (another important tantric text) specifically says that *maṇḍalas* were situated in the *kūṭāgāra* on Sumeru, with the main deity in the center.¹⁰¹ Such *maṇḍalas* as these include layers, or galleries in which reside numerous manifestations of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and other deities, whose arrangement varies from *maṇḍala* to *maṇḍala*.

The textual analogy between architectural and *maṇḍalic* arrangements which, it is argued here, is reflected at Ellora, is further strengthened by an emphasis on triads. According to the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, the "layers" may also be viewed as a triad: the Matrix *Maṇḍala* is arrayed in three layers (or spheres around the center) that correspond to the three mysteries and the three *dharma*-bodies, the *nirmāṇakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and *dharmakāya*, where the latter is the central mansion of the *maṇḍala*.¹⁰² A biography of the great Tibetan translator Rinchen-bzang-po recounts that, when visited by Atīśa, a famous Indian tantric Buddhist teacher, they retired for the night into a three-storey temple. The first floor was circled by deities of the *Guhyasamājantra*, the second by divinities of the *Hevajratantra*, and the third by the *maṇḍala* of the *Cakrasamvara*

gods. At twilight, Rin-chen-bzang-po meditated on the first floor, at midnight on the second, and at dawn on the top floor.

The sense of architectural "threeness" connects, if only distantly, the Tibetan tradition to the vertical structure of the three-storied Ellora Caves 11 and 12. Three-storey structures were an innovation in Indian Buddhist temples of the seventh and early eighth centuries, suggesting another element in the advent of new teaching at Ellora. Ellora's *maṇḍala* was certainly simpler than those worshipped in the Tibetan legend; a single scheme, or perhaps a group of three closely related *maṇḍalas*, were applied to the three floors of Cave 12. Still, this tale suggests that the use of a three-storied temple was indeed a part of tantric ritual, so that we might imagine a sequential use of the ascending floors in Cave 12, perhaps progressing upward from dusk to dawn as in the Tibetan story.¹⁰³ Extending this idea further, in chapter 2, it will be shown that the idea of a three-storied architectural space determined by the *maṇḍala* was even earlier expressed at Ellora in horizontal space where, in Caves 2, 3, and 4, iconographic and programmatic details show relationships among those caves similar to those found later in the vertical arrangements of sculptures in the three floors of Cave 12. In both the horizontal and vertical cases, the shrines are circled by images of Buddhist deities, much as the floors of the Tibetan temple were encircled by deities of the *Guhyasamājantra*, *Hevajratantra*, and *Cakrasamvara*.

We have no evidence for the rituals actually performed in Ellora's cave temples, but the extensive records of early Japanese esoteric sects provide suggestive analogies, which may be connected to certain iconographic details in the caves. Thus, the ritual use of the *maṇḍala* which, for example, takes seven days in the Japanese Shingon initiation, begins with rites to drive away demons (Māra) and to awaken the earth gods.¹⁰⁴ In doing so, the acolyte mirrors the key stage in Śākyamuni's enlightenment at Bodhgaya when, challenged by Māra, he called upon the earth goddess, Bhūdevī, to witness the enlightenment he achieved and thus, repel the demon and his hosts. In the Shingon tradition, the worshiper himself kneels with knees

and toes touching the earth, torso upright (it will be interesting to note the images of worshipers in this position in Ellora's Buddhist caves), then touches the earth with a *vajra*, a transformation of the *bhūmisparśamudrā* found on Buddha images representing the enlightenment. The analogy can be carried further, positing the *maṇḍala* as "an ideal Bodhgaya, an 'adamantine plane,' that is, an incorruptible surface, the representation of the very instant in which is accomplished the revulsion to the other plane, in which one becomes Buddha."¹⁰⁵ As noted above, and as will become clear in the next chapter, the iconography of the shrines in Caves 11 and 12 make this analogy quite explicit. From the doorways themselves to the central Buddha images seated on thrones supported by Māra's dwarfs, to the images of the earth goddess, Bhūdevī, and Aparājītā (emphasizing the defeat of obstacles), these shrines clearly focus on recreating the essence of Bodhgaya-as-seat-of-enlightenment.

Beyond its general cosmological functions, each *maṇḍala* focuses on a particular deity, or set of deities central to the teaching of particular forms of tantric Buddhism. From descriptions in such texts as the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, *Sādhanaṃālā*, *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, and *Kriyā-saṃgraha*, lists have been compiled describing thirty-seven different *maṇḍalas*, including *mahāmaṇḍalas* that contain smaller *maṇḍalas*¹⁰⁶ (the nine-*maṇḍala* Diamond World *Maṇḍala* of the Shingon sect exemplifies this macro-cosmic structure centered on Vairocana);¹⁰⁷ a Tibetan compilation lists 132 *maṇḍalas*.¹⁰⁸ Specific *maṇḍalas* were associated with individual teachers. Thus, Amoghavajra, a famed Chinese monk, is known to have translated the *Aṣṭamaṇḍalakasūtra* (*maṇḍala* of eight Bodhisattvas, centered on Śākyamuni) into Chinese in the mid-700s.¹⁰⁹

As noted earlier, Shingon tradition says that its founder, Kobo-daishi (Kukai), brought the layout of the Matrix and Diamond World *Maṇḍalas* from China to Japan in the early 800s.¹¹⁰ These he had displayed in temple shrines, ultimately leading to adjustments in entire temple complexes (analogous to the adjustments proposed here at Ellora), which in the Shingon tradition stood for the *dharma*hātu and *garbhadhātu*. The arrangement

of the *maṇḍalas* is reflected in temple and monastery layouts, interior plans of main halls, in the movements of rituals, as well as in sculpture and painting. Thus, at the Kongobu-ji temple on Mount Koya, the head temple of the Shingon sect, the traditional lecture hall became the scene of esoteric rites, divided into inner and outer precincts, with images of the two *maṇḍalas* painted on its walls. At the Daigo-ji temple in Kyoto, of the tenth century, its five-storied pagoda is a representation of the *maṇḍala* in two worlds. Within these temples, sculptures were intended to make the worshiper feel that deities stand before him, "exactly as if they had sprung full-fledged from the *maṇḍala* on the altar top."¹¹¹

Somewhat later, but closer to home, the great Tibetan teacher, Rin-chen-bzang-po, translator of the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, brought the new *maṇḍalas* included in this system to the Ladakh/Himachal Pradesh region in the late 900s. In the era of international tantric Buddhism, it appears that dissemination and translation of *tantras* could be almost immediately followed by representation of their *maṇḍalas* in built forms.¹¹² At Ta-pho, thirty-two stucco images are arranged within the main assembly hall, so that the worshiper is placed at the center of the *Vajradhātu maṇḍala*. Four larger Buddha images, attended by four Bodhisattvas each, represent the Buddhas of the four directions, accompanied by the eight goddesses of offering. This is, then, a life-size sculptural reproduction of a completely integrated *maṇḍala*.¹¹³ A rare occurrence, this temple confirms the argument made here, that the earlier temples at Ellora also recreate a *maṇḍala*. The demand for and receptivity to new teachings and the *maṇḍalas* that represented them is further illustrated by the iconography of temples at Alchi, where sanctuaries based on the teaching of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* (a *yoga tantra*) were erected in the early 1000s. The group of five temples is called the Chos-'khor, *dharma maṇḍala* in Sanskrit; this demonstrates explicitly that a group of temples could be viewed as a *maṇḍala*, and provides an analogy for the arrangement of Ellora's first *maṇḍala* which, as will be explained in chapter 2, was extended horizontally in Caves 2, 3, and 4. Alchi is most noteworthy for its extraordinarily well-preserved

wall paintings, where the assembly hall alone includes six *maṇḍalas* of Vairocana, his manifestations and entourage. The walls of the Sum-Tsek, a three-tier temple, are similarly replete with painted *maṇḍalas*.¹¹⁴ As the only existing painted *maṇḍalas* on the Indian subcontinent, they are of considerable importance, but their complexity precludes direct connection to the less elaborate *maṇḍalas* from Ellora, created three centuries earlier.

Ellora's rock-cut *maṇḍalas*, much simpler than these later forms, are essentially two-dimensional diagrams, carved on walls in very shallow relief. In location, if not complexity, they are comparable to the more complex, numerous painted *maṇḍalas* of tenth- and eleventh-century Himalayan Buddhist temples. As was the case at Ta-pho, at Ellora the *maṇḍalas* were also transformed into the three-dimensional programs of the cave shrines where life-size sculptures were carved in relief so deep as to create the impression that they are free-standing, creating an impression—as in Japanese esoteric temples, that the images had sprung full-fledged from a *maṇḍala*. This three-dimensionality is enhanced by the physical arrangement of the sculptures: worshipers had to move through caves and shrine areas in order to view all images. Thus, instead of proceeding mentally through a two-dimensional *maṇḍala* that might have been painted on a wall or on cloth suspended from the shrine ceiling in the sanctum, the worshiper could literally walk through a set of three-dimensional, horizontal *maṇḍalas*—the shrines themselves. And, in Cave 12, this extension into space is intensified as the worshiper moves vertically through the three floors of the cave, perhaps representations of the *kūṭāgāra*, within which are the *maṇḍalas* to be worshipped by the initiates. The similarity between Ellora's *maṇḍalas* and groups of Bodhisattvas in its later shrines has been recognized for over a century,¹¹⁵ but the relationship has never been explored in detail. The connection between the simpler, nine-Buddha *maṇḍalas* in Cave 6 and the sculptures of Cave 2 has received even less attention. Although the links between relief *maṇḍalas* and sculptural Bodhisattva iconography should be sufficient proof that a teaching encompassing a *maṇḍala* operated at Ellora, the earlier evi-

dence from Caves 6 and 2 extends this assumption back in time and suggests that such a teaching or teachings might have had a comprehensive effect on the development of the site as a whole. In the following chapters, the logic of this effect will be demonstrated by an explication of the iconography and programs of the caves. Recently, John Huntington has argued that Cave 6 and 7 at Aurangabad, near Ellora, represent the application to the iconography of rock-cut caves of a pair of *maṇḍalas* that are extremely important in Japanese Shingon Buddhism.¹¹⁶ But only at Ellora, for the first time, were *maṇḍalas* carved on the walls, permanent proof of the use of such diagrams that is only implied at sites such as Aurangabad. The relationship between *maṇḍala* as a diagram and as shrine program provides the key to understanding the iconographic and spatial aspects of the development of Ellora's century-long Buddhist phase.

Among examples analogous to Ellora, where a *maṇḍala* was systematically applied to the layout of a Buddhist monument, Barabudur, in Java, is perhaps the best known case.¹¹⁷ This connection is more than superficial, in view of its structure, composed of five terraces, three circular platforms supporting seventy-two small *stūpas*, surrounding a large, central *stūpa* on the topmost terrace, with symmetrically arranged Buddha images displaying the varying *mudrās* of the *pañcathāgata* system. Since Paul Mus's monumental work published in the 1930s,¹¹⁸ considerable efforts have been made to interpret its significance as a three-dimensional *maṇḍala*, as a *stūpa*, and as a reflection of tantric Buddhism that passed from South India to Java on its way to China and Japan.¹¹⁹ Recent studies have demonstrated connections between Barabudur and specific tantric texts—the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* tradition of Shingon Buddhism, or the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, or the teachings of Vajravarmaṇ as reflected in the Tibetan tradition of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*.¹²⁰ Barabudur's structure and content differ from Ellora's Buddhist caves sufficiently so that we should not assume that they reflect a common literary tradition, but Barabudur studies suggest both promise and prudence in seeking a textual basis for Ellora's

maṇḍala. These studies demonstrate that it is possible to go beyond the general statement that “Barabudur is like a *maṇḍala*,” but at the same time, consensus has not yet been reached on the text or teaching that inspired creation of the monument, confirming the earlier point that strict adherence to links between formal literary texts and material remains will be frustrating, and ultimately, unproductive when other sorts of evidence are available.

Closer to home, a cluster of sites in eastern Orissa—Lalitagiri, Udayagiri, and Ratnagiri—provide a different sort of evidence for the use of *maṇḍalas* and specific texts in the construction of Buddhist monuments. As will be explained in chapters 4 and 5, at all three sites, steles and individual images represent an eight-Bodhisattva *maṇḍala* nearly identical to Ellora’s.¹²¹ Equally important, images of *bhūmiśparsamudrā* Buddhas, attended by Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi, are found at all three, again analogous to the central shrine images of Ellora’s latest caves. Nancy Hock has recently shown that the first of two tantric Buddhist stages at Ratnagiri depended on a *kriyātantra* text like the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, which emphasizes the three Buddha families headed by Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi, and Śākyamuni,¹²² but excludes horrific or erotic representations of deities. By contrast, Ratnagiri’s later stage was inspired by the *Guhyasamāja*, an *anuttarayoga* text that included worship of Hevajra and Heruka, horrific deities not found at Ellora. The similarities between the earlier phase at Ratnagiri and the later Buddhist phase at Ellora suggest that both were in the *kriyātantra* tradition, while differences make it clear that the two sites did not share all the details of a single teaching.

As the following section will make clear, the case for connecting a written text with

Ellora requires even more caution. The relief *maṇḍalas* assure us that we should seek support from the tantric textual tradition on *maṇḍalas* in explicating the caves, even if they do not promise that precise correlation will be made. As is the case with Ratnagiri and Barabudur, there are several lines that can be pursued. For instance, with eight Bodhisattvas in the *maṇḍala* and in the shrines, Ellora may have been inspired by a teaching like the *Aṣṭamahābodhisattvamaṇḍalasūtra* of the *yogatantra* tradition prevalent in China and Japan.¹²³ This *maṇḍala*, centered on an image of Vairocana with hands held in *dhyānamudrā* (meditation gesture) does not, however, correspond to the central *bhūmiśparsamudrā* shrine images in the latest caves. Some features of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*, another text of the *yogatantra* school, known in two Tibetan versions, centered on Mahāvairocana/Śākyasimha,¹²⁴ suggest yet another possible identification of the central Buddha images in Ellora’s later caves, but this *tantra* makes use of the more complex five-Buddha system, clearly absent from Ellora. However, with Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi as shrine attendants, and with no significant sign that the five-Buddha system was in use at Ellora, it may be that, like Ratnagiri’s first phase, it reflects a simpler form of *kriyātantric* Buddhism, or a teaching that—earlier than the canonization of either *kriyā* or *yoga* tantra, preserves vestiges of both.

Like Ratnagiri and Barabudur, which remain uniquely complex expressions of esoteric Buddhist teaching, Ellora is also unique and may remain the most satisfactory “text” about itself, preserving on the periphery of the tantric world a relatively early expression of a teaching not completely transmitted into written form. In the following pages, this text—the monument—as *maṇḍala* will be explored in detail.