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Summary Article: **Asoka**

From *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*

Asoka (ca. 304–232 BCE; Sanskrit *Aśokah*, "without sorrow," also commonly transliterated "Ashoka") was ruler of the Indian Mauryan empire from around 269 until his death (Thapar 1997; Falk 2006). He was son of Bindusara and grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Maurya Dynasty. Asoka occupies an important position in the ancient Indian historical and epigraphic tradition, where he appears as a ruthless conqueror and subsequently as a patron of Buddhism. He is also one of the few Indian rulers whose dealings with the west, especially with the kings of the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean and with the Greek-speaking population of Arachosia, are well documented (Karttunen 1997; see Alexandria Arachosia).

At the time of Asoka's ascension to the throne the Mauryan empire already covered most of the Indian subcontinent. His grandfather Chandragupta had moved into the power vacuum left by Alexander III, The Great's brief occupation of the former Achaemenid provinces of northwestern India and Arachosia and consolidated his control over these regions in a war with Seleukos I Nikator in 305 BCE. Asoka's father Bindusara, of whom little is known, also maintained a diplomatic relationship with the Greek world to the west. under the name "Amitochrates," a transliteration of one of his Sanskrit titles, he is the subject of an anecdote (Ath. 14.67): Bindusara sent an envoy to Antiochos I Soter asking for some sweet wine, dried figs, and a sophist — to which Antiochos replied that he would gladly send the wine and the figs, but that Greek sophists were not for sale.

Asoka's bloody conquest of Kalinga in eastern India, early on in his reign, around 265, apparently precipitated his conversion to Buddhism. This conquest and the subsequent conversion are documented in a series of edicts engraved on rocks and pillars throughout the empire, in which Asoka described his repentance after the terrible destruction and huge loss of life wrought on Kalinga. He outlined his new "ethical code" (Prakrit *dhamma*, a cognate of the Sanskrit *dharma*) of respect for one's elders, vegetarianism, charity, non-violence, and thrift — a code that he expected his subjects to adhere to. In these edicts Asoka bears the Prakrit title *Piyadassi* ("he who regards [everyone] with affection"); he was also described by the title *Devanampiya*, "the one beloved of the gods" (Thapar 1997: 226–7). The edicts (text edited in Allchin and Norman 1985, translated in Thapar 1997: 250–66) provide a unique insight into Asoka's world-view and into the administration of his empire.

Asoka's great interest to Classical scholarship lies in the evidence contained in his edicts for relations with the Hellenistic kingdoms, and also with Greek populations who lived within his empire. In his Second Major Rock Edict, Asoka outlined his missionary programme for the lands bordering his empire, and these included southern India, Sri Lanka, and the lands "of the Greek king Antiochos and of those kings who are neighbours of that Antiochos" (Thapar 1997: 251). The Greeks are again mentioned as subjects of a mission of this sort, alongside people of the Indo-Iranian borderlands, in the Fifth Major Rock Edict. In the Thirteenth Major Rock Edict (ca. 256–255), Asoka mentions the Greeks as the only people among whom Indian religious orders are not to be found; but he also makes a grand claim:

The Beloved of the Gods considers victory by Dhamma to be the foremost victory. And moreover the Beloved of the Gods has gained this victory on all his frontiers to a distance of six hundred yojanas [i.e., about 1,500 miles], where reigns the Greek king named Antiochos, and beyond the realm of that

Antiochos in the lands of the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas [of Cyrene], and Alexander [of Epirus]. (Thapar 1997: 256)

We have no record of the reception of missionaries among these Hellenistic kings, or indeed any knowledge of Asoka's *dhamma* coming from them (see Antiochos II Theos; Ptolemy II Philadelphos; Antigonos II Gonatas; Magas; Alexander II Of Epirus). But Asoka's claim to have promulgated his ethical creed among the Greek populations of the Indo-Iranian borderlands of his empire received remarkable confirmation with the discovery of two Greek versions of his edicts at Kandahar. This city was the capital of Arachosia, which Chandragupta had received from Seleukos I Nikator. Of the Greek community there, which was descended from the garrison of Alexander the Great, we know little (Fraser 1979; Bernard, Pinault, and Rougemont 2004). One of the Asokan edicts found at Kandahar was a translation of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Major Rock Edicts; the other was a short Greek-Aramaic document with a freer rendering of some moral precepts (Pugliese Carratelli and Garbini 1964; Schlumberger and Benveniste 1968; now in Canali De Rossi 2004: nos. 290-2). Although the Greek-speaking community of Kandahar was still significant enough in mid-third century BCE, both numerically and politically, to be courted in its own language, the reproduction of the same text of the edicts displayed throughout the Indian subcontinent demonstrates Asoka's consolidation of Arachosia as an integral part of his empire.

SEE ALSO:

Achaemenid Dynasty; India; Kingship, Hellenistic; Megasthenes.

References and Suggested Readings

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Mairs, Rachel. "Asoka." *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, Roger S. Bagnall, et al., Wiley, 1st edition, 2012. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/asoka>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2019.