

Bhaja Cave Architecture

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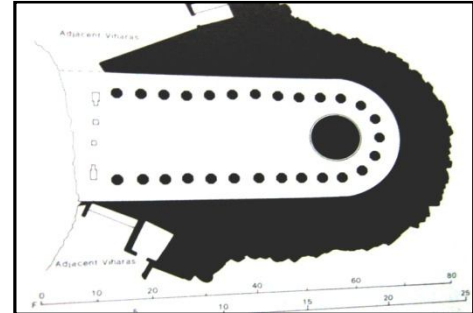
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The Bhaja caves (18°44'N; 73°29' E) is located on a hill near the village of Bhaja, 1 mile from the Malavali railway station on the Mumbai-Pune line. The caves are executed during 2nd century B.C to 1st century A.D. is situated at a height of about 120 m from the ground level and all facing west. There are altogether 22 caves at the site. The Bhaja caves consist of Chaitya-grihas with or without decorations. Cave no 19 is the oldest and has deities sculpted on the front veranda. The cave consists of on its façade mortise holes indicating that the usage of wooden appendage was in practice.



The river Indrayani is located near by and waters the valley. The area was also in occupation during medieval period is attested by two Maratha forts, Lohagarah and Visapur along the adjoining hill top. The donor inscriptions noticed here do not attribute to any particular ruling family or dynasty. However an inscription datable to 2nd century A.D. as found on the back wall of a cistern records the donation of Mahathi Kosikiputa Vihnudata, can be attributed to the caves. Another two inscription inscribed on the wooden beam below the vault are short and dedicatory in nature and datable to 2nd century B.C. The survival of this original inscription on the wooden beams indicates that they have survived for the past 2200 years. The excavations here consist of *Chaityagriha*, viharas and podhis. The most prominent among the excavations is the *Chaityagriha*. The Bhaja Monastery consists of two *chaityagrihas* (No: 12 and 16). There are 13 lenas, out of which three are partly finished, two mandapas, five open Panurapdhis (Cisterns) again three more cisterns. There are recesses and group of rock cut Stupas. These are one of the earliest caves in western India. Some caves bears Asikan Brahmi inscriptions. The cave 12 still has the evidence of wooden ribs. These shows prototype of wooden imitation. On the plan it consists of a large apsidal hall

measuring 17.08 mtrs in length and 8.13 mtrs in width. The hall divided into a central nave and side aisles divided by 27 pillars in two straight row which forms a semi circle at the back.

The ceiling of the nave is vaulted and original wooden beams are fixed. The pillars are plain octagons and they taper inwards, as it would have been required in wooden structures as this is a copy of an existing wooden structure. The inward slope of pillars is required in wooden structure to cope up with outward thrust from the top. A stupa is placed at the back for worship measuring 3.45 mtrs in diameter. The stupa has a prominent hemispherical dome on a cylindrical drum crowned by a railing pattern (Harmika) and provision of hole for a top for inserting a wooden umbrella.

Cave 18 is a monastery and consists of a rectangular hall with a front pillared verandah. The hall has two cells each on the back and right side, while on the left side is a bench. Unlike the pillars of the *chaityagriha* the pillars have square base and top with octagonal shape at the middle. Two doors from the verandah lead to the hall; they are flanked by lavishly bejeweled dwarfpalas. The verandas of this monastery have two famous sculptures relief which are most important. One depicts a royal personage attended by two women, driving in a chariot driven by four horses, which tramples on a demonic figure.

The person in royal attire has been identified by some scholars as Surya. To the left of the door is depicted a person driving an elephant carrying an ankusha (elephant goad), with attendants carrying a banner and spear. The figure has been identified by some of Indra.

Apart from cave 18, which is highly decorative and elaborate, the group of caves at Bhaja has other monasteries of simple type, hall with verandah, the former having cells, at one, two or three sides. Some exceptions are also noticeable, like the ones with a circular cell and a stupa inside; circular cell with oblong verandah etc.