

Cave I

At the beginning of the horseshoe bend on the north side of the Ajanta site is the most magnificently painted *vihara* in India. Although there are no inscriptions in this cave to establish its date, on stylistic grounds it appears to be a little earlier than Cave 2, has inscriptions dating from the first half of the sixth century.

In this *vihara* the visitor is transported into a world of loveliness, in which the painter has achieved the highest standards of beauty in terms of both line and colour. Indeed, in this cave every painting conveys a sense of the painter's devotion to his task.

The cave formerly had a portico, but this collapsed before the Ajanta site was rediscovered in 1819. The plan of the *vihara* comprises a verandah, a large hall and a shrine beyond. The verandah, which is 64 ft (19.50 m) long, 9 ft 3 in. (2.82 m) wide and 13 ft 6 in. (4.11 m) high, has a cell at either end. A door in the centre leads into the grand hall, which is 64 ft (19.50 m) square.

There are twenty pillars in all, leaving aisles about 9 ft 6 in. (2.90 m) wide on all four sides. For a plan of this cave see p. 234.

The façade of Cave 1, which dates from the sixth century. This is the most magnificent example of a vihara (monastery) among all the rock-hewn temples of India. Originally, this cave had a porch which has collapsed. Above the pillars are several bands of skilfully carved reliefs depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha, as well as portrayals of contemporary life.



BELOW: A gentle prince brings an offering to the great Bodhisattva Vajrapani.



RIGHT: The Majesty of the Spirit is revealed through the divine aspect of the Bodhisattva Vajrapani, the Bearer of the Thunderbolt. This regal being, on the right of the entrance to the antechamber of the main shrine of Cave 1, is one of the most exalted masterpieces of Ajanta's art. The glorious workmanship of the jewelled crown is truly remarkable. In the centre of the crown is a damaged figure which, though not identifiable in its present state, is of immense significance in the study of Buddhist iconography. This is the earliest known depiction of a figure wearing the head-dress of a Bodhisattva. In later Buddhist art such figures in the crown indicate the association of the Bodhisattva with one of the Dhyani Buddhas, each representing a different aspect of the Buddha's wisdom; they are seen in all the Mahayana Buddhist countries of Asia.





Below the Bodhisattva is a dark princess to whom a lady is shown offering lotuses. This leads us to assume that the princess is the consort of the Bodhisattva Vajrapani. Her features are very refined and the delineation of the eyes, with hazel-brown irises, is extremely realistic. Although the painting has suffered considerable damage, it is still regarded as one of the finest works of Indian artistic genius and counts among the most outstanding portraits of feminine beauty made in any part of the world.



To the left of the entrance to the antechamber of the main shrine is seen the gentle figure of the Bodhisattva Padmapani, the Bearer of the Lotus (opposite). This benign apostle is painted amidst the many activities of the teeming world around him; closer views are seen in the details illustrated overleaf. Next to the Bodhisattva Padmapani is painted a dark princess (above) holding a lotus — an indication that she is his consort. Her face has a very serene expression and the treatment of her limbs is exquisite. This portrait is, indeed, one of the most graceful paintings of Ajanta.



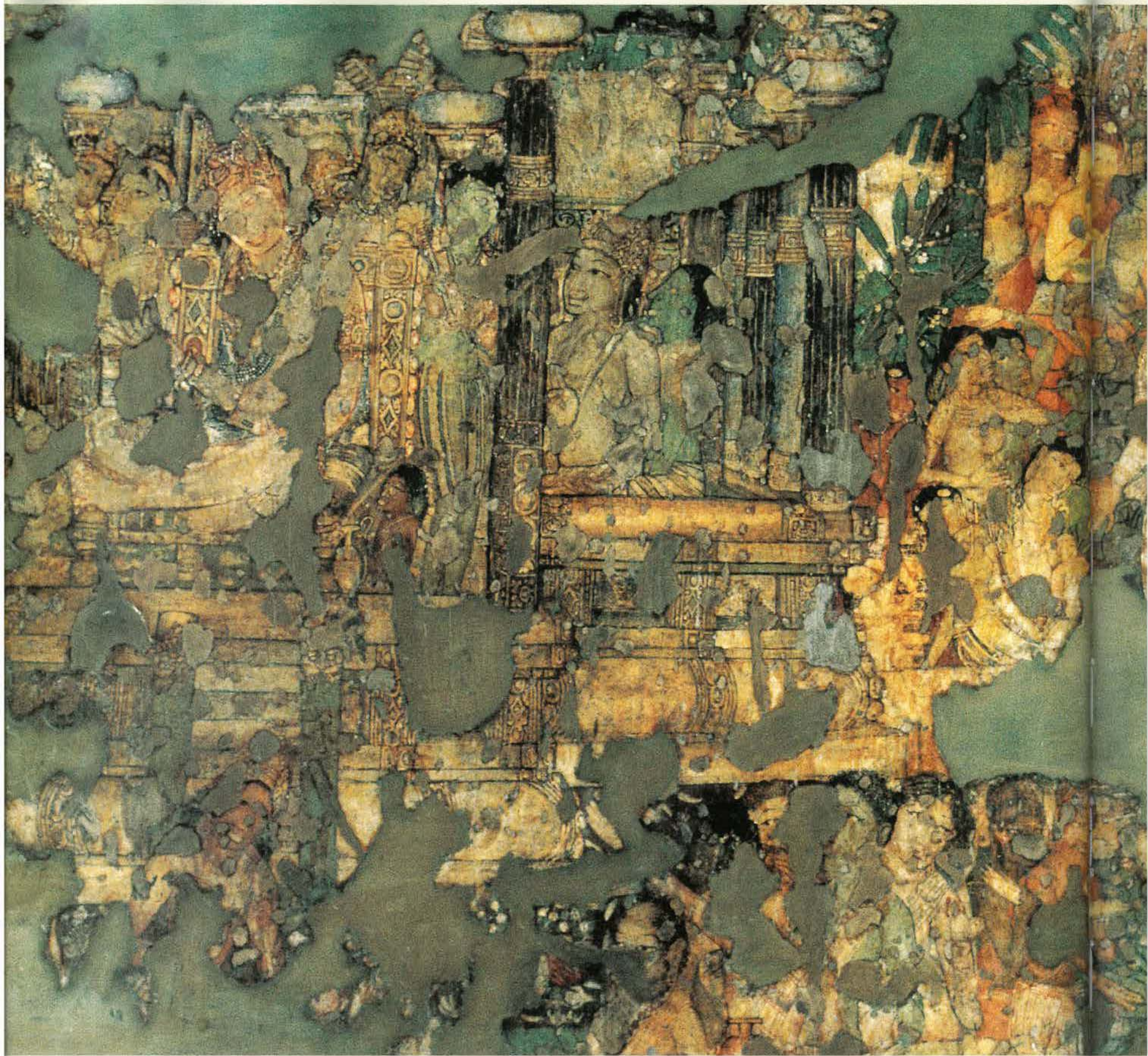


Monkeys, which are seen playing above the left shoulder of the Padmapani, represent the distractions of everyday worldly activity.

OPPOSITE ABOVE: A kinnara, a celestial musician who is part-bird and part-human, is painted above the Padmapani on his right. Again, his divine music is symbolic of the pleasant pastimes which may serve as distractions to One who is on the Path of True Knowledge. The stringed musical instrument, complete with tuning knobs, on which the kinnara plays is of particular interest as it adds to our knowledge of the culture of the painter's times.

OPPOSITE BELOW: In the panel of the Padmapani, a delightful detail of peacocks painted with lapis lazuli to convey the iridescent blue of their neck plumage.





Sibi Jataka

King Sibi was a previous birth of Lord Buddha: the Bodhisattva on his way to Enlightenment. In this *Jataka* the Lord Indra (who figures often in Buddhist lore as *Sakka*) puts to the test his qualities of righteousness and justice (see also pp. 226–7).

Pursued by a hawk, a frightened pigeon came to King Sibi who took him under his protection and saved him from the predator. However, the hawk also appealed to the king for justice. He said that he needed fresh meat for his nourishment and the pigeon was its legitimate prey. Thus, the just and kind King Sibi found himself in a dilemma. The only solution for him, which was acceptable to the hawk, was that the king cut off some of his own flesh, equal in weight to the pigeon, and give it to the hawk.

The hawk and the pigeon were, in fact, the disguised Lords Indra and Agni respectively. As Agni in the form of the pigeon was placed on the scales, he made himself heavier and heavier, causing the king to cut off larger parts of his own flesh. Finally King Sibi had to climb bodily onto the scales.

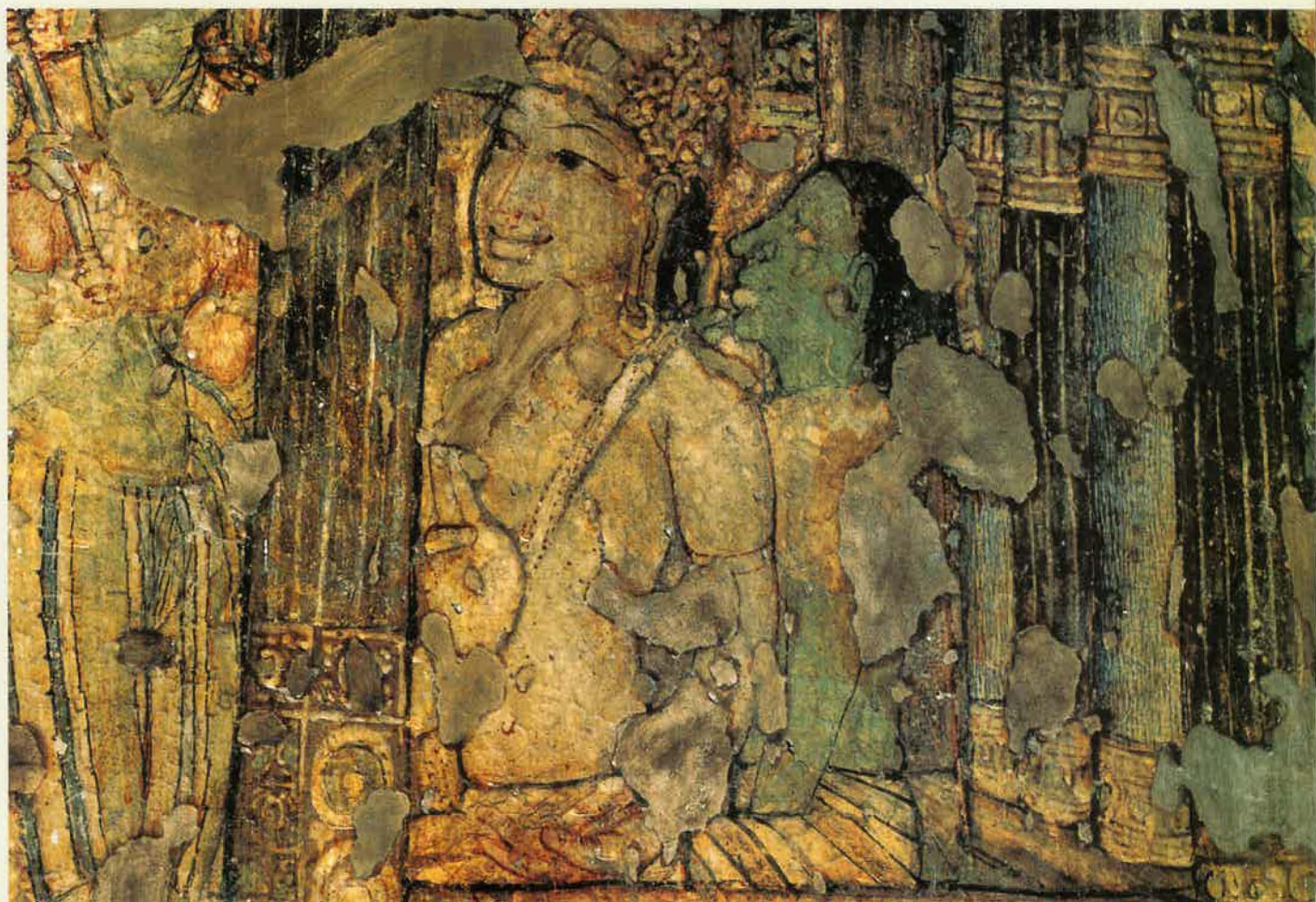
When the Gods saw that the king was willing to make the supreme sacrifice, they revealed themselves in their true forms. King Sibi's wounds were healed and praise was showered upon him in recognition of his virtues.

The Sibi Jataka is seen on the inside of the front wall to the left of the doorway as one enters Cave 1. The story also occurs in the Hindu and Jain traditions.

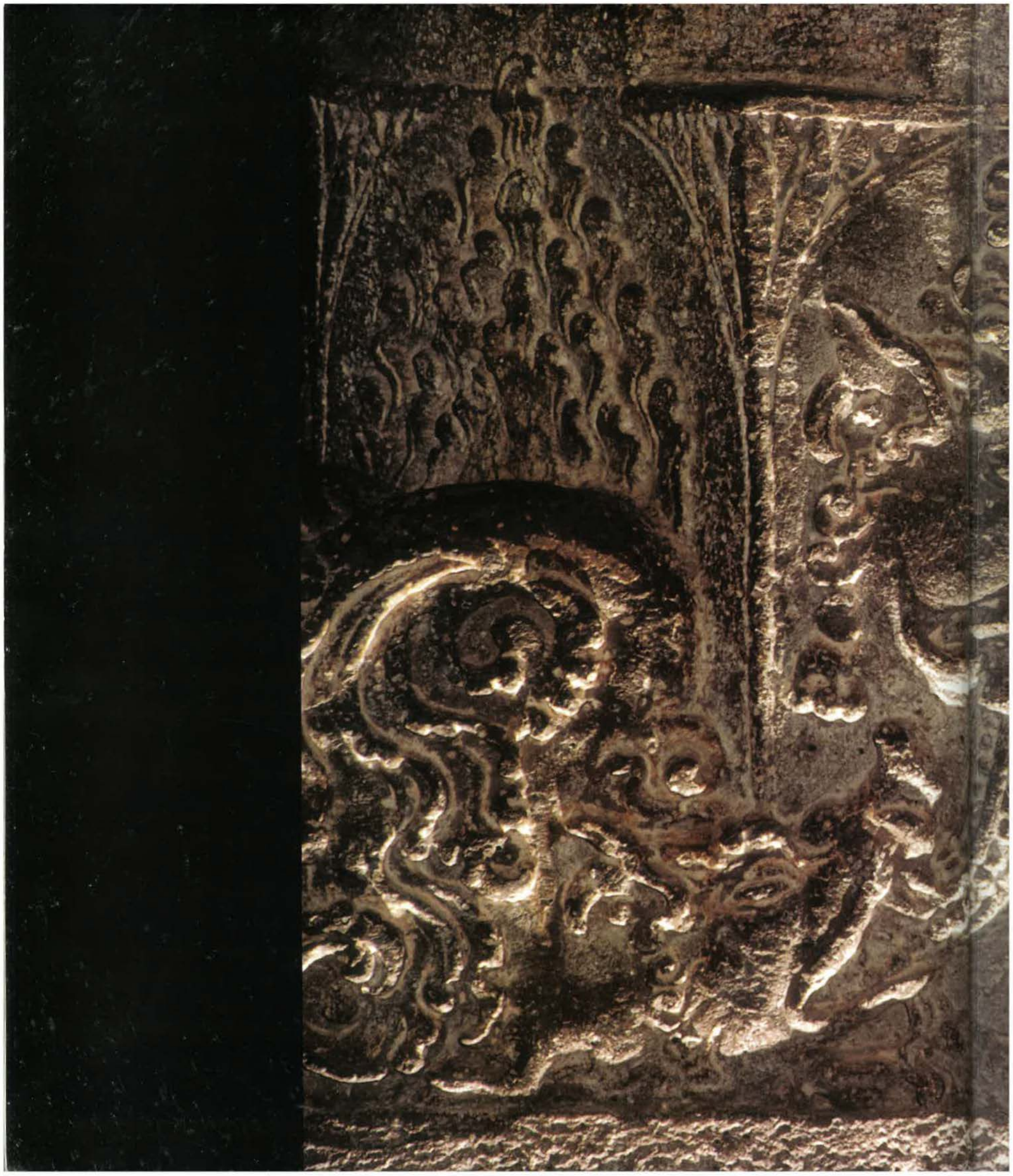


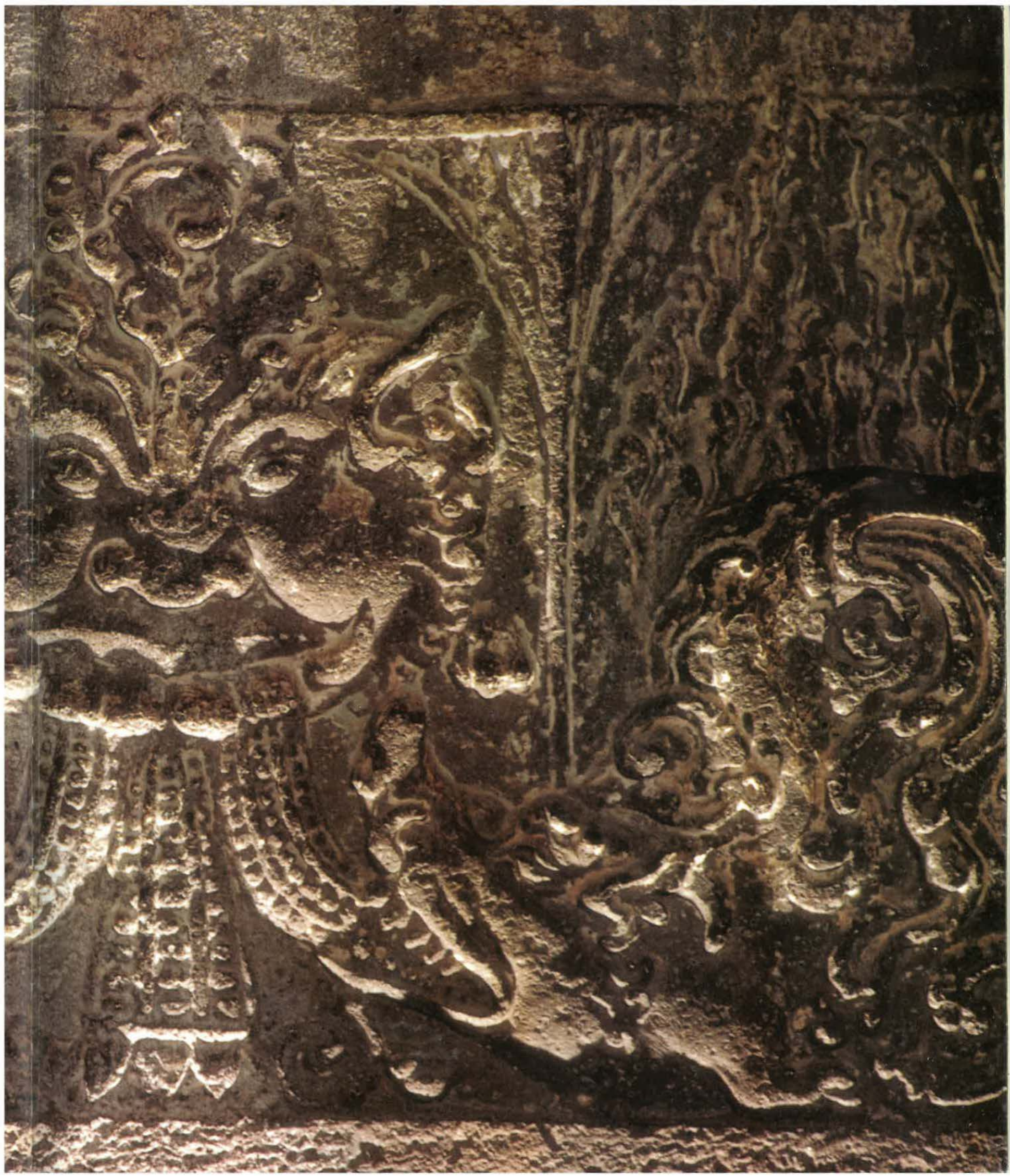
LEFT: *The just and noble Bodhisattva King Sibi stands next to the weighing scales. The gentle expression on his face is poignant as he prepares to sacrifice his own self to uphold the quality of justice.*

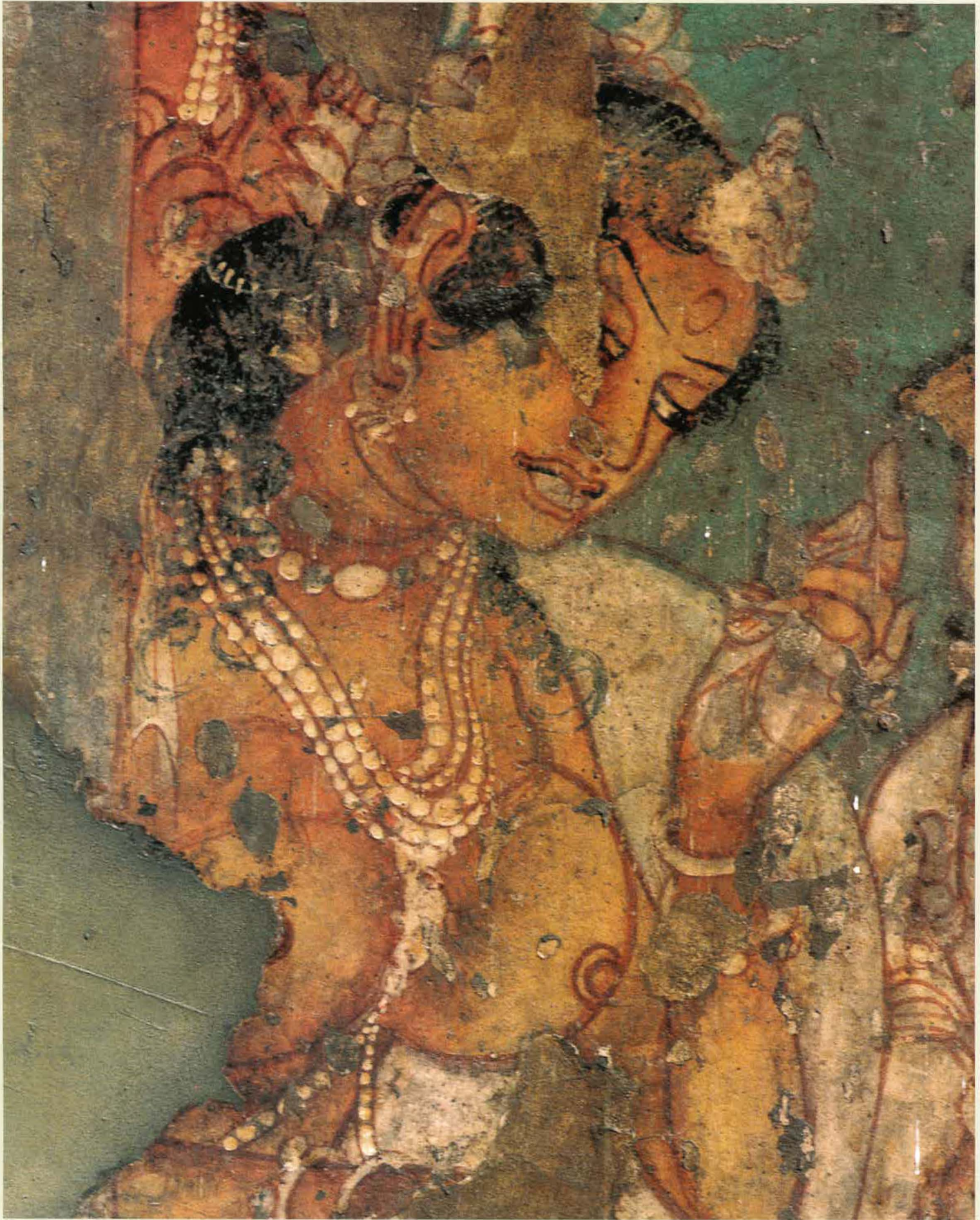
BELOW: *A prince and princess in a pavilion in the palace look compassionately towards King Sibi.*



OVERLEAF: *A kirtimukha carved on a pillar. The caves are profusely ornamented with carvings of mythical creatures like this one, as well as other motifs such as makaras, lotus-creepers, pearl-hangings and jewel-like patterns. They help to create a warm and rich atmosphere in the cave.*







The Conversion of Nanda

Nanda was a cousin of the Buddha. Among the incidents of the Lord's life, his conversion of Nanda is one of the favourite themes of Buddhist artists. The story is painted to the right of the Sibi Jataka on the front left wall of Cave 1 (we find another very sensitive depiction of it in Cave 16 – see pp. 150–1). In this detail (right) we see Nanda after he has renounced his palace life to become a wandering mendicant (bhikshu). This gentle soul, who is made so graceful by his divine introspection, is seen here begging for alms at his own palace door. This detail is one of the most soulful masterpieces of Ajanta's art. Nanda with his inward look radiates a serene peacefulness which holds the attention of the viewer most compellingly.

Nanda's wife Queen Janapada-kalyani (left) has been informed that her husband, once the king, has come to the palace door begging for alms. The queen is deeply disturbed by these unusual events and wonders how to win back the attention of her husband. Interestingly, this is the only panel at Ajanta in which the women are seen wearing the traditional Indian bindi (an auspicious circular symbol of marriage) on the forehead.





OPPOSITE: An agitated palace attendant is portrayed in the story of King Nanda. One can well imagine the confusion and the rush of mixed emotions created within the palace by the appearance of the king in his new state as a mendicant.

In two other details from the story, palace maids are seen pouring water over the lissom Queen Janapada-

kalyani as she pines for her husband (right), and taking an offering of food for the bhikshu at the palace door (below).

Again the bindi is seen on the maid's forehead and she also has a most unusual coiffure. Indeed, almost every conceivable hairstyle seems to have been prevalent in the days when the Ajanta caves were painted.



Sankhapala Jataka



Once the Bodhisattva was born as Duyyodhana, the son of the King of Magadha. When the prince came of age, his father handed over the reins of the kingdom to him and retired to live the life of an ascetic.

One day when he visited his father's hermitage, Duyyodhana saw the splendour and wealth of a Naga king who had come with his retinue to hear the ascetic's discourse. Being struck by the Naga king's grandeur, the Bodhisattva wished that he be reborn in such a form.

The Bodhisattva's wish was granted and he was born

In the upper left portion of this panel, the King of Magadha (now an ascetic) is imparting the Law of Dharma to Sankhapala the Naga king. The figure of the ascetic has suffered considerable damage, but that of Sankhapala is better preserved. He is shown with his hands folded in devotion and humility.

A charming detail is a woman who is seated on the ground with her back to the viewer, also listening to the sermon. Her pose shows great observation and skill: she is squatting on the ground with crossed legs, leaning on her left hand which is placed on the ground, while her right hand with the elbow resting on her knee supports her head in a very realistic manner.

To her right is a dwarf, who brings an offering of flowers for the ascetic. The religious austerity of the scene is offset by the somewhat comic effect of his long trunk and wild expression.

as Sankhapala, King of the Nagas. After some time of dwelling in the luxuries and pleasures of the serpent world, he realized the futility of worldly prosperity and decided to end his meaningless life. Accordingly, he went and lay on an ant-hill.

The Serpent King was spotted by a band of hunters, who captured him and treated him cruelly. This was seen by a merchant named Alara, who was moved by pity for the serpent and had him released by offering cattle and gold coins to the hunters. Out of gratitude, the Bodhisattva King Sankhapala invited Alara to the Naga world. For a year Alara revelled in its luxuries and heavenly delights, but was finally influenced by the wisdom of the Bodhisattva. He then gave up the glory and pleasures of the serpent world and went to the Himalayas to become an ascetic and to preach the Law. In Alara's words from the *Jataka*:

'Men fall like fruit, to perish straight away,
All bodies, young and old alike, decay:
In holy orders only find I rest,
The true and universal is the best.'

(translated by H. T. Francis; edited by E. B. Cowell)

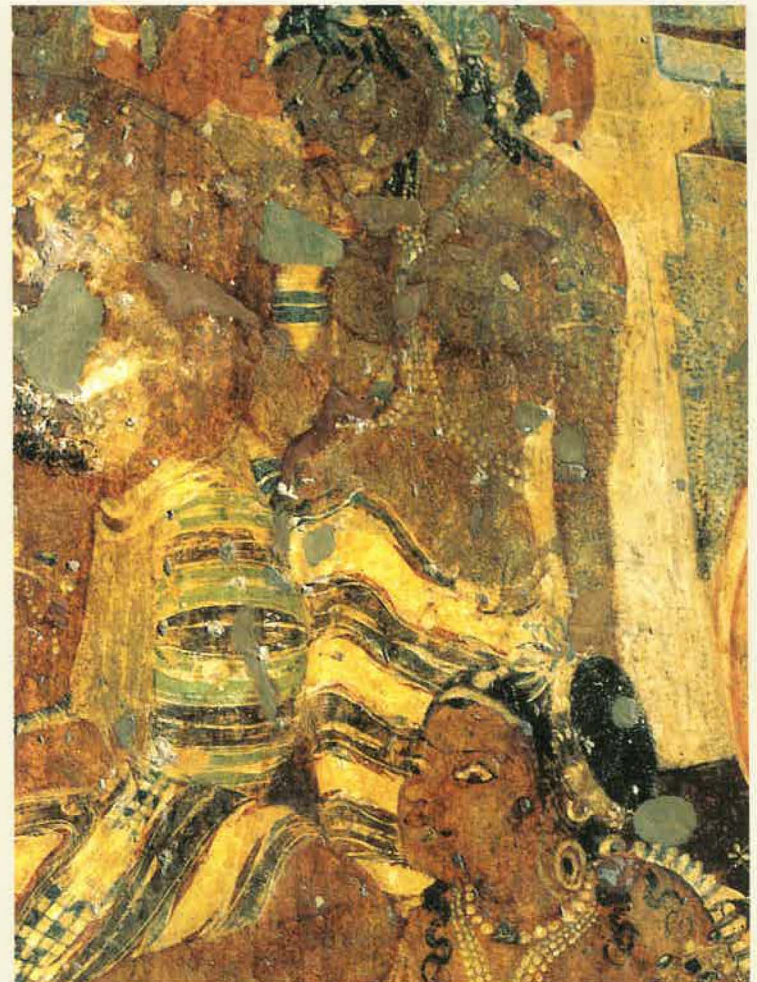


The Serpent King is dragged along by hunters who have put a rope through its nose (left). The effort in pulling on the rope has been most dynamically depicted. Behind the hunters is a man watching with sympathy as the cruelty is inflicted upon the serpent. Below the serpent, Alara offers coins and his oxen to the hunters to induce them to release the serpent. The various attitudes of the cattle show the painter's acute observation and knowledge of animal life.

Painted to the left of the previous scene is an elegant princess (below, right), drawn with long and sinuous lines. She stands behind the Naga king, listening with close attention to the sermon.

In the bottom left of the mural we see the Naga King Sankhapala with his rescuer Alara (below, left). The features of the Bodhisattva Sankhapala are extremely graceful and show a remarkable contrast to the coarse features of the merchant Alara.

The practice of worshipping Naga or Serpent kings is one of great antiquity, and they were adopted in the beliefs prevalent at various times in India's early history. In Buddhist thought they are regarded as evolved beings on the True Path to enlightenment, their original fierce nature having been tempered by the compassion of the Buddha's message.



Mahajanaka Jataka

Mahajanaka was the son of Ariththanaka, who had been banished from the Kingdom of Mithila by his brother Polajanaka. Mahajanaka became a merchant in order to amass a large enough fortune to enable him to reconquer the kingdom which had been usurped by his uncle.

After many adventures, including a shipwreck, he returned to the Kingdom of Mithila. In the meantime, King Polajanaka had died leaving no son to succeed him on the throne. He had only one daughter, the wise and learned Sivali. On his deathbed, the king had expressed the wish that she should be married only to a man who could fulfil three conditions: he should know the head end of a square bed; draw out the sixteen treasures which were hidden in his kingdom; and be able to string a bow which required the strength of a thousand men. Mahajanaka fulfilled all three requirements, married the beautiful Sivali, and so became the King of Mithila.

However, the pomp and luxuries of royal life soon lost their attraction for the Bodhisattva and he decided to renounce his kingdom to become an ascetic. Queen Sivali was heartbroken and made many unsuccessful attempts to distract him and persuade him not to give up the kingdom. Ultimately she followed him into the forest and, realizing that he could not proceed further on his Path unless he was able to dissuade her from following him, he broke a stalk of *munja* grass and said to her, 'See, Sivali this stalk cannot be joined again. So like to a *munja* reed full grown, live on, O Sivali, alone.' Sivali realized the fateful meaning of his words. She fell into a faint and as she lay overcome with grief, the Bodhisattva proceeded on his journey to the Himalayas. There he meditated upon the Truth, never to return to the worldly life.



A scene from the Mahajanaka Jataka. This story of the Bodhisattva is magnificently painted over most of the left wall of Cave 1, and extends onto part of the rear wall of the cave. Here, in the upper part of the panel, an ascetic is shown delivering a sermon. Among those listening is King Mahajanaka, seen with his hands folded in reverence. See also pp. 92-3.

Details from the sermon scene shown on p. 85.

RIGHT: *The great ascetic imparting to King Mahajanaka the knowledge of the True Path of Renunciation.*

BELOW: *A delightful detail, in which antelope are also listening with rapt attention to the discourse: at Ajanta there are no barriers between the world of the animals and that of mankind. We are reminded here that Lord Buddha himself had been born previously in the form of several different animals. Hence, the artist depicts a faith which has a profound belief in the unity of all forms of life.*





The Bodhisattva listening with devotion to the ascetic's words. Mahajanaka was a great and glorious king who had, in fact, won back the lands that had earlier been lost by his father. Yet here we find this powerful ruler with hands folded, gazing with adoration towards the simple ascetic. It is this quality of humility which enriches the Life of the Spirit.



King Mahajanaka, having heard the wise words of the sage and returned to the palace, decides to renounce the worldly life. In this detail he is shown announcing his decision in the palace; behind him is his mother, who appears worried by her son's resolve.



RIGHT: Before the king as he makes his decision known is his beautiful wife Queen Sivali, who is perplexed by her husband's desire to leave the palace and part from her. The lower garments worn by the women are woven in the form of ikhat, which is still practised in India. The fabrics of the upper garments are silks and muslins, so fine that they appear diaphanous.

The artists' minute attention to detail in these paintings is extraordinary. The gentle curve of the strings of pearls hanging beneath the queen's bosom depicts a lightly swinging movement with exquisite realism. The curls of hair upon her neck and shoulders emphasize her vulnerability at this moment when her husband has chosen to leave her.

LEFT: Three of the palace maids, painted behind the queen, respond with shock and sadness to the most unexpected news that the king intends to renounce his worldly life and leave their mistress the queen.

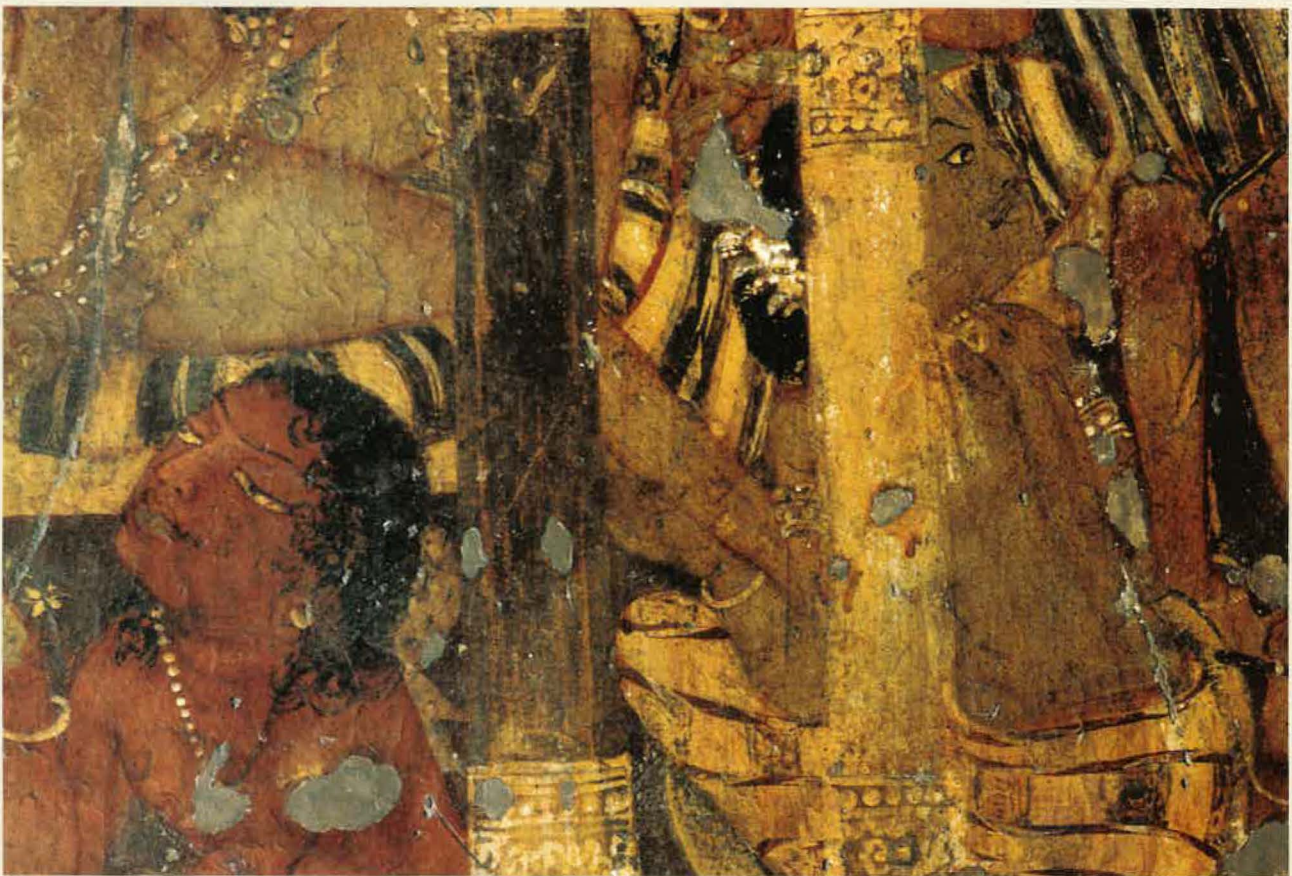
Amazement is writ large upon the face of one maid and we see the sorrowful glances of the other two. The directness of the warm human touch in this moment of grief is clearly evident as they empathize with the queen's deep sense of impending loss.



A palace scene from the Mahajanaka Jataka: the king and queen are shown seated in a pavilion watching a dance performance arranged by Queen Sivali. Four details from this scene are shown on the following pages.







OPPOSITE ABOVE: Seated next to the king in the royal pavilion is Queen Sivali, looking tenderly towards him. Another woman stands behind the queen, delicately holding a conch in her hand.

OPPOSITE BELOW: A most unusual and realistic moment captured by the vivid imagination of the painters of Ajanta: a maid is shown pressing the legs of the queen, but obviously she is distracted by the dancer behind her and, even as she touches the queen's legs, she turns to look in that direction.

RIGHT: Between the pavilions of the royal couple and the dancer are two other palace maids. One is in a pensive mood and the other leans upon her shoulder, looking at her, as if questioning. The realism and inexhaustible variety of feelings and expressions of the figures are a source of constant wonder. Each of the countless individuals depicted in these Jatakas has a unique and distinctive expression. The lower garment of the pensive maid has colourful stripes and beautiful decorations.







A gorgeously attired dancer and musicians, who have been summoned by Queen Sivali to distract the king from his resolve. This scene is a unique instance in Indian art where a complete orchestra and dancer are all women.

There are seven musicians: two flautists, two playing cymbals, one a pair of drums (dhol), another playing a double drum called a mridang, and one playing a stringed instrument. All these musical instruments, practically unchanged, remain in use in India.

The painting closely follows the directions laid down in the ancient Indian treatise of painting, the Chitrastotra of the Vishnudharmottra. According to the text, dancers should be shown most exquisitely attired, as we see here. She is bedecked with a large variety of ornaments, including an arsi (thumb-ring with a miniature mirror), ear-rings with most elaborate designs and ornaments of the head, comprising gold or pearl strings. The coiffure is very pleasing and depicts strings of flowers intertwined with the hair in her chignon.

In keeping with the directions of the Chitrastotra, her scarves are also seen swirling behind her with her movements. The pose caught of the dancer is most interesting. It is typical of Indian dance movements still in use today, and serves to show that these traditions were already well established more than 1,500 years ago



ABOVE: King Mahajanaka, not distracted by all the diversions of the palace, goes ahead with his resolve. Here we see him riding out of the palace gates, leaving worldly affairs behind him.

OPPOSITE: Behind the head of King Mahajanaka's horse is a man wearing a most interesting block-printed shawl with a duck pattern. Also seen here is another man wearing a diaphanous cloth with a clearly discernible design.



Another scene from the Mahajanaka Jataka, painted on the back wall of Cave 1 to the left of the main shrine. Here we see the abhishek (ritual bath) of the king, which is to cleanse him before he dons the saffron robe signifying his final renunciation of the world.

The profusely decorated palace pavilion with its bejewelled pillars speaks of a highly developed and prosperous civilization which must have existed when the cave was painted. Of particular interest is the straight-backed seat of the king, gorgeously carved with animal figures.

The feeling of the painting is very realistic. The moment is depicted in great detail, showing Mahajanaka's wet hair, a dwarf coming up the steps and handing over a tray to an adolescent girl, bearers bringing vessels of water; a graceful female attendant and others who are gathered in a group; and several mendicants who have come to beg for alms on this auspicious occasion.

In this complex panel we discern the careful arrangement of the composition in keeping with the closely linked traditions of painting and theatre. (These are set out in detail in the Vishnudharmottra, as well as in the older text on drama and dance called the Natyashastra of Bharata.) The artist is so skilled and inspired that he has succeeded in presenting a large group of persons, each imbued with individual personality and feeling, while simultaneously – by the direction of their attention and actions – leading the viewer's eye to the central figure of Mahajanaka.

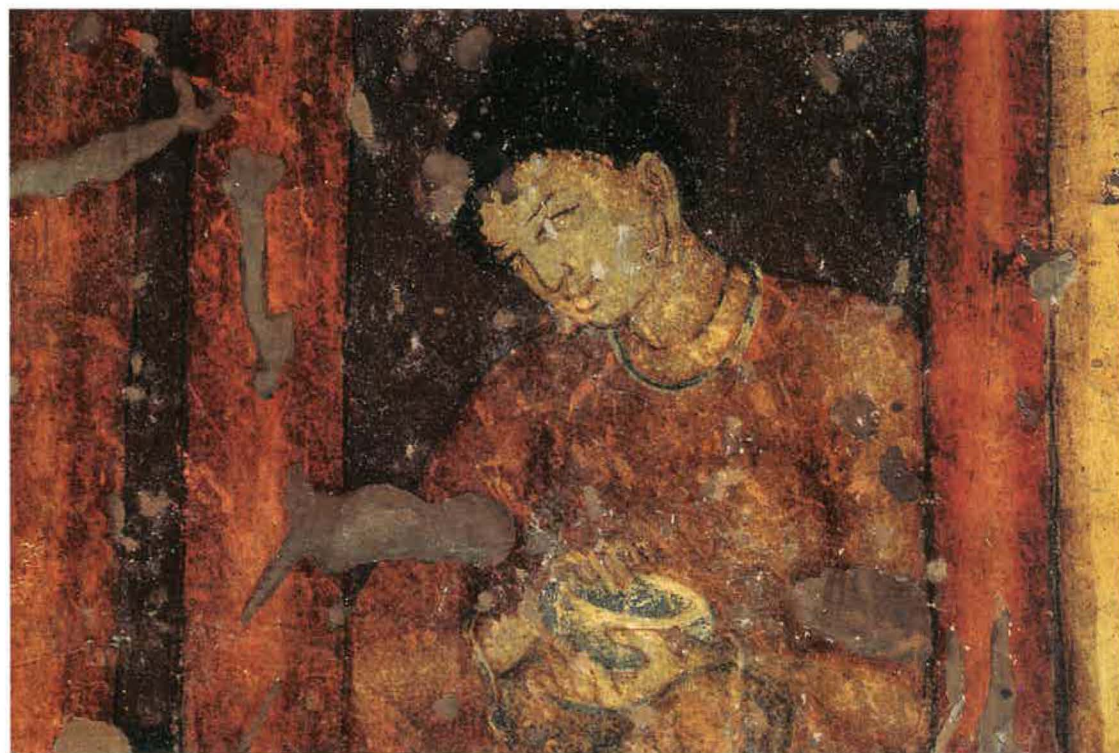
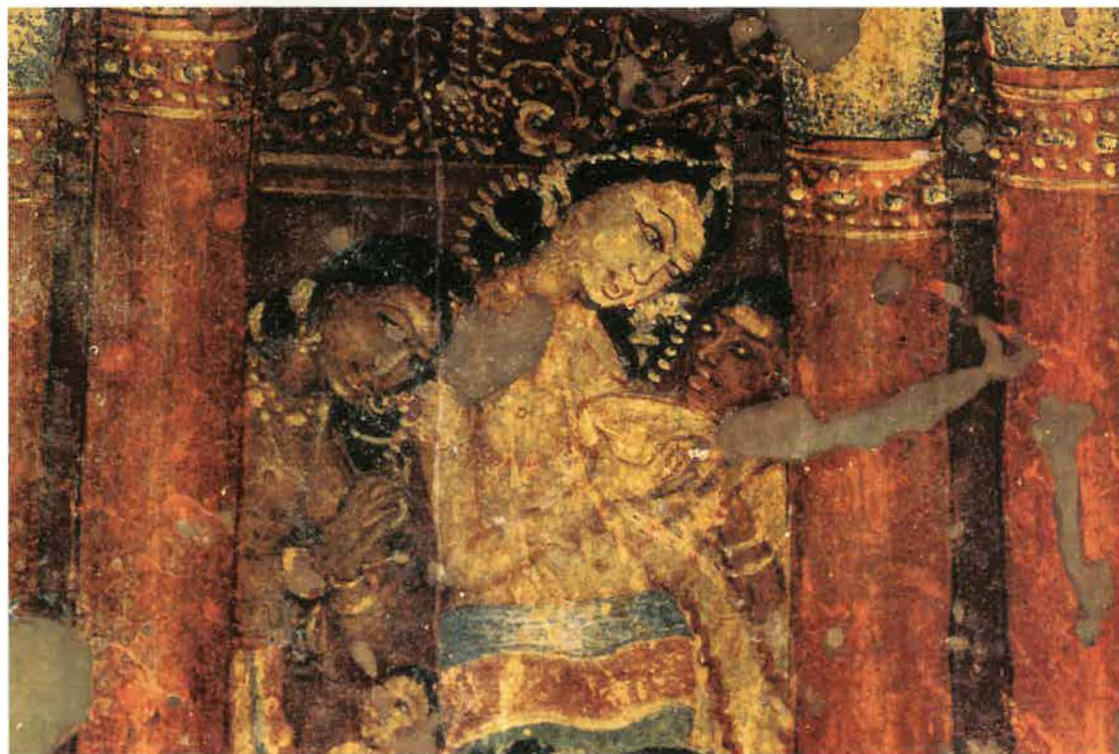




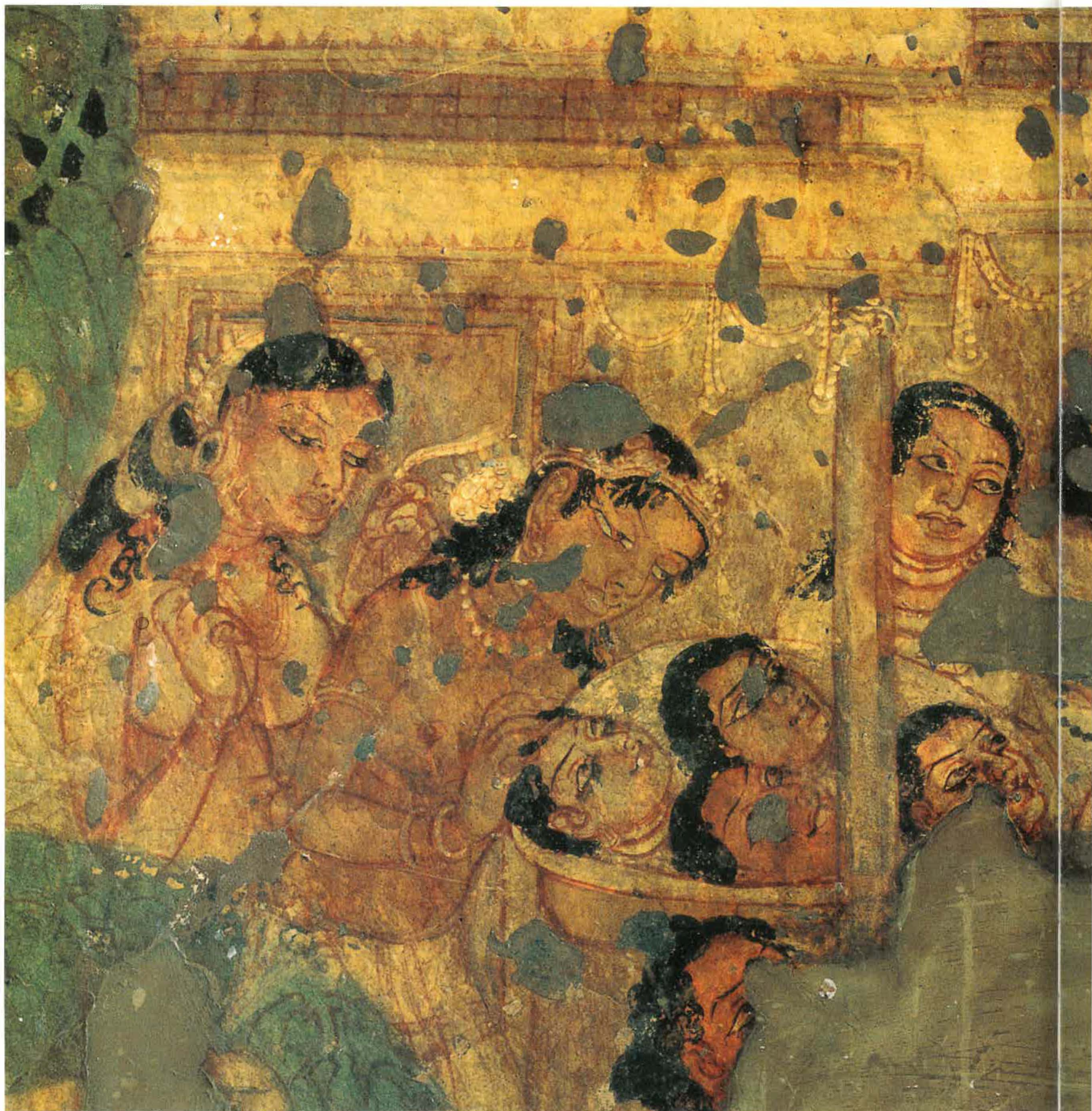


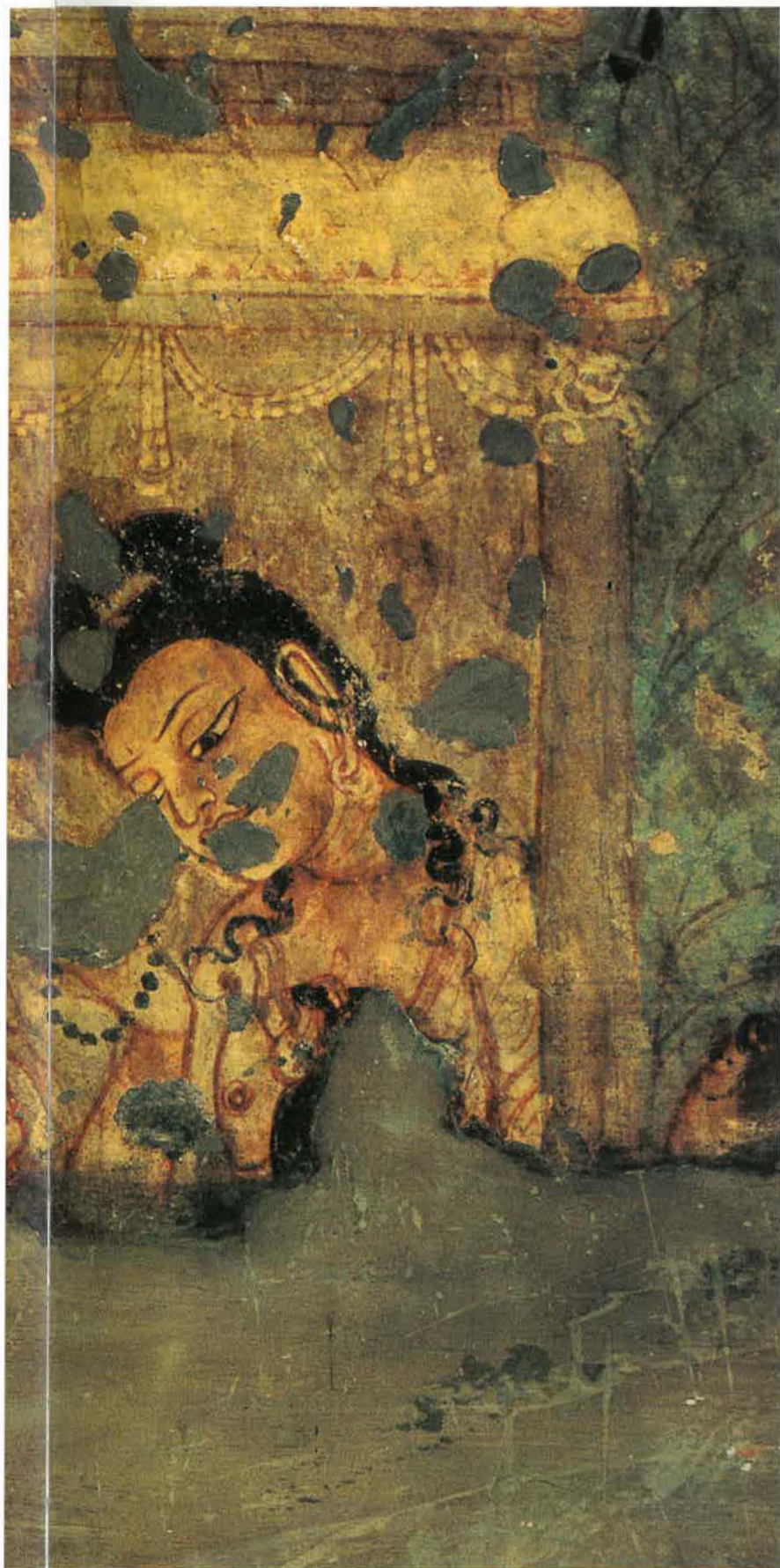
RIGHT: In this detail from the Mahajanaka Jataka women are shown bearing offerings for the king, who has now become a bhikshu. The flowing S-curve (frequently seen in Indian art) is beautifully delineated, from the reverential bending of the neck to the curve of the devotee's hip.

In another detail (below) the bhikshu is shown seated inside the pavilion, begging bowl in hand.



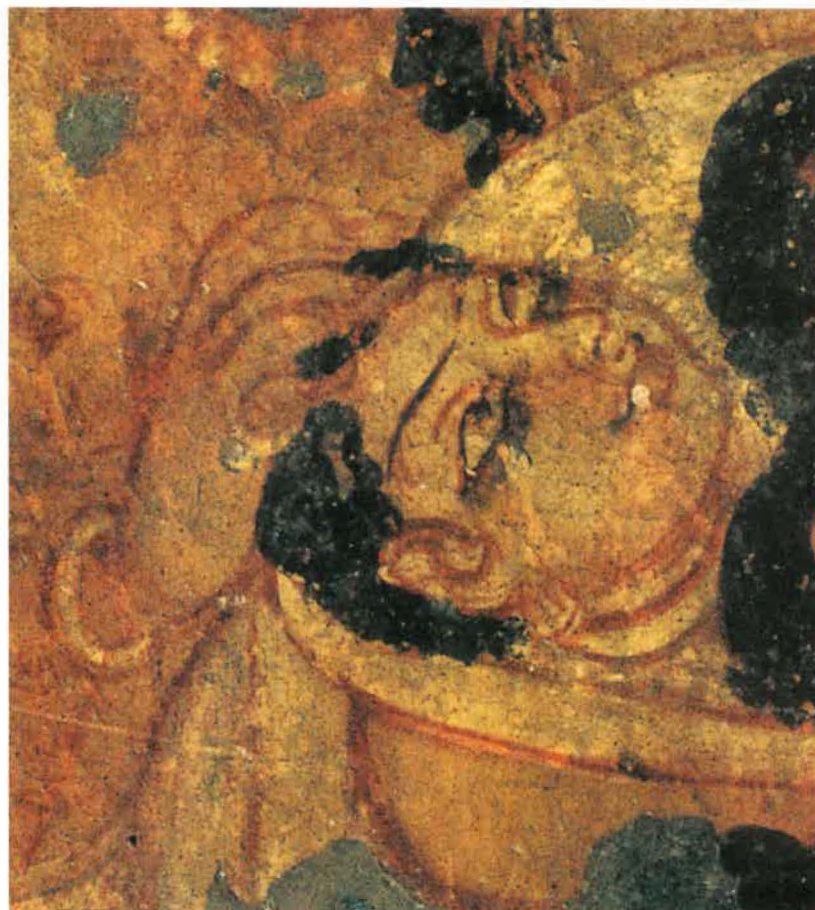
LEFT: A detail from the abhishek scene showing two attendants. The male attendant is most interestingly attired in what appears to be a tight shirt-like garment and wears a cap on his head. The dusky female attendant is invested with tenderness and feminine grace.





On the back wall of the cave, below the Mahajanaka Jataka, is a very curious unidentified scene. It appears as if the heads of four young men are brought on a platter before an ascetic who is seated in a palace pavilion, rosary in hand.

BELOW: One of the heads from the unidentified group.



Campeya Jataka

The Bodhisattva was once born into a poor family. He used to go to a nearby river called Campa, where lived the magnificent Serpent King Campeya. Impressed by Campeya's glory, the Bodhisattva wished that he be reborn as a Naga king.

In his next life his wish came true, but as the years passed he became unhappy and discontented with his luxurious existence as the Serpent King. He tried to kill himself but his wife Sumana helped to rekindle his interest in life and with her beautiful companions succeeded in keeping him amused.

The Bodhisattva soon perceived that he would not be able to release himself from his sensual attachments if he continued to live in the Naga world. Thus he came out to lead a life of austerity in the world of men.

As Campeya lay on an ant-hill, a young Brahmin from Benaras saw the magnificent snake and captured him. The Brahmin then took him to the city and forced the serpent to dance. Soon his fame as a dancing snake spread throughout the kingdom and he was taken to the court of King Uggasena to perform before

him. The king and his people were enthralled by his dance and showered him with jewels.

In the meantime, Campeya's wife Sumana grew concerned about the fate of her husband and, on making enquiries about his whereabouts, appeared in King Uggasena's court. She pleaded with the king for the release of her husband. The king was touched by Sumana's devotion and offered great wealth to the Brahmin in exchange for the freedom of the snake. The Brahmin was ashamed of himself and, refusing the wealth offered to him, immediately released Campeya.

The Serpent King Campeya and Sumana then transformed themselves into a young man and a beautiful woman and thanked the king profusely for his kindness. They took the king with them to share the opulent luxuries of the Naga kingdom. The king then came to realize that the snake was none other than the Serpent King Campeya. At the end of seven days of the wondrous pleasures of the Naga world, he returned to his own kingdom at Benaras laden with wealth bestowed on him by the Serpent King. According to the *Jataka*, from that time on the ground was golden throughout India.



To the right of the Bodhisattva Vajrapani panel on the back wall of the cave is painted the Campeya Jataka. Here the Naga King Campeya is seen in his palace, very dejected as is obvious from his pose. Having enjoyed the pleasures of royal life and violated the rules of virtue, the Bodhisattva now deeply regrets his conduct.



The second scene of the jataka shows King Uggasena watching the performance of the snake, for which many people are gathered. On the right we see the snake-charmer seated on the ground. On the left is Sumana, the favourite consort of Campeya, who has brought her child with her.

Below the king is the most fascinating detail of this panel, with two men shown seated on the ground. The features of one of them, including the moustache and the tuft of hair on the back of his head, are still typical of the people of Benaras. His floral, silken angrakha (upper garment) is also reminiscent of the attire and the continuing textile industry of the city. The features, the hair style and the manner in which the other man wears his dhoti remain typical of the people of Orissa.



In a palace hall depicted in the third scene, Bodhisattva Campeya is seen in the teaching mudra, showing King Uggasena the Righteous Path. The palace attendants and courtiers who crowd around to listen are depicted with consummate grace and skill.



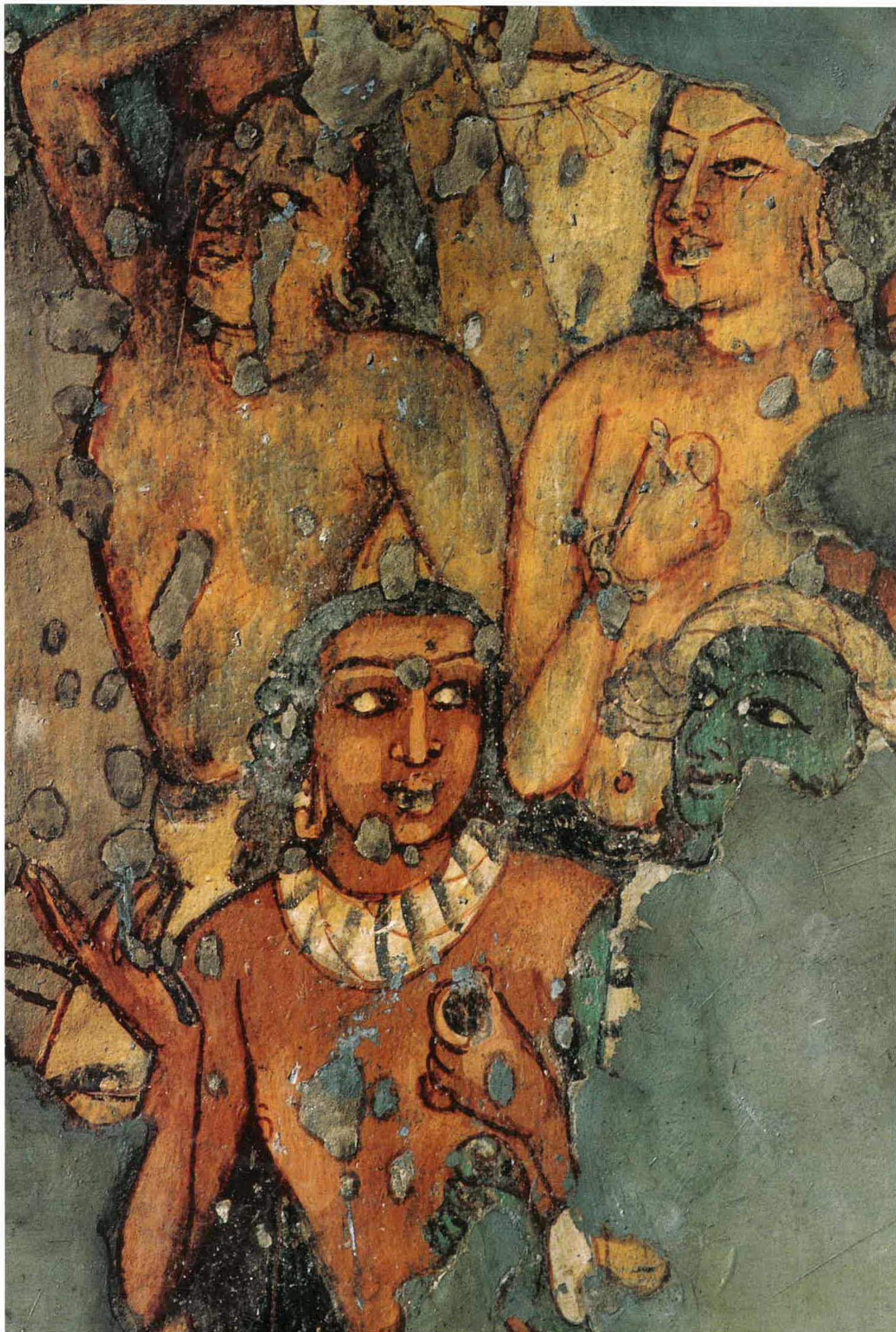
An amusing detail in the extreme right of the palace scene shows a maid carrying a platter of delicacies with flowers arranged around them. She listens to the sermon with rapt attention and is oblivious of the man behind her who quietly picks up one of the items on her platter. The curling locks of hair of the young maid are most charmingly portrayed.



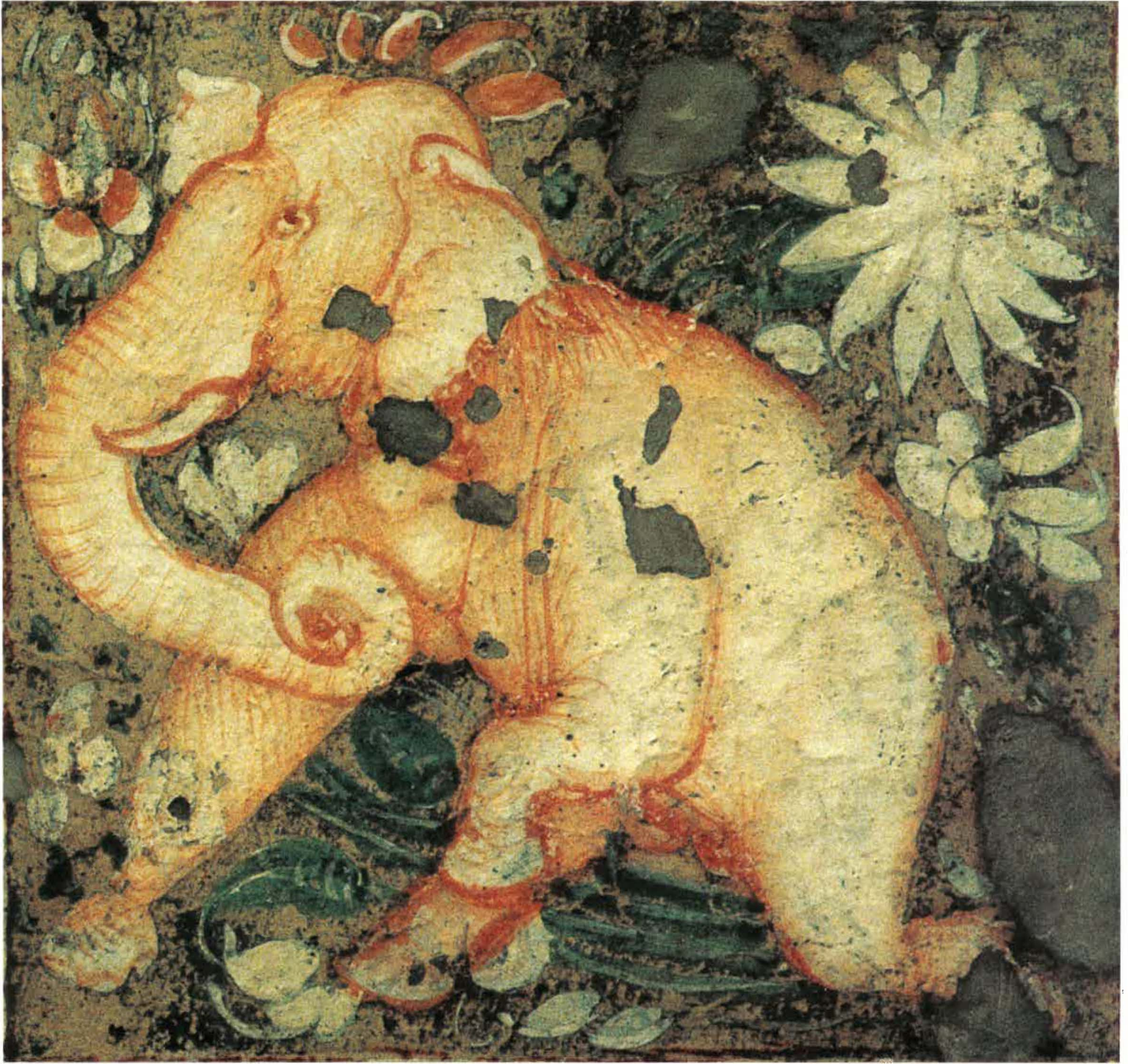
ABOVE: A Bacchanalian scene, painted on the ceiling, representing foreigners from the north-west of India. Buddhism had spread beyond the frontiers of India well before the Christian Era, and the artists active at Ajanta during the second creative phase were already quite accustomed to the presence of such visitors.

RIGHT: A detail from another damaged and unidentified scene, painted on the right-hand wall. It is significant, however, for it presents a different style of painting and the persons depicted appear, from their features and ornamentation, to belong to another race or country. Because Ajanta lay on the arterial trade route, it was open to influences from far and wide, and one may surmise that this is a representation of a wealthy merchant and his retinue from a foreign land.

OVERLEAF: The ceiling is painted with rich and exquisite detail. The themes of the ceiling paintings are quite different from the religious content of the murals. Here the painter gives free rein to his imagination and decorative skills. The flora and fauna of the times are depicted here, as well as legendary and mythical creatures.







This beautifully observed light-footed elephant painted in one of the ceiling panels has been chosen as the official logo of the Government of India's Department of Tourism.