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Original Article

Art and Architecture of the Rashtrakutas with Special Reference to the Kailasa Temple

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Abstract

The Rashtrakuta dynasty, which exercised power over large parts of the Deccan between the eighth and tenth centuries CE, made an important contribution to the region's artistic and architectural history. Its patronage is especially visible in the development of monumental temple architecture and the rock-cut monuments of Ellora. The Kailasa Temple (Cave 16) at Ellora is a major example of monolithic architecture: it was excavated from a single mass of basalt and combines a carefully planned temple complex with elaborate sculptural programmes. This article examines the historical background of Rashtrakuta art, the principal characteristics of its architecture, and the design and significance of the Kailasa Temple. It also considers selected monuments associated with Rashtrakuta-period or wider Deccan architectural activity. The discussion highlights the relationship between royal patronage, religious traditions, craftsmanship and the evolution of temple forms in early medieval India.

Keywords: *Rashtrakuta Dynasty; Deccan Architecture; Kailasa Temple; Ellora Caves; Rock-Cut Architecture; Monolithic Temple; Dravida Style; Temple Sculpture; Jain Architecture; Religious Patronage.*

Introduction

The Rashtrakutas were one of the influential ruling dynasties of the Deccan during the early medieval period. From the eighth to the tenth centuries CE, their political power and cultural patronage extended across substantial parts of the Indian subcontinent. Their period is significant in the history of Indian art because of the scale and technical ambition of the monuments associated with their rule. The Kailasa Temple at Ellora, traditionally associated with the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I, is among the most celebrated achievements of Indian rock-cut architecture.

This article focuses on the artistic and architectural contributions associated with the Rashtrakutas, with particular attention to the Kailasa Temple. It considers the historical setting of Ellora, the major features of Rashtrakuta-period architecture, the layout and sculptural programme of the Kailasa complex, and selected monuments that help illustrate the wider architectural environment of the Deccan.

Historical Background of Rashtrakuta Art

The Rashtrakuta period formed an important phase in the development of Deccan art and architecture. Royal patronage, religious institutions, local communities and skilled groups of artisans all contributed to the creation and maintenance of religious monuments. The surviving architecture demonstrates the interaction of regional building traditions and the adaptation of structural-temple forms in rock-cut settings.

Ellora, in present-day Maharashtra, is a major site for understanding this artistic environment. The complex contains 34 Buddhist, Hindu (Brahmanical) and Jain caves excavated over several centuries. The groups are not all products of one dynasty or one short period: the Buddhist caves are generally dated from the fifth to eighth centuries, the Brahmanical group from the seventh to tenth centuries, and the Jain group broadly from the ninth to twelfth centuries.

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The site therefore represents a long sequence of religious and artistic activity rather than a single Rashtrakuta building programme.

Rashtrakuta patronage is particularly important in relation to the Kailasa Temple (Cave 16), which is traditionally attributed to Krishna I in the eighth century. The wider Ellora complex also contains monuments from different phases and under varied forms of patronage. It is therefore more accurate to describe the Rashtrakutas as major patrons of selected monuments at Ellora rather than as the builders of the entire cave complex.

The Elephanta Caves should also be treated separately. They represent an earlier phase of western Indian rock-cut architecture, and their precise dynastic patronage is debated. For this reason, they are not presented here as a direct Rashtrakuta construction.

Main Features of Rashtrakuta Art and Architecture

- Rock-cut and monolithic construction: The Kailasa Temple at Ellora demonstrates the ability of artisans to transform a natural rock mass into a complex architectural composition. Rather than assembling separate blocks, the builders removed the surrounding basalt to reveal the temple from the rock, working broadly from the top down.
- Dravida architectural vocabulary: The Kailasa complex adapts features associated with southern Indian temple architecture, including a prominent shrine tower (vimana), pillared halls and subsidiary structures. These elements were translated into a rock-cut setting, creating the appearance of a freestanding temple complex.
- Temple components: Important architectural elements include the entrance, courtyard, Nandi pavilion, pillared mandapa and principal shrine (garbhagriha). Their arrangement establishes a clear ritual and visual progression through the complex.
- Sculptural decoration: The temple's walls, pillars and architectural surfaces carry elaborate sculptural work. Mythological subjects, including episodes associated with Shiva and the story of Ravana attempting to lift Mount Kailasa, contribute to the monument's religious meaning and visual impact.
- Religious patronage: The Deccan's architectural landscape includes Hindu, Buddhist and Jain monuments. Ellora is especially significant because sanctuaries belonging to all three traditions occur within the same wider complex. This coexistence should be understood as evidence of a plural religious landscape, while individual monuments must be dated and attributed separately.
- Continuity and regional interaction: Rashtrakuta-period architecture developed within an established Deccan tradition shaped by earlier and contemporary regional styles. It should not be treated as an isolated or uniform style; individual monuments show different combinations of inherited forms, local craftsmanship and patronage.

The Kailasa Temple at Ellora

Historical Background and Patronage

The Kailasa Temple, also known as the Kailasanatha Temple, is Cave 16 in the Ellora complex in Maharashtra. Dedicated to Shiva, it is conceived as an earthly representation of Mount Kailasa, the divine abode of the god. The temple is traditionally associated with the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I, who ruled in the eighth century CE. Its scale and execution reflect the resources, planning and artistic expertise available to its patrons and builders.

Monolithic Construction and Architectural Layout

The temple is carved from a single mass of basalt. Its construction involved cutting away the surrounding rock to expose the architectural form, a method that required careful planning because the monument had to be conceived as a complete three-dimensional structure before and during excavation. The result is a monumental complex that reproduces, in rock, many features normally associated with a built temple.

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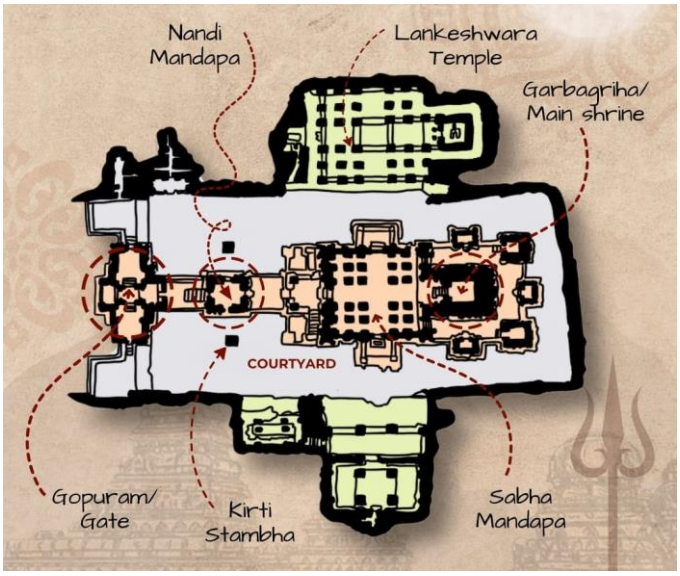


Figure 1. Aerial view of the monolithic Kailasa Temple at Ellora.

The complex includes an entrance gateway, an open courtyard, a Nandi pavilion, a pillared assembly hall (mandapa) and the principal Shiva shrine (garbhagriha) with its tower. The spatial relationship between the Nandi pavilion and the main shrine follows the ritual association between Nandi, Shiva's sacred bull, and the deity. Galleries and subsidiary architectural elements frame the courtyard and contribute to the monument's overall composition.



Figure 2. Plan of the Kailasa Temple complex showing the principal architectural components.

Sculptural Programme and Religious Significance

Sculpture is integral to the architecture of the Kailasa Temple. Large reliefs and decorative figures animate the walls and architectural surfaces, translating episodes from Hindu mythology into monumental visual form. One of the best-known compositions depicts Ravana attempting to shake or lift Mount Kailasa, while Shiva remains composed. The scene expresses the power of Shiva and demonstrates the sculptors' ability to convey movement, tension and narrative through stone.

The temple is both a place of worship and an outstanding artistic achievement. Its architecture brings together religious symbolism, sculptural storytelling, spatial organisation and technical innovation. It also provides evidence of the close relationship between political authority, religious patronage and artistic production in the early medieval Deccan.

Historical and Cultural Importance

The Kailasa Temple forms part of the Ellora Caves, which were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1983. UNESCO recognises Ellora for its exceptional artistic achievement, technical accomplishment and the presence of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain sanctuaries within one extensive site. The Kailasa Temple remains a particularly important example of the possibilities of monolithic rock-cut architecture in India.

Other Important Monuments and Regional Examples

The following examples provide a wider view of religious architecture in the Deccan during or around the Rashtrakuta period. Their dates and

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dynastic associations are not equally certain; the descriptions below distinguish documented Rashtrakuta-period connections from broader regional context.

1. Jain Narayana Temple, Pattadakal

The Jain Narayana Temple at Pattadakal, Karnataka, is assigned by the Archaeological Survey of India to the Rashtrakuta period and is generally dated to the ninth century CE. Built in the Dravida style, it includes a porch, a hall and a sanctuary with a circumambulatory passage. Its architectural details, including the basement mouldings, pilasters and columns, demonstrate the continued development of Dravida forms in the Deccan. The temple is an important example of Jain religious architecture associated with Rashtrakuta-period patronage.

2. Navalinga Temple Group, Kuknoor

The Navalinga Temple Group is located at Kuknoor in present-day Koppal district, Karnataka. The group consists of nine shrines associated with the worship of Shiva. The temples are part of the region's early medieval architectural heritage and display features found in Deccan temple building. However, a direct and secure attribution of the entire group to Rashtrakuta royal patronage is not established by the material consulted for this article. It is therefore more cautious to discuss the group as a regional example rather than as a confirmed Rashtrakuta foundation.

3. Dashavatara Cave (Cave 15), Ellora

The Dashavatara Cave, or Cave 15, is a two-storeyed Hindu rock-cut monument at Ellora. It contains sculptural panels associated with both Vishnu and Shiva. An inscription of the Rashtrakuta ruler Dantidurga is recorded at the monument, making the cave important evidence for Rashtrakuta presence and patronage at Ellora. The inscription should not, by itself, be taken as proof that every part of the cave was constructed by Dantidurga; it is safer to describe the monument as associated with Rashtrakuta-period activity.

4. Indra Sabha (Cave 32), Ellora

Indra Sabha, known as Cave 32, belongs to the Jain group at Ellora. It is a major rock-cut complex with elaborately carved pillars, shrines and images of Jain Tirthankaras. The Jain caves at Ellora belong broadly to the later phase of the site's development, from the ninth to twelfth centuries. Indra Sabha therefore illustrates the Jain artistic tradition flourishing at Ellora during the wider period that included Rashtrakuta rule, although it should not be presented as a monument whose exact royal patron is established.

Conclusion

The Rashtrakuta dynasty occupies an important place in the history of early medieval Indian art and architecture. Its association with major monuments at Ellora, above all the Kailasa Temple, demonstrates the ambition and technical ability of Deccan artisans and the role of royal patronage in supporting monumental religious architecture. The Kailasa Temple is remarkable for its monolithic construction, carefully organised courtyard and shrine complex, Dravida architectural features and extensive sculptural programme. It transforms the natural basalt landscape into an elaborate sacred architectural space.

The wider Ellora complex also reveals a long history of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain artistic activity. This diversity should be understood through the different dates and contexts of individual caves rather than attributed collectively to one dynasty. Other monuments, such as the Jain Narayana Temple at Pattadakal and the Dashavatara Cave at Ellora, further illustrate the varied architectural and religious environment of the Deccan. The Rashtrakuta legacy is therefore not limited to a single monument: it forms part of a broader history of artistic exchange, religious patronage and architectural innovation in medieval India.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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