Ancient Buddhists Created Cave Temples Full of Sculptures

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Two thousand years ago, merchants in India had to travel over a huge mountain range to reach the country's busiest ports. The mountains were called the Western Ghats. Once these were crossed, the merchants could carry out profitable business deals with the Roman Empire.
Buddhist merchants traveled through the valleys and hills that made up these sprawling mountains. They created a religious refuge in the basalt rock by carving temples into it. These decorated places of worship survive today as relics from an ancient time. They provide rare physical evidence of the architectural traditions that existed in Buddhist society.

"We have no examples from this period that have survived apart from the caves," says David Efurd, a professor of art history. Efurd spent years photographing cave temples in Maharashtra, a state in western India. Efurd has visited and photographed some 70 cave temple sites in India, where he studied Buddhist architecture. Roughly half of these fell within his sphere of expertise: caves built and used between the second century B.C. and the third century A.D. This was about 2,000 years ago.

Some of the sites are easy to visit and popular with tourists from nearby towns. Others are so remote that Efurd had to trek for several hours before reaching them. He relied on the directions of local guides or even 19th-century maps. Through his research, Efurd has pieced together a picture of the eras in which these incredible structures were built.
A history of living in the caves

In the ancient world, architectural thinkers took advantage of rock because of its durability. In northeastern India, monks have lived in caves since Buddhism began around 2,500 years ago. According to early texts, simple caves used as dwellings were transformed over time. They later became spaces that had more decorations and were more architecturally creative. These inspired the caves found later in the Western Ghats.

Maharashtra has the greatest concentration of Buddhist cave temples in India. It is thought that the monks directed the construction of the temples, which were excavated along popular trade routes. Descriptions at the sites suggest there was a division of labor. This means some workers were simply involved in the heavy lifting, while others created the artistic elements.
Worship at the temples took place in the chaitya, or prayer hall. Traditionally the monk conducts the ceremony from the stupa, a dome-shaped monument at the end of the hall that holds sacred items. The chaitya pictured above consists of a large prayer hall and columns that border the cave. Lions are carved into the pillars at the entrance to the temple.

Full of decorations

The sites often consist of more than one temple. For example, there are several carved into the hillside at Ajanta, a village in Maharashtra. These caves, built in the 5th or 6th century, have some of the fanciest interior decorations. A few of their wall paintings survive to this day.
Yet some of the most impressive features of these temples are their sculptures. This photograph is an example of a tall statue of the Buddha, whose teachings led to the Buddhist religion. The statue is over 2,000 years old and appears to be in excellent condition. In each of the caves Efurd photographed, the walls and ceilings are engraved with religious patterns or figures. The sculptures found in the Buddhist caves are in effect permanently attached to the rock. That is why it’s rare to find them in museums.

The Indian government has labeled some of the caves as protected sites. There has also been some restoration work to maintain the interiors and exteriors of the temples. Yet the majority of the sites remain unchanged. They are a tribute to the workmanship and sheer strength of the basalt rock. Nearby religious spots that were carved into sandstone instead have collapsed in natural disasters.

Buddhism prospered in Maharashtra until the 11th and 12th century. It largely disappeared after that. Efurd believes the caves preserve a unique form of Buddhist art that history may have otherwise forgotten.