

The Date of Ellora's Kailasa Cave-Temple

Vedveer Arya

Kailasa temple of Ellora is the largest single monolithic structure and one of the greatest manmade wonders of the world. This Shiva temple is located close to the famous Ghrishneshvara Jyotirlinga temple. Evidently, Ellora is an ancient center of Shaivism. There are total 34 rock-carved temple-monastery caves excavated out of Ellora hills. Out of 34 caves, 12 are Buddhist caves on the southern side (Caves,1-12), 17 are Hindu caves in the middle (13-29) and 5 are Jain caves at the northern end (30-34). These caves have been serially numbered from 1 to 34 starting from southern end of the hill to the northern end. The Kailash temple is the 16th Cave.

Archaeologists and historians generally agree that these caves of Ellora were built in the following three phases:

- Early Hindu Phase - 400-600 CE (Caves 17-19)
- Buddhist Phase - 600-730 CE (Caves 1-12)
- Hindu and Jain Phase - 730-950 CE (Hindu Caves 13-16 & Jain Caves 30-34)



It is evident from the chronological history of Ellora that Hindu temple caves are the earliest structures in the hills of Ellora. Buddhist and Jain caves have been excavated later. But historians unreasonably date the Dasavatara temple (Cave 15) and the Kailash temple (Cave 16) in the later phase around 730-950 CE citing epigraphic evidence. According to them, Dasavatara temple cave was excavated during the time of Rashtrakuta king Dantidurga and Kailasha temple cave was excavated during the reign of King Krishna I. Ferguson and Burgess speculated that "All the superfluous wealth of the Rashtrakuta prince (Krishna I) was placed at the disposal of the Brahmanas, to commemorate their triumph over the Buddhists, the Kailasa must always remain a miracle of patient industry applied to well defined purpose."

German scholar Hermann Goetz says¹: "The Kailasa is generally dated into the middle of the 8th century approximately, on the evidence of reference in inscriptions of the Rashtrakuta dynasty which attribute its erection to Krishnaraja I (757-772 CE). However, on the closer inspection the problem appears not so simple. The Kailasa is not a homogenous building erected under one ruler. Its very size alone excludes the possibility of its having been excavated and sculptured within the fifteen years of Krishnaraja's reign. For the narrowness of space and the technical resources then available had to keep in bounds even the ambitions of such a strong ruler." Goetz made an exhaustive study of Kailash temple and speculated its development through eight architectural phases. According to Goetz, the lion and elephant frieze on the lower plinth of the Kailash temple was carved during the first half of the 11th century.

According to historians, the general design of the Kailasa temple is inspired by the architecture of the Virupaksha temple of Pattadakal. It is also observed that there are a number of panels which belong to the period of early Chalukyas. Historians thought that Chalukyan artists were present at Ellora because the Kailasa temple was being carved out on a Chalukyan prototype i.e. Virupaksha temple of Pattadakal.

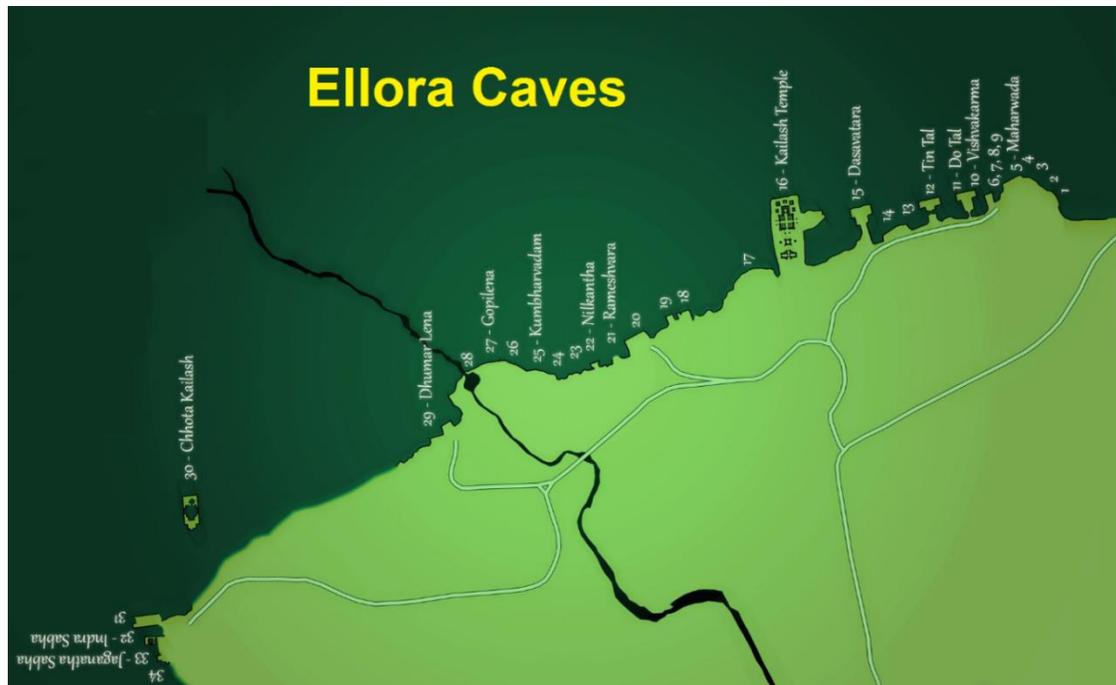
Thus, the historians have propounded the following three main hypotheses:

Hypothesis no. 1

Kailasa temple (Cave 16), Dasavatara temple (Cave no. 15), Cave no. 13 and 14 have been excavated after the Buddhist phase. These caves cannot be erected without having advanced skills of rock-carving. Therefore, the Caves from 13 to 16 must be dated after the Buddhist phase.

The monoliths of Cave no. 13-16 are situated prominently in the hill of Ellora and the best monoliths among the available ones for rock-cut temples. It is evident that whoever occupies the hill first, he would naturally select these monoliths for excavation of caves. For the sake of argument, let us assume that Hindus occupied the hills first but Buddhists took over the hill

before Hindus could plan a temple on this best monolith. Now the question arises that why Buddhists neglected this best monolith and erected the caves only on the southern end of the hill? Why everyone had conspired to reserve or earmark this monolith for the future construction of the Kailasa temple? It seems highly unlikely that Buddhists left this monolith untouched though it was available. In reality, Kailasa temple and Dasavatara temple had been already erected on this monolith before the Buddhist occupation of the hill. Therefore, Dasavatara and Kailash temple caves must be dated in the earliest phase.



Hypothesis no. 2

Dasavatara cave inscription, Kailash temple inscription, Kadamba copper plates and Bagumra copper plates clearly indicate that the Caves 13, 14, 15 and 16 were excavated during the time of the Rashtrakuta kings Dantidurga and Krishna I.

The inscription of Dasavatara Cave (No. 15) opens with an address to Siva and Parvati². It contains 29 4/3 shlokas. This inscription eulogizes the Rashtrakuta dynasty and gives the following genealogy of King Dantidurga.

1. Dantivarma
2. Indraraja
3. Govinda
4. Karka
5. Indra
6. Dantidurga

The contents of the inscription clearly indicate that this inscription was written after the death of King Dantidurga. This inscription is an eulogy of Rashtrakuta King Dantidurga and it does not give any information about the construction of Dasavatara temple. Moreover, it is written in early Devanagari characters which unambiguously indicates that this inscription was written at least 150-200 years after the date of Dantidurga.

Kailasa Temple has a small inscription as “Svasti Kannaradeva”³. There were three Rashtrakuta kings having the name of Krishna or Kannara. Moreover, this inscription simply mentions the name of Kannaradeva. This cannot be the evidence to establish that King Kannaradeva erected the Kailasa temple.

The Kadamba copper plates also simply eulogize King Krishna I and metaphorically state that King Krishna I was like a Kanneshvara temple⁴.

342	EPIGRAPHIA INDICA.	[Vol. IV.	
31	karnnan-ôdit-ânurâgaiḥ prârabdha-vṛitta-nṛi-	prâvṛiḍ-ârambha-kâla-janit-ôtsav-ârambhaiḥ ¹	mayûraiḥ
32	ttântam ² bhâva-praka-	dhûma-vêḷâ-lilâ-gata-vilâsini-janânâm	kara-tala-kisalaya-rasa-bhâva-sad-
33	ṭana-kuśala-śaśivadan-ânganâ-narttan-âhṛita-paura-yuvatī-jana-chitt-ântaram		samasta-
34	ra ³ -pâraga-muni-śata-saṅkulam sva-nâmadhêy-âmkita[m ⁴]	dêvakulam=âsit	<u>Kanṇé(ṇṇé)śvaran-nâma</u>
35	v=Akâlavarsha iti vikhyâtaḥ [⁵]	Tasya sūnuḥ	ânata-nṛipa-makūṭa-mapi-gaṇa-

The Bagumra copper plates clearly indicates the existence of the Shiva Temple in Elapura before the time of King Krishna I. These plates record; “when King Krishna saw this wonderful temple, he admired it to be the real Kailasa of Shiva. He had full praise for the Shilpi (Sculptor). King Krishna also wondered that even the Shilpi might have been surprised after seeing what he has created.” These plates also say that the people have great admiration for this wonderful edifice since ancient times (*satam bahu charchayanti*)⁵.

- mahâ-varûham hariṇichakâra } prâjya-prabhâvah
^[14] khalu râja-siṅgha(mha)ḥ | (||) Ēlâpur-âchala-gat-âdbhuta-sannivésam | yad=vikshya
vismita-vimânachar-âmarêndrah êta-
^[15] [t*] Svayambhu-Siva-dhâma na kritrimê(mam) Śrîr-dṛishṭ=êdṛis=iti satatam bahu
charchchayanti || Bhûyas=tathâvidha-kṛitau vyava-
^[16] sâya-hânir=êtan=mayâ katbam=ahô kṛitam=ity=akasmât | kartt=âpi yasya khalu
vismayam=âpa śi-
^[17] lpi | tan-nâma-kirttanam=a(a)kâryyata yêna râjûâ |(,|) Gaṅgâpravâha-himadîdhitî-kâlakû-
Second plate; first side.
^[18] tair=atyadbhut-âbharanakaish=kṛita-maṅdanô=pi | mânikya-kâñchana-purassara-sarvva-
bhû-
^[19] tyâ | tatra sthitaḥ punar=abhûshyata yêna Śambhuḥ || Nṛipasya tasya Dhruvarâja-

Evidently, the epigraphic evidence unambiguously suggests that the Kailasa temple was excavated at least few hundred years before the time of King Krishna I. Therefore, historians have wrongly concluded that the Ellora caves (13 to 16) were excavated during the reign of Rashtrakuta King Dantidurga and Krishna I.

Hypothesis no. 3

Kailash temple was erected during the time of Rashtrakutas because the Kailasa temple was being carved out on a Chalukyan prototype i.e. Virupaksha temple of Pattadakal.

Since historians wrongly dated the Kailasa temple, it is therefore speculated that the Shipi (Sculptor) of Kailasa temple has copied the design from Virupaksha temple of Pattadakal. If we correct the date of Kailasa temple, it is more likely that the architect of Virupaksha temple has copied the design from Kailasa temple.

In view of the above, we can conclude that the Rashtrakuta Kings did not excavate the Dasavatara and Kailasa temples in Ellora hills but these Hindu temple-caves were erected at least few hundred years before the time of the Rashtrakutas. When Dantidurga and his uncle Krishna I defeated the Chalukya kings and took control over northern Maharashtra, they established their capital in Elapura (Ellora and Devagiri fort). A copper plate inscription of Dantidurga dated Saka 663 is also found in Ellora⁶. In all probability, an inscription was engraved on the west side of a mandapa in front of Dasavatara temple when a considerable time has been elapsed after the death of Dantidurga because this inscription was written in early Devanagari characters. The Bagumra copper plates unambiguously inform us that Kailasa temple was existing since ancient times and King Krishna himself admired this wonderful edifice and the Shilpi (sculptor).

Kokāsa was the Sutradhāra (architect) and Shilpi (sculptor) of the Kailasa temple

According to the later Kalachuri inscriptions of Ratanpur, Chhatisgarh, Kokāsa was the great Sutradhāra (architect) and Shipi (sculptor) of ancient times⁷. These inscriptions refer to the descendants of Kokāsa living in Chhatisgarh. The medieval literary sources of Maharashtra clearly record that kokāsa was the architect of the Kailasa temple. This temple was known as Manikeshwar temple in ancient times.

MK Dhavalikar writes⁸; “There is considerable literary evidence of the medieval period which refers to this rock temple as the Manikeshwar cave temple because it was built by a certain queen Manikavati of the King of Elapura. The story goes that a certain king of Alajapura

(Achalapur in Amaravati, Maharashtra) had committed a certain sin in his previous birth, and as a result, was suffering from incurable disease. Curiously enough, the king suffered from the disease only during the night whereas during day time he was his normal healthy self. Once the King went on a hunting expedition to Mahisamala (Mhaisamala near Ellora) and bathed in the tank at that place. After bath he found that he was cured of the disease probably because the sin which he had committed in his previous birth was washed off. The queen, who had accompanied the king, worshipped the god Ghrishneshwar at Elapura and took a religious vow that if the king was cured, she would build a temple in the honour of Shiva. Naturally therefore when the king was cured, she requested the king to build the temple immediately. She decided to observe fast until she saw the sikhara of the temple. The king agreed, but no architect on earth would have been able to build the temple in such a short time. The king summoned many artists, but they all said that it would take at least sixteen months to build a temple with its sikhara. There was, however, one shilpi who would do the job; he was one Kokāsa, a resident of Paithan (ancient Pratihthana), but he would not start his day without a bath in the Godavari River. He was summoned and the king told him his predicament. Kokāsa accepted the challenge and assured the king that the queen could have the darshana of the sikhara within a week's time. Kokāsa then began to carve out the sikhara within a week and saved the royal couple from their predicament. The temple was then named after the queen as Manikeshwar and the king established a settlement at the site."

Evidently, the architect of the Kailasa temple was Kokāsa. Medieval literature eulogizes Kokāsa to be the incarnation of Vishvakarma. He erected the Kailasa Cave-temple on the request of the King Ela or Aila of Achalapur and his queen Manikavati. Since the Kailasa temple was erected following the religious vow of queen Manikavati, the Kailasa was called "Manikeshwar Temple" in ancient times.

The Date of Queen Manikavati of Achalapura

Achalapura (close to ancient Amaravati, Maharashtra) was the ancient kingdom of central India. It appears that Achalapura was the capital of a clan of Aila dynasty before the rise of Pratihthana (Paithan) during the reign of Satavahanas. Sanskrit poet Dandi records that Bharavi's ancestors migrated from Anandapur of north-western India and settled in Achalapura. Thus, Achalapura was an ancient city and older than Paithan city of Satavahanas. According to an excerpt published in 1801 in the sixth volume of the Asiatic Researches or Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the name of the king was Ela or Aila who built the city of Elapura. He also excavated the temples, and built the fortress of Devagiri (Daulatabad). According to Puranas, Aila kings belonged to the Lunar dynasty.

Unfortunately, there is no credible information about the time of Aila king and his queen Manikavati. In all probability, they lived before the rise of the Satavahana dynasty in

Maharashtra. Therefore, Kailasa temple might have been erected in pre-Satavahana period. It may also be noted that the Kailasa temple was the first cave-temple of the hills of Ellora.

The Chronology of Ellora Caves:

In view of the above, we can summarize the following chronology of Ellora caves:

- Early Phase - Hindu Caves (13-29) : Satavahana Period (100-300 CE)
- Middle Phase – Buddhist Caves : Vakatakas of Vatsagulma Period (450-600 CE)
- Later Phase – Jain Caves : Rashtrahuta Period (750-900 CE)

If we correct the chronological error considering the epoch of the Saka era (583 BCE) and the epoch of Buddha Nirvana (1865 BCE), the chronology of Ellora caves would be:

- Early Phase - Hindu Caves (13-29) : Satavahana Period (1100-800 BCE)
- Middle Phase – Buddhist Caves : Vakatakas of Vatsagulma Period (700-500 BCE)
- Later Phase – Jain Caves : Rashtrakuta Period (200 BCE-200 CE)

References:

1. Dhavalikar, MK, "Kailasa – The Stylistic Development and Chronology", Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute, Vol 41, 1982, pp. 33-45.
2. Burgess J and Bhagwanlal Indraji, "Inscriptions from The Cave-Temples of Western India", Bombay, 1881, p. 92.
3. Burgess J and Bhagwanlal Indraji, "Inscriptions from The Cave-Temples of Western India", Bombay, 1881, p. 96.
4. Epigraphica Indica, Vol IV, p. 342.
5. Indian Antiquary, Vol XII, pp.156-165.
6. Epigraphica Indica, Vol XXV, pp. 25-31.
7. Mirashi VV, "Inscriptions of The Kalachuri-Chedi Era", Vol II, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 555-567.
8. Dhavalikar, MK, "Kailasa – The Stylistic Development and Chronology", Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute, Vol 41, 1982, pp. 33-45.