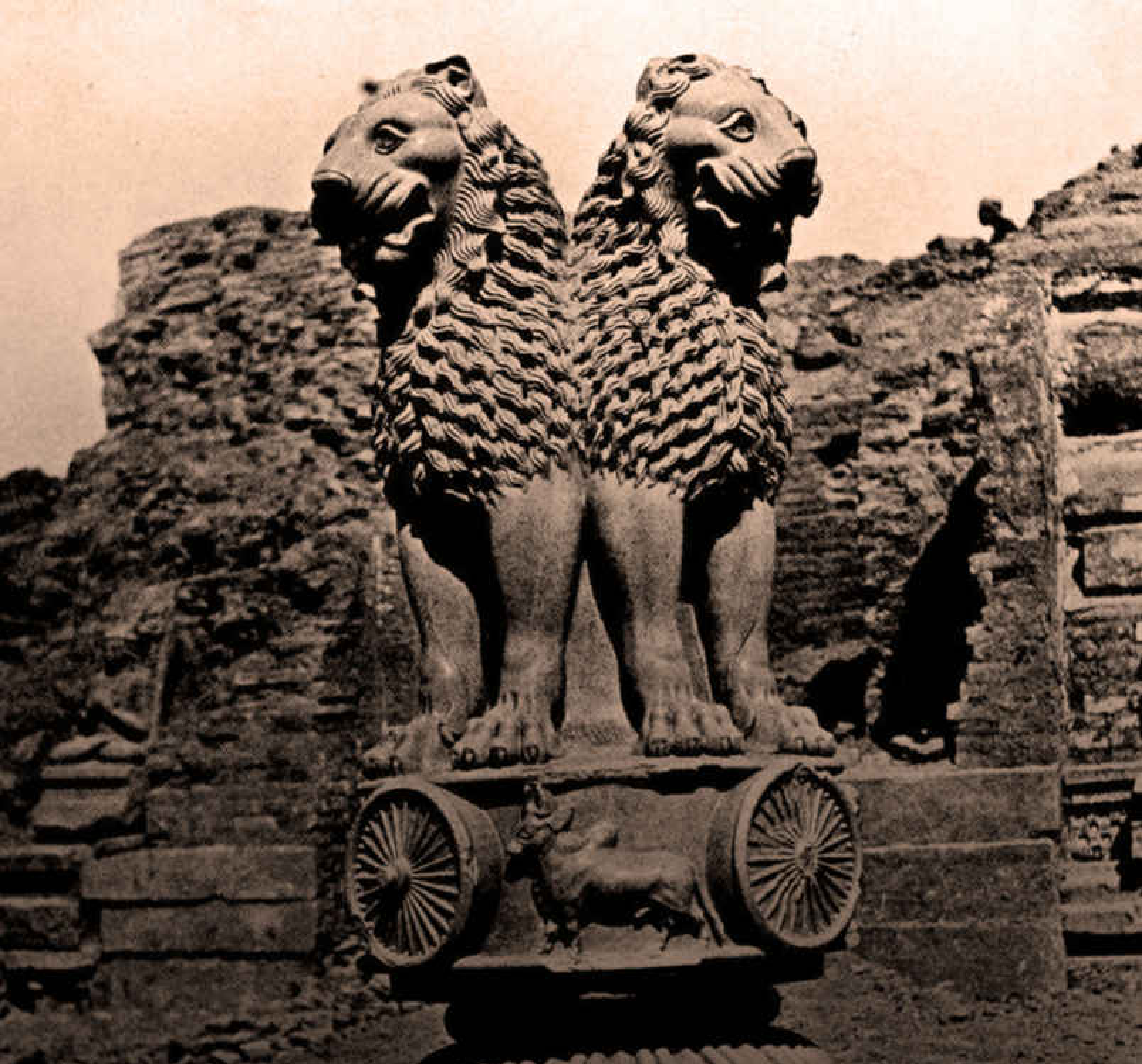


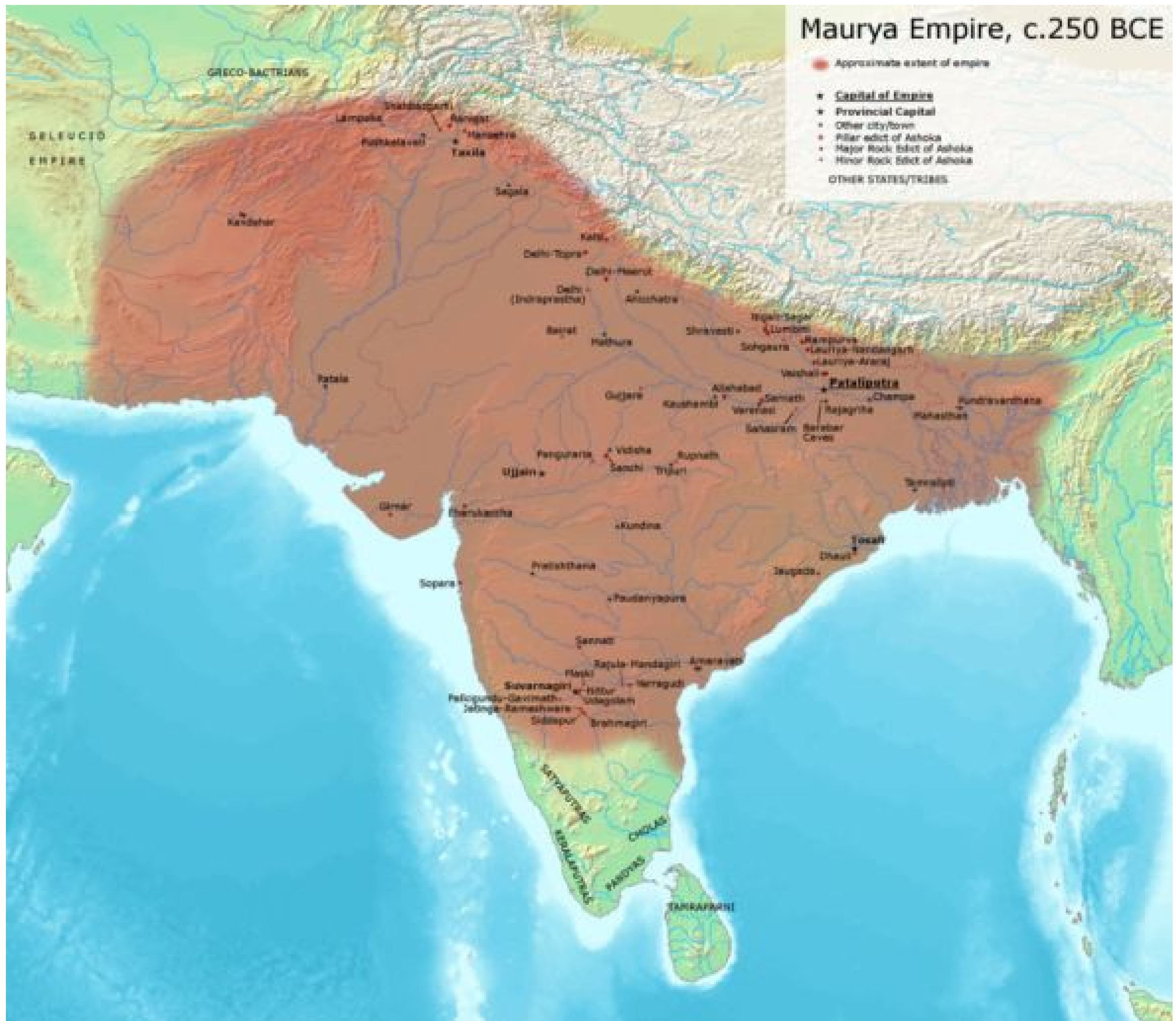
The Maurya Empire

The History and Legacy of Ancient India's Greatest Empire

Charles River Editors

The Maurya Empire: The History and Legacy of Ancient India's Greatest Empire

By Charles River Editors



Avanti Putra's map of the empire

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Introduction

Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.'s picture of a Mauryan coin

The Maurya Empire

During the last centuries of the first millennium BCE, most of the Mediterranean basin and the Near East were either directly or indirectly under the influence of Hellenism. The Greeks spread their ideas to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia and attempted to unify all of the peoples of those regions under one government. Although some of the Hellenistic kingdoms proved to be powerful in their own rights – especially Ptolemaic Egypt and the Seleucid Empire, which encompassed all of Mesopotamia, most of the Levant, and much of Persia during its height – no single kingdom ever proved to be dominant. The Hellenic kingdoms battled each other for supremacy and even attempted to claim new lands, especially to the east, past the Indus River in lands that the Greeks referred to generally as India. But as the Hellenistic Greeks turned their eyes to the riches of India, a dynasty came to power that put most of the Indian subcontinent under the rule of one king.

The dynasty that came to power in the late fourth century BCE is known today as the Mauryan Dynasty, and although the ruling family was short-lived and their power was ephemeral, its influence resonated for several subsequent centuries and spread as far east as China and into the Hellenistic west. Through relentless warfare and violent machinations, the Mauryans were able to take a land that was full of disparate and often warring ethnic groups, religions, and castes and meld it into a reasonably cohesive empire. After establishing the empire, subsequent kings were able to focus their attentions on raising the living standards of their people. One particular Mauryan king, Ashoka, embarked on several ambitious public works projects and promoted the tenets of Buddhism. Due to its influence on religion and what many believe was the world's first attempt by a government to legitimately acknowledge human rights, the Maurya Empire continues to be a source of interest and inspiration today.

The Maurya Empire: The History and Legacy of Ancient India's Greatest Empire looks at one of antiquity's most interesting empires. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Mauryans like never before.

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Before the Mauryans

The geographic area known today as “India” is a modern concept that was created by the United Kingdom when the British partitioned south Asia along religious lines in 1947; the predominantly Hindu south became India, while the predominantly Muslim areas became Pakistan. For most of its history, India was divided along religious and ethnic lines with scores of kings and princes claiming authority over relatively small regions. Languages too were widely dispersed, with the north being home to more Indo-European-descended people and the south being home to the Dravidians (Thapar 2002, 13).

There were certainly clashes between these different groups, but for most of its early history, there was equilibrium on the subcontinent. Outside of the Aryan conquest in the middle of the second millennium BCE, not one of the many groups was able to gain ascendency over the others. This situation changed in the late fourth century BCE, when Alexander the Great led his army all the way to the banks of the Indus River. Alexander toppled kingdom after kingdom as he led his armies west on a campaign to conquer the known world, which brought him through the Middle East into Persia, and then finally into India in 326 BCE. Many of the Classical historians recorded the warrior-king’s most important battles in India, as it turned out to be a seminal point in Hellenistic history; the Greeks were ultimately repulsed and forced to focus on promoting Hellenism in more familiar confines.

Andrew Dunn's picture of an ancient bust of Alexander

The first century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus gave detailed accounts concerning how Alexander was continually faced by the enigmatic Indian king "Porus." Porus, known to the Indians as "Puru," is believed by modern scholars to have been the king of the Jhelum region, which made him powerful, but he was still just one of many who claimed such a title in India at the time (Thapar 2002, 158). The Indians had a well-equipped army and proved to be a match for the Greeks: "In this year Alexander repaired his army in the land of Taxiles and then marched his army against Porus,

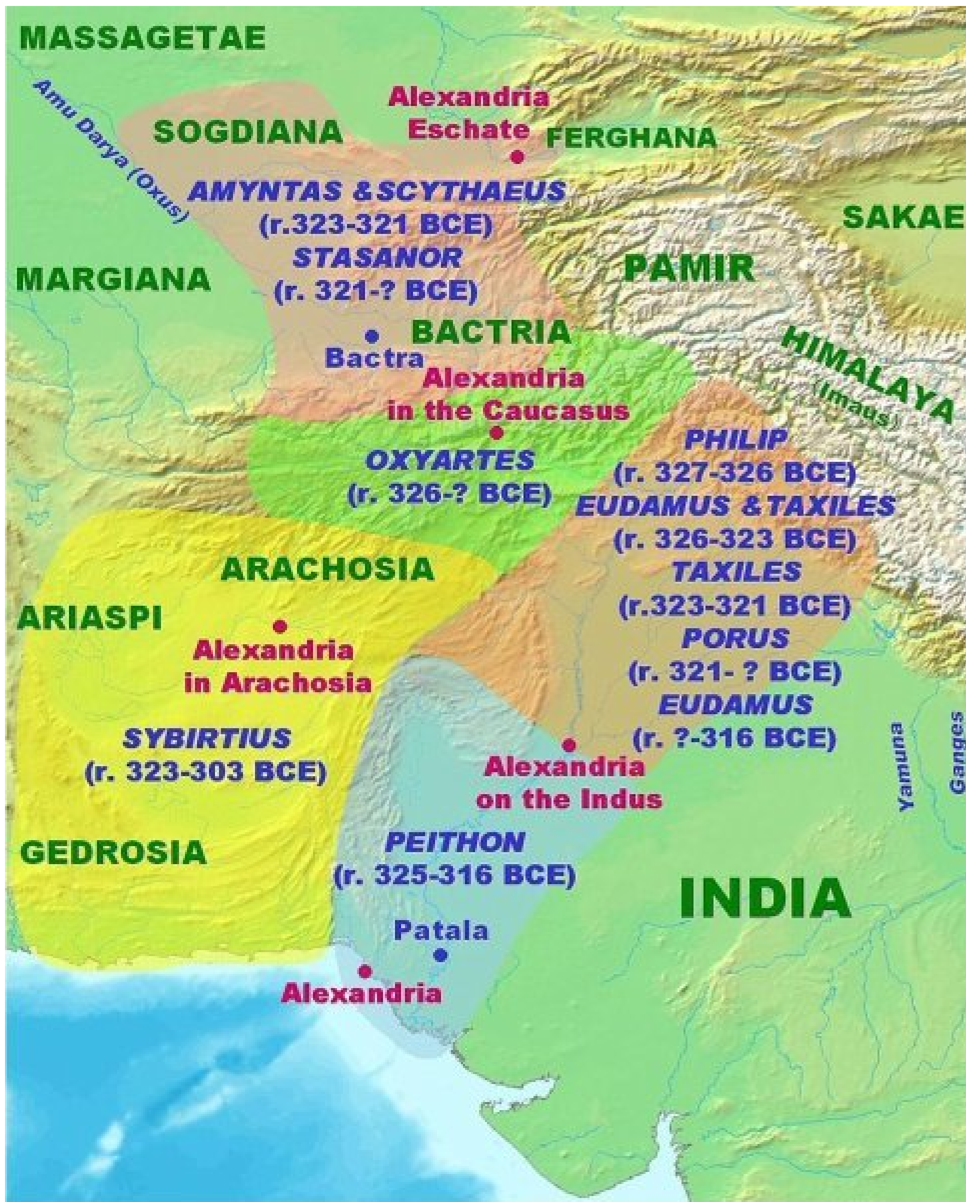
the king of the neighboring Indians. He had more than fifty thousand infantry, about three thousand cavalry, more than a thousand chariots of war, and one hundred and thirty elephants. . .When Alexander received word that this king was four hundred furlongs away, he decided to attack Porus before the arrival of his ally. As he approached the Indians, Porus learned of his advance and deployed his forces promptly. He stationed his cavalry upon both flanks, and arranged his elephants, arrayed so as to strike terror in an opponent, in a single line at equal intervals along his front. . . Then the elephants came into play, trained to make good use of their height and strength. Some of the Macedonians were trodden under foot, armour and all, by the beasts and died, their bones crushed. Others were caught up by the elephants' trunks and, lifted on high, were dashed back down to the ground again, dying a fearful death. Many soldiers were pierced through the whole body. Nevertheless the Macedonians faced the frightening experience manfully. They used their long spears to good effect against the Indians stationed beside the elephants, and kept the battle even. . . Many were slain in their flight, but then Alexander, satisfied with his brilliant victory, ordered the trumpets to sound the recall." (Diodorus, *Library of History*, XVII, 87-89).

After defeating Porus, Alexander ordered his troops to move on and cross the Indus River, which the Greeks considered the traditional boundary of India. It was there that Alexander's troops threatened to mutiny and not move forward. According to the second century CE Greek historian Arrian, Alexander gave the following speech: "You all wish to leave me. Go then! And when you reach home, tell them that Alexander, your King, who vanquished Persians and Medes and Bactrians and Sacae. . . who crossed the Caucasus beyond the Caspian Gates, and Oxus and Tanis and the Indus, which none but Dionysus had crossed before him." (Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, VII, 11). Nonetheless, Alexander eventually relented and agreed to move his army back to Babylon.

The Indus debacle is generally seen as a military failure and a physical demonstration of the limits of Hellenistic imperialism, but for the Indians, Alexander's campaign into India was devastating, as it added more instability to an already chaotic political situation. Due to the plurality of ethnic groups and religions, India tended toward political decentralization.

Beginning in the sixth century BCE, decentralization in northern India had led to many wars by competing princes to unify the land, as the various kings, princes, and warlords all desired to rule over much larger realms than they did. India was moving into a phase that most civilizations throughout the world have experienced: the drive by the constituent kingdoms to place all of the civilization's peoples under the banner of one government.

Thus, in the wake of Alexander's campaigns, the focus of the process was centered on the kingdom of Magadha in northeast India (Scialpi 1984, 56). The various warring forces tried to conquer Magadha because the winner of that kingdom stood to gain most of northern India, especially after Alexander's army left the region.



A map of the region in the late fourth century BCE

The Establishment of the Mauryan Dynasty

Once the smoke from India's civil war cleared, it would be obvious who the winner was. The extant primary sources state that Chandragupta Maurya (ca. 321-297 BCE) was the progenitor of the Mauryan Dynasty and its first monarch (Thapar 2002, 175). The origins of the family are open to debate because they differ widely based on the source of the text. Since the Mauryan Dynasty is often remembered as a Buddhist dynasty due to Ashoka's proselytizing efforts, Buddhist sources tend to be more positive in their treatment by assigning the family the background of the *kshatriya* caste, but conversely, Brahman texts state that the Mauryans were of the *shudra* caste (Thapar 2002, 176).

Understanding the Indian caste system and the role it played in India before, during, and after the Maurya Empire is vital in any study of the Mauryan Dynasty because the caste differences are so crucial to Indian culture and historiography. The *kshatriya* caste was, in the ancient Vedic religion – what is today generally thought of or referred to as "Hinduism" – the caste of the warriors and among the top two castes, while the *shudra* caste was that of the peasants and serfs.

The creation of the castes in ancient India – known as *varnas* in the Sanskrit language – is believed to have been introduced by the Aryans in the middle of the second millennium BCE. One was born into a caste and spent most of his or her time around others in the same caste and could only marry of the same caste. There were four basic castes in Indian society: at the top were the *brahmins*, who were priests; just below them, but almost equal, were the *kshatriya*, who were noble warriors; the *vaishya* caste was comprised of farmers and merchants; the *shudras* were day laborers and serfs; and the *chandalas* were without a caste, which made them "untouchable" to all the others (Thapar 2002, 63).

The origins and reasons for the caste system are described in the collection of ancient Indian holy books known as *The Rig Veda*. One hymn reads: "When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

"His mouth became the Brahim; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born." (Doniger 1981, 31).

The caste system continued to play a role during the Maurya Empire, and almost as important, it played a role in how the Mauryan rulers were remembered. Buddhist chroniclers in later centuries, who did not follow the caste system, took a much more positive view of the Mauryans than the Hindu historians did, especially because the latter possibly saw them as apostates.

The murky origins of the Mauryan Dynasty were also touched upon by the Classical historians. The Classical Hellenic historians referred to the Mauryan kings by Hellenized names, much like they did for most of the non-Greek and Roman peoples they encountered. As a result, the name the Greek historians and geographers gave to Chandragupta was "Androcottus" or "Sandrocottus," who according to some of the Hellenistic sources had met but offended Alexander the Great (Lamotte 1988, 219). In his treatment of Alexander the Great, the famous ancient historian Plutarch mentioned a brief encounter between Alexander and Chandragupta, writing, "Androcottus, when he was a stripling, saw Alexander himself, and we are told that he often said in later times that Alexander narrowly missed making himself master of the country, since its king was hated and despised on account of his baseness and low birth." (Plutarch, *Alexander*, LXII, 9).

The meeting between Alexander and Chandragupta cannot be corroborated, but it certainly seems to fit the historical chronology and would have been logical.

As he watched Alexander and the Greeks attempt to invade India, Chandragupta was given a crash course in ancient warfare tactics and geo-politics that he would use to forge an empire. Chandragupta certainly proved to be an excellent student of martial affairs, taking the experience and knowledge that he gained against the Greeks in northwest India and applying it against the various other warring Indian princes. When Chandragupta set out on his war of conquest shortly after the Greeks left India, he focused most of his energy against the Nanada Dynasty, which was the most powerful in northern India. Instead of thrusting his forces

directly at the Nanada's capital, Chandragupta instead took lands in the northwest that were left vacant by Alexander the Great's army. In doing this, Chandragupta planned to starve the Nanadas by restricting the flow of valuable resources that they used to pay their troops to their capital (Thapar 2002, 176). The strategy allowed Chandragupta to conquer rich lands all around the Nanadas until he had the rival dynasty encircled.

Once Chandragupta finally vanquished the Nanadas, he reached out past the Indus River with an olive branch to his former Greek enemies. Geopolitics in the pre-modern world were quite fluid as alliances constantly shifted, and a kingdom that was another kingdom's friend one day might be an enemy the next. Alliances were based on the ability to get resources and also served security interests and were often cemented by marriages. When Chandragupta established the Mauryan Dynasty, it was in a precarious position; nearly all of the lesser Indian kingdoms wanted to see them toppled, and the Hellenistic Seleucid Dynasty to the west constantly cast a covetous eye to the east. Aiming to protect his western flank and to also open up new trade routes to Persia and Europe, Chandragupta made peace with the king of the Seleucid Dynasty at the time, Seleucus I (r. 305-281 BCE).

A number of Classical authors wrote about the peace, most notably Plutarch. Plutarch's passages regarding Chandragupta are particularly important because they describe the actual peace treaty and also note how the king was able to overwhelm India due to the sheer size of his army. "For Androcottus, who reigned there not long afterwards, made a present to Seleucus of five hundred elephants, and with an army of six hundred thousand men overran and subdued all India." (Plutarch, *Alexander*, XXXI, 5).

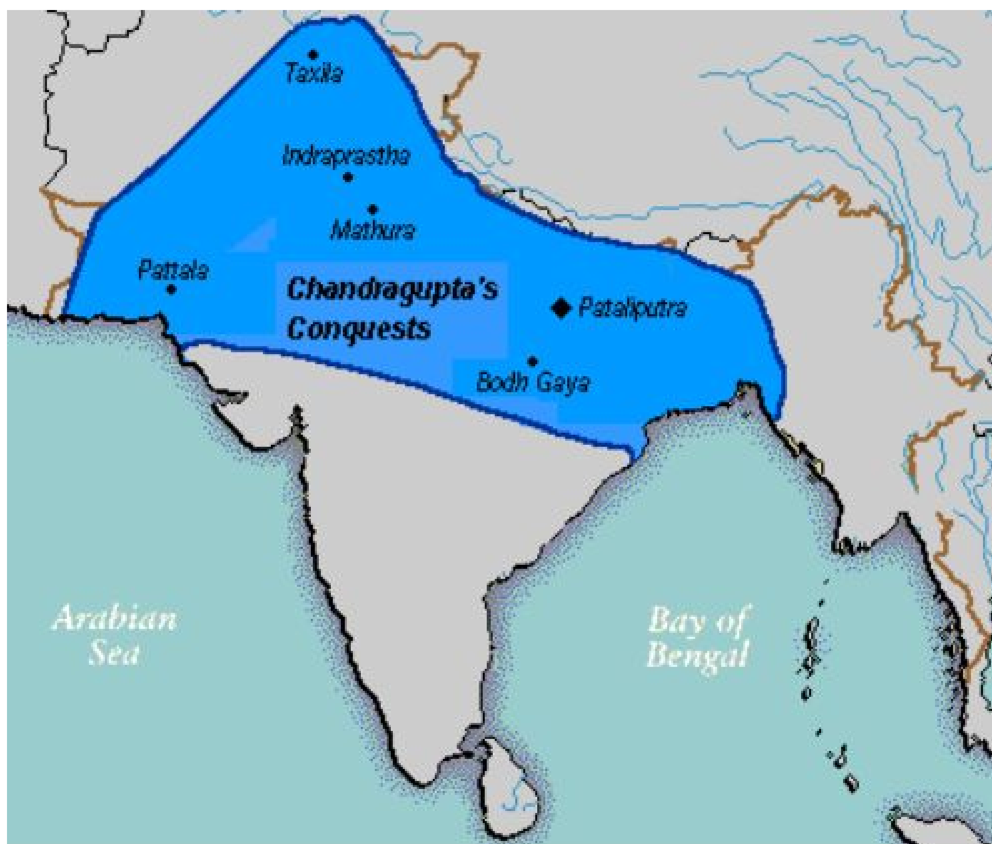
A number of other Classical sources also mention the deal between Chandragupta and Seleucus I, but the first century BCE Greek geographer Strabo added in his account that the treaty was sealed with diplomatic marriages. "The Indus lies, latitudinally, alongside all these places; and of these places, in part, some that lie along the Indus are held by Indians, although they formerly belonged to the Persians. Alexander took these away from the Arians and established settlements of his own, but Seleucus

Nicator gave them to Sandrocottus, upon terms of intermarriage and of receiving in exchange five hundred elephants." (Strabo, *Geography*, XV, 2, 9).

The marriage alliance not only sealed the peace between the Seleucid and Mauryan Dynasties, but it also brought the Mauryans much closer to the Hellenistic world. In fact, the Mauryans' link to the Hellenistic world was much stronger than it was to East Asia. Moreover, some scholars believe that the dynastic marriages that sealed the alliance between the Mauryans and the Seleucids may also have legalized marriages between non-noble Indians and Greeks within the Mauryan realm (Thapar 2002, 177). Legalized marriages between Indians and Greeks would have allowed trade to flow more freely between the two kingdoms, and in the case of the Seleucids, it provided another way to promote Hellenism to the non-Greek world.

Besides the Seleucid princesses who came to the Mauryan court, Greek scholars also spent time with Chandragupta and some of the other Mauryan kings. Perhaps the best known of the Greek scholars to spend considerable time in India was a historian and geographer named Megasthenes, who Strabo cited extensively. Megasthenes served as the ambassador of the Seleucid Empire, under Seleucus I, to the Maurya Empire (Scialpi 1984, 57). In his *Anabasis*, often titled in English translations as *The Campaigns of Alexander*, Arrian offered a brief geographical description of India, for which he cited Megasthenes. "Imagine Asia as divided by the Taurus and Caucasus ranges, running in an east-west direction, and you will see that the two main divisions are formed by the Taurus, one lying north of it, the other south; the southern part may then again be divided into four, the largest of which is, according to Erastosthenes and Megasthenes, India; (Megasthenes, by the way, spent much time in Arachotia with its governor Sibyrtius, and tells us that he frequently visited the Indian King Sandracottus." (Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, V, 6). Along with Megasthenes, a Seleucid Greek named Deimachus also served as ambassador at the Mauryan court in the capital city of Pataliputra during the reign of Chandragupta's son and successor, Bindusara.

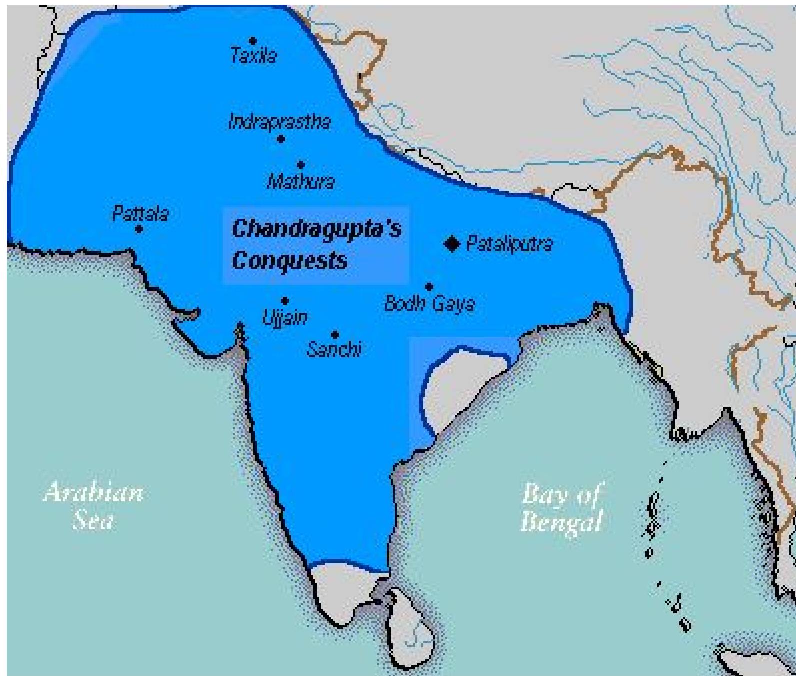
By all accounts, Chandragupta's reign was incredibly successful. He forged an empire, made important contacts with the Hellenistic world, and brought stability to a region that had been marred by instability and chaos for quite some time. The sources concerning Chandragupta's death are a bit sketchy, but modern scholars believe that the king abdicated the throne in favor of his son Bindusara (ca. 297-273 BCE). The fact that Chandragupta abdicated on behalf of his son is not particularly important or interesting, but the way that he possibly ended his life was. Chandragupta was a follower of the ancient Indian religion known as Jainism, which holds as one of its central tenets the idea of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, which the most ardent Jains apply to all living creatures, even insects and many plants. Although Chandragupta certainly did not follow the concept of *ahimsa* when he was conquering most of northern India, he apparently became more spiritual later in his life and decided to end his life as a devout Jain. He first abdicated his throne, which would follow with the idea of non-attachment to worldly possessions. He then chose to end his life in the true Jain tradition by starving himself to death (Thapar 2002, 178).



A map of the Maurya Empire after Chandragupta's campaigns

Ilya Mauter's picture of Bhadrabahu Cave, where Chandragupta is said to have died Like his father, Bindusara began his rule in a particularly aggressive fashion. Bindusara identified the 16 most bothersome princes and nobles within his kingdom and then had them summarily executed. Modern scholars believe that Bindusara's repression of the nobility probably had less to do with him being a despot or tyrant and more to do with the 16 princes being troublemakers in the kingdom. The princes were probably especially cruel to their subjects and fanned the flames of rebellion in order to cover their nefarious activities against their own people (Lamotte 1988, 223).

Whatever the reason or reasons, within a few years of taking the throne, Bindusara had expanded the Mauryan realm from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Within its borders were numerous different ethnicities and religious sects with nearly as many languages.



Bindusara's expansion of the empire Although the primary sources from Bindusara's reign are fairly scant, it does appear that he continued his father's policy of good relations with the Seleucids. Bindusara is mentioned by some of the Classical authors, who refer to him as "Amitrochates" (Thapar 2002, 178). It was during Bindusara's reign that the Greek writer Deimachus spent time at the Mauryan court in Pataliputra. Although nearly all of Deimachus's writings are now lost, other Classical writers cited him in their accounts of Indian geography and history.

Jean-Michel Moullec's picture of a coin minted during Bindusara's reign Besides the continued good relations with the Seleucids, Bindusara

also maintained many of his father's domestic policies within the empire. For the most part, both Chandragupta and Bindusara took an especially enlightened view toward the many religious sects within their realm. As a Jain, Chandragupta practiced tolerance toward other religious groups because the prophets and tenets of his religion taught that there was more than one way to enlightenment. Like his father, Bindusara also followed a religious sect that was outside of the Vedic orthodoxy of the time. Bindusara was a practitioner of the Ajivika religion, which essentially held that man has no free will (Sciapli 1984, 58). Although not followers of the mainstream Indian-Vedic gods, the Ajivikas, like the Jains and Buddhists, were believers in religious tolerance, so Bindusara never engaged in persecution of other religious communities in his realm, nor did he attempt to forcefully convert any of his subjects to Ajivikism. In fact, records show that Bindusara actually patronized the Brahmins, who were the highest caste in Vedic society (Lamotte 1988, 223).

Ashoka the Great

Bindusara's reign was one of peace and relative stability, but when he died, the kingdom was thrust into a brief interregnum over who would be the next king. In fact, historians are still divided on what exactly took place after Bindusara died. The Buddhist sources provide the bulk of the information for this short period, but they could be described as "pseudo-historical" at best, as they are more concerned with presenting the Buddhist emperor Ashoka as an enlightened ruler, despite his shortcomings. Many modern scholars believe that after Bindusara died or was possibly murdered, a four-year civil war was fought among his brothers for control of the Mauryan Dynasty (Thapar 2002, 180). The successor and rightful heir to Bindusara was a man named Susuma, but the capital city of Pataliputra – and therefore the seat of the royal crown, royal treasury, and the army – was occupied by Ashoka, one of Bindusara's other sons (Lamotte 1988, 223). Since Ashoka occupied the metaphorical high ground, he was able to eventually defeat all rival claimants to the throne and make himself the ruler of most of India.

Dharma's picture of an ancient relief depicting Ashoka

There is a consensus among modern scholars that Ashoka's assumption of the Mauryan throne was violent, but the details of how he went from being a brutal and malevolent dictator to an enlightened and benevolent Buddhist ruler are unclear. One of the most cited primary sources concerning Ashoka's first few years on the throne is known as the *Ashokavadana*, which is a Sanskrit-language, pseudo-biographical tale about the king. Since the *Ashokavadana* was written hundreds of years after Ashoka's death and its true purpose was to depict the king as a pious Buddhist, the text's historiographical value is suspect. With that said, the text is important because it details some of the major events in Ashoka's life. The *Ashokavadana* is also important historically because it demonstrates how later Buddhists viewed Ashoka, and how they believed an enlightened monarch should rule.

According to the *Ashokavadana*, when Ashoka was known as "Jaya" in a previous life, he offered a clump of dirt to the Buddha, who was at first taken

aback by the offering but then realized that the boy had a much greater destiny in a future life. The text reads, “After presenting this offering to the Blessed One, Jaya then proceeded to make the following resolute wish (pranidhana): ‘By this root of good merit, I would become king and, after placing the earth under a single umbrella of sovereignty, I would pay homage to the Blessed Buddha.’ The compassionate Sage immediately perceived the boy’s character, and recognizing the sincerity of his resolve, he saw that the desired fruit would be attained because of his field of merit. He therefore accepted the proffered dirt, and the seed of merit that was to ripen into Ashoka’s kingship was planted.” (Strong 2014, 200-1).

Buddha subsequently told his companions that Jaya would in fact become king 100 years after he had reached the state of *nirvana*. The *Ashokavadana* states, “One hundred years after the Tathāgata has attained parinirvana, that boy will become a king named Aśoka in the city of Pātaliputra. He will be a righteous dharmaraja, a cakravartin who rules over one of the four continents, and he will distribute my bodily relics far and wide and build the eighty-four thousand dharmarajikas. This he will undertake for the well-being of many people.” (Strong 2014 203-4).

The above mythological passages are not necessarily important for retracing the chronology of Ashoka’s life, but they demonstrate the importance that he had within the pre-modern Buddhist world outside of India, as well as the importance of Buddhism in the king’s life. At the same time, regardless of how important as Buddhism was in Ashoka’s personal life and in his kingship, he became the king before he became a Buddhist, and the *Ashokavadana* depicts the events surrounding Ashoka’s ascension to the Mauryan throne as chaotic and violent. It claims that even before Bindusara died, regions within the empire attempted to break away, but the Mauryans were woefully unprepared for the situation. According to the text, since Ashoka was deemed to be a king during a previous life by none other than Buddha himself, the Mauryans’ weapons problems were solved by providence.

“Now it happened that the city of Taksasila rebelled against King Bindusara. He therefore sent Aśoka there, saying: “Go, son, lay siege to the city of Taksasila.” He sent with him a fourfold army [consisting of cavalry, elephants, chariots, and infantry], but he denied it any arms. As Aśoka was about to leave Pātaliputra, his servants informed him of this: ‘Prince, we don’t have any

weapons of war; how and with what shall we do battle?’ Aśoka declared: ‘If my merit is such that I am to become king, may weapons of war appear before me!’ And as soon as he had spoken these words, the earth opened up and deities brought forth weapons.” (Strong 2014, 208).

After valiantly fighting the usurpers and after engaging in his own duplicitous actions against his own family, Ashoka finally became the king, but during his first few years, he was not the enlightened Buddhist he is remembered as today. Ashoka was an exceptionally cruel leader who reveled in the pain and misery of others, and the *Ashokavadana* suggests Ashoka’s cruelty began not long after he assumed the throne. He directed his fury not just at recalcitrant nobles, but even toward the environment: “Once Ashoka had become king, many of his ministers began to look on him with contempt. In order to discipline them, he ordered them, [as a test of their loyalty], to chop down all the flower and fruit trees but to preserve the thorn trees. ‘What is your majesty planning?” they asked, ‘should we not rather chop down the thorn trees and preserve the flower and fruit trees?’ And three times they countermanded his order. Ashoka became furious at this; he unsheathed his sword and cut off the head of five hundred ministers.” (Strong 2014, 210).

The young Ashoka’s wrath knew no bounds, and he directed his anger at concubines and lower officials as much as he did at the high-born. The *Ashokavadana* states that he killed 500 of his concubines when they cut down one of his favorite trees: “Strolling through the park he came across an ashoka tree whose blossoms were at their peak, and thinking “this beautiful tree is my namesake,” he became very affectionate. King Ashoka’s body, however, was rough-skinned, and the young women of the harem did not enjoy caressing him. So after he had fallen asleep, they, out of spite chopped all the flowers and branches off the ashoka tree. ‘Who did this?’ he asked his servants who were standing nearby. ‘Your majesty’s concubines,’ they answered. On learning this, Ashoka flew into a rage and burned the five hundred women alive. When the people saw all these vicious acts of the king, they concluded he was fearsome by temperament, and gave him the name ‘Ashoka the Fierce.’” (Strong 2014, 210-11).

Dharma's picture of an ancient relief depicting Ashoka and some of his wives

Although Ashoka displayed his own affinity and acumen for cruelty and killing, his closest advisors nevertheless convinced him to hire a royal executioner named Girika. Girika was described in the *Ashokavadana* as an incredibly cruel young man who enjoyed torturing animals, and when Ashoka's advisors learned of the youth, they asked him to work for Ashoka. After killing his parents, Girika joined the king and became his royal executioner and torture expert. According to the *Ashokavadana*, he even built a prison that was modeled on the Buddhist concept of Hell. "Then they took Girika to King Ashoka. The first thing he did was to ask the king to have a building made for this purposes. Ashoka had one built immediately; it was actually a very frightful place, and people called it 'the beautiful gaol.'Candagirika then said: 'Your majesty, grant me this wish – that whosoever should enter this place should not come out alive.' And the king agreed to his demand. Soon thereafter, Candagirika went to the Kukkutarama where he heard a monk reciting the Balapandita Sutra. 'There are being who are reborn in hell, and the hell-guardians grab them, and stretch them out on their backs on a fiery floor of red-hot iron that is but a mass of flames. They

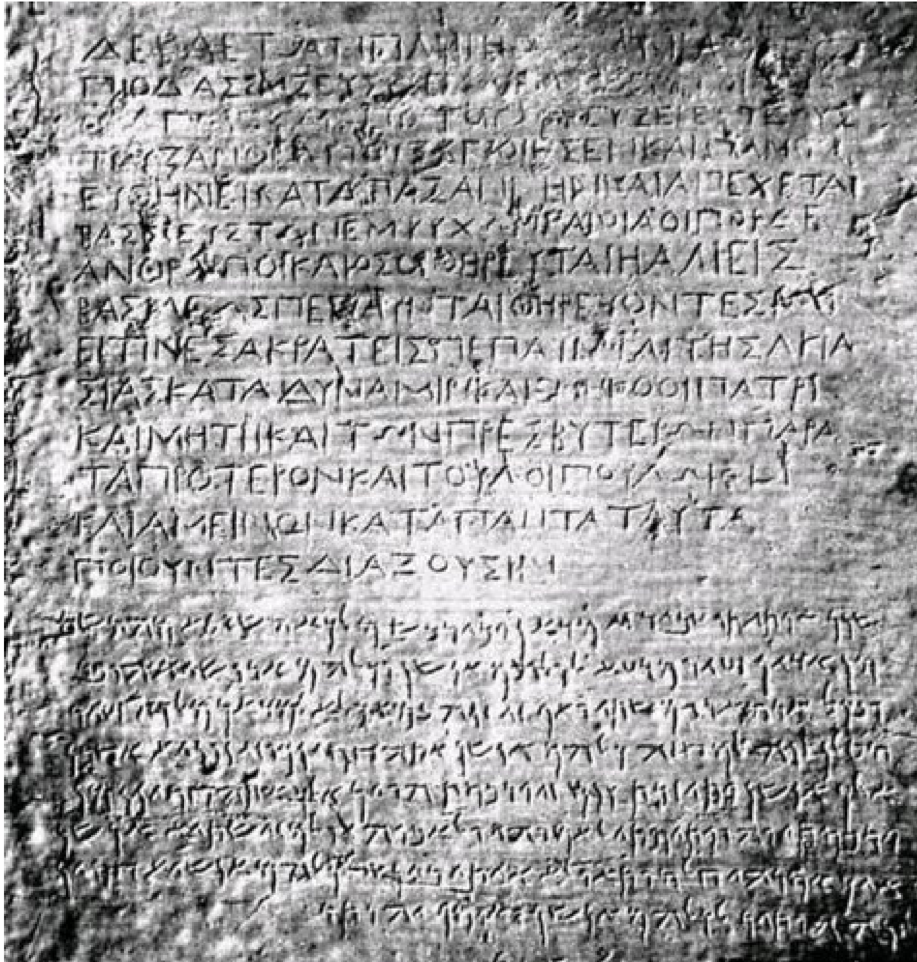
pry open their jaws with an iron bar and pour fiery balls of red-hot iron into their open mouths…' 'There are other beings who are reborn in hell, and the hell-guardians grab them and stretch them out on their back on a fiery floor of red-hot iron that is but a mass of flames. They pry open their mouths with an iron bar and pour boiling copper down their throats…'And there are beings who are reborn in hell whom the hell-guardians grab and throw onto their faces on a fiery floor of red-hot iron that is but a mass of flames. They mark them with a chalk line of searing hot iron… 'Finally, there are beings who are reborn in hell whom the hell-guardians grab, and stretch out on their backs on a fiery floor of red-hot iron that is but a mass of flames. Then they carry out the torture of the five-fold tether; they drive two iron stakes through their hands; they drive two iron stakes through their feet; and they drive one iron stake through their heart. Truly, O monks, hell is a place of great suffering.'" (Strong 2014, 212-13).

The *Ashokavadana* depicted Ashoka as a vile person with few redeeming qualities, a ruler who was unmoved by the pain he caused others. If anything, he seemed to revel in the torture, until he came across a Buddhist monk whom he could not kill. According to the legend, a Buddhist monk named Samudra came to the Mauryan court, but displeased Ashoka with his unapologetic piety. Perhaps seeing something in himself that was lacking, Ashoka ordered Samudra arrested and sentenced him to be boiled to death in a cauldron. The passage reads:

"That unmerciful monster, feeling no pity in his heart and indifferent to the other world, threw Samudra into an iron cauldron full of water, human blood, marrow, urine, and excrement. He lit a great fire underneath, but even after much firewood had been consumed, the cauldron did not get hot. Once more, he tried to light the fire, but again it would not blaze. He became puzzled, and looking into the pot, he saw the monk seated there, cross-legged on a lotus. Straight-away, he sent word to King Aśoka. Aśoka came to witness this marvel, and thousands of people gathered, and Samudra, seated in the cauldron, realized that the time for Aśoka's conversion was at hand." (Strong 2014, 216).

Although the *Ashokavadana* is a fictional story, its depiction of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism may be rooted in historical facts. Based on the rock and pillar edicts/inscriptions Ashoka had carved throughout his kingdom, it is

known that Ashoka did in fact convert to Buddhism later in his reign. The turning point in his conversion was not the torture of an innocent Buddhist monk, but prolonged and intense military campaigns that resulted in the extreme loss of life.



A picture of a bilingual inscription of one of Ashoka's edicts found in the city of Kandahar

Besides the pseudo-historical *Ashokavadana*, there are few extant primary texts that chronicle Ashoka's early reign. Most of the rock and pillar inscriptions were commissioned later in his kingship, but two in particular relate important events from the eighth year of his rule, which roughly coincides with the year 260 BCE (Thapar 2002, 180). The edict in question – which is referred to by modern scholars as edict thirteen – is written in the Prakrit language, although a number of different scripts were employed in all

of the edicts (Thapar 2002, 182). The subject matter of edicts twelve and thirteen concern Ashoka's conquest of the region of Kalinga in northeast India.

Rock edict thirteen reads: "Eight years after his coronation King Devanampiya Piyadasi conquered the Kalingas. In that (conquest) one hundred and fifty thousand people were deported (as prisoners), one hundred thousand were killed (or maimed) and many times that number died. Thereafter, with the conquest of Kalinga, King Devanampiya Piyadasi (adopted) the practice of morality, love of morality and inculcation of morality. For there arose in King Devanampiya Piyadasi remorse for the conquest of Kalinga. For when an unsubdued country is conquered there occur such things as slaughter, death and deportation of people and these are regarded as very painful and serious by King Devanampiya Piyadasi. Brahmins and ascetics live everywhere, as well as votaries of other sects and householders who practice such virtues as support of mother and father, service of elders, proper treatment of friends, relatives, acquaintances and kinsmen and slaves and servants and steadfastness in devotion to duties. They too suffer injury (separation from loved ones), slaughter and deportation of loved ones. And for those whose love is undiminished, their friends, acquaintances, relatives and kinsmen suffer calamity. . . Hence, whatever the number of men then killed (or wounded) and died and were deported at the annexation of Kalinga, a hundredth or a thousandth part (thereof) even is regarded as serious by King Devanampiya Piyadasi." (Gokhale 1966, 157-8).

The impact that Ashoka's campaign had on the Mauryan Dynasty, as well as the king himself, was tremendous. Based on the inscriptions concerning the conquest of Kalinga, along with archaeological work, modern scholars believe that the numbers mentioned in edicts twelve and thirteen are fairly accurate, with up to 150,000 people deported from the region, 100,000 killed, and many more dying later as a result of the epic battle (Lamotte 1988, 226). After a life of wanton death and cruelty, Ashoka would show genuine remorse at the destruction he had partially caused.

When Ashoka came to power in India, Buddhism was still a fairly new religion, having only been around 200 years since the death of the Buddha. The new religion had made some inroads among the Indian population in the years between Buddha's death and Ashoka's kingship, but in many people's eyes, it was just an obscure Vedic sect that eschewed the traditional caste

system. Apart from the pseudo-historical passages in the *Ashokavadana*, Ashoka had probably been quite familiar with Buddhism since childhood, but it was the bloodbath in Kalinga that pushed him over the edge and become an official Buddhist monarch who tried to convert the entire population of India to his religion.

In order to understand Ashoka's conversion apart from the propaganda of the later Buddhist texts, one must turn to the rock and pillar edicts to read the king's own words. In an inscription known as "Minor Rock Edict #1," Ashoka implies that his conversion to Buddhism was actually a gradual process, and that he had not been such an ardent follower even after he accepted the faith. The first part reads, "From Suvarnagiri, by the order of the Prince and high officers, the high officers of Isila are to be wished well and addressed as follows: (The Rupnath Version has Devanampiya commands thus). For more than two and one-half years since I have been a lay-devotee I have not been exerting myself energetically. But for over a year since I approached the Order I have been exerting myself strenuously. . . And for this purpose this must be written on rocks (or pillars). This must be spread all over your jurisdiction. This proclamation I have made while on a tour of 256 nights." (Gokhale 1966, 161).

Jadia Gaurang's picture of one of Ashoka's rock edicts

Of central importance is Ashoka's explanation of why he decided to construct these edicts across his empire. In the second part of the same inscription, Ashoka related some of what he believed were the most important concepts in his new empire. "Devanampiya says this: Mother and Father must be shown due respect; likewise the elders; proper regard for living beings must be firmly established, truth must be spoken. These values of morality must be propounded: Pupils must honor teachers; kinsmen must be well regarded. This is the ancient law, of long duration; this must be practiced." (Gokhale 1966, 162).

The numerous edicts Ashoka had inscribed throughout his empire are important both in terms of historiography and theology. The edicts have been useful in constructing the chronology of Ashoka's reign, but more importantly, they demonstrate the desire the king had to promote his newfound religion within his realm. But before he spread the word of Buddhism to his subjects through the rock and pillar edicts, he attempted to better organize the Buddhist

community in India. By the time that Ashoka became king, the Buddhist community, or *sangha*, was fairly organized in its own right, but the king intended to help it along further with royal patronage. About 18 years into Ashoka's reign, in 250 BCE, the Third Buddhist Council met in Pataliputra. There were a number of issues for the monks and patrons of the religion to discuss, including the codification of their central beliefs and the idea of proselytization. It was decided at the council that the believers would follow the trade routes to spread the message of Buddha to all corners of the world. The council also discussed important theological issues such as the proper or best way to reach enlightenment. Those in attendance agreed that studying the *sutras* – the actual sayings and writings of Buddha – would provide the core of their religious canon, which ultimately proved to be the origin of the Theravada branch of Buddhism (Thapar 2002, 181).

Besides allowing organized Buddhism a place to thrive, Ashoka also carried out his own initiatives that promoted his religion. In year ten of his rule, Ashoka embarked on a grand tour of his empire. The tour was multi-purposed, as it served to promote Buddhism throughout the kingdom, but it also helped to send a message of goodwill from the royal house, thereby engendering stability within the realm. At the many stops he made, Ashoka distributed gold to his subjects and later had rock and pillar edicts constructed to commemorate his visits (Lamotte 1988, 226). As discussed earlier, the edicts ranged in topics from being historiographical in nature – like the mention of the Battle of Kalinga – to those concerning Buddhist philosophy and theology. In the more religious edicts, Ashoka urged his subjects to adopt Buddhist ideas, such as following a vegetarian diet. Rock edict #1 reads, "This rescript on morality has been commanded to be written by the King Devanampiya Piyadasi. Here no animal may be slaughtered and offered in sacrifice. No convivial assembly too may be held. For King Devanampiya Piyadasi sees many a blemish in convivial assemblies. But there are some assemblies considered good by King Devanampiya Piyadasi. Formerly in the kitchen of King Devanampiya Piyadasi every day hundreds of thousands of animals were slaughtered for curry. But now since this rescript on morality has been written only three animals are slaughtered for curry; two peacocks and one deer, and that deer to not always. Even these three animals will not be slaughtered hence." (Gokhale 1966, 151-2).

Dharma’s picture of a relief depicting Ashoka’s visit to Ramagrama

Although Ashoka never required any of his subjects to become vegetarians or even follow Buddhism, he did introduce what amounted to a government sponsored “morality police.” Rock edict #5 states, “King Devanampiya Piyadasi says thus: Benevolence is difficult; he who performs a benevolent act accomplishes something difficult. I have performed much that is benevolent. Benevolence shall also be practiced by my sons, grandsons and their descendants even until the very dissolution of the universe. But he who neglects even a part hereof does evil. To commit sin, indeed, is easy. In times past, formerly, there were no morality officers (Dharmamahamatras). Since I have been crowned thirteen years ago, I have appointed morality officers. They are engaged with votaries of all faiths, for the firm establishment of morality, for its progress, for the happiness here and hereafter of those devoted to morality. They are employed among the Greeks, Kambojas, Gandharas, Rashtrikas, Petenikas and among the frontier peoples. They are employed among the servants and masters, among the Brahmins, the destitute and the aged, for their benefit and happiness, for the removal of hindrances for those devoted to morality. They are engaged in helping those incarcerated, in preventing harassment and securing release of those who have large families or have been overwhelmed with calamity or are old. Here in Pataliputra or elsewhere they are employed in all towns, in all the harems of my brothers and establishments of my sisters and other kinsmen. They are employed among all those who are devoted to morality or are established therein everywhere in my dominions. For this purpose has this rescript on morality been written that it may long endure and that my subjects may practice it.” (Gokhale 1966, 153-4).

Conspicuously absent in the inscription is a detailed account of what Ashoka considers "moral behavior," especially in the harems. One can only assume that he considered moral behavior to be that which fell in line with Theravada Buddhism, which he interpreted in various other edicts. It also seems to follow that what Ashoka and other Buddhists considered moral behavior was followed by the kingdoms Jains, Ajivikas, Vedic practitioners.

Ashoka's worldview can be seen in a number of the rock and pillar inscriptions, and although appearing disjointed when viewed singularly, they make much more sense when seen together. Despite being an ardent Buddhist throughout most of his rule, Ashoka was not known to engage in any widespread persecution of India's many other religions, to the extent that he actually promoted religious tolerance in many of his edicts. Rock edict #7 reads, "King Devanampiya Piyadasi desires that all sects may live everywhere. All of them desire restraint and purity of the mind. But men are of diverse desires and passions. They will practice all (points of their faith) or only a part. Even for a generous man, if he not have restraint, purity of main, gratefulness or steadfastness in faith, there is not greatness." (Gokhale 1966, 155).

Besides tolerance of all religious sects, one of the other reoccurring themes in many of the edicts was care for animals and the encouragement to follow a vegetarian diet. Along with his belief in early "animal rights," Ashoka also championed the preservation of the natural environment. Pillar edict #5 states, "King Devanampiya Piyadasi says thus: since I was crowned twenty-six years ago, I have made inviolate these species (of animals and birds) to wit; parrots, starlings, arunas, Brahmany ducks, wild geese, *nandimukhas, gelatas*, bats, queen ants, terrapins, boneless fish, *vedaveyakas, gangapuputakas*, skate, turtles, squirrels, Borasing stags, Brahmany bulls, rhinoceros, white pigeons, common pigeons, all quadrupeds that are not in use or are not eaten. . . Forests must not be burnt just for mischief or to destroy living beings in them. Life must not be fed on life." (Gokhale 1966, 167).

A picture of Ashoka's pillar at Vaishali

None of the edicts point toward Ashoka compelling his subjects to convert to Buddhism, but the texts that relate the activities of the moral police certainly indicate that the king at least attempted to enforce transgressions against his edicts. What is not clear from the edicts is what, if any, punishment was meted out for those who transgressed Ashoka's edicts.

It is obvious that Ashoka believed in the ideas he promoted through the edicts, but if he did not in fact expect his subjects to convert to Buddhism, what was the point of promoting Buddhist theology in his kingdom? In pre-modern periods, most religious communities in India lived in relative peace alongside each other, so while Ashoka never planned to convert the mass of his kingdom to Buddhism, he apparently believed that by promoting Buddhist ethics and morality through his edicts, he would make his realm a more moral and happy place. Pillar edict #1 reads, "King Devanampiya Piyadasi says thus: This rescript on morality has been commanded to be written by me since I was crowned twenty-six years ago. Happiness in this world and the next is difficult to achieve except through utmost devotion to morality, keen introspection,

complete obedience, fear of evil and great exertion. Now because of my instruction this reliance on morality and devotion to it have increased daily and will increase. My officers, too, whether of the highest, middling or low ranks, must follow my instruction and practice it so that they may encourage the weak or hesitant as much as they can. Similarly the high officers (Mahamatras) of the frontiers must act. And this should be the norm of conduct that administration must confirm to morality, that legislation should be according to morality; this alone can make people happy according to morality and protect them according to the law of morality.” (Gokhale 1966, 165).

Ashoka attempted to make India a Buddhist land - or at least Buddhist friendly - not through force, but by appealing to the beliefs that Vedic, Jain, and Ajivika Indians shared with Buddhists, such as the belief in *ahimsa*, which was often manifested in a vegetarian diet.

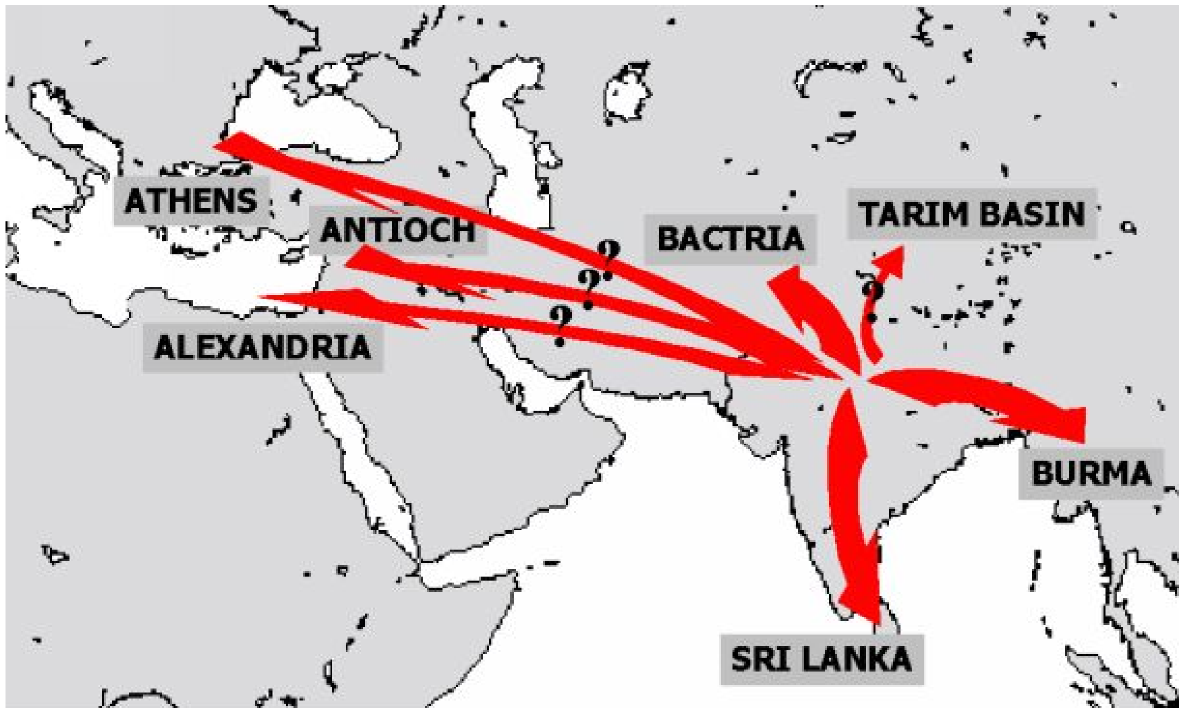
Along with creating pro-Buddhist laws and government through the edicts and giving organized Buddhism a physical sanctuary, Ashoka also promoted his religion through the construction of numerous monuments and monasteries. The most visible of Ashoka’s building projects were the numerous pillars scattered across his empire, which contained the edicts described earlier in this article. The pillars range in size, but some are as high as 50 feet. The magnificent pillars can be seen from great distances and are the earliest extant examples of monumental Indian art (Irwin 1973, 706). Although the pillars are an unmistakable symbol of the Mauryan Dynasty and therefore Indian culture, they were undoubtedly influenced by Western architectural and artistic styles (Thapar 2002, 182).

The most famous of all the Ashoka pillars is the one that still stands in the city of Sarnath. The Sarnath pillar, which is said to mark the spot where Buddha first preached his message of enlightenment to his acolytes, stands 37 feet tall, with four lions adorning its capital (Irwin 1973, 706). Even today, scholars are unsure why many of the pillars were erected in their particular locations. As mentioned above, the pillar in Sarnath was erected on a holy spot, and the first pillar, which was built in Sanchi, was erected in front of the Great Stupa in that city (Irwin 1973, 709), but many are located in rural areas far removed from any Buddhist holy sites. Modern mapping techniques have revealed that placement of many of the pillars seemed to coincide with trade

routes to the west (Irwin 1973, 717). The idea of a nexus between merchant activity and early Buddhism in India certainly is logical when one considers how many other world religions, such as Christianity and Islam, were spread by merchants, not just priests and armies.

Capital of inscribed Asoka pillar at Sārnāth.
(A. S. photo.)

Picture of Ashoka's pillar (circa 250 BCE) located at Sarnath



A map depicting the routes Buddhists took to proselytize the faith

Since the pillars are the earliest known examples of monumental architecture in India, modern historians have debated their inspiration for decades. It is believed that Ashoka got the idea for the pillars as a result of his interactions with the Seleucid Greeks, who in turn were influenced by earlier cultures. The Sanchi Pillar in particular bears a striking similarity to some of the extant pillars in the Achaemenid Persian royal palace in Persepolis, which was built in the sixth century BCE. Irwin believeds that the influence goes back even further, to the Hittite Empire of the second millennium BCE, though he noted they show a strong Hellenistic character (Irwin 1973, 710). Irwin is right for believing that inspiration for the pillars predated the Achaemenid Persians, but it is likely the Hittites' descendants, the Lydians, provided inspiration to the Persians.

Along with the pillars, a vast number of *stupas* were also built during Ashoka's reign. In his bid to make his kingdom Buddhist, Ashoka knew that he had to provide shelter for the religion's many monks and holy men, as well as places to store their holy relics. Unlike the Vedic religion that was practiced by most Indians at the time, Buddhism was not a ritualistic or cultic religion, so it did not require large, ostentatious temples; the faithful only required places where their monks could meditate and study. Ashoka's answer was the

creation of thousands of stupas. Stupas are the distinct, round buildings that today dot the landscape of modern India. According to Buddhist written tradition, Ashoka had 84,000 stupas erected throughout his kingdom as a profession of his piousness and to promote his faith (Irwin 1973, 715).

A picture of the stupa at Sanchi

A picture of the stupa in Taxila

Although modern scholars know what stupas were used for – many are still used today by Buddhist monks – they are unsure why they were built with such a distinct shape. Some scholars believe that they were simply built on top of prehistoric tumuli (ancient burial mounds) and, for whatever reason, the Mauryans just decided to keep the same shape (Irwin 1973, 717).

Ashoka followed Chandragupta's policy of fostering relations with the Seleucid Dynasty, but he also expanded the Mauryans' geopolitical influence by reaching out to Sri Lanka and the Far East. The primary sources that mention Ashoka's relations with the West seem to indicate that he followed the details of his predecessor's program, as well as the general policy, by engaging in trade and diplomacy. Ashoka's contacts with and influence in the East, though, were more intricately intertwined with his Buddhist beliefs, and much more indirect. The king's impact on the Hellenistic kingdoms was immediate, yet ephemeral, while his influence on the Far East was minimal when he was alive, but continues to this day.

Ashoka's interactions with the West are well-documented in both Mauryan and non-Mauryan sources. Many of Ashoka's rock and pillar edicts were

erected in territories formerly held by the Seleucids, including Ghandara and Bactria. In fact, it is believed that Ashoka spent time in Ghandara, probably as a viceroy for his father, Bindusara (Scialpi 1984, 59).

The connections that Ashoka made with the Seleucid Greeks probably came in handy during his reign, as he was able to keep the trade routes flowing between the two empires. Although there is little textual evidence to support extensive trade between the Mauryan and Seleucid Empires, a passage in the work of the second century BCE Greek historian Polybius referred to an encounter between Antiochus I (ruled 281-261 BCE) and an as of yet unidentified Indian "king" named Sophagasenus. "Antiochus took his departure, serving out generous rations of corn to his troops and adding to his own the elephants belonging to Euthydemus. Crossing the Caucasus he descended into India and renewed his alliance with Sophagasenus the Indian king. Here he procured more elephants, so that his total force of them amounted now to a hundred and fifty, and after a further distribution of corn to his troops, set out himself with his army, leaving Androsthenes of Cyzicus to collect the treasure which the king had agreed to pay." (Polybius, *The Histories*, XI, 39, 10-13).

Since Ashoka was known as "Piodasses" to the Greeks, most historians believe that Sophagasenus was a viceroy or other high-level administrator who worked under Bindusara or Ashoka. It is also not clear if Ashoka was the Mauryan king in question when this event took place, since Antiochus I ruled for about 10 years before Ashoka came to power, but when one considers the interregnum/civil war that took place in India after Bindusara's death, it is more than likely Ashoka was the king in India.

Although the above reference may not definitely pertain to events during Ashoka's reign, inscriptions from Mauryan territory prove that Ashoka was aware of his Western counterparts and their culture. The rock inscriptions from the western reaches of the Maurya Empire, in what would today be western Pakistan and Afghanistan, refer to the Hellenistic kings by their equivalent Indian names and includes Greeks as one of the subject peoples of the empire. One shorter edict was written completely in Greek. Rock edict thirteen mentions that the Maurya Empire extended to the borders of the Hellenistic kingdoms. "King Devanampiya considers the victory of morality as the greatest. And this victory has been accomplished by King Devanampiya up to

all his frontiers, even to a distance of six hundred *yojanas* where the Greek King Antiochus rules, and beyond Antiochus' realm in the dominions of the four kings called Ptolemy, Antigonas, Magus, and Alexander, downwards into the dominions of the Cholas and Pandyas, even up to Tamraparni. Similarly in the royal domains where live the Greeks, the Kambojas, Nabhakas, Nabhapantis, Bhojas, Pitinikas, Andhras and Paridas, everywhere people follow the instruction in morality by King Devanampiya." (Gokhale 1966, 158).

The actual Indian names in the inscription are Amtiyoko (Antiochus II, who reigned from 261-246 BCE), Turamaye (Ptolemy II of Egypt, who reigned from 285-247 BCE), Amtikini (Antigonus II of Macedon, who reigned from 278-239 BCE); Maka (Magas of Cyrene, who reigned from 300-258 BCE), and Alikasudaro (Alexander II of Epirus, who reigned from 272-258 BCE).

In addition to the mention of the Hellenistic kings, a rock inscription in Kandahar indicates that Ashoka counted many Greeks among his subjects and tried to persuade them to follow Buddhism. The Greek-language Kandahar inscription states:

> "Ten years after his coronation King Piodasses instructed the people in morality. After that he made people practice morality more and more.
>
> "There is prosperity in all the world.
>
> "The king refrains from violence to living beings as do the other and even the hunters and fishermen refrain from killing.
>
> "Those that were unrestrained have practiced restraint as much as it was possible for them to do.
>
> "Obedience to father and mother and elders has in the past led to a better life and will do so in future with the practice of the rules given above." (Gokhale 1966, 163).

The Mauryan rulers in general — and Ashoka specifically — clearly had a working relationship with the Hellenistic kings that could be described as friendly and productive. Future discoveries may even demonstrate more details about the relations between the various kingdoms. Ashoka and the Mauryan rulers did not just focus their attention on the West, though; they

attempted to develop diplomatic relationships with many of the existing powers of the time.

Given that India is in Asia and very close to East Asia, and given that Ashoka was such an ardent Buddhist – which, although a native Indian religion, later became the primary religion of tens of millions of East Asians – one might assume the Mauryan kings would have established deep ties with their Asian neighbors, but that was not the case. Even today, the Himalayan Mountain range is a barrier to regular travel between India and China, which during ancient times meant that contact between the two countries was minimal (Thapar 2002, 183). In the centuries after the Maurya Empire, more trade routes were developed between India and China, mostly due to Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, but there are few sources that attest to the Mauryans having any significant connections to China. The Chinese scholars Fa-hsien and Hsuan Tsang recorded many of Ashoka's pillars and rock edicts into Chinese, but these men lived in the fourth and seventh centuries CE, which means that they never had contact with any Mauryan rulers (Irwin 1973, 709).

Although the Mauryans had little contact with China, there is evidence that suggests they developed ties with the island of Sri Lanka. Ashoka's own son was the first Buddhist missionary to Sri Lanka, and shortly after that, the island became one of the first kingdoms to accept Theravada Buddhism (Thapar 2002, 184). Also, many of the pseudo-biographical texts written about Ashoka were recorded in the Sinhalese language, which is the traditional language of Sri Lanka.

Long after the Maurya Empire collapsed, Buddhism gradually faded from significance in India, but the Sinhalese-speaking people of Sri Lanka continued to be pious followers of Theravada Buddhism and remain so today.

Mauryan Culture

The Maurya Empire displayed many attributes that are common or indicative of several empires throughout world history. Perhaps the most important feature is when the government unifies several different groups under a single ideology, which was Buddhism in the case of the Mauryans. Ashoka's personal conversion to Buddhism and the ways he promoted Buddhist ideas were important, but the king also molded some aspects of Buddhist theology to fit with his religiously pluralistic kingdom.

All branches of Buddhism and all practicing Buddhists recognize the Four Noble Truths as the core tenets of the religion. The Four Noble Truths are as follows: to live is to suffer; suffering comes from desire; it is truthful to eliminate suffering; and the elimination of suffering comes from following the Noble Eightfold Path (Carter 2008, 78). The Noble Eightfold Path involves these thoughts and actions: right view, right thought, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Carter 2008, 78).

When one examines the theology espoused in Ashoka's rock and pillar edicts, it becomes clear that the king did not promote a traditional form of Buddhism, but one that was more in line with older Indian religions (Lamotte 1988, 233-4). Neither the Four Noble Truths nor the Noble Eightfold Path are mentioned in any of the edicts. With that said, the policies that Ashoka promoted in his edicts did coincide with the general idea of *ahisma*, which was shared by Buddhists, Jains, Ajivikas, and traditional followers of the Vedic religion alike.

One crucial aspect in which Buddhism differed from its Vedic parent religion was the recognition of the caste system. As discussed earlier, it was the Aryans who introduced the caste system to India nearly 1,500 years before Ashoka, which was intended to be a beneficial way to separate the ruling Aryans from the native Dravidian people. In time, the ethnic differences in the caste system gave way to spiritual and class differences, with the priest and warrior classes being the rulers of the society. Although Buddha himself was of the warrior caste, he allowed people from all castes, even the casteless *chandalas*, or "untouchables," to follow him. He taught

that enlightenment could come to a person from any caste and was fully contingent upon that person following the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which was in many ways directly in conflict with the Vedic ideals.

Despite being an ardent Buddhist, Ashoka never threatened to end the caste system or slavery, for that matter. Strabo quoted Megasthenes, who visited at least one Mauryan king, in a detailed passage about the Indian caste system. Although the passage is faulty in its placement of the warriors, it is important because he points out the many sub-castes. "He says then, that the population of India is divided into seven castes: the one first in honour, but the fewest in number, consists of the philosophers; and these philosophers are used, each individually, by people making sacrifice to the gods or making offerings to the dead. . . The second caste, he says, is that of the farmers, who are not only the most numerous, but also the most respected. . .The third caste is that of the shepherds and hunters, who alone are permitted to hunt, to breed cattle, and to sell or hire out beasts of burden. . . After the hunters and the shepherds, he says, follows the fourth caste – the artisans, the tradesmen, and the day-labourers. . . The fifth caste is that of the warriors, who, when they are not in service, spend their lives in idleness and at drink-bouts, being maintained by the royal treasury. . . The sixth is that of the inspectors, to whom it is given to inspect what is being done and report secretly to the king. . . The seventh is that of the advisers and councilors of the king, who hold the chief offices of state, the judgeships, and the administration of everything." (Strabo, *Geography*, XV, 1, 39-49).

Either Megasthenes related some confusing details in his original account or Strabo made some mistakes in his transmissions. For instance, the warriors are the second highest caste in the Indian caste system, not the third to the bottom. With that said, the warrior caste did enjoy a life of leisure, so perhaps the confusion came when one of the two Greeks compared the caste system with their own culture.

Megasthenes/Strabo did correctly identify that, in addition to the primary castes, there were several other sub-castes. The most important aspect of this passage, though, at least in relation to Ashoka's desire to spread

Buddhism throughout his kingdom, was that the caste system persisted despite having a Buddhist king on the throne. Perhaps Ashoka knew that challenging the Vedic priest and warrior castes would have led to civil war in his kingdom, or maybe things were going so well that he did not want to shake things up too much.

Besides being considered by many to be one of the most enlightened empires in human history, the Maurya Empire was also incredibly wealthy. The Mauryan kings took advantage of the remarkable wealth of natural resources that they possessed to engage in trade across great distances. The wealth of the Maurya Empire can be gauged through archaeological discoveries, which show that many of the houses in the larger urban areas were made of brick, while the palace in Pataliputra was made of stone (Thapar 2002, 189). The Mauryans were able to send their precious resources to the west via their "Great Road," which went from Taxila, in what is now northwest Pakistan, to the Mauryan capital. Smaller roads connected Taxila to central Asian cities such as Kabul and the Parthian-Persian cities farther to the west (Scialpi 1984, 57).

There were also sea routes that brought ships from India to Mesopotamia and even as far west as Egypt. Strabo wrote about large numbers of Roman ships sailing to India during his time, and he also noted that during the Ptolemaic era in Egypt, which coincided with the Mauryans, the routes were less used but still active nonetheless. "At any rate, when Gallus was prefect of Egypt, I accompanied him and ascended the Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Ethiopia, and I learned that as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India, whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise." (Strabo, *Geography*, II, 12).

The Mauryan rulers were able to import commodities from the west, such as furs, while exporting elephants, which the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms frequently used in their wars against each other. The trade of elephants was particularly interesting, and it naturally raised the stature of India in the eyes of the West for some time. When Alexander invaded India, his soldiers were introduced to the concept of elephant warfare (Lloyd 2000, 400), but after their initial horror and shock over what the animals

could do on the battlefield wore off, Alexander realized that he could bring elephants back west to use on his enemies there. When Alexander died and his conquests were divided into the Hellenistic successor states, the Seleucid Empire and Ptolemaic Egypt both used elephants against each other.

Although the use of elephants certainly had advantages, armies quickly learned that they could charge elephants effectively by using small contingents of cavalry, and the supply of elephants also eventually became an issue. The Ptolemies found that Asian elephants were better for warfare than African forest elephants, but in order to keep a steady supply, they would have to go through Seleucid territory to get to the Maurya Empire (Lloyd 2000, 401). Eventually, elephant warfare became more of a fad than anything in the West, and so the demand diminished, which hurt Mauryan trade routes.

Even after the fad of elephant warfare passed in the West, the trade routes remained quite active between the Seleucid and Mauryan capitals. In addition to the benefits that the routes brought to the royal houses of the Seleucid and Mauryan Dynasties, the routes also had the effect of dispersing wealth in a trickle-down effect throughout India, leading to the formation of merchant guilds and the creation of a middle class (Scialpi 1984, 60). The great amount of wealth that flowed into India during the period of the Maurya Empire also contributed to creating a large government apparatus that far eclipsed anything in previous periods of Indian history. The Mauryans came to power through warfare, and once they established their dynasty, they rewarded the warrior caste by creating a large standing army. The army was much larger than anything India had previously seen; at its peak, the army could boast of 80,000 infantry and 700 elephants (Thapar 2002, 191). Even during Ashoka’s relatively peaceful rule, the military retained its size and influence, which may point toward another compromise that the astute king was willing to make in order to keep the many factions and sects within his empire happy.

Although the military may have wielded considerable influence in the Maurya Empire, there is no doubt who ruled the kingdom. The Maurya Empire, like most ancient empires outside of Greece and Rome, was an

absolute monarchy. The king decided the course of the government, ranging from diplomacy to war and trade, and he could even influence his subjects to follow a certain religion. With that said, the Maurya Empire was a complex bureaucracy, so the king often needed to delegate responsibilities to nobles and trusted advisors. Under the king, the two most important government positions were the treasurer and the "chief collector," whose job it was to collect taxes from the empire's many districts (Thapar 2002, 198). Since there were so many districts in the Maurya Empire, the king allowed a certain level of autonomy in order to make the wheels of government turn a little easier.

It is believed that, during the Maurya Empire, princes from the priest and warrior castes retained their noble titles and were allowed to continue to rule as long as they accepted Mauryan authority and paid their taxes. Under the princes, governors were appointed to administer smaller districts (Thapar 2002, 198). Some modern scholars believe that the system was based on the Achaemenid Persian government, whereby administrative districts were based on the ethnicities of the subject groups more than any geographic area (Scialp 1984, 61).

Although documents from the period do not go into any detail about the system, some of Ashoka's rock and pillar edicts help make the situation a bit clearer. Rock edict three names the men who administered the districts and some of their responsibilities. "King Devanampiya Piyadasi says thus: Twelve years after my coronation have I ordered thus! Everywhere in my dominions, the officers (Yuktas, Rajukas and Pradeshikas) will embark on tours of inspection every five years for the inculcation of morality and other such works. (They will instruct my subjects that) obedience to father and mother is excellent, liberality to friends, acquaintances and kinsmen, to Brahmins and ascetics is excellent; excellent is abstention from the slaughter of animals; and abstemiousness and few possessions are excellent. The council (Parishad) will also order the officers (Yuktas) to enforce these, both in their letter and spirit." (Gokhale 1966, 152).

Pillar edict seven gives a few more details about the bureaucrats' duties. "My morality officers have engaged themselves in acts of royal benevolence in diverse ways. They are engaged among those that have

renounced the world as well as the householders and among all sects. I have ordered them to be engaged in the welfare of the (Buddhist) Order as also the welfare of Brahmins, Ajivikas, Nigranthas and other sects. These high officers will engage themselves in their diverse and respective duties whereas the morality officers are engaged specifically among all denominations in addition to other duties. . . These and many other officers are engaged in distribution of royal charity." (Gokhale 1966, 169).

Of course, the overarching theme and purpose of the Mauryan government, at least during Ashoka's reign, was to promote the values of Buddhism in the best way possible. The first three Mauryan kings certainly created a government system that worked quite efficiently, but after Ashoka, the wheel of government quickly came undone.

The Decline of the Mauryan Dynasty

Like so many other great empires and dynasties, the Maurya Empire went into a precipitous decline after their most famous ruler's death. In the case of the Mauryans, it took less than 50 years after Ashoka's death for the dynasty to collapse, and in that period, there were dozens of kings whose reigns often overlapped (Lamotte 1988, 259). Though the reasons for the dynasty's decline are not entirely clear, and there are disagreements by modern scholars pertaining to those reasons, a few possibilities can be considered.

Many believe that the Maurya Empire's pluralistic society was one of the primary reasons for its demise, which happened to other empires before and after the Mauryans. The Achaemenid Persians established one of the first truly global empires, but its diverse population of different subject peoples was quick to side with Alexander the Great when he promised to liberate them from the Persians. In the modern period, the spark that ignited the powder keg of World War I came when Serbian nationalists assassinated the archduke of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. Thus, while Ashoka seemed to keep the kernels of ethnic and religious distrust and hatred out of his kingdom during his reign, they did not take long to surface once he was gone. The Brahmin/priest caste, in particular, probably resented Ashoka's Buddhist program, as they believed that they were the traditional defenders of kingship in India (Lamotte 1988, 259). This might have meant that once a strong ruler was gone, the Brahmins were able to manipulate the local rulers of India until there was no longer any central authority.

At the same time, any state's authority cannot be effectively challenged without first challenging its military. The Indian military establishment increased tremendously under the Mauryans, and the first three kings were able to build a military that could rival any of the Hellenistic kingdoms in size, but some historians think that Ashoka's policies, especially his adherence to the concept of *ahimsa*, were a double-edged sword for the dynasty. On the one hand, the promotion of nonviolence brought stability within the realm, but it also weakened the military (Lamotte 1988, 259).

This could have ensured that once the Mauryan military complex was significantly diminished due to Buddhist polices, the dynasty was vulnerable to foreign armies, as well as enemies from within.

Whatever the reasons, the Maurya Empire suffered from a host of internal problems, and it eventually went the course of so many empires before and after it by breaking into smaller regional states (Thapar 2002, 205). Upon the empire's collapse, India once more divided itself into several kingdoms based on ethnicities and religious sects, much the way it was before Chandragupta. The Mauryans themselves maintained a power base in the Ganges River basin, where they remained a regional power (Thapar 2002, 205).

The fractured nature of India would remain until the Mughal conquered most of the region in the 16th century, nearly 2,000 years after Alexander's invasion had helped facilitate the rise of the Mauryans.

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