

Patronage, Composition and Iconography in Rock-cut Temples at Badami and Aihole

Niharika Sankrityayan¹

Between sixth and eighth centuries C.E. there was a flow of activity at the Brahmanical¹ sites of Badami, Aihole, Mahakuta and Pattadakal. The Chalukyas of Badami distributed their cave ventures all over their empire. The easy availability of raw material at each site certainly played an important role. Also, the continuation of preceding cave monuments in the vicinity had a substantial character. Many scholars are of the opinion that the Badami caves are distinctive as they are very intimately associated with the workmanship at Ellora. Irrespective of similarities and influences, the Badami caves are indicative of a centralized control in patronage and perhaps even of craft stimulus.² The key imperial patrons in this area were the Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas. There was an enormous desire to stabilize Brahmanism and to re-establish its ritual traditions by these kingdoms, which would earn merit to them along with political stability. The caves were hence carved with rich iconography which can be seen as the loud declaration of Brahmanical faith. One can notice that Buddhism was consciously expelled but Jainism was endorsed and sometimes promoted at state levels.³

Chalukya rock cut temples exist at two sites of Badami and Aihole. At Badami, there are three Brahmanical caves and one Jain cave. Cave 1 is of Ēaiva affiliation, Cave 2 & 3 is Vaiçōava and Cave 4 is dedicated to Jaina tirthankara Parçevanath. At Aihole, the Rāvaōa Phadi cave has Ēaiva affiliation. There is also a two storeyed Buddhist temple on the Meguti hill where in the front, a headless statue of Buddha is placed.⁴ Close to the Buddhist temple stands the Jain temple, dated to 634 C.E. with an inscription consisting of poems in Sanskrit composed by Ravikriti, the court author of Pulakeçin II.⁵ The composition gives an account of the Chalukya family and the exploits of his royal patron. The Jaina cave temple is placed in the southern side of Meguti hill. At either end of the vestibule are deeply sculpted figures of Parçevanatha (left) and Bahubali (right), both with female attendants.⁶ The chronology of the Chalukya caves, however, seems unclear. Gary Tartakov⁷ is of the opinion that the excavations at Aihole began in the middle of the sixth century and culminated at Badami in Cave 3 which was finished in 578 C.E.⁸ While James Burgess⁹ argues that the sequence of the caves was 3, 2, 1. Tartakov and Odile Divakaran¹⁰ strongly believe that the order is 1, 2 and 3. Since the cave temples are labelled 1 to 4 in an ascending series, George Michell points out that this numbering does not necessarily reflect the sequence in which they were excavated.¹¹ If one follows Michell's building chronology and the four phase scheme proposed by him, in the first phase of the rock cut architecture, during the reigns of Pulakeçin I and Kirttivarman I, Badami caves 1 to 4 were excavated along with RāvaGa Phadi and Jaina/Buddhist caves in Aihole. Certainly these caves are the earliest evidence of Chalukya art. But how far are they indigenous, whether any existing structural buildings are of the same period and what connections could possibly be identified between cave temples and structural temples are some unanswered questions.

¹ Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.