

## Narrative Modes in Ajanta Cave 17: A Preliminary Study

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Story telling is an activity of universal occurrence; as Roland Barthes remarked, 'narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is simply there like life itself.' (Barthes, 1977, p. 79) Yet, it is only in the last twenty or so years that narratology has become an independent field of study, and it is even more recently that theories of narrative have been extended beyond the sphere of literature into the realm of the visual arts of painting and sculpture. The few published studies of visual narratives are largely in the field of ancient classical sculpture and of medieval manuscripts. Recently, I have attempted to analyze modes of story telling in a Buddhist context, and have proposed the existence of seven distinctive modes of visual narration in early India (Dehejia, 1990). Many questions arise as a result of such a proposal. Why do so many alternative modes exist in Buddhist narrative art? Do the modes themselves carry meaning, individually or in conjunction? Are the choices significant in a larger context of ritual and movement? Is there a pattern of preference, and if so, does that pattern change over time?

It is with such problems in mind that I turn to an examination of the narrative modes displayed in the paintings at the cave monastery of Ajanta. Commenced during the reign of emperor Harisena (c. 458-478) of the Vakataka dynasty, the monastery may have been excavated, sculpted and painted within a period of twenty years (Spink, 1974), although a previous, though largely discarded theory suggests development over 150 years. (Earlier writings - Benjamin Rowland, Percy Brown - reflect this point of view) I have chosen to focus on the narratives decorating Ajanta cave 17 for two main reasons. First, it is an inscribed cave of 'known' date, with a single royal patron, Upendragupta, a Rishika prince who was a feudatory of the Vakataka emperor Harisena. His inscription tells us that he made 'this jewel of a monolithic temple, which is majestic and contains within a shrine to the muniraj (Buddha)', that he constructed it 'when Harisena was ruling', and that he made this 'incomparable shrine, expending profusely upon it, such that the poor cannot even grasp in imagination'. (Gupte and Mahajan, 1962) It would appear justified to assume that the entire narrative programme, part of Upendragupta's profuse

expense, would be the conception of one master artist/designer in consultation with his royal patron. The cave would thus provide ideal grounds within which to examine the modes of narration that might have co-existed at any given moment.

A second reason for the choice of cave 17, a large excavation with an interior measuring roughly 70 feet

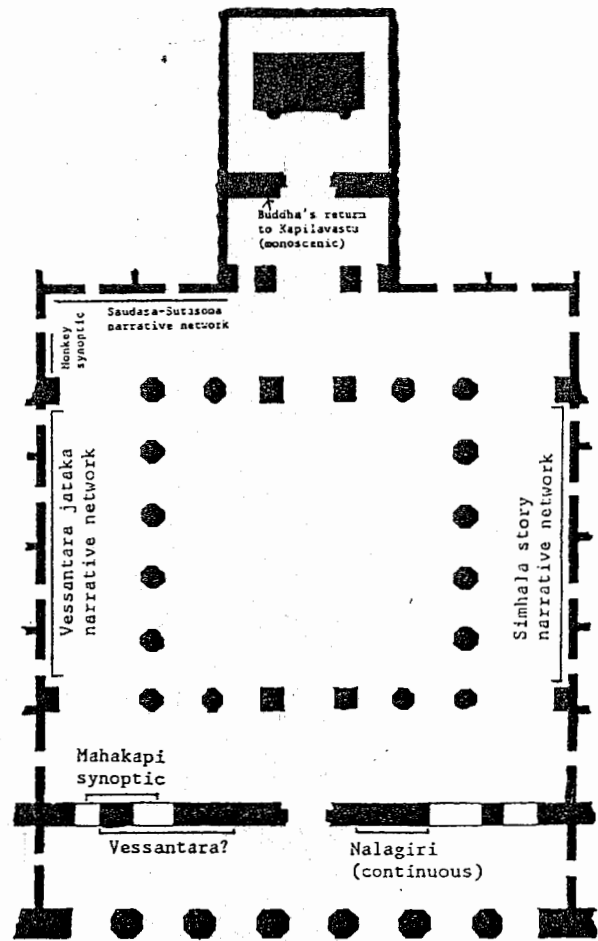


Fig. 1. Plan of Ajanta cave 17, with location of narratives discussed.

square, lies in the fact that its painted sequences are quite complete. The interior walls, extending some 260 feet in total length, and measuring 15 feet from floor to ceiling, were painted and largely completed; in addition, there are the painted veranda walls. The murals are in an adequate state of preservation, enabling us to make assumptions on the choice and distribution of modes of narration employed in the decoration of the cave (Figure 1). By contrast with the other painted caves, cave 17 does not require us to make allowances for destroyed segments of murals that may have contained a different scheme.

A third though lesser reason for the choice of cave 17 lies in the intriguing fact, apparent on even a cursory examination, that two artists worked on the main doorway leading into the cave, with their work meeting at the center of the lintel (Figure 2). One may cite no less than six points of difference between the left and right sides. Starting at the very top with the band of eight earthly Buddhas, we see a difference in the colouring schemes; the artist at the right half favoured the use of peachy pink, while the artist of the left side opted for a more sober scheme. Next, one may point to the differences in the three horizontal bands of floral and geometric decoration. The two artists knew the general character of the decoration of each band, but did not follow an identical pattern. One may note the fine as opposed to thick vegetal scroll; below it the difference

in the treatment of the stylized lotus flowers; and lower down, the variations in the diamond and lozenge pattern. Two further inconsistencies between the left and right sides of the doorway are evident in the sculptured decoration. First, there is a difference in the decorative treatment of the pilasters along the door jambs, and second, there are stylistic differences in the plastic treatment of the female figures at the top of the door jambs, the one on the left being stiff in comparison to the fluid lines of the other. It would appear probable that the sculpted and painted decoration of the doorway was executed by the same artist. If not, one would have to assume that two separate sculptors carved the door frame, followed by two different painters who then executed the mural decoration. The doorway highlights the probability that more than one hand worked on any of the extensive narrative programs within the cave.

It is necessary to preface our discussion of the murals of cave 17 with a few introductory words on narrative. All stories revolve around actions, human or otherwise, that occur in space and unfold in time. For the artists, the protagonists of a story together with the elements of space and time, comprise the three major components of narrative. The artist has to decide how to portray his actors, how to represent the space or spaces in which his story occurs, and how to shape the time during which the story unfolds. The artist may also arrange his story into a series of more or less discrete episodes; if so, he



Fig. 2. Detail of central doorway.



Fig. 3. Monoscenic narrative. Buddha seeking alms from his wife Yashodara and son Rahula at Kapilavastu.  
Photo: Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.

must decide the manner in which he wishes to compose these episodes within the visual field. The artist may also adopt a variety of modes to present the same or similar narratives to his viewer, and it is these modes that I have categorized as seven in number. (Dehejia, 1990) Five of these seven modes are in evidence in Ajanta cave 17.

The monoscenic mode, a favourite with artists at the early Buddhist site of Bharhut (first century BC), is used in two instances in cave 17. In this mode, which favours brevity, a single, easily identifiable scene, excerpted from one of the key episodes of a narrative, is presented to stimulate recognition of the story in the viewer. Having prompted the viewer into identifying the tale, the artist then leaves him to narrate the story to himself. One of cave 17's monoscenic narratives presents the viewer with a hieratically enlarged image of the Buddha with alms bowl in hand, requesting alms from his wife Yashodara and his son Rahula (Figure 3). This single scene, extracted from the tale of the Buddha's return to his home-town of Kapilavastu, was intended to serve as a reminder of the entire series of events and miracles that accompanied his first return to the home and town which he had abandoned to go forth in search of enlightenment. The knowing viewer would recognize the single scene, and narrate to himself the earlier and the later phases in the Kapilavastu sequence.

The monoscenic mode is also used to narrate the tale of the fish jataka. The artist presents the viewer with a small pond occupied by the large bodhisattva fish and a shoal of smaller fishes; perched around in predatory fashion, an entire series of birds reach down with their beaks, ready to capture the fish. The single scene serves to remind the viewer of the drought that caused the lake to shrink drastically and of the impending death of the fish. He will then recall the manner in which the great fish called down a torrential rain, whereupon the birds fled and the fish were saved.

A second narrative mode seen in cave 17, and very popular with artists at the early stupa of Sanchi (second half of first century BC), is the expanded mode of continuous narration, in which the viewer is presented with more than one episode of a story, or more than one scene of an episode, frequently leading up to its climactic conclusion. In each scene the figure of the protagonist is repeated without any framing device to demarcate one scene from the next, or one episode from another, and the story flows 'continuously' across the available space. To decipher the presentation, the viewer must be aware that the repetition of the figure of the protagonist indicates that we are seeing that prota-

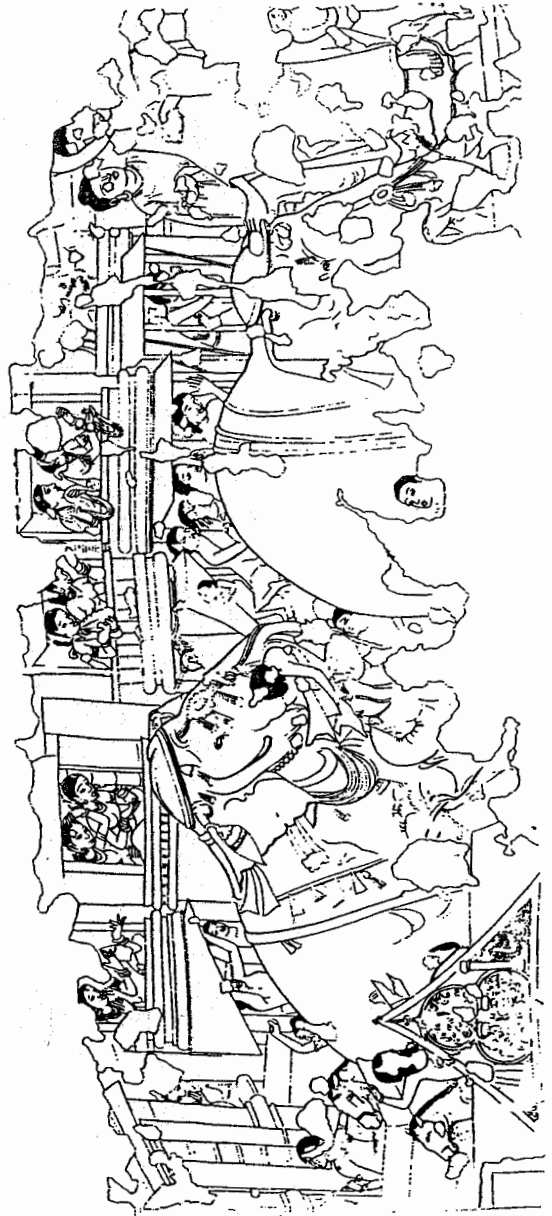


Fig. 4. Continuous narrative. Story of elephant Nalagiri: scenes 3 and 4.

gonist in different spaces at successive moments of time. The artist telling the story of the elephant Nalagiri in Ajanta 17 chose the mode of continuous narrative, presenting the viewer with a set of four scenes that commence at the left and move directly rightwards. The first scene portrays a palace in which Devadatta plans the destruction of the Buddha, while the next depicts his emissary emerging from the palace to free the fierce, maddened elephant chained beside the stables. We next see the protagonist elephant rampaging through the streets of Rajagriha, and immediately to the right, without any separating device, Nalagiri is shown bowing to the Buddha (Figure 4). The viewer familiar with this mode of narration will recognize that the artist is not portraying three different elephants, but that he is presenting Nalagiri at different moments of time, in different locations within the town of Rajagriha.

Continuous narrative in a vertical format is effectively utilized to portray the Buddha's descent from the

heavens at Sankissa. At the topmost level, the Buddha preaches in the heavens to his mother and to the gods; the middle portion refers to the descent; while the lowest level depicts him on earth, preaching to monks and lay worshippers.

In synoptic narration, multiple episodes from a story are depicted within a single visual field, but their temporal sequence is not communicated, and there is no consistent or formal order of presentation with regard to either causality or temporality. We are given no hints as to where to start deciphering a story, or indeed as to where it might end. The multiple episodes of a story generally contain the repeated figure of the protagonist. Eight scenes from the Mahakapi (Great Monkey) jataka are portrayed in cave 17 using the synoptic mode. Painted from floor to ceiling in the space between a window and a side door that open into the cave, the story seems to commence at the bottom, where much of the painted plaster has peeled away, and it moves upwards. At the top, it extends laterally by

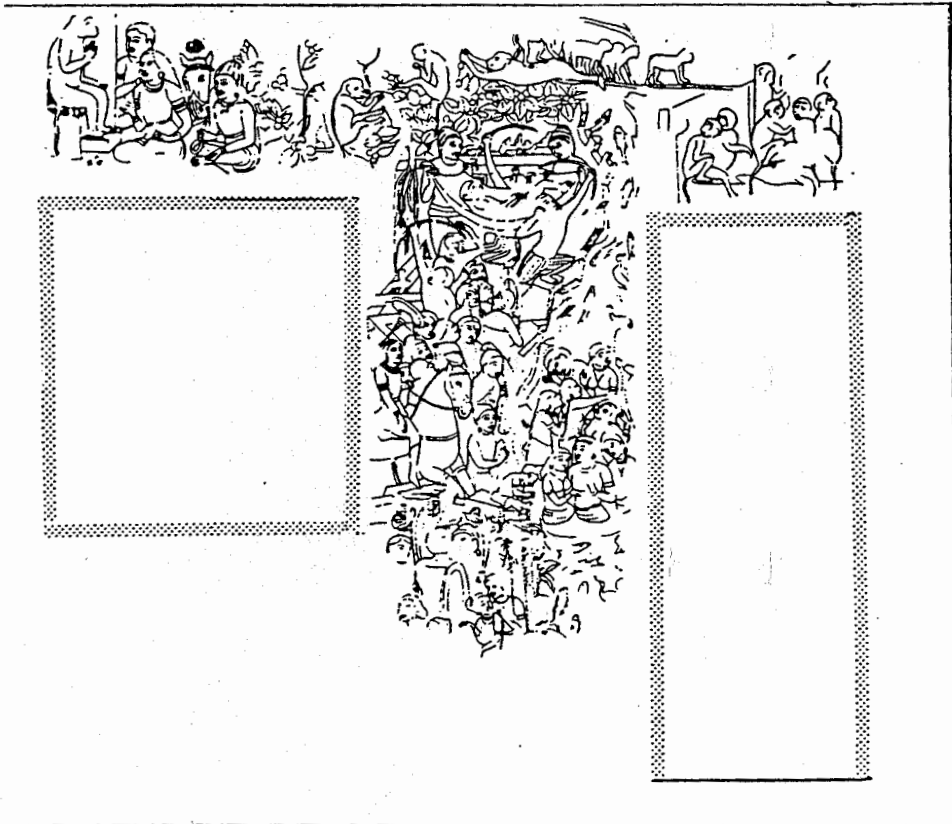


Fig. 5. Synoptic narrative. Mahakapi jataka.  
After Dieter Schlingloff.

making use of the space above the window and the doorway. The synoptic depiction of the story within this T-shape (Figure 5) is difficult to decipher until one realizes that the right third of the painting, with a stylized meandering curve that extends all the way from floor to ceiling, represents the river Ganges along whose banks the story unfolds. The artist has liberally sprinkled his painted river with fish, and yet it is difficult to 'read' because of the exaggerated manner in which the picture plane is tilted up (Figure 6). Bathing in the river are the king and queen of Benares (1), and in their hands is the delicious fig discovered in the waters, which started their quest for the fig tree. To the lower left, in a much damaged segment, the king and queen (2) are seen for a second time. We next see the monarch and his retinue riding along the river (3) in search of the tree that produced the delicious fig. Having found it, the king's archer shoots up (4) at the monkeys devouring the fruit that the monarch so desires. To provide a means of escape across the river for his followers, the monkey-king crafts a bamboo bridge, and finally lays himself across as the last link (5) when the bamboo proves to be a bit too short. Jumping onto the monkey-king's back, the monkey horde successfully escapes across this bridge to the safe environment on the opposite bank (5a). The king of Benares, who has been admiringly watching the proceedings, decides that he wishes to encounter the courageous, much bruised monkey-king. At his command, two of his archers shoot upwards (6), one to sever the bamboo bridge, and the other to cut the branch held by the monkey. The monkey falls into the stretcher (7) that the monarch has provided for the purpose. In the final episode of the jataka, that extends laterally over the window, the monkey-king preaches to the human monarch and his retinue (8) on the vital importance of attending, at all costs, to the welfare of his people. It is this virtue that the story exemplifies and of which the viewer must remind himself while stringing the episodes together. One of the implications of this method, as indeed of most visual narration in early Buddhist India, is that the artist relied on a knowing viewer. These illegible narratives could only be read by those who previously knew the story, and could hence read the episodes in their correct sequence.

Cave 17 contains a large number of synoptic narratives, all presented within relatively circumscribed spaces, so that the viewer, standing a few feet from the wall, is able to visually encompass the entire set of scenes comprising the story. One of the implications of such synoptic narratives is that chronology is undermined. The entire story, from beginning to end, is



Fig. 6. Detail of central portion of Mahakapi jataka.

visible at any one time and, in the course of unravelling any narrative, the viewer may well come to its commencement via its end. Narratives in cave 17 that utilize the synoptic mode include an entire range of animal births – jatakas of a hare, a bull, two deer stories, two monkey tales, a hamsa, the elephant Chaddanta, two more elephant tales, king Sibi, and brahmin Syama. The second monkey jataka, analyzed briefly, will give an idea of the wide range of variation that exists within the synoptic mode of narration. In the space of a restricted rectangular field, the artist depicts six scenes of this story (Figure 7). Lost in a forest, a man falls into a deep ravine (1) and cries out for help. A monkey hears him, wraps his tail around a tree (2) and peers into the ravine to see what has happened; through his infinite compassion, he decides to make the herculean effort to rescue him. In scene 3 we see the monkey, with the man on his back, laboriously climbing out of the ravine. The artist then portrays the exhausted monkey slumped on the ground, while the rescued man stands upright on safe firm ground (4). Overcome by his great effort, the

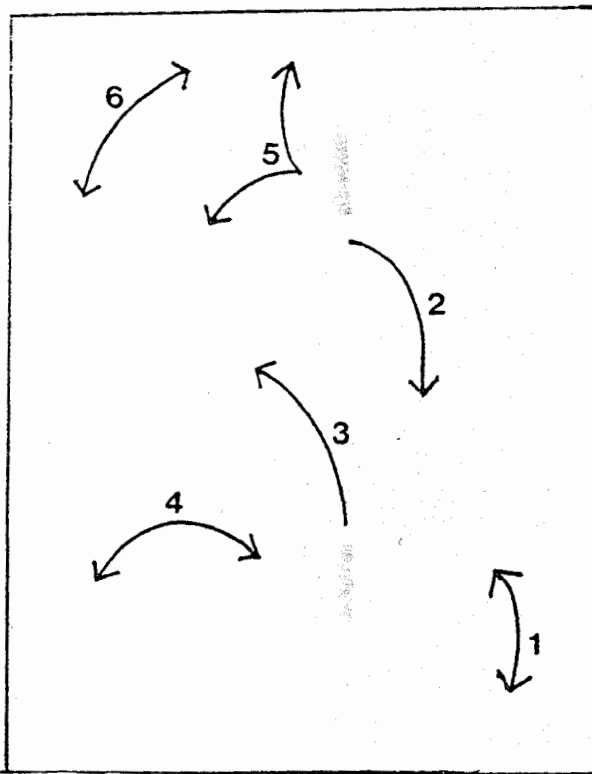


Fig. 7. Synoptic narrative. Schematic sketch of second monkey jataka.

monkey lies down to sleep asking the man to keep guard; but the thankless man decides to kill the monkey for food, and raises a great boulder with which to destroy him (5). The final scene reveals the failure of this evil plan, with the monkey waking up and rising at the crucial moment so that the boulder descends harmlessly in front of the monkey. The end of the story is visible at the same time as the beginning, and the arrows on Figure 7 will reveal that the movement is basically from right to left, and from the lower to the upper areas of the designated space. Each of the instances of synoptic narration in cave 17 follows a slightly different system in its organization of the story within a restricted rectangular field.

Narrative presentation in which the figure of the protagonist is conflated rather than being repeated from one scene to the next is not popular in cave 17; nevertheless it exists in a key set of scenes within a piece of synoptic narrative. While the mural telling the tale of the elephant Chaddanta is sadly damaged, it is possible to recognize seven scenes from the story; we shall not, however, attempt to follow the entire narrative but concentrate only on the use of conflation. Much of the right section of the mural portrays the episode of the hunter acquiring Chaddanta's tusks, which is presented in three scenes that adopt the conflated mode. The artist portrays the hunter on three different occasions, referring each time to the same single figure of the elephant. First the hunter shoots his arrows at the elephant; next he bows before the same elephant who saws off his own tusks; finally, departing with the tusks, the hunter looks back at the same elephant. The overlapping manner of presentation characteristic of the conflated mode certainly serves to further undermine temporal succession.

The fifth mode of narration found in cave 17 is one that I describe as 'narrative networks'. It is a mode specially beloved of Ajanta artists, and is seen at its most dramatic in the two narratives that decorate the two side walls of the cave. On either side, the 45 foot span, interrupted by four doorways leading into cells, is given over to the extensive delineation of a single story. Both stories feature human protagonists – on the left side wall is the previous life of the Buddha as Prince Vessantara, and on the right side wall is an avadana (previous life of a monk) of the merchant Simhala.

In the story of Simhala, told in a total of 29 scenes, the interlaced sequences meander their way across the right wall of cave 17 producing a narrative of labyrinthine complexity (Figure 8). While the protagonist, the merchant Simhala, is repeated in several scenes, there is none of the coherence that accompanies continuous

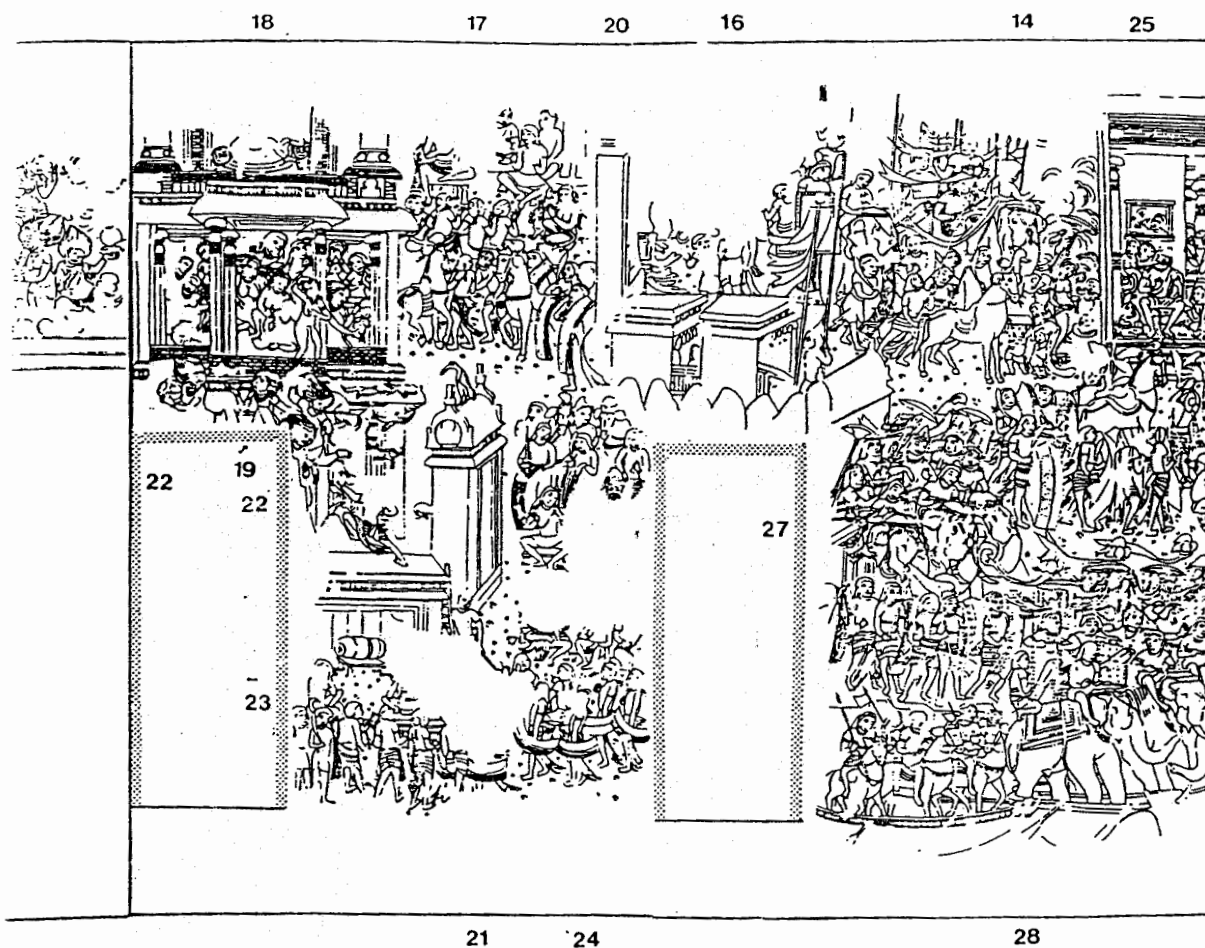


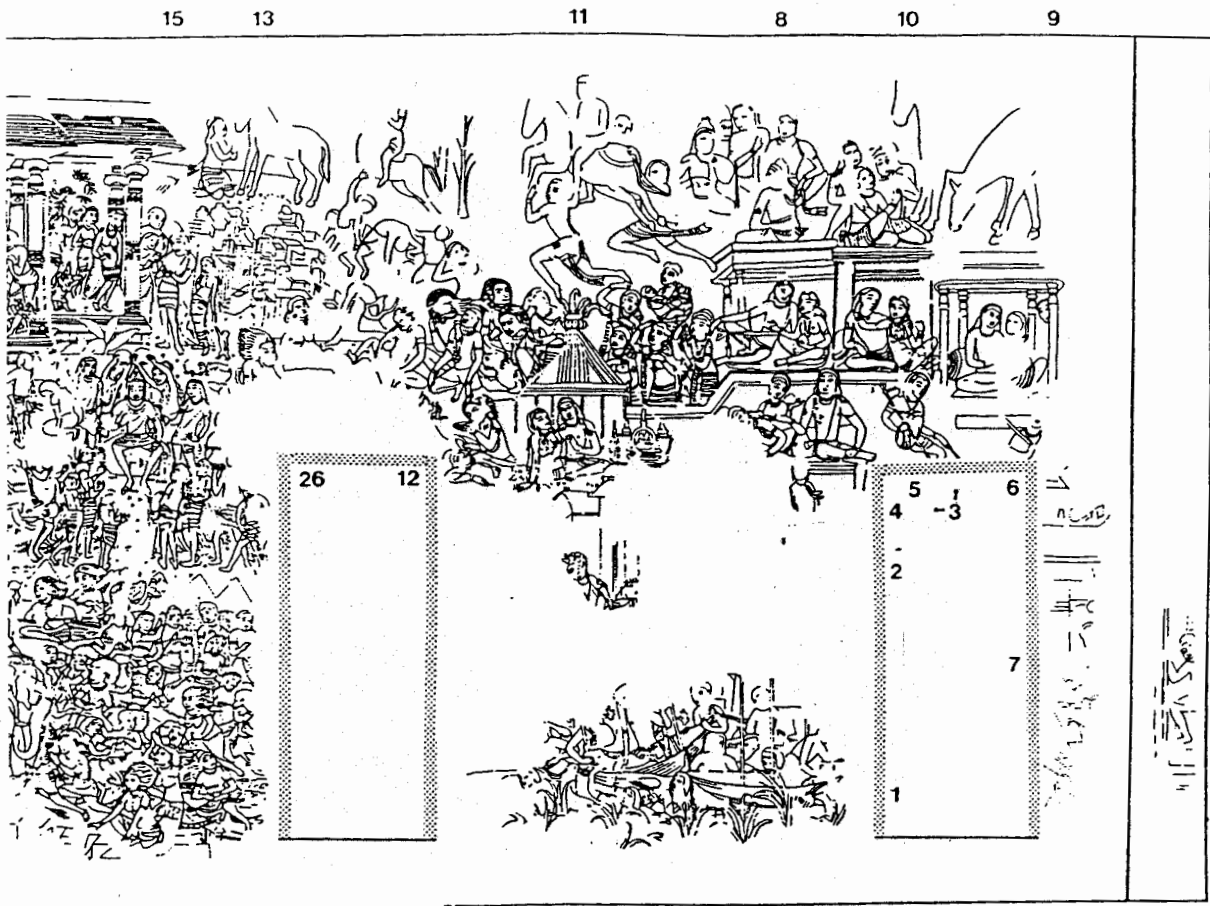
Fig. 8. Narrative network. Story of

narration with its clear depiction of temporal succession and spatial movement. Instead, the action moves across the wall in an unpredictable manner, commencing at the lower level of the right section and moving upwards, then working its way across the upper segment of the wall to the left where it meanders downward, finally culminating in the central section of the available space. Within each of these segments – right, left and center – the action moves in crisscross fashion and no specific pattern emerges from the most painstaking study of the painted wall. In fact, one is confronted with a complete network of movement in space and

time. Without the numbering scheme provided by Dieter Schlingloff in his interpretive study of the painted murals, (Schlingloff, 1989) even those familiar with the story, given in summary form below, will find it difficult to unravel the narrative network.

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1    | Island shipwreck.   |
| 2-6  | Witches transform themselves into beauties and entreat traders to live with them. |
| 7-8  | Simhala discovers the truth; only the magic horse Balhala can save them.          |
| 9-13 | Balhala agrees to 'fly' traders home, but they                                    |





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Simhala. After Dieter Schlingloff.

- must refrain from looking back with longing. Simhala alone reaches home.
- 14 Simhala's witch-wife arrives. He rejects her.
- 15-18 King takes her into harem.
- 19-23 Witches devour king.
- 24-26 People crown Simhala.
- 27-29 Simhala and army confront witches and defeat them.

The basic arrangement of the Simhala story may be viewed in terms of geographical/spatial relationships. The right third contains events that occurred on the

witches' island, while the left third houses events in the palace of the king. The central space, containing the conclusion of the story, as also earlier episodes relating to Simhala, is space that belongs to Simhala. The upper zone contains Simhala's home, the central zone his coronation, the lower zone his climactic confrontation with the witches. Yet, when lit only by flickering oil lamps, it would have required 'strong eyes, great persistence, and an excellent, retentive memory' (Brilliant, 1984, p. 63) to follow the narrative course. Like the narratives on Trajan's famous column, it is all there, even if *very very* hard to see in its entirety. As a purely

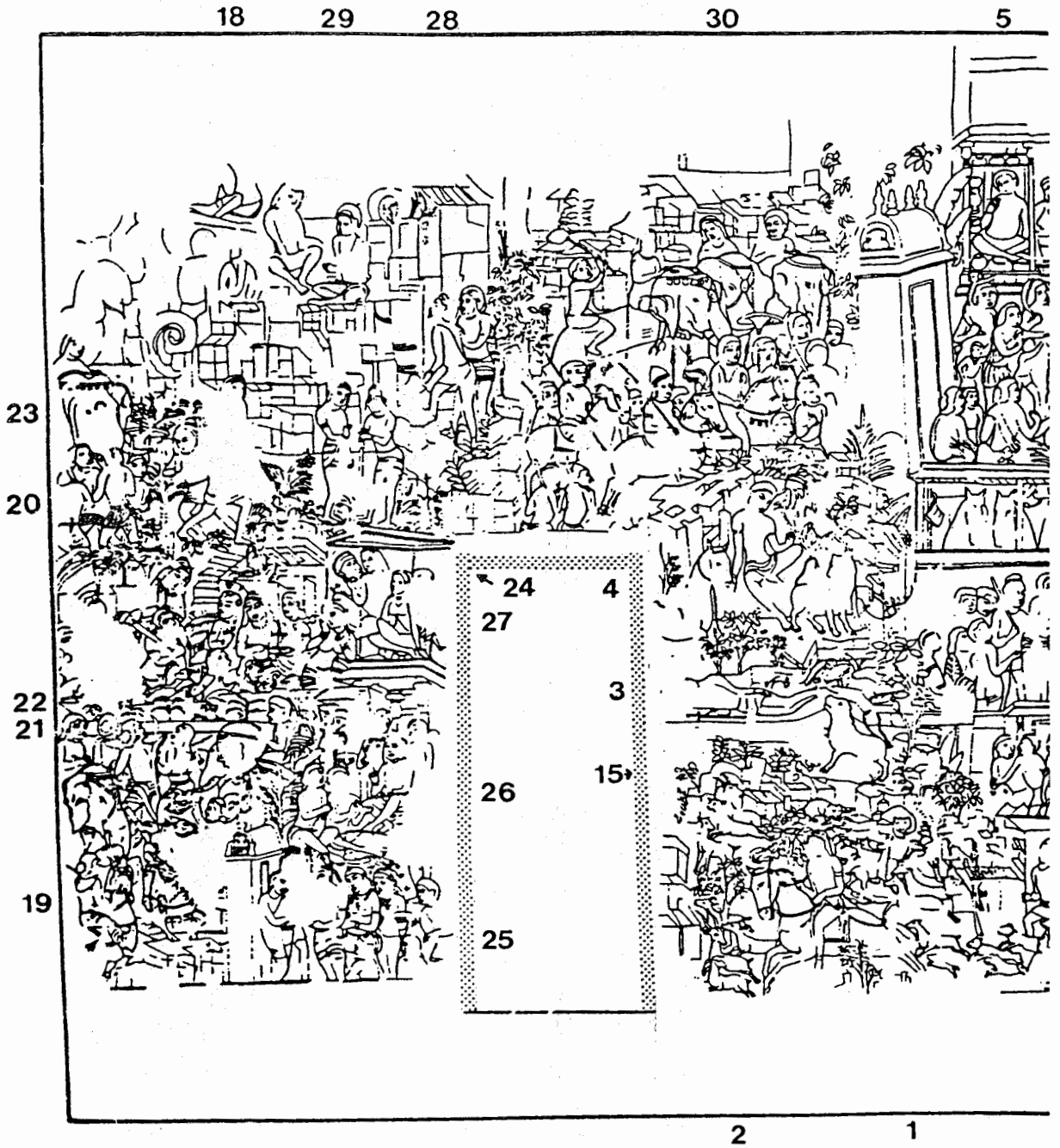
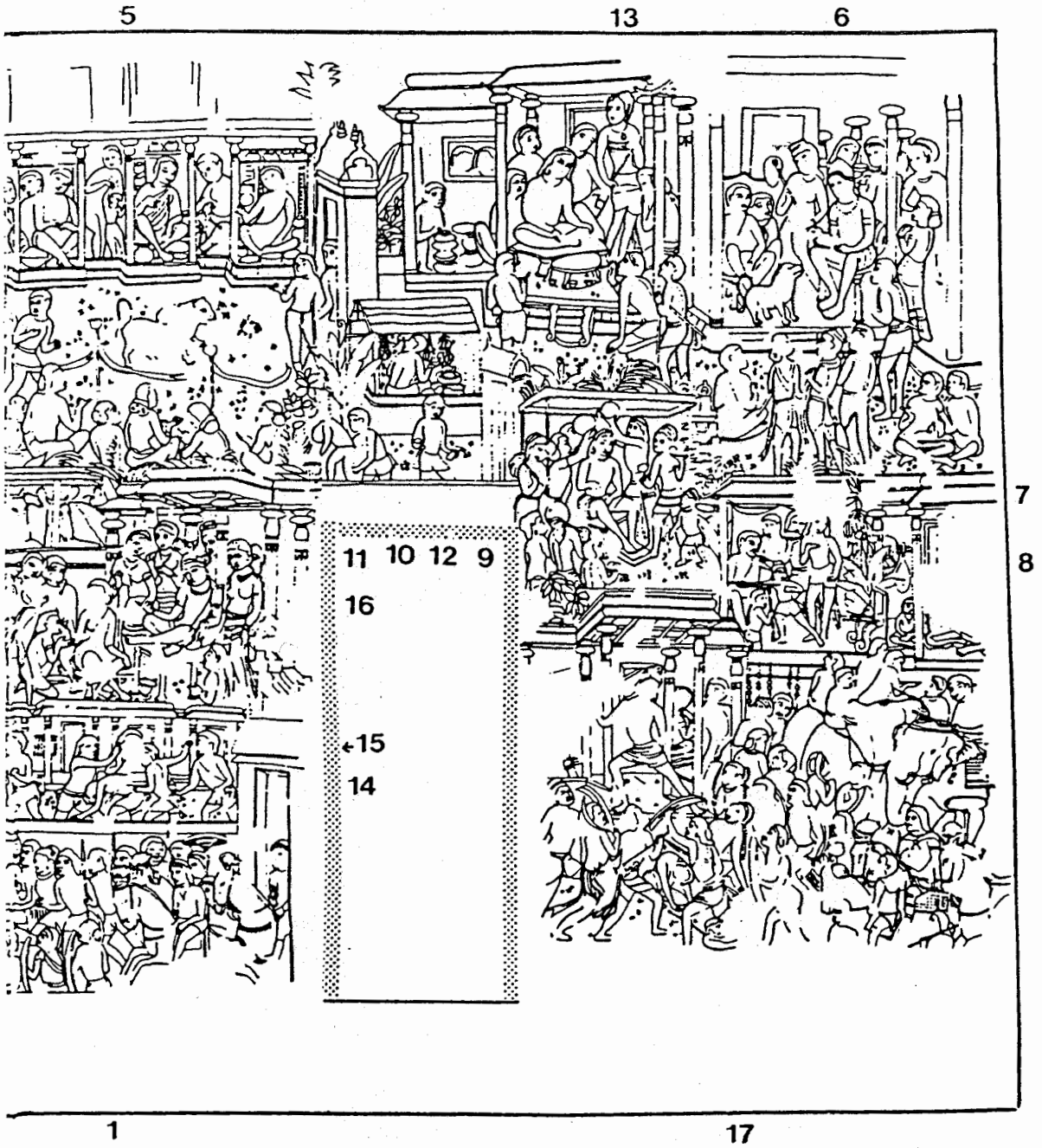


Fig. 9. Narrative network. Saudasa-Sutasoma



legend. After Dieter Schlingloff.

practical matter, one wonders if any viewer was inclined to put in so much effort. Yet the sense of the narrative must have been clear to him through familiarity with the story. Perhaps identifying the story and gathering its general sense was all that interested the viewer, or indeed was expected of him.

One might label the artist of the Simhala story 'the master of the swallow-tail convention'. The bifurcated swallow-tail is ubiquitous; it is seen on the numerous banners in the painting, and on the scarf-like drapes adorning the many figures. One must add a caveat to the effect that although the term master is used above in the singular, it is highly probable that more than one artist worked on this wall. Perhaps the 'workshop of the swallow-tail convention' might be a more accurate phrase. The style of this master and his artists is quite distinctive and reveals his predilection for a multitude of small figures, among whom even Simhala does not stand out distinctively. This artist wished to depict every detail that he could possibly crowd into his available space.

By contrast, the opposite wall with the Vessantara legend was the work of 'the master of the sweeping curves'. He too had 45 feet of wall space at his disposal, but rather than squeeze in 29 episodes from the story, he gives us a mere 16, adopting a more leisurely pace, making his figures much larger, conferring individuality on them, and making lavish and loving use of sweeping curves. The Vessantara story commences to the extreme left of the available space and gradually moves across the wall to the far right—a different concept from that of the Simhala legend. Yet the often achronological and apparently random placing of the episodes is curious. For instance, the scene depicting the evil brahmin Jujuka asking Vessantara for his children is placed high up on the wall above the third cell, while the actual gift of the children with the 'pouring of water' to legitimize it, is placed at ground level to the right of that same doorway.

Given the expansive space at the disposal of the artist, it is strange that the gift of the state elephant, which resulted in the banishment, is not depicted, nor indeed is the giving away of the wife Madri, which is the climactic event of the tale. The events are not arranged geographically as in the Simhala legend, and we do not find a palace at beginning and end, with forest scenes between, as is done, for instance, in the narration of this tale at the Sanchi stupa. The artist appears instead to have conceived of the story as thematic clusters which he placed at an easily readable eye-level. Between doorways 1 and 2 is the gift of the horses; beyond doorway 2 is the gift of the chariot;

between doorways 3 and 4 are scenes relating to the gift of the children. All acts of giving (charity is the moral exemplified by the tale) are placed in readily viewable locations. In a dimly lit cave where it is impossible to view an entire wall, thematic clusters of scenes dealing with the various acts of giving is one logical way of handling an extensive legend.

The problematic nature of the scenes in the front veranda, that appear to represent vignettes from the initial stages of the Vessantara story, must be mentioned. Two separate episodes are depicted—the distribution of gifts by a prince, and the banishment of a prince and princess. Are they intended as signal references to the Vessantara legend? If so, is their placement in the veranda intended to draw worshippers into the cave to view the complete denouement of the tale along the left side wall?

It would appear that, as with the doorway into the cave, at least two artists worked on the Vessantara wall. In the section of wall from the left end to halfway across the cave, Vessantara's short white lower garment, resembling boxer shorts, has blue horizontal stripes; in the right half of the wall, however, Vessantara's garment has red vertical stripes. Adding even further variety, Vessantara in the veranda (assuming it is he) wears a white garment with pale blue vertical stripes. The style of the figures is the same, and it is clear that the artists belonged to the same workshop. Apparently, however, they did not consult with each other on such minor details as the patterns of garments, or, as we saw earlier, the exact patterns of decorative scrolls.

A third hand—'the master of the tight boxes'—is seen in the Saudasa-Sutasoma narrative network on the rear wall of cave 17, which differs from both the leisurely pace of the Vessantara wall, and the busy crisscrossing of the Simhala wall. This master had a vision of controlled space, and preferred to arrange his figures neatly and systematically in horizontal tiers of boxes (Figure 9). He commences his story at the lower center, moves to the right segment, then jumps across to the left segment, and concludes in the upper center of his wall space. There is, however, a geographical and spatial logic evident in his system, much as there is in the Simhala wall. The central segment contains the prelude to the story, and belongs to king Sudasa of Benares and the lioness with whom he mated to produce the child Saudasa (born of Sudasa). The space to the right belongs to Saudasa and his city of Benares; it depicts the childhood and youth of Saudasa and his gradual transformation into a consumer of human flesh. Attacked by his own army when the truth becomes known, he flees his town. The space to the left belongs

to prince Sutasoma and his town of Hastinapura. Captured by man-eating Saudasa, prince Sutasoma appeals to him for release for just as long as it would take him to keep his promise to a brahmin. He gives his word to return thereafter, and when he does so in the face of certain death, Saudasa is overwhelmed, accepts Sutasoma as his teacher, is converted, and abandons his man-eating habits. The tale ends at the upper left of the central space with a scene portraying the two, now friendly, royal personages. While the narrative moves in fairly unpredictable manner, the artist has, whenever feasible, organized his story in panels and boxes, presenting the viewer with bands of narrative.

A question difficult to resolve concerns the manner in which these narratives would have been experienced by the worshipper cum viewer of the fifth century. There is no certainty that circumambulation, a basic requirement of worship in India, would have been of relevance within a residential cave, even though such caves contained a shrine for a Buddha image at the far end. On the other hand, it is considered inauspicious to approach any religious monument in India in a counter clockwise manner, even if it be an abandoned shrine. A visitor wishing to photograph a sculpture on the right wall of a shrine, is required, at least in public view, to walk in a clockwise direction to reach the image. If then one assumes a clockwise approach within cave 17, several narratives will be approached in a less than logical sequence. The Simhala story for instance will be approached from its conclusion, and the viewer will reach its commencement only later.

A second question concerns the manner in which the narratives may be viewed in the conditions of darkness that normally envelop the caves. Even with the artificial lighting provided today by the Archaeological Survey of India, only small sections of the murals may be illuminated at any one time. With only the flickering light of oil lamps, a viewer would find it impossible to view the narratives in their entirety. Is it possible that the viewer was taken around the cave by a monk wielding a lamp, who explicated the narratives for him?

Finally, one must indeed consider if the narratives were intended for viewing by the general public. Perhaps they were painted only for the edification of the community of monks who lived in a particular cave. Support for such a view comes from the Chinese version of the *Mulasarvastivadīn Vinaya*, translated by I-Ching in 710 A.D., but belonging around the third century AD. When the donor Anathapindaka queries the Buddha as to the subjects with which he should adorn the monastery he had just constructed, the Buddha speaks of painting jātakas and miracles, of

yakshas and nagas, of scenes of preaching, and the like. He then makes the significant comment that the paintings will prove an effective aid to spiritual advancement; he cautions the monks to use care when washing and setting fires in order to avoid damage to the murals. (Soper, 1950, p. 149).

Ajanta's cave 17 presents us with five modes of narrative: two instances of monoscenic narrative; two of continuous narrative; several synoptic narratives, of which we have considered two, all arranged in relatively small rectangular spaces; a single restricted usage of conflation within a piece of synoptic narrative; and three dramatic sweeps of narrative networks. As far as styles and composition are concerned, we have three distinct hands within just the category of narrative networks: the master of the swallow-tail convention (Simhala story), the master of the sweeping curves (Vessantara story), and the master of the tight boxes (Saudasa legend). It also appears that any single composition, be it a doorway or a painted wall, was generally the work of more than one artist from the same workshop. Upendragupta's cave was produced when Harisena was ruling—a period of approximately 20 years. Within that relatively brief span, we see a variety of narrative modes, the hands of three distinctive masters, and evidence that more than one artist worked on any single composition. It would appear that the varying modes of narration utilized in cave 17 were viewed by artist and patron as equally viable alternatives. The allocation of space for each story, and the arrangement of the legends along the walls may have been decided by the chief artist cum planner in consultation with his patron. The narrative modes were probably the choice of individual painters, and may have depended on the artists' guild traditions.

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