

History of the Art of India, Part I: Origins to Mughals



OLLI
Spring 2024

Week 4



Gupta Art

Gupta Art

- A. Gupta: History and Buddhist art**
- B. Gupta: Brahmanical art**
- C. Gupta: Ajanta**

A. Gupta: History and Buddhist art

A1. History

A2. Buddhist art style and workshops

A3. Mathura workshop

A4. Sarnath workshop

A5. Metal sculpture

A6. Terracotta

A. Gupta: History and Buddhist art

A1. History

- Gupta empire emerged in Bihar ca. 320... dominated north India
- Emulating Mauryan empire, established capital at Pataliputra
- Zenith under Chandra Gupta II 375-415 (Note: not Chandragupta Maurya)
- Ruled till late 5C or early 6C



A1. History

- **Classic period of Indian arts and sciences**
 - **Visual arts: Sculpture, earliest surviving painting**
 - **Lit: Poetry/plays (Kalidasa), prose, Purāṇas (epics, basis for modern Hinduism)**
 - **Math: Invention of zero and Arabic numerals (Arabs call math “the Hindu art”)**
 - **Astronomy: Length of solar year, spherical earth rotating on axis, lunar eclipse**
 - **Seafaring: To Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia**
- **Cf. Roman empire**

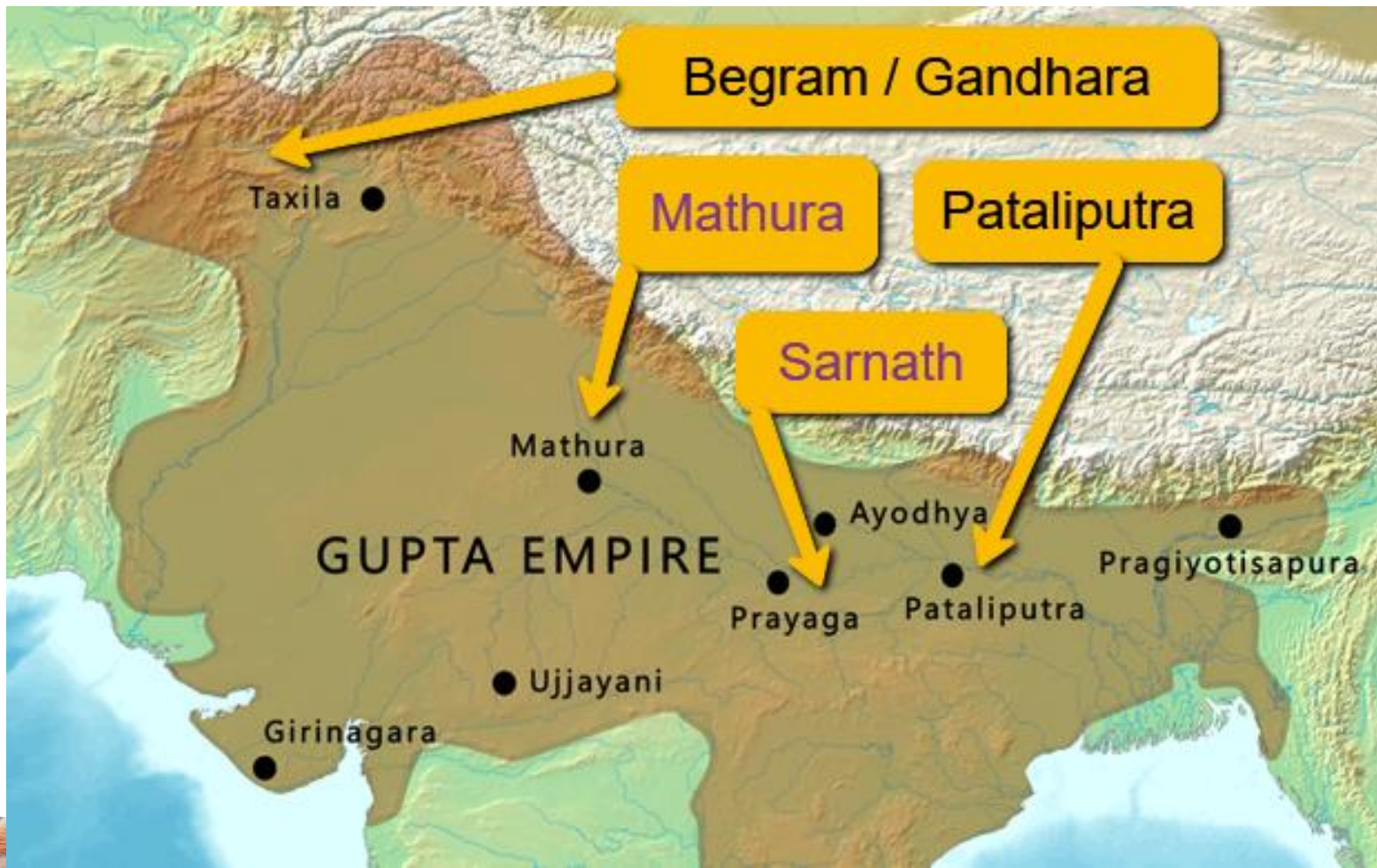
A. Gupta: History and Buddhist art

A2. Buddhist art style and workshops

- Form and iconography of the Buddha figure created during Kushan period became dominant during Gupta period
- Gupta art combined elements of Kushan Gandhara and Mathura
 - e.g., from Gandhara: robe covering both shoulders
 - e.g., from Mathura: full-bodied form
- Buddha face and head in Gupta art: downward-looking r/t spiritual preoccupation... snail-shell curls on head and ushnisha (topknot)
- Sculpture grew out of Kushan Buddhist art of Mathura

A2. Buddhist art style and workshops

- Two major workshops
 - Mathura, using local red sandstone
 - Sarnath, using tan sandstone (~ Ashoka's columns)



A. Gupta: History and... art

A3. Mathura workshop

- Standing Buddha from Jamalpur
- Red sandstone
- Monumental simplicity, refined realism
- Calm, inner tranquility, spiritual other-worldliness
- RT hand probably showed **abhaya mudra**
- Inscription on pedestal: installed by monk Yasadinna
- **SO: Monastic patronage**

Standing Buddha, red sandstone, ca. 5C, Jamalpur Mound (Bihar), Government Museum, Mathura



A3. Mathura workshop

- Halo: concentric circles with decorative patterns
- Head and ushnisha completely covered with “snail curl” motif
- Heavy eyelids direct the figure’s gaze inward
- Gown clings closely to the body... almost disappears
Defined by string-like folds (element from Gandhara)
- Sensuous body visible beneath

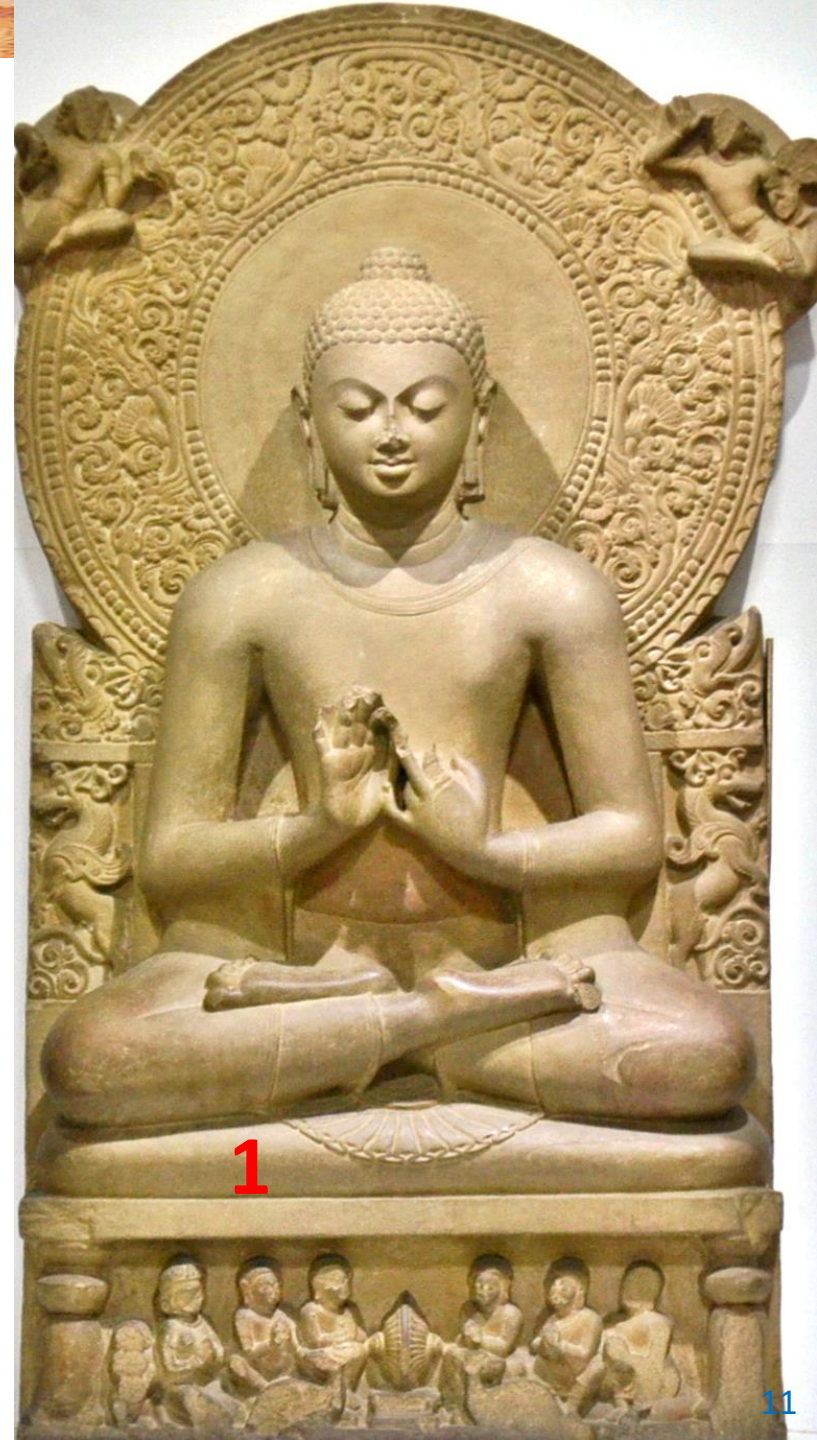


A. Gupta: History and... art

A4. Sarnath workshop

- Seated Buddha preaching the law, 5C
- Tan sandstone
- Shows the essence of Gupta art: balance between refined simplicity + decoration
- Dignity & stability of the form
- Decorative cloth (1) under Buddha's feet echoes the decorative halo above
- Hands in dharma chakra mudra

Seated Buddha preaching the law, Gupta Sarnath, 5C, tan sandstone, 5' 3", Archeological Museum, Sarnath



A4. Sarnath workshop

- “Strings” eliminated in smooth robe
- Robe indicated only by hem line at neck, wrists, ankles
- Ushnisha & large ears (2,3)
- 2 heavenly beings fly near top of halo (4) (celebrating the Miracle of the First Sermon)
- 2 lions flank the Buddha’s elbows (5) (lion roar of the Buddha’s spiritual authority)
- Pedestal: 6 devotees worship a wheel flanked by 2 deer (6) (Wheel of the Law and Deer Park)



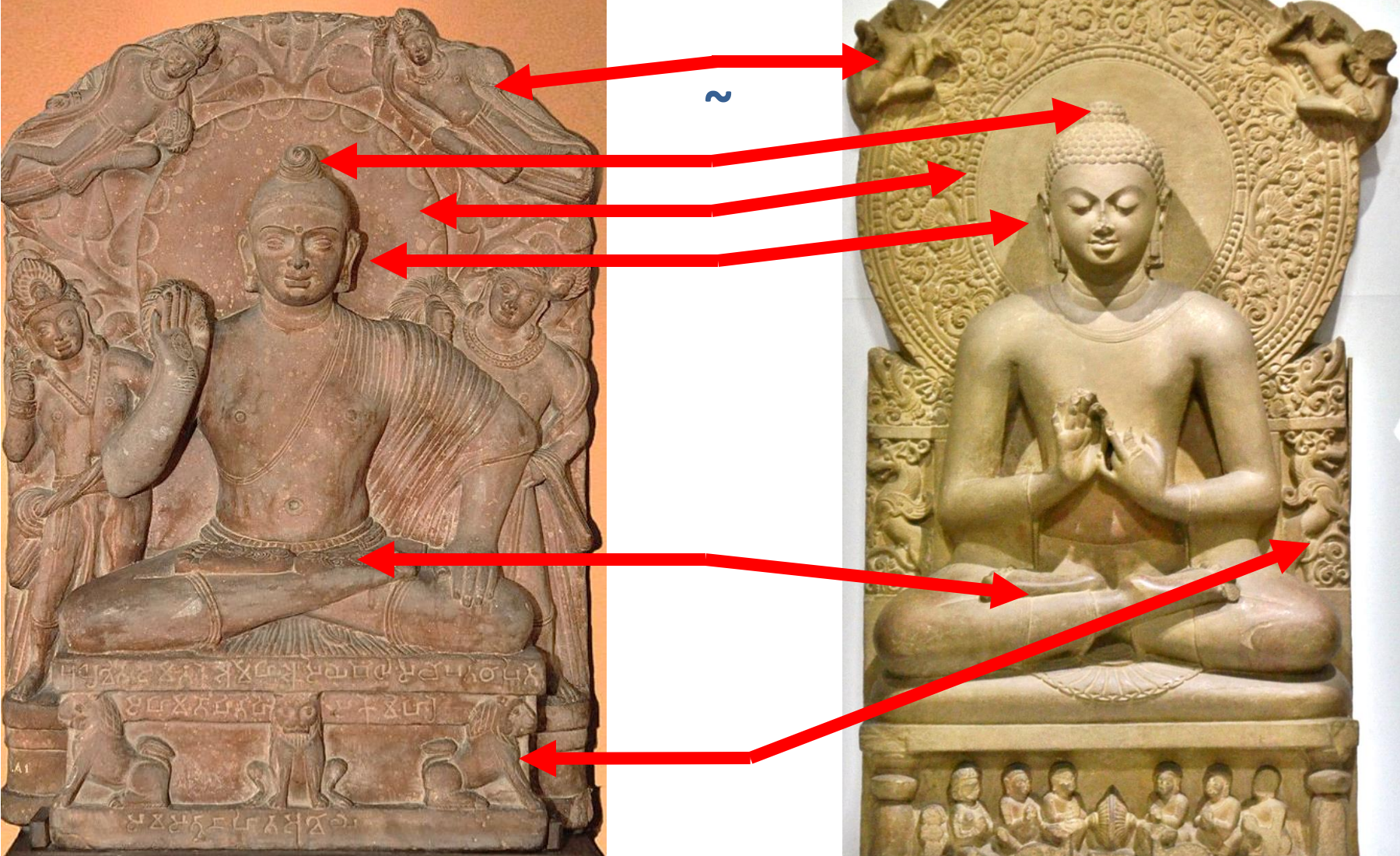
A4. Sarnath workshop

Details:

- Heavenly beings (2) →
- Winged lions (3) →
- Wheel flanked by 2 deer (4)



Recalls iconography of Buddha from Kushan Mathura



Buddha seated on lion throne, Mathura, 1C CE, red sandstone, 27", Mathura Mus.

Diffs: mudra / red VS tan sandstone / outgoing VS introspective pose

A4. Sarnath workshop

- Sophisticated craftsmanship
- **Craven:** Sublime example of Gupta Sarnath sculpture
- W/ establishment of std Buddha iconography and excellent craftsmanship, focus of Buddhist worship changed from stupa to temple with Buddha image
- Aesthetics: plain VS decorated; focal point; circle VS hor. line
- Gupta Buddha inspired artworks in China and throughout SE Asia



A. Gupta: History and... art

A5. Metal sculpture

- Cast bronze, standing Buddha, 591 CE
- ~ Sandstone Buddha... except halo & suggestion of movement
- folds of robe concentrated at edge of garment & stylized lines on arms and
- Inscription: dedicated by nun in Nepal; prob. made N India
- Licchavi: northern extension of Guptas in Nepal



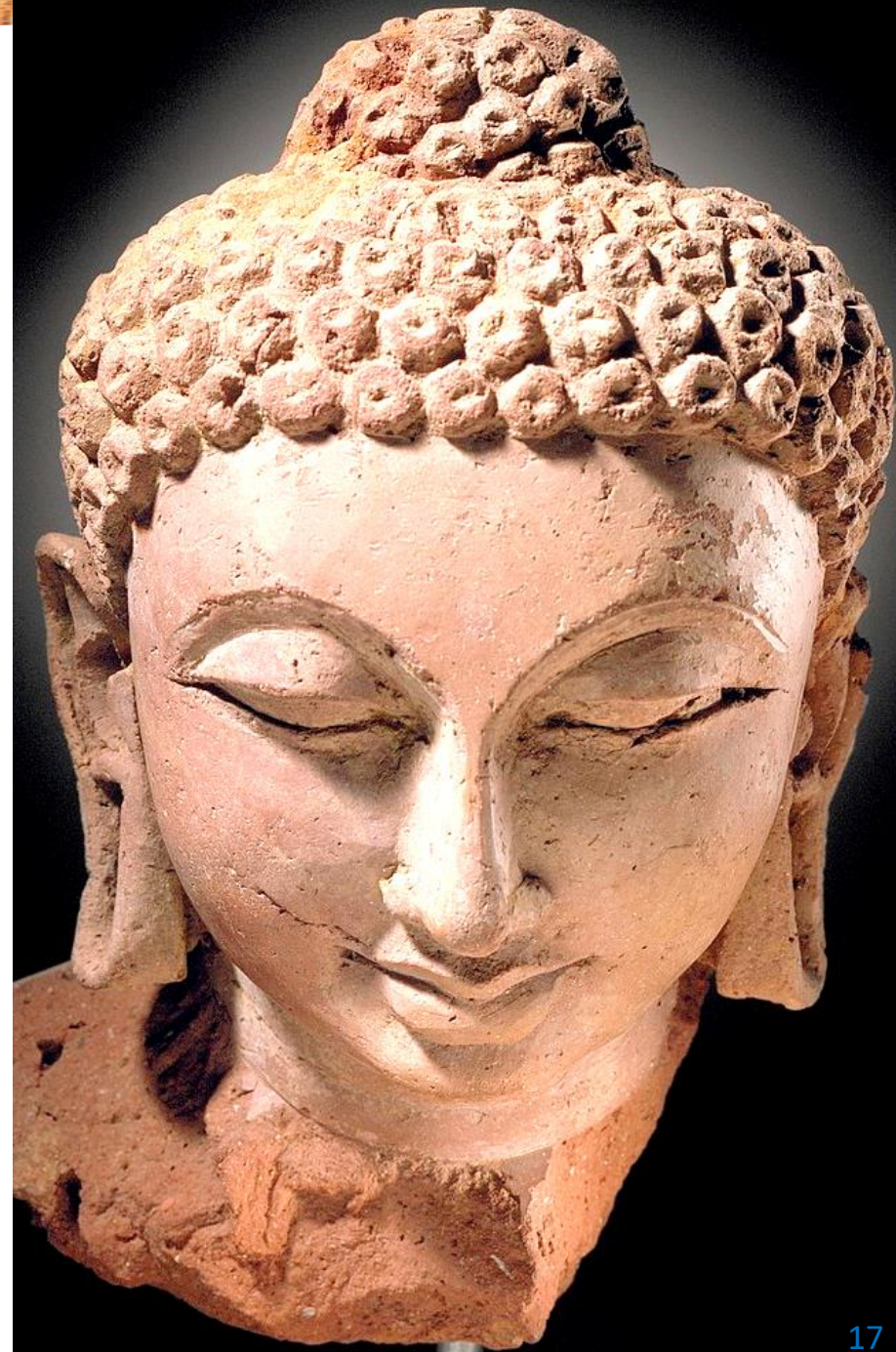
Standing buddha, bronze, 591 CE, dedicated by nun from Nepal, made in N India, 18 5/16" with base, Cleveland Museum of Art

A. Gupta: History and Buddhist art

A6. Terracotta

- Many terracotta statues produced in Gupta India
- Head of the Buddha from Gujarat (W of empire)
- Large ears, ushnisha, “snail curl,” heavy lids
- Gandhara features... stylized brows

Head of Buddha, terracotta, Devni Mori, Gujarat, 8” x 5” x 5.5”, 375-400 CE, LACMA



B. Gupta: Brahmanical art

B1. Introduction

B2. Udayagiri cave 5: Vishnu relief

B3. Udayagiri cave 6: Vishnu reliefs

B4. Udayagiri caves 4, 6: Various deities

B5. Other reliefs

B. Gupta: Brahmanical art

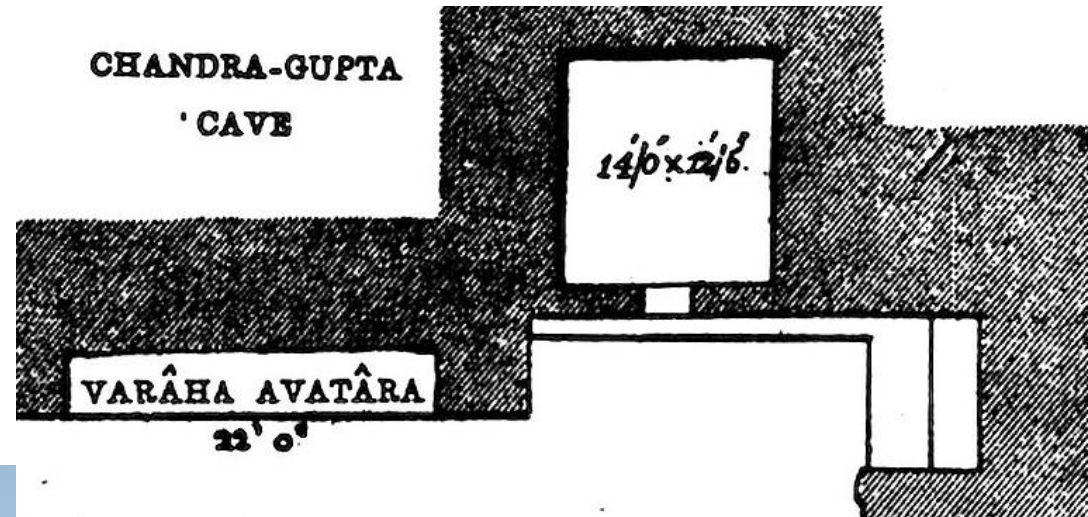
B1. Introduction

- In Gupta period, Buddhist art becomes less prominent, **brahmanical art** more so
- Guptas were Hindus; allowed Buddhists and Jains to practice their religions
- Buddhist rock-cut caves with their facades, chaityas, viharas: Bhaja (3C BCE), Karli (1C CE)
- Now under the Guptas: Earliest examples of Hindu art in rock-cut shrine at Udayagiri (near Bhopal, M.P., in W central India)
- 20 rock-cut caves after ca.400 CE (20 Hindu, 1 Jain)
- Several from reign of Chandra Gupta II (375-415)

B. Gupta: Brahmanical art

B2. Udayagiri cave 5: Vishnu relief

- View of hill
- Plan of cave 5



- High relief of Vishnu varāha avatāra (boar incarnation)
- Vishnu's 3d incarnation... churning cosmic ocean of milk...
- Goddess earth abducted... Vishnu returns, lifting her up



Vishnu varāhaavatāra, high relief, Udayagiri cave 5, 401-402 CE, 12' 8"

B2. Udayagiri cave 5: Vishnu relief

1) Vishnu as varāha... 2) Goddess earth

3, 4) Gods Brahma & Siva... SO: 3 great gods present

5, 9) Heavenly beings... 18, 19) Sages



B2. Udayagiri cave 5: Vishnu relief

15) Snake god with 7 hoods, worshiping Vishnu

16) Consort Lakshmi

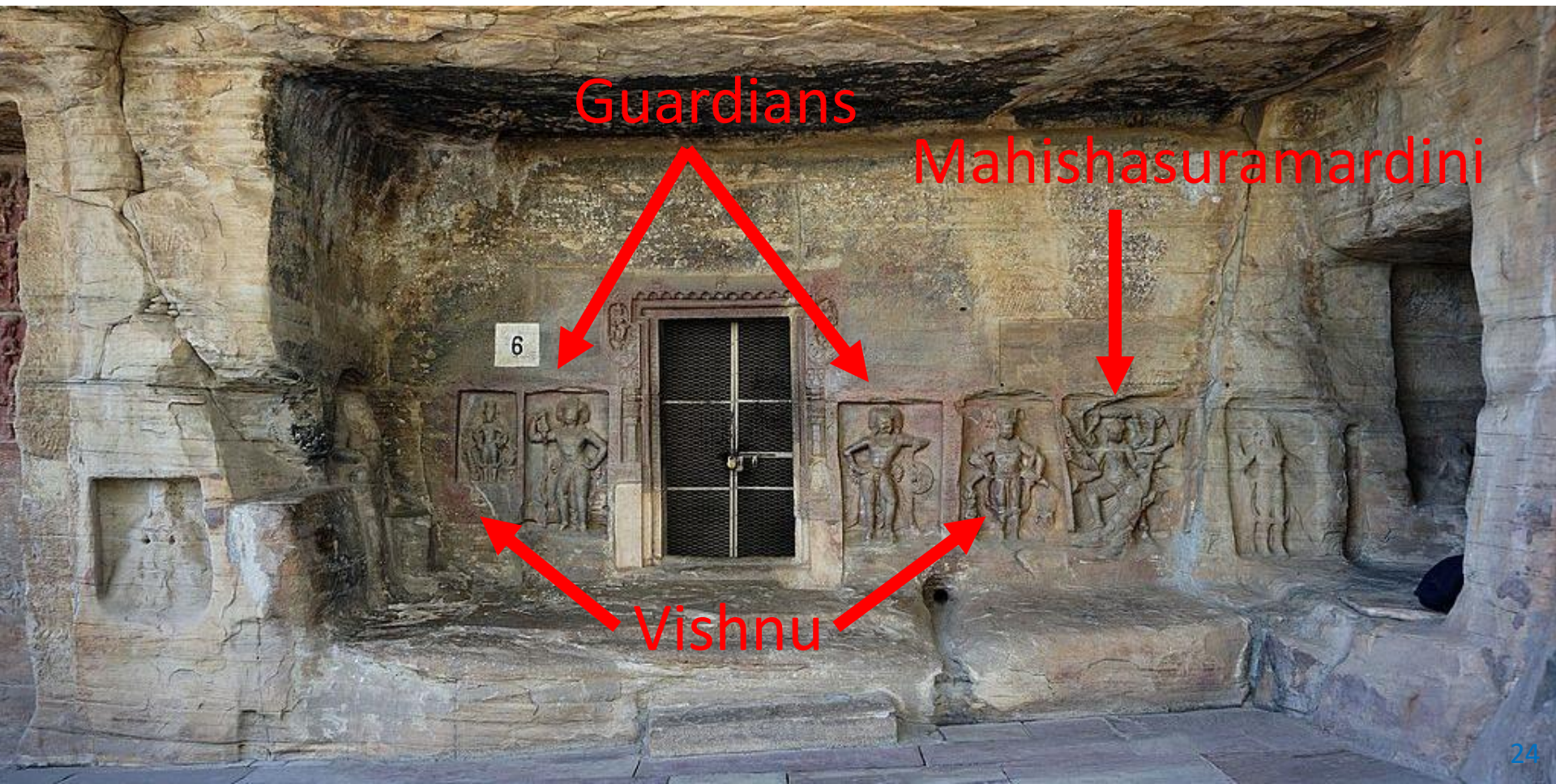
SO: An early Vishnu theology & iconography



B. Gupta: Brahmanical art

B3. Udayagiri cave 6: Vishnu reliefs

- Skt inscription: sponsored by Sanakanika, 402 CE



B3. Udayagiri cave 6: Vishnu reliefs

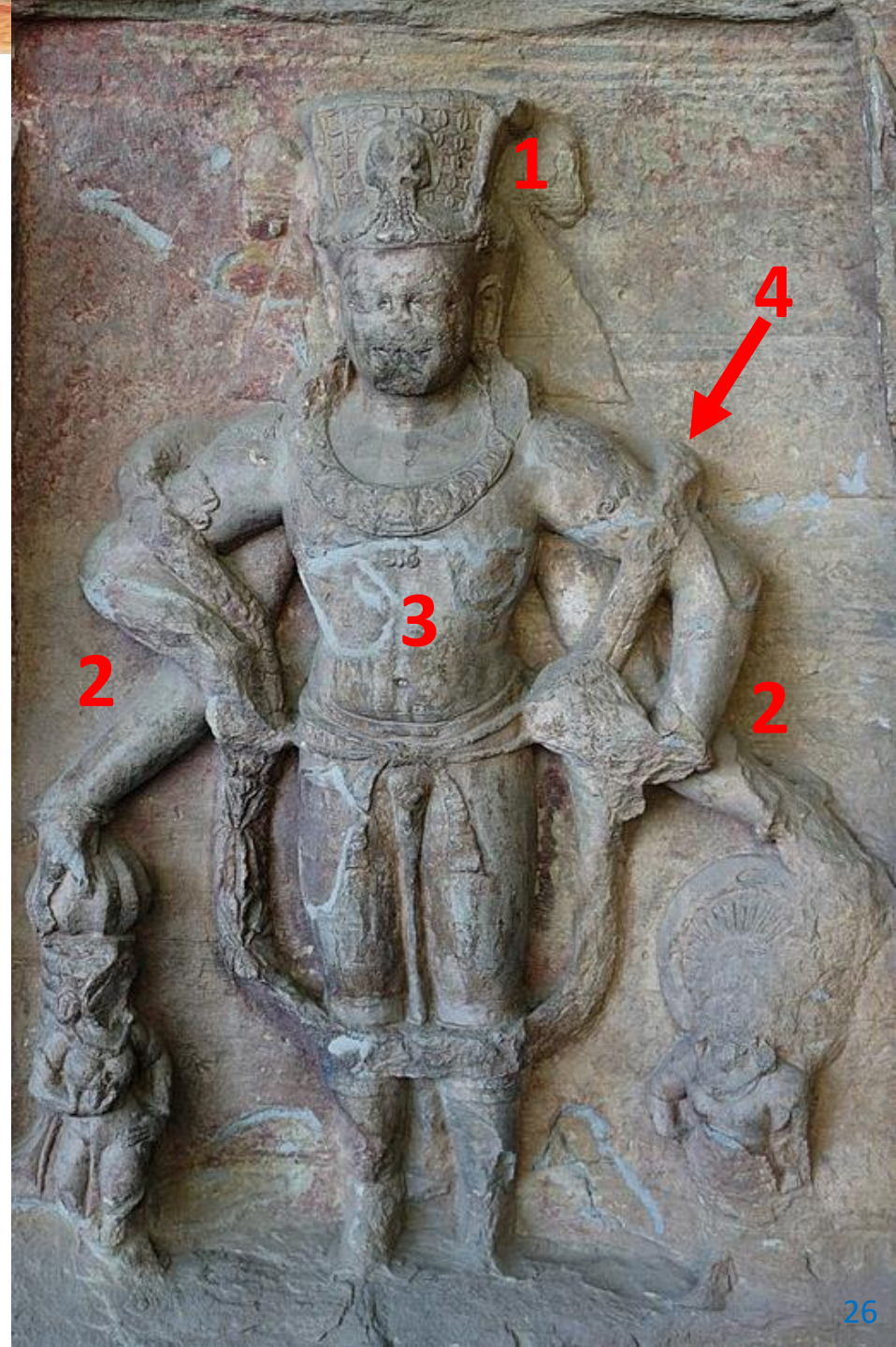
- Interior...



B3. Udayagiri cave 6: Vishnu reliefs

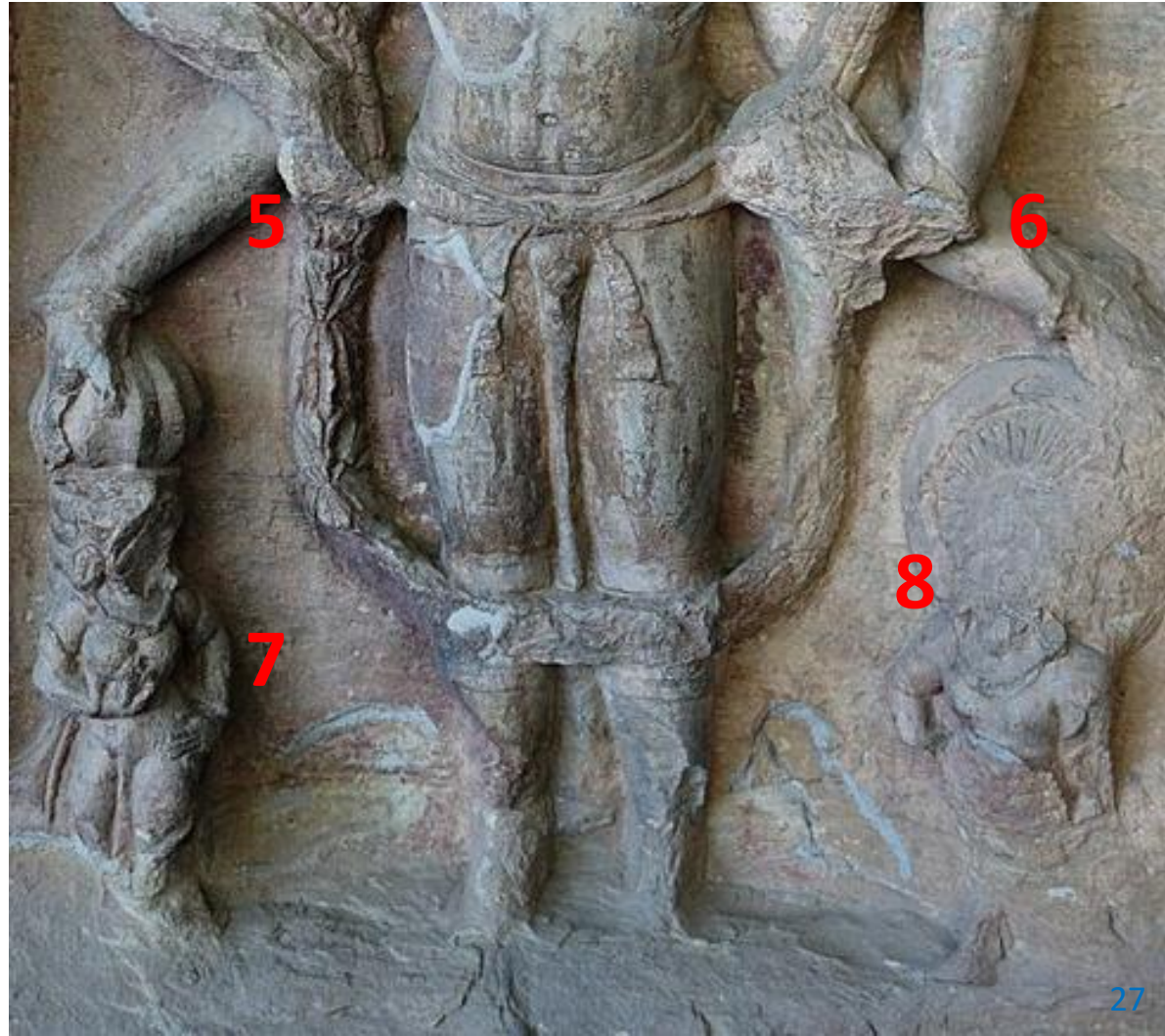
- From entrance wall:
relief of standing Vishnu
in niche on RT side of
doorway to cave 6 ...
- Jeweled crown on head
(1), 4 arms **(2)**
- Necklace w/ shrivatsa
jewel on chest **(3)**
- Garland draped around
his 2 upper arms **(4)**

Standing Vishnu with anthropomorphic
attributes, medium relief, Udayagiri
cave 6, 402 CE



B3. Udayagiri cave 6: Vishnu reliefs

- Hands damaged; probably RT (5) displayed abhaya mudra & LT (6) held conch shell
- Anthropomorphic representation of Vishnu's attributes at his sides:
 - His RT: mace, represented by female figure (7)
 - His LT: discus, represented by male figure (8)



B3. Udayagiri cave 6: Vishnu reliefs

- Compare w/ non-anthropomorphic attributes
- **SO:** variations in presenting the same iconography



Vishnu with non-anthropomorphic attributes, left of doorway, cave 6



B. Gupta: Brahmanical art

B4. Udayagiri caves 4, 6: Various deities

- 3 religious paths
- (1) We've seen
Vaishnavism
- Here in cave 6: **Durga as Mahishasuramardini**
 - 8 arms holding weapons
 - stands on and slays the buffalo demon
- **SO: Shaktism**



Udayagiri Cave 6, Mahishasura mardini,
medium relief, 402 CE

B4. Udayagiri caves 4, 6: Various deities

- In cave 4: Shiva linga on altar; SO: Shaivism
- In cave 6: Wall relief of Ganesha



- SO: religious eclecticism from very beginning of Hindu art



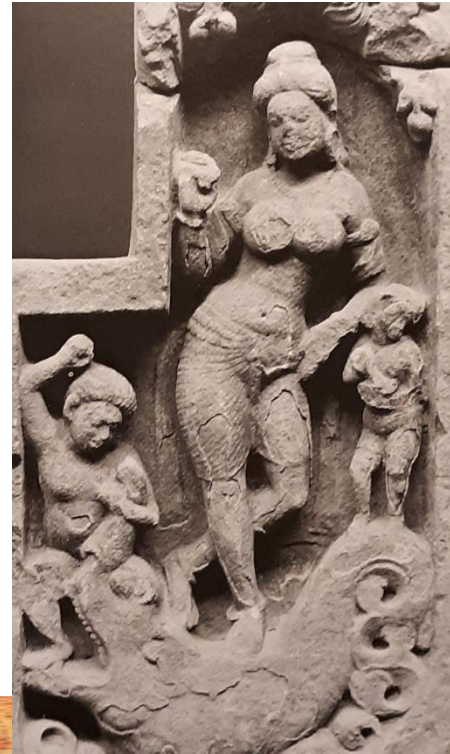
Udayagiri Cave 4, Shiva linga on altar, early 5C CE

Udayagiri Cave 6, Ganesha, medium relief, 402 CE

B. Gupta: Brahmanical art

B5. Other reliefs (example 1)

- Development of tradition: yakshi > river deity
- On doorway lintels at Udayagiri are female figures
- ~ lintel fig. from nearby temple at Beshnagar, c.500 CE
- Earlier yakshis transformed into Goddess Ganga



B5. Other reliefs (example 1)

- Goddess Ganga stands on top of a mythical creature, makara, ~ crocodile (1)
- ...voluptuously in tribhanga pose
- RT: small fig. worships her (2)
- LT: another figure subdues the makara (3)
- Goddess on makara is symbol of Ganges River...
- SO: Ganges as religious ideal
- SO: universal, not local: river is ca. 250 mi NE of Beshnagar



Goddess Ganga standing on makara, doorway lintel, temple of Beshnagar, sandstone, ca.500 CE, 30", Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

B. Gupta: Brahmanical art

B5. Other reliefs (ex. 2)

- Noteworthy brahmanical reliefs on walls of ruined Dashavatara temple at Deogarh
- Daśāvatāra = 10 incarnations (of Vishnu) e.g., varāha, Rama, Krishna
- Early Gupta temple in N Indian style (more later)

Daśāvatara temple at Deoghar, 5C
(completed ca.500 CE)



B5. Other reliefs (ex. 2)

The story:

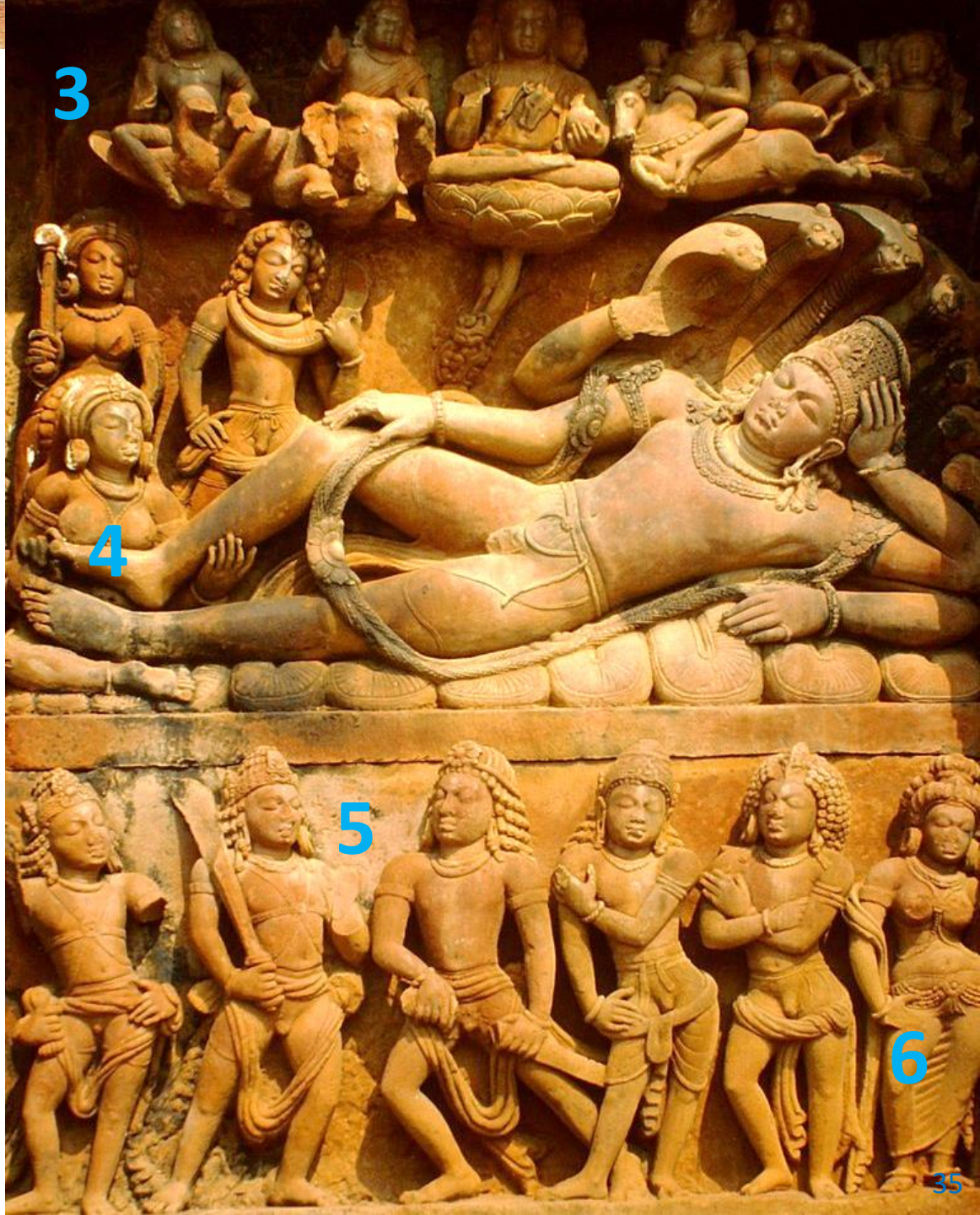
- 4-armed Vishnu the creator asleep on coils of serpent Ananta, floating on sea of milk
- Ananta's 7 heads (1) protect Lord Vishnu
- Vishnu dreams the universe into existence
- First event: Lord Brahma seated on a lotus (2)

Vishnu anantaśāyana, high relief on wall of Daśāvātara temple, Deogarh, U.P., ca.425



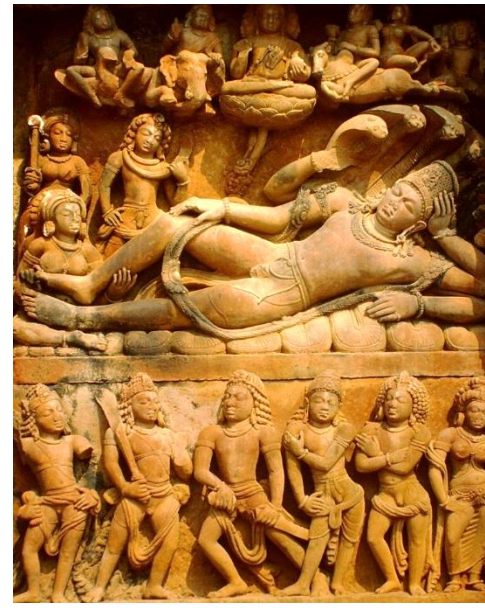
Iconography:

- At Brahma's sides: Indra, Shiva, and other gods (3)
- Goddess Lakshmi, Vishnu's dutiful spouse, massages his feet and legs (4)
- In panel below: 5 Pandava brothers (5) (from *Mahābhārata* story) and Draupadi (6), their common wife



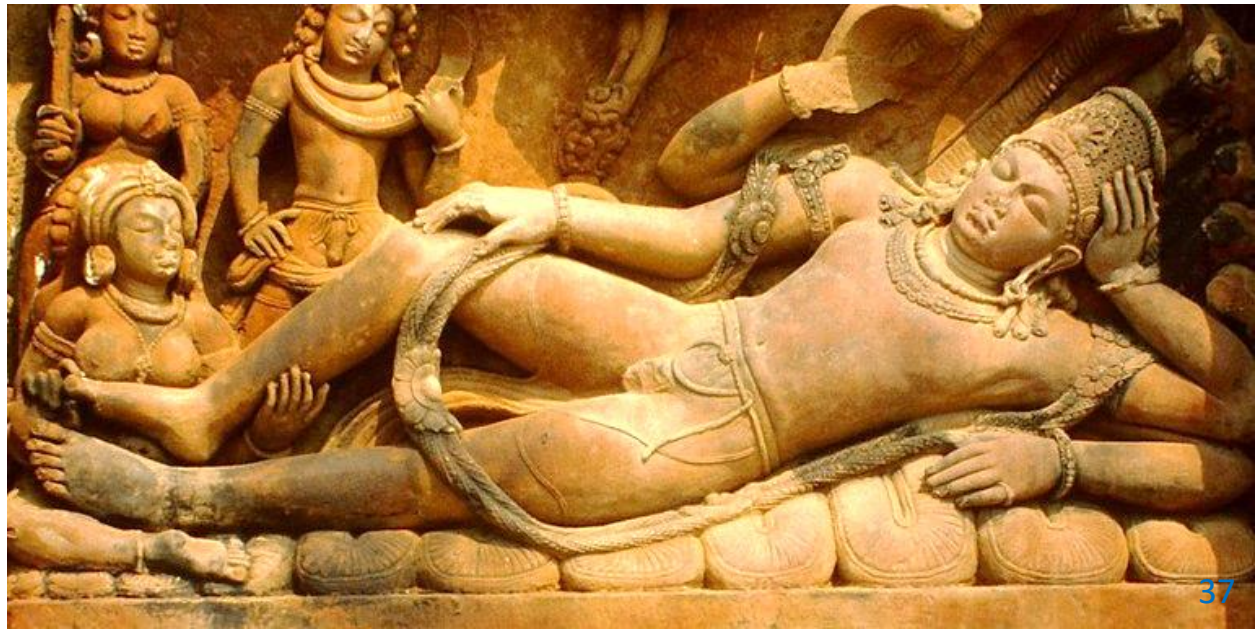
Theology:

- Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva... functions: Creator-Preserver-Destroyer...
- Temple as a whole is dedicated to Vishnu
- S side with **anantaśāyana** relief represents Vishnu as creator
- E side represents Vishnu as preserver
- N side represents Vishnu as destroyer
- **SO: a complete temporal theology of the universe**



Artistic style:

- Adoption of Buddhist style of relief sculpture, e.g., Mathuran Sarnath: smooth and simple forms (2C Bodhisattva)
- Perhaps recollection of narrative panels, as in Sanchi gateway (1C BCE)
- **SO: Hindu sculpture from Buddhist sculpture**



C. Gupta: Ajanta

C1. Introduction

C2. Technique, style, and other points

C3. Cave 1 paintings

C4. Cave 17 paintings

C. Gupta: Ajanta

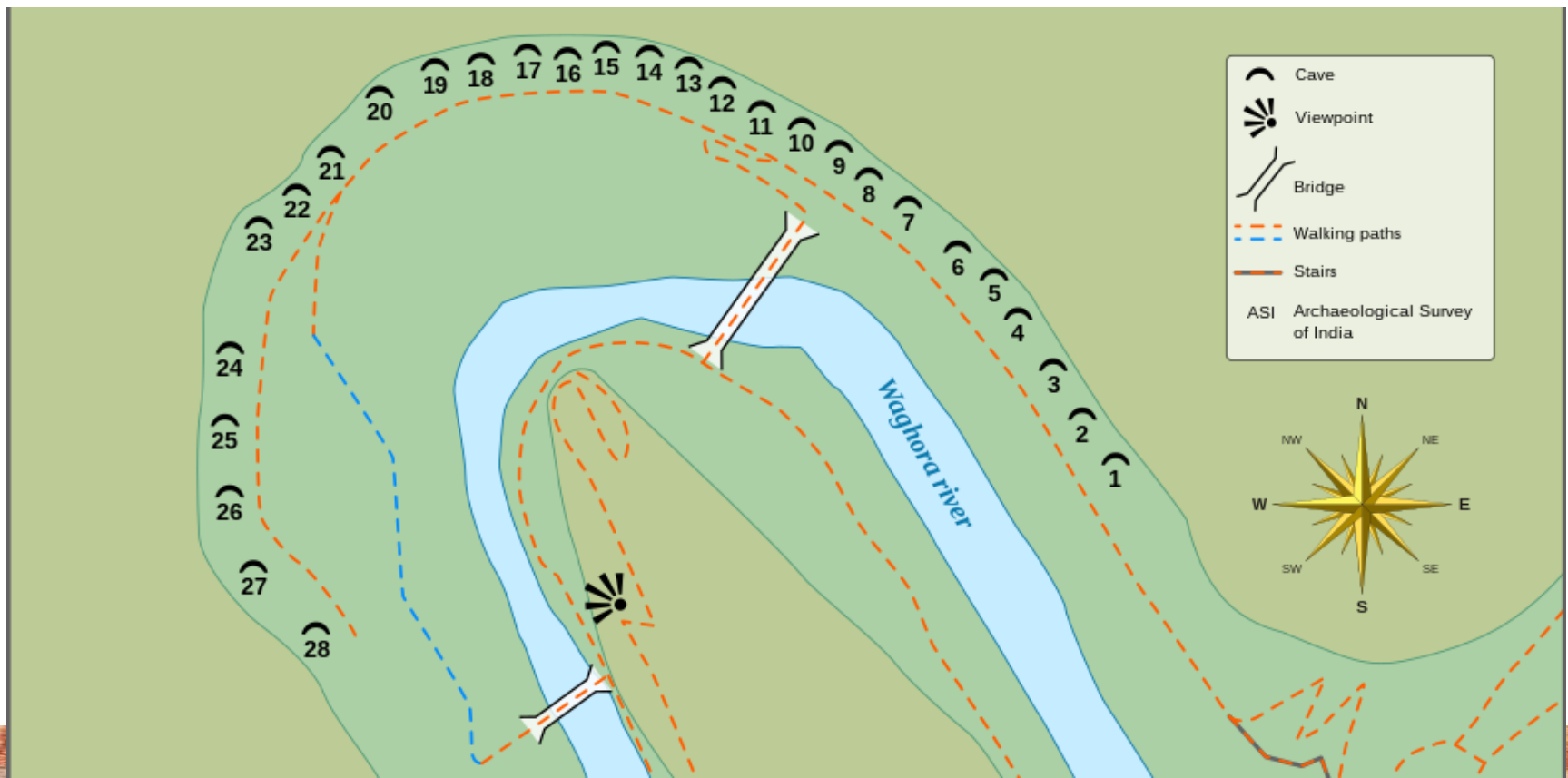
C1. Introduction

Among rock-cut sites in India, an elaborate example:
29 viharas & chaityas at Ajanta, horseshoe-shaped



C1. Introduction

- Begun 2C BCE (noted in week 2)... continued through Guptas in 5-6C
- **SO:** Hindu patronage of Buddhist sites (but also Hindu)
- **Architecture, but here: Magnificent painting in 5C**



C1. Introduction

- **Earliest painting from 1C BCE (in cave 10, earliest cave, 2C BCE)**
 - Fragments of scene of a rāja and his retinue
 - Suggests that there was already a tradition of wall painting (alas, lost!)
- **Gupta paintings 5-6C (mostly ca.425-500)**
- **Increased lushness of Buddhist sculpture and painting**
- **Over-abundance of images indicates triumph of Mahayana Buddhism (recall from Kushan...)**
- e.g., Cave 19 elaborate chaitya façade, late 5C
- Cf. austere chaitya facades, e.g., Shunga Bhaja, 2C BCE

- Same time as Hindu sculpture coming into its own
- **SO:** Hindu gods now asserting themselves on Buddhist art
- After 6C, site abandoned and overgrown... discovered by British soldiers 1817



Bhaja cave, chaitya façade, ca. 100 BCE



Ajanta, cave 19, chaitya façade, 5C CE

C. Gupta: Ajanta

C2. Technique, style, and other points

- **Technique**
 - Stone surface coated with clay mixed with cow dung to 1-2” thickness, then with lime plaster
 - On plaster wet or dry (some argument whether true or false **fresco**), outlines added with red cinnabar and subjects defined with **terre verte**
 - Paint figures with colors from natural water-soluble pigments, local except for lapis lazuli
 - Brown or black lines added

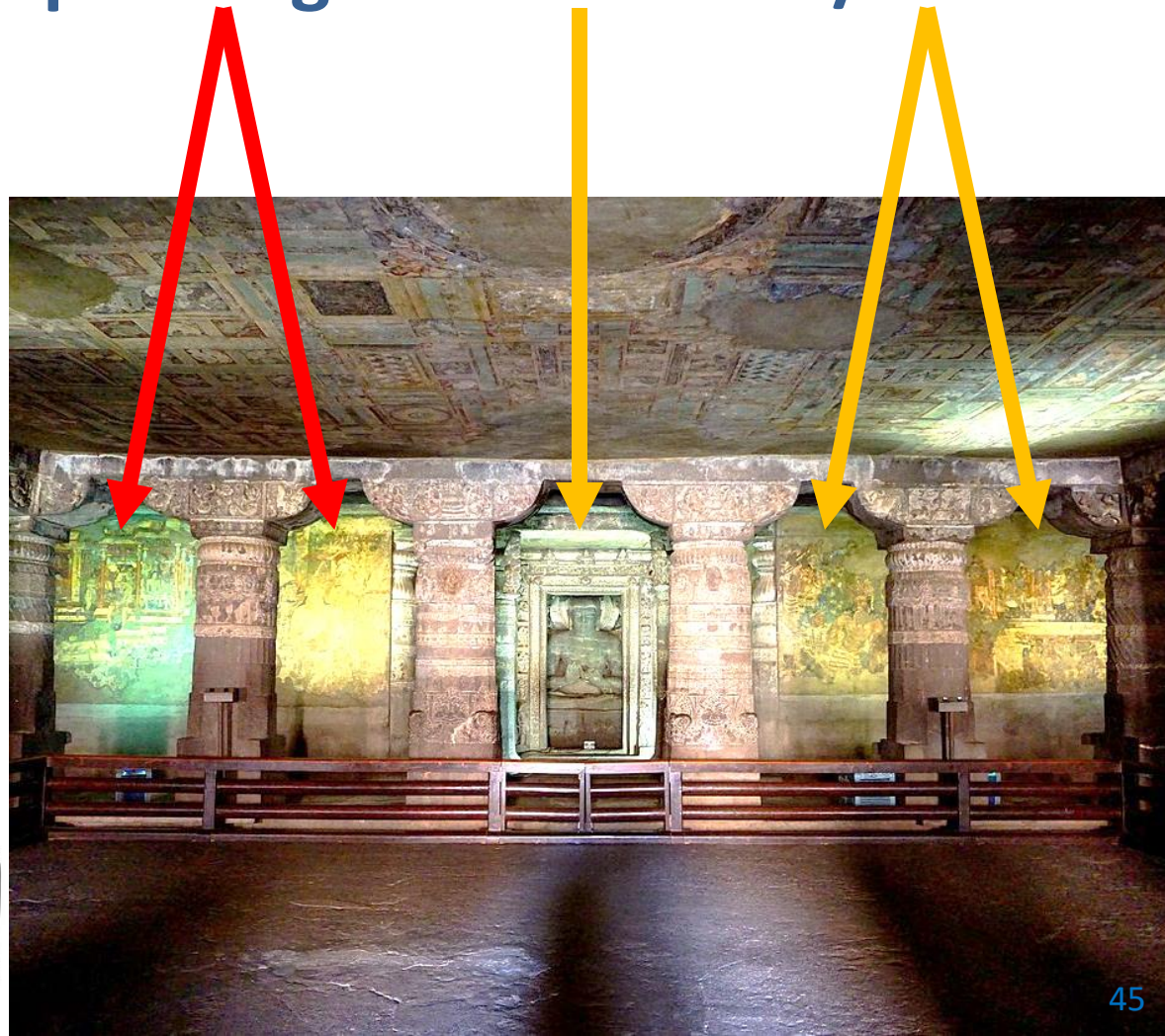
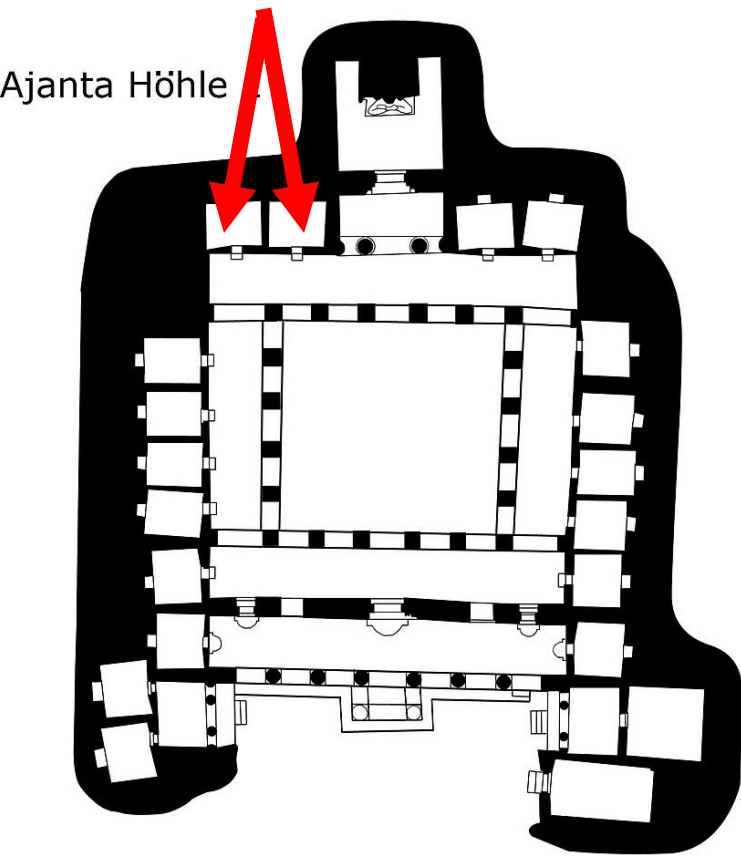
C2. Technique, style, and other points

- **Style**
 - Multiple perspectives, & fg figures overlap bg figures
 - **Hierarchic scaling**
 - Some shading, only for 3D effects (not light effects)
- **Other points**
 - **Subject matter: mostly incarnations of the Buddha from Jataka tales**
 - Some earlier Euro scholars (e.g., Craven) cf Ajanta ptgs to Euro Ren. ptgs, but not so for later scholars (e.g., Dehejia)
 - **Audience: patrons, monks, visitors**
 - **Function: perhaps as aid to monks' meditation**
 - **Artists: several workshops, resulting in some discrepancies in paintings**

C. Gupta: Ajanta

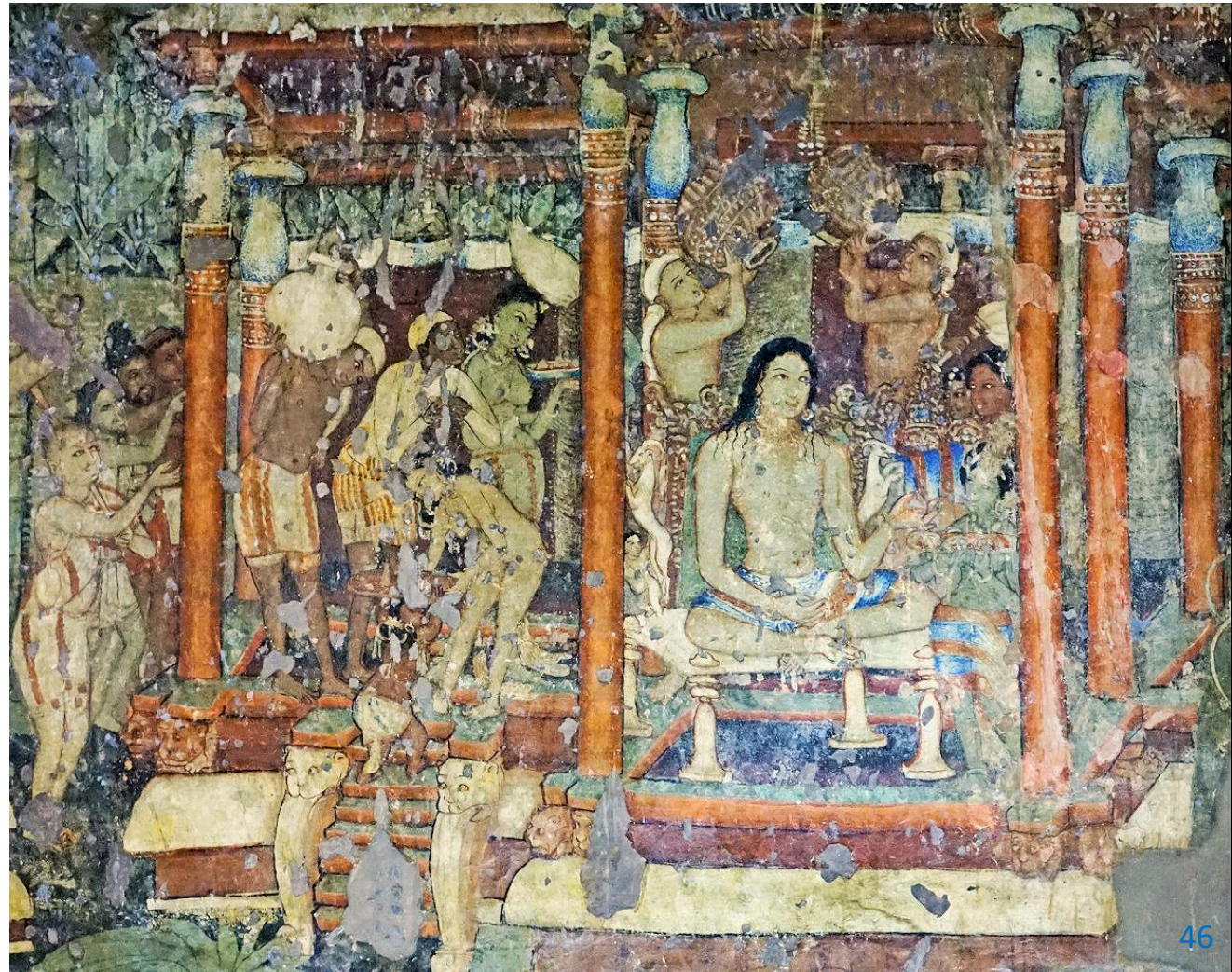
C3. Cave 1 paintings

Plan and wall with 4 paintings and shrine w/
Buddha statue



C3. Cave 1 paintings: Prince Mahajanaka

- Scene from the *Mahajanaka Jataka* (past lives of B)
- Figures in an architectural setting
- Rudimentary perspective
- Hierarchic scaling
- Blue, orange, green, yellow,
- **SO**: reserved palette



Prince Mahajanaka
bathing, wall painting,
Ajanta Cave 1, 5C CE

C3. Cave 1 paintings: Bodhisattva Padmapani

- **Tribhanga pose**
- **Rich jewelry (crown & sacred cord)**
- **Hierarchic scaling**
- **Calm expression w/in crowded figs. suggests spiritual...**
- **Minimal shading**
- **Absence of shadow suggests unworldly light...**

Compassionate bodhisattva
Padmapani, wall painting, Ajanta
Cave 1, 5C CE

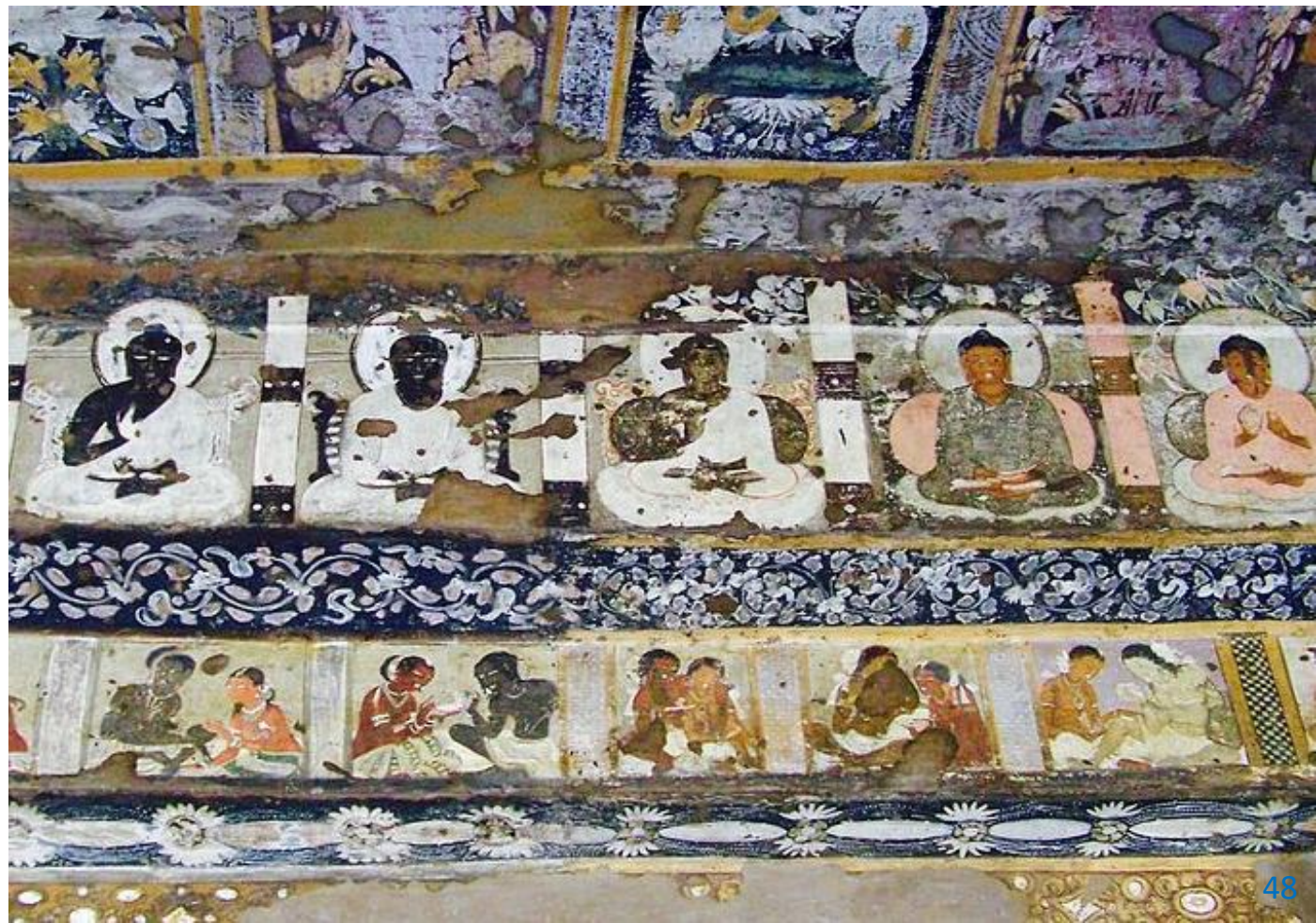


C. Gupta: Ajanta

C4. Cave 17 paintings (ex. 1): Above door lintel

- Top-down: decorative ceiling, row of Buddhas, band with leaf-and-vine motif, row of seated couples
- Different artists:
motif differs
Lt/Rt
- Buddhas differ
Lt/Rt in
color &
gesture

Buddhas and couples,
wall painting, Ajanta
Cave 17, 5C CE



C4. Cave 17... (ex. 2): Prince Vishvantara & queen

- Motif (common later) of Indian ptg: Lovers in a pavilion
- Here: Scene from the *Vishvantara Jataka*, 5C
- The story... Prince tells queen he's banished from father's kingdom
- Lovers' embrace
- SO: Erotic overtones in rel. ptg. & setting
- Perspective (?)

Prince Vishvantara and queen
in a pavilion, wall painting,
Ajanta Cave 17, 5C



- cf. column capitals in cave 17 fresco of prince and queen & cave 19 high relief carving of a king and queen
- SO: Architectural self-referentiality



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Gupta Art