

AŚOKA (aśoka, *Sanskrit* — ‘(Born) without pain’ or ‘Without sorrow’) b. ? — 232/227 BC) — a king of the Mauryan dynasty of ancient India.

Chronology

The time of Aśoka’s reign differs in Indology; 264–227 BC [Vigasin 2005: 594], 265–238 BC [Sen 2024].

Sources

The main reliable source of information about Aśoka are the inscriptions engraved on pillars and rocks that he and his apprentices have left behind (Fig. 1) [Hultsch 1925; Thapar 1961: 250–266; Vigasin 2007: 11–36]. Fourteen Major Rock Edicts, two Separate Rock Edicts and one Minor Rock Edict, seven Pillar Edicts — a total of over 150 copies of texts attributed to Aśoka has survived. The Minor Pillar Edicts include the Schism Edict, the Queen’s Edict, the Rummindei/Lumbini Edict, and the Nigali Sagar Edict (found in Nepal). Most of the edicts are written in Prakrits, the Middle Indic vernacular languages. Aśokan inscriptions found in north-western India and Afghanistan are written in Aramaic and Ancient Greek.

In view of some scholars, Aśoka’s edicts were inspired by the inscriptions of the Achaemenid rulers of Persia and the Hellenistic sovereigns of the Middle East [Thapar 1961: 127–128; Vigasin 2005: 594].

The *Narrative of Aśoka* (Aśokāvadāna in Sanskrit), a legendary biography of Aśoka, is a part of Divyāvadāna or *Divine Narrative*, a Buddhist anthology in Sanskrit written not earlier than the 2nd century [Coleman, Elsner 1995: 173]. It describes Aśoka as a Buddhist universal ruler (chakravartin, Sanskrit — ‘the one who turns the wheel’), entirely devoted to spreading Buddhism, at times extreme cruel towards people of other faiths, or excessively generous towards the Buddhist community [Strong 1983; Mukhopadhyaya 1960; Przyluski 1923; Mitra 1882: 6–17]. Currently, Aśokāvadāna is considered an unreliable source [Thapar 1961: 9].

Some sources are written in Pāli: the Sinhala Buddhist poems *Dīpavaṃsa* or ‘Chronicle of the Island’ (4th–5th centuries) and

Mahāvamsa or ‘The Great Chronicle’ (5th–6th centuries) [Vigasin 1984: 296; Oldenberg 1879; Law 1947; Frisch 2004: 70–81; Geiger, Bode 1912; Guruge 1990]. Regarded to be more reliable [Thapar 1961: 8], they often contradict each other; see Aśoka’s mother’s name discussion below. Sanskrit historical legends or *puranas* (*purāṇa*; ‘ancient, former’) give a relatively fair, though sometimes confusing, chronology of the reign of Aśoka and other Mauryan kings and provide a generalised image of the king [Thapar 1961: 9; Parigiter 1922; O’Flaherty 1993].

Some information about Aśoka is preserved in old Chinese written sources like the accounts of the Buddhist pilgrims Faxian (法顯) (5th century) and Xuanzang (玄奘) (7th century).

Biography

Aśoka was the son of Bindusara and the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya. According to the *Matsyapurāṇa* (272, 24), he ruled for 36 years [Vigasin 1990: 165]. His father ruled for 25 years according to the *purana*, for 28 years according to the *Sinhala Chronicles*, and for only 18 years according to the commentary to the 5th century Pāli canon *Samantapāsādikā* (Pāli ‘Entirely Pleasing’) written by Buddhaghosa [Law 1946: 15–16].

The exact year of Aśoka’s birth has not been established. His mother’s name is not known. According to the *Aśokāvadāna*, she was Subhadrāṅgi, the daughter of a Brahmin from the kingdom of Campā; according to *Divyāvadāna* her name was Janapadakalyani or Subgadrāṅgi, and in the *Vaṃsatthapakasīnī*, the commentary to the Sinhala Buddhist chronicle *Mahāvamsa*, she was called Dharma [Thapar 1961: 21; cf.: Lahiri 2015: 363].

According to a story in the *Divyāvadāna* anthology, Bindusara sent Aśoka to subdue a rebellion in the city of Taxila, but it had ended by the time the prince got there [Law 1946: 15; Thapar 1951: 21]. The *Mahāvamsa* mentions that Aśoka was the Viceroy of Ujjain, and this is supported by an inscription found during excavations in Saru Maru near the village of Pangoraria in Madhya Pradesh [Falk 1997: 119; Allen 2012: 154].



Fig. 1a. The Rock Edict of Aśoka from Maski.
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After Bindusara's death, Aśoka killed all his brothers except Tissa and ruled for four years without coronation, according to the *Samantapāsādikā*. His coronation took place in Pataliputra [Law 1946: 16]. Aśoka was known as Devānaṃpiya Piyadāsi (Prakrit) or Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin (Sanskrit), i. e. 'Beloved of the Gods' and 'One who looks with kindness upon everything'. Some scholars consider this a title, others believe it was the king's given name [Monier-Williams 1899: 495, 710; Thapar 1961: 226–227; Vigasin 2007: 37–46].

The 13th Major Rock Edict states that Aśoka conquered the kingdom of Kalinga in the eighth year after his anointment (coronation), killing 100,000, causing death for another 100,000, and capturing 150,000. Feeling remorse, he began to spread dharma, a code of moral tenets. He sent emissaries to the Greek king Antiochus II Theos ('Antiyoka'), Ptolemy II Philadelphus ('Tulamaya'), Antigonus II Gonatas ('Antikeni'), Magas of Cyrene ('Maga'), Alexander ('Alikasundara'), son of Pyrrhus of Epirus or son of Craterus

of Corinth, and also to the Chola and Pandya kingdoms [Vigasin 2007: 22–23, 96–97].

As 'King of Dharma' Aśoka aimed to achieve a symbolic conquest of the universe [Vigasin 2005/2016; 2007: 106]. Aśoka regarded the propagation of dharma as his universal or 'far-reaching' victory. To achieve it, he ordered to engrave the inscriptions of dharma in short, medium-length and extended versions, depending on the extent of his conquests ('vijita' in Sanskrit and Pāli) (14th Major Rock Edict) [Vigasin 2007: 24]. The 4th Major Rock Edict lays out the main tenets of dharma: abstention from killing or injuring any living beings, courtesy to relatives, Brahmins and Śramanas, and obedience to mother, father, and elders [Vigasin 2007: 13]. According to the 9th Major Rock Edict, the observances of dharma include regard for slaves and servants, respect for teachers, restrained behaviour, donations to Brahmins and Śramanas [Vigasin 2007: 18]. The 11th Major Rock Edict adds proper behaviour towards friends, acquaintances, and relatives [Vigasin 2007: 20]. 'Officers

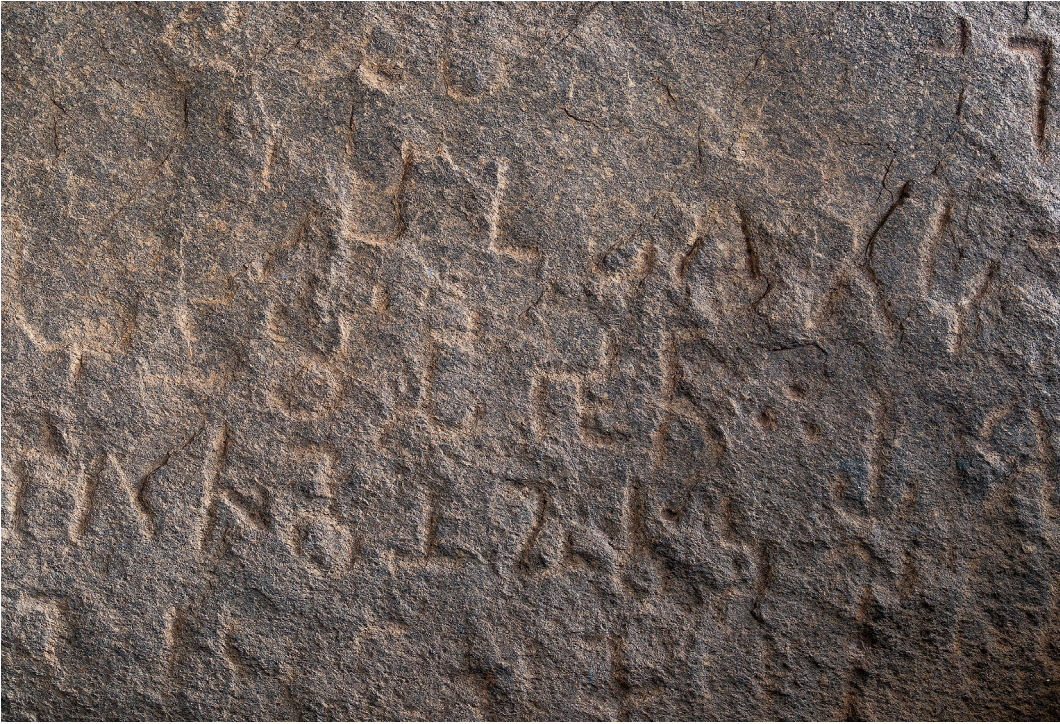


Fig. 1b. The Rock Edict of Aśoka from Maski.

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of the Dharma' were enjoined to attend to the welfare of various ethnic and social groups like 'the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Gandharas, the Ritthikas, the Pitinikas, the people of the west, Brahmins, Ibbhas, orphans, the aged, and prisoners' (5th Major Rock Edict) [Vigasin 2007: 15].

The royal decrees on dharma were to be proclaimed in Tosali once every four months during the day of the nakshatra of Tisya star, at intervals between the Tisya days, and on special occasions (not specified in the 1st and 2nd Separate Edicts) [Vigasin 2007: 25, 27].

In his edicts the king is depicted as a protector, the father of his people: 'All men are my children. Just as I desire for my children that they should obtain welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, the same do I desire for all. But you do not realize how far this principle goes — possibly one man among you may realize, but even he only in part and not entirely' (1st Separate Edict in Dhauri) [Thapar 1961: 257; cf. Vigasin 2007: 25]. Aśoka saw himself as the father of his subjects (1st and 2nd Separate Edicts),

with constant concern for their welfare and the welfare of the whole world (6th Major Rock Edict) [Vigasin 2007: 16, 25–26]. He proclaimed religious tolerance (7th and 12th Major Rock Edicts) [Vigasin 2007: 17, 20–21].

On the tenth year after his coronation, Aśoka went on a pilgrimage to the site of Buddha's enlightenment and made generous donations to the aged, Brahmins and Śramanas (8th Major Rock Edict) [Vigasin 2007: 17].

Twelve years after his coronation, the king ordered that his officers and vassal rulers shall tour their jurisdictions every five years to instruct people in the dharma (3rd Major Rock Edict) [Vigasin 2007: 12]. These officers were called 'Officers of the Dharma' ('dhammamahāmātā' in Prakrit; 'dharmamahāmātra' in Sanskrit; 5th Major Rock Edict) [Vigasin 2007: 14]. The 1st Separate Edict also establishes this tour of duty to be performed every five years and directs that the prince in Ujjain and the king's representative in Taxila shall also delegate an officer with similar duties every three years [Vigasin 2007: 25–26].



Fig. 2. The Lion Capital on the Aśoka Pillar in Sanchi.

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Under Āśoka the Maurya kingdom in the mid-3rd century BC encompassed about 5 million square km with a population of around 15–30 million [Dyson 2018: 24]. Other hypothetic estimates of 50–60 million [Taylor Sen 2022: 9] and even 181 million [Datta 1962: 277–291] are clear exaggerations. The frontier lands mentioned in Āśoka's inscriptions are the territories of the Cholas, Pandyas, Satyaputras, Kerala-putras, Tamraparni, and the kingdoms of the Greek king Antiochus and his neighbours (2nd Major Rock Edict) [Vigasin 2007: 12].

Presumably, it was during the reign of Āśoka that the Third Buddhist Council was held in Pataliputra and many stupas were erected. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian (法顯) noted that Āśoka intended to build 84,000 Buddhist stupas (XXIII) [Alexandrova 2008: 132]. In Sri Lankan history the spread of Buddhism on the island is attributed to Āśoka.

Legacy

In the Buddhist tradition Āśoka is held as a model ruler of the universe (chakravartin) and patron of Buddhism. In Indian national historiography Āśoka is a pan-Indian emperor, the ruler of a centralised empire, a symbol of imperial grandeur and, at the same time, the cause of the gradual decay of the nation's martial spirit [Law 1946: 17; Thapar 1961]. In contemporary historiography Āśoka is the ruler of an extensive kingdom ('the 'vijita' of the edicts) with extremely uneven control over dependent territories [Thapar 2006; Vigasin 2007].

The lion capital on the Āśoka pillar in Sanchi has become the state emblem of the Republic of India (Fig. 2).

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