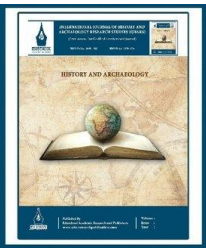
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Stone, Script, and Sovereignty: The Asokan Edicts and the Communication of Imperial Authority in Mauryan India, c. 268 to 232 BCE

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Abstract

The inscriptions of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka are the earliest substantial body of royal texts in South Asia and the only contemporary evidence for the workings of the first subcontinental empire. This article examines them not primarily as sources for Aśoka's biography or religious convictions, the questions that have dominated their study since James Prinsep's decipherment in 1837, but as instruments through which a thinly administered empire attempted to communicate authority across a vast and heterogeneous territory. Drawing on the epigraphic corpus as edited by Hultzsch and re-examined by Falk, on the administrative analysis of Fussman and Thapar, and on the recent reinterpretations of Olivelle and Lahiri, the article argues that the edicts constituted a deliberate technology of rule. Their placement along routes and at frontiers, their adaptation to local languages and scripts, and their construction of dhamma as a political idiom accessible to subjects of every persuasion reveal an emperor who governed by the projection of a royal voice rather than by the dense bureaucratic apparatus imagined in the Arthaśāstra. The article concludes that the strengths and the limits of this strategy help to explain both the extraordinary reach of Aśoka's empire and the rapidity of its dissolution after his death.

Keywords: - Aśoka, Mauryan Empire, Edicts, Epigraphy, Dhamma, Brahmi, Imperial Communication, Ancient India.

Introduction

When James Prinsep read the first words of the Brahmi script on the Delhi pillar in 1837 and recovered the phrase devanampiya piyadasi, beloved of the gods, of gracious countenance, he restored to history a ruler whose name had survived only in Buddhist legend and whose empire had left no other written trace. The identification of Piyadasi with the Aśoka of the Sri Lankan chronicles was confirmed within a few decades, and the discovery in the twentieth century of minor edicts at Maski, Gujarra, Nittur, and Udegolam bearing the name Asoka itself removed any remaining doubt (Hultzsch 1925, introduction; Falk 2006, 55–58). The corpus that Prinsep opened now comprises fourteen major rock edicts, two separate rock edicts, a series of minor rock edicts, seven pillar edicts, several minor pillar inscriptions, and cave dedications, distributed across the subcontinent from Kandahar in Afghanistan to Brahmagiri in Karnataka and from Sopara on the Konkan coast to Dhauli in Odisha.

The scholarly literature on these inscriptions is enormous, but its centre of gravity has been biographical and doctrinal. The edicts have been read for what they reveal of Aśoka's conversion after the Kalinga war, of the

content of his dhamma, and of the relationship between that dhamma and Buddhism. These questions are legitimate and the present article does not dismiss them. But they treat the inscriptions as a window onto the mind of the emperor rather than as objects that were carved, placed, and read for particular purposes. The argument advanced here is that the edicts are best understood as a technology of imperial communication, and that their form, distribution, and language were shaped by the problem of governing a territory far larger than any administrative apparatus of the period could directly control.

The article proceeds in five sections. The first surveys the corpus and its geographical distribution. The second examines the choice of languages and scripts. The third analyses dhamma as a political rather than a sectarian idiom. The fourth reconstructs the administrative structure the edicts presuppose and sets it against the model of the Arthaśāstra. The fifth considers the limits of the strategy and its bearing on the decline of the empire.

The Corpus and Its Distribution

The edicts fall into groups distinguished by content, medium, and date. The minor rock edicts, the earliest, were issued around the tenth regnal year and record the emperor's growing zeal for dhamma after a period of association with the Buddhist community. The fourteen major rock edicts, engraved as a set on rock surfaces at some ten sites, were issued between the twelfth and fourteenth years and contain the fullest statement of Aśoka's policy, including in the thirteenth edict the celebrated account of the Kalinga war and the remorse it provoked. The pillar edicts, inscribed on monolithic sandstone columns, date to the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh years and represent the mature expression of the programme (Thapar 1997, chaps. 1 and 5; Salomon 1998, 133–140).

Harry Falk's survey of the sites has clarified the logic of their placement. The major rock edicts cluster at the margins of the empire: at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra in the northwest, at Kalsi in the Himalayan foothills, at Girnar and Sopara in the west, at Dhauli and Jaugada in Kalinga, and at Yerragudi in the south. The minor rock edicts are concentrated in the southern Deccan, in the mining and pastoral zones of Karnataka and Andhra. The pillars, by contrast, stand in the Gangetic heartland along the royal road from Pataliputra to the northwest and at sites of Buddhist pilgrimage such as Lumbini and Sarnath (Falk 2006, 13–20 and 55–60). The pattern is not random. The rock edicts announce the emperor's authority at the points where the empire met other polities and other peoples, and the pillars affirm it along the arteries through which the court itself moved.

Nayanjot Lahiri has drawn attention to a further feature: many rock edict sites were already places of significance, associated with routes, springs, hilltop shrines, or older settlements, and the inscriptions were inserted into landscapes that had their own meanings for the people who used them (Lahiri 2015, chaps. 6–7). The edicts were thus not simply deposited in the wilderness but attached to points where they would be encountered, and in several cases they instruct that they be read aloud on specified occasions. The seventh pillar edict records the emperor's intention that the texts be engraved wherever stone pillars or slabs were available so that the message would endure. The medium was chosen for permanence, the sites for audience.

Language, Script, and Audience

The linguistic variety of the corpus is its most striking evidence of communicative intent. The great majority of the inscriptions are in Middle Indo-Aryan dialects, collectively called Prakrit, written in the Brahmi script that appears here for the first time in datable form. But the dialect varies regionally: the eastern edicts follow the Magadhi of the court, while those in the west and northwest show phonological features of the local vernaculars, indicating that the texts were adapted in transmission rather than copied mechanically (Salomon 1998, 72–76; Norman 1990, chap. 9). At Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra the script is Kharoshthi, derived from Aramaic and current in the Gandharan region. At Kandahar the emperor's message was rendered in Greek and Aramaic on a single bilingual stone, and fragments of further Greek and Aramaic versions have been found at Kandahar, Taxila, and Laghman.

These choices presuppose a chancery that knew its audiences and possessed the linguistic resources to address them. The Greek text at Kandahar is not a translation but a recomposition in the idiom of Hellenistic royal proclamation, using the philosophical vocabulary of eusebeia, piety, for dhamma, and adapting the emperor's injunctions to a readership familiar with Greek civic ethics (Olivelle 2023, chap. 9). The Aramaic version similarly draws on the chancery language of the former Achaemenid provinces. Aśoka, in other words, spoke to the Greeks of Arachosia as a Greek king would and to the Iranian populations of the northwest in the administrative tongue they had used under Persian rule.

The implication for the character of Mauryan rule is significant. An empire that adapted its official voice to the languages of its subjects was not attempting to impose a single imperial culture. Its claim to authority was expressed through accommodation rather than assimilation. This does not mean that the claim was weak. The presence of the emperor's words in local speech at the frontier of the empire was itself an assertion that the frontier

belonged to him. But it was an assertion designed to be understood and, ideally, accepted, and its form reflects the recognition that acceptance could not be commanded.

Dhamma as Political Idiom

The content of the edicts is dominated by dhamma, a term that has been translated as law, righteousness, morality, and piety, and whose relationship to Buddhism has been the subject of a long and unresolved debate. Romila Thapar's influential interpretation held that Aśoka's dhamma was a deliberately non-sectarian civic ethic, drawing on ideas common to the religious movements of the period but formulated so as to unite a diverse population under a shared moral vocabulary that the emperor himself embodied (Thapar 1997, chap. 5). Later scholars have qualified this reading. Olivelle has argued that Aśoka's personal commitment to Buddhism was deeper than Thapar allowed and that the dhamma of the edicts, while not doctrinal, was informed by Buddhist ethics at every point (Olivelle 2009, introduction; Olivelle 2023, chaps. 5–6).

For the argument of this article, the theological question matters less than the political function. Whatever its sources, the dhamma of the edicts is presented as the emperor's own, and its practice is enjoined on all subjects regardless of sect. It comprises obedience to parents, generosity to brahmins and ascetics, restraint toward living beings, truthfulness, and, above all, tolerance among the religious communities, which the twelfth rock edict describes as the essential condition of their mutual flourishing. These are not the prescriptions of a legal code. They are the terms of a moral community of which the emperor is the head, and adherence to them is represented as the proper form of loyalty to him.

Upinder Singh has emphasized the extent to which this idiom coexisted with, rather than replaced, the coercive apparatus of the state. The same thirteenth edict that expresses remorse for the suffering of Kalinga warns the forest peoples that the emperor's power to punish remains, and the separate edicts at Dhauli and Jaugada instruct officials in the conquered province to govern justly precisely so that the population will be reconciled to Mauryan rule (Singh 2017, chap. 1). Dhamma was not an alternative to power. It was the language in which power was made acceptable, and its promulgation by inscription was a means of extending the emperor's presence to places his armies rarely went.

Administration Between Centre and Periphery

The edicts also allow a partial reconstruction of the administrative structure through which they were disseminated. The third rock edict refers to the yuktas, rajukas, and pradesikas, officials of differing rank, who were to undertake tours of inspection every five years and to proclaim the dhamma. The fifth records the creation in the thirteenth regnal year of the dhamma-mahamattas, a new class of officers charged with the welfare of the religious communities and of vulnerable groups. The fourth pillar edict entrusts the rajukas with authority over hundreds of thousands of people and grants them independence in judicial matters. The separate edicts address the mahamattas of Tosali and Samapa in Kalinga, and the minor rock edicts at Brahmagiri were issued from the southern viceregal seat of Suvarnagiri. Provincial capitals at Taxila and Ujjain are attested in the edicts and in later tradition (Thapar 1997, chap. 4; Fussman 1988, 43–72).

Gérard Fussman's analysis of this evidence has been decisive in overturning the older image of the Mauryan state. Against the model derived from the Arthaśāstra, with its dense hierarchy of departments and its omnipresent spies, Fussman argued that the empire was administered by a small number of officials operating over enormous distances, that the provinces enjoyed wide autonomy under royal princes, and that the emperor's control was exercised through periodic tours, correspondence, and the moral pressure of the edicts rather than through routine bureaucratic supervision (Fussman 1988, 43–72). The Arthaśāstra, in Olivelle's reconstruction, is a composite text whose final form is considerably later than the Mauryan period and whose prescriptions describe an ideal rather than any historical administration (Olivelle 2013, introduction).

Thapar herself revised her earlier view in the light of this work, proposing a model of the Mauryan state as a metropolitan core in Magadha surrounded by core regions of direct administration and a wider periphery of tributary, forest, and frontier zones over which control was nominal (Thapar 1997, afterword). The distribution of the edicts corresponds closely to this structure. The pillars mark the metropolitan area; the rock edicts mark the outer limits of the core regions; and the forest peoples whom the thirteenth edict warns lie beyond both. The inscriptions were the means by which a state with limited administrative depth projected its authority to the edges of its claim.

The Limits of Reach and the Decline of the Empire

The strategy had costs as well as advantages. An empire whose cohesion depended on the voice of a single ruler was vulnerable when that voice fell silent. The Mauryan state fragmented within half a century of Aśoka's death in 232 BCE, and the last of the dynasty was overthrown by his general Pushyamitra around 185

BCE. The causes of this decline have been debated since Haraprasad Sastri attributed it to a brahmanical reaction against Aśoka's patronage of Buddhism, a thesis that Thapar dismantled on the ground that the edicts show no hostility to brahmins and that the successor dynasties were not uniformly brahmanical (Thapar 1997, chap. 7). Kosambi proposed economic exhaustion, evidenced by the debasement of punch-marked coinage in the later Mauryan period, but the numismatic evidence is difficult to date with precision (Kosambi 1956, chap. 8).

The analysis offered here suggests a structural explanation. The Mauryan empire was held together by a communicative order centred on the person of the emperor and by a thin provincial administration whose loyalty was personal. Aśoka's edicts created an imperial presence that the state's institutions could not sustain without him. His successors, of whom almost nothing is known, left no inscriptions, and the provincial governors on whom the system depended became the founders of independent kingdoms. The empire did not collapse because its ideology was rejected; it dissolved because the ideology had substituted for institutions that were never built.

This reading also accounts for the curious afterlife of the edicts. Their script was forgotten within a few centuries, and later Indian rulers who encountered the pillars, such as the Gupta emperor Samudragupta at Allahabad and the Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq at Delhi, could not read them but recognized them as symbols of sovereignty worth appropriating. The edicts outlived the empire precisely because their function had been symbolic rather than administrative. They marked the claim to rule long after the capacity to rule had passed to others.

Conclusion

The Aśokan edicts have been read as confession, sermon, and legal code. They are better read as the instruments of an emperor who understood that the extent of his territory exceeded the reach of his administration and who sought to close the gap by making himself present in stone. Their placement at frontiers and along routes, their translation into the languages of the periphery, and their construction of dhamma as a moral community under royal headship were elements of a coherent strategy of communicative rule. That strategy achieved an imperial presence across the subcontinent unmatched until the Mughals, and it failed as soon as the voice that sustained it was gone.

For the comparative study of ancient empires, the Mauryan case offers a corrective to the assumption that scale requires bureaucracy. The Achaemenid, Roman, and Han empires built administrative institutions of considerable depth; Aśoka governed by proclamation. His empire was shorter-lived than theirs, but the inscriptions that were its principal instrument have proved more durable than the archives of any of them, and they remain the foundation on which the history of early India is written.

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