

RANDOM OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEWER ASOKAN EPIGRAPHS

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Abstract: *Comparative Abundance of Sources for the Nanda-Maurya Period Whereas for the earlier period of Indian history one has to extract evidence from literary sources, often very meagre, far removed and scattered, and mostly of uncertain character and indefinite date, with the Nanda-Maurya period, especially the Maurya, there is a comparative abundance of information from sources either contemporary or of a later date.*

Key words: *Chandragupta Maurya, Arthasastra of Kautilya and Mahabhashya of Patanjali, Amaravati, Sahasram, Jatinga-Ramesvaram, Palkigundu and Gavimath etc.*

Comparative Abundance of Sources for the Nanda-Maurya Period Whereas for the earlier period of Indian history one has to extract evidence from literary sources, often very meagre, far removed and scattered, and mostly of uncertain character and indefinite date, with the Nanda-Maurya period, especially the Maurya, there is a comparative abundance of information from sources either contemporary or of a later date. These sources consist of (1) various legends - Brahmanical, Jaina and Buddhist-concerning the Nandas, Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka and other Mauryas in Pali, Sanskrit, and other languages; (2) Brahmanical works such as the Arthasastra of Kautilya and the Mahabhashya of Patanjali; (3) the Greek Accounts having bearing upon the Nandas and the Mauryas, their foreign relations and administration, as well as upon the geography and general history of India; and (4) the itineraries of Chinese pilgrims such as Fa-hsien, Yuan Chwang and I-tsing in respect of the facts recorded by them as eye-witnesses and the legends that they were told by their informants. Among the archaeological sources for the Maurya period one may mention (1) the inscriptions of Asoka and Dasaratha; (2) coins, mostly Punch-marked Coins (or the PMC), pottery, terracottas; and (3) monuments belonging to the Maurya period. But the last of these hardly provide any information on political developments. In this paper I will focus on the recent developments in the epigraphical studies of Asokan period.

So far as the discovery of new source material is concerned, some additions have been made in the post-Independence period. Numerous new edicts of Asoka were brought to light, and several hoards of the PMCs, obviously mostly belonging to the Maurya period, were unearthed. Among the new Asokan epigraphs discovered post-1947 the following are included: (1-2) Two Aramaic edicts of Priyadarasi (Asoka) discovered in 1969 and 1973 respectively from Lamghan (Eastern Afghanistan). (3) Shar-e-kuna (Kandahar, Southern Afghanistan) Bilingual Edict (in Greek and Aramaic) found in 1957. (4) Kandahar Greek Version of RE XII and XIII found in 1963. (5) Kandahar Aramaic Fragmentary inscription discovered in or some time before 1964. (6) Fragment of the RE IX found from Bhuigaon near Sopara in 1956. (Another Fragment of the RE VIII was found in 1882 from the same general locality by Bhagwanlal Inderji.) (7) Northern version of MRE I found at Ahraura, district Mirzapur, U.P in 1961. (8) The Bahapur (Delhi) version of the MRE I found in 1966. (9) Gujjara (Madhya Pradesh) version of the MRE I found in 1953. (10) Panguraria (Madhya Pradesh) version of MRE I found in 1976. (11) Rajula-Mandagiri (Kurnool District) version of MRE I and II discovered in 1953 (through its eye-copy had been prepared by Mackenzie sometime in the beginning of the nineteenth century). (12) Fragmentary Pillar Edict from Amaravati noticed in 1959-60. (13) Nittur (near Bellary) version of the MRE I and II found in 1977. (14) Udegolam (near Nittur) version of the MRE I and II found in 1978. (15) Sannati (Gulberga) version of RE XII and XIV and Separate RE I and II found on two sides of a slab in 1989. (16) The Ratanpurwa Minor Rock Edict discovered by Devi Dayal Maurya in 2009.³

Recent Research on Asokan Epigraphs

Since the discovery of the Aramaic inscription at Taxila in 1914-15 and Pul-i-Darunta Aramaic Stone Tablet Inscription found 'a few years before 1932', scholars have gradually realized the importance of Asokan edicts found in this region as a complementary source of our knowledge of the history of the Maurya age. Since then, as noted above, several Greek and Aramaic inscriptions have been found from Afghanistan. One may now reasonably hope for discoveries of several more edicts of Asoka in Greek and Aramaic, though this hope can hardly be fulfilled in the present political situation of the region, troubled as it is by the political disturbance. However, even now the material at the disposal of historians is enough to reconstruct the history of the Mauryas in this region on more solid foundations. B.N. Mukherjee has even published a monograph on these inscriptions. D.C. Sircar

has also published his articles on most of them in his *Asokan Studies*. The latter work also includes Sircar's papers originally published between 1955 and 1978 on the Brahmi inscriptions discovered in India. The book may be regarded, as Sircar himself states, as a supplement to the *Corpus of Hultzsch*. Apart from these works numerous other scholars have published their articles on the recently found epigraphs of Asoka. Some of them are: Franz Altheim's *The Greek-Aramaic Bilingual Inscription of Kandahar and its Philological Importance* published in *East and the West* (1959); Paul Bernard's *Hellenistic*

Arachosia: A Greek Melting Pot in Action, East and West (2005); Paul Bernard and Rougemont's *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum II: Inscriptions of the Seleucid and Parthian Periods and of Eastern Iran and Central Asia* (London, 2012); Jules Bloch's *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka* (Paris, 1950); Jean Filliozat's *L'enigme des 256 Nuits d'Asoka* (*Journal Asiatique*, 1949); Kenneth Roy Norman's *Notes on the Greek Version of Asoka's Twelfth and Thirteenth Rock Edicts* (*Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, 1972); Schlumberger, Dupont- Sommer and Benveniste's *Une Bilingue Greco-Arameenne d'Asoka* (*Journal Asiatique*, 1958); Romila Thapar's *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (New Delhi, 1977); Paul K. Andersen's *Studies in the Minor Rock Edict of Asoka I: Critical Edition* (Frieburg, 1990); T.P. Verma's *Discovery of the Ratanpurwa Minor Rock Edict of Asoka* (*Itihas Darpan*, 2009); Scribe, Engravers and Engraving of the Asokan Edicts: A Critical Analysis of Edicts in the Southern Territory by Majumdar, Ghosh and Chatterjee and Balazs Gaal and Ibolya Toth's research paper *Some Major Trends in Asoka's Minor Rock Edicts*. Mention must also be made of Francesco Maniscalco's *A New Interpretation of the Edicts of Asoka from Kandahar* (*Serie Orientale*, Vol. 54, Giugno 2018). He has proposed a new completion for the opening lacuna in the Greek section of the bilingual epigraph, and cast his doubt anew on the originality of the Greek Texts, considering the attribution of the region to Indian, rather than Seleucid rule after the pact between Seleucus Nicator and Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka's grandfather.

Distinct Culture-Complex Visible from MREs from Afghanistan

The Major Rock Edicts found from Afghanistan whether translations or adaptations from the Prakrit versions throw a flood of light on the meaning of crucial terms such as *dhamma* translated as *eusebia* and *pasanda* translated as *diatribe*. It is not often that historians are fortunate enough to get contemporary translation which provides an additional dimension to the meaning of words. These inscriptions suggest the presence of a large number of Greek and Aramaic speaking people in these regions and point to the consciousness of a different culture-complex. The phrase *duvadasavas-*

abhisitena is translated as "twelve years after my coronation" or as "in the twelfth year after my coronation". Most scholars would now accept the first reading after the discovery of the bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription at Kandahar which clearly gives the date in expired years. Sircar's subdivision of the Minor Rock Edict into four edicts, though useful, has not generally been accepted by historians. There are now some seventeen versions, either exact or approximate, of this edict and most likely more will be discovered. Unlike the Major Rock Edicts, there is a greater variation in their text: some are shorter, some address to local officers, some occur only at certain places and even their language varies. What Sircar calls Minor Rock edict I occurs at all the sites. But its latter half, where he refers to as Minor Rock Edict II, occurs only at seven sites and that too in a cluster of three districts of Kurnool, Bellary and Chitradurga. The second edict largely comprises further instructions to officers to publicize the Dhamma. Curiously the engraver of these edicts in this area indicates that he was also familiar with Kharoshthi. This section of the edict may have been added after the first section was issued when Asoka had been travelling for 256 Nights.

A Textual Singularity in the Ahraura Version

The precise translation of Asokan edicts will of course remain a matter of discretion. The Ahraura version contains a crucial sentence which might explain the enigma as to why Asoka was travelling for 256 nights when the edict was issued. It reads: esa savane vivuthena duve sapammatisati am mam (ch)e Buddhassa salile alodhe (ti), ie. "This announcement (was made when I was) travelling for 256 nights (from the time) the relics of the Buddha were raised on the couch". Sircar draws attention to the statement of Yuan Chwang that Asoka built the Asokarama at Pataliputra and suggests that possibly this was the installing of the relics referred to in the edict. The installing of relics was generally done in the form of a casket buried in a stupa; they were not normally kept raised on a platform. Were the relics perhaps raised from such a casket within a stupa, placed briefly on a platform and then taken to different parts of the country before being finally enshrined once again? The word mancha in the Pali text refers in most cases to a bed or a couch and the reference here maybe to transference from the stupa to couch-like platform on which the casket was placed to facilitate its carriage.

Rationale behind the Location of MRES

Harry Falk has dwelt on the rationale behind the MRE sites which are peculiar as they are commonly found at places that are definitely not on everybody's way. Summing up, we find MRES:

in caves or rock-shelters on top of hills (at Sahasram, Jatinga-Ramesvaram, Palkigundu and Gavimath); in caves or rock-shelters halfway up a hill (at Maski and Siddapura); at the beginning of a path leading up to or along rocky formations to a sacred place(at Gujjara, Nittur, Bairat and Erragudi); on the flat surface of sacred sites (at Ahraura). The Delhi site is identical, but its historical value is unreported.

by the side of or in connection with sacred water places (at Rajula- Mandagiri and Brahmagiri).

Implications

Falk draws attention to the fact that the MREs are placed at sites which are peculiar in nature like often on the top of hills requiring an ascent of 20 to 40 minutes. The reason may be that the folk religions, still found in many parts of Central and Southern India, held festivals at sacred places during auspicious times of the year, usually away from the settlement in an extraordinary rocky formation. D.D. Kosambi and Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer from Germany did extensive research on such cults mostly centering on some mata aur devi. The latter may hold some meaning for us, as it seems that these edicts have survived the ravages of time because of being engraved at such places.

According to Thaplyal Asoka's text is missionary in nature, which presupposes non-Buddhist listeners. In Falk's view Asoka is not waiting for people to come to his edict in the wilderness, but he places this edict where people used to go on their own, motivated by festivals of a popular nature. Asoka is particularly concerned with 'gods mingling with men' or 'men mingling with gods', depending on the MRE version, and recommends to follow his example and attend the Buddhist uposatha ceremonies, which will promote such mingling on a higher scale. The lower scale which he wants to overcome can be explained by practices in folk religions as described by Sontheimer and Mallebrein wherein on festival days a man or a woman turns into a medium, falls into a trance and embodies a deity which can be approached and questioned. It is my belief however that if laymen would attend such ceremonies and interact with monks and nuns, even in a simple manner, there would have been a permeation of Buddhist ethical knowledge among the lower strata.

The Recently Discovered Ratanpurwa MRE

In January 2009 one more Minor Rock Edict (MRE) was brought to public notice first by its discoverer Devi Dayal Maurya, teacher at Mughalsarai, Varanasi who had reported it to scholars at the Jnana-Pravaha Centre for Cultural Studies and Research, Varanasi, which is devoted to the

maintenance and promotion of the traditional sciences and arts of India. Startled by a first photograph provided by the discoverer, Dr. Niraj Pandey and Samrat Chakravorti visited the site, took better photographs and informed the academic world about it. Very soon the text was edited by K.K. Thaplyal and published in the Monograph series of the said Institute with the title A New Asokan Inscription from Ratnapurwa in 2009. The Ratnapurwa MRE's coordinates in Google maps are 25°01'05"N and 83°20'30"E. Synoptic Presentation of Texts at Ratanpurwa and Sahasram by Falk Harry Falk has presented the text of both sites Ratnapurwa and Sahasram in synoptic form which first demonstrates the degree of accordance. We can then continue to discuss one singular feature which is found only at one of these two sites, namely punctuation. The line beginnings are given in round brackets. The sentences are numbered alphabetically. A plus sign '+' indicates a missing or completely obliterated aksara, a central dot '.' a missing part of an aksara, either the consonant sign or the vowel stroke. Differences are given in bold letters. Note the vertical punctuation strokes **:

Observation on the use of punction marks

As pointed out by Falk the most peculiar feature of this scribe is that at Sahasram he separates sentences by a short vertical bar, similar in appearance to what other scribes use for the ra. Sentences C, F, I, J, L, M and F finish in this manner. The Sentences E and N show one stroke in the middle also. Sentence F contains three such strokes, after amtalena, jambudipasi and ammisamdeva. These strokes must be compared to those speech units which are separated by short spaces in the Pillar Edicts, as was shown by Janert. Such units are called varga by Kautilya in Arthasastra." The speech units ending in a short pause make it possible to comprehend those parts of a sentence that Asoka wanted to emphasize. They may be called purna viramas.

The Riddle of 256 Nights

Many scholars have attempted to solve the riddle of 256 Nights. Hu- von Hinuber, in a lecture at Bamberg in 2001 proposed that if we calculate by taking the full moon and the new moon as uposatha days, we get just two in a synodic month (at 29.53 days). The 256 uposatha days lighting up in the morning amount to 128 synodic months or roughly 10 solar years and 127 days (with 365.25 days) or 10 years and 4 months. In the Kandahar bilingual inscription Asoka declares "Ten years (of reign) having been completed, King Piodasses made known (the doctrine of) Piety to man." This matches the above computation and can be interpreted as Asoka made known his dhamma in the eleventh current regnal year.

Connotation of "My Sangha"

In the Schism Edict Asoka says that "whichever monk or nun shall break up my Sangha shall put on white cloth and live outside the monastery". Falk has reasoned that here Asoka is considering the Sangha to be his property. I however think that he is merely displaying his intense attachment to it, sort of His Highness declaring his devotion to the Sangha to all the listeners or readers.

Notes And References:

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