

# MAGADHA EMPIRE ANCIENT INDIA



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# SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF MAURYAN PERIOD



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The most important literary source is Megasthenes' *Indica*. Megasthenes was a Seleukidian envoy who visited the Mauryan capital Pataliputra during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. His account, *Indica*, encapsulates his impressions of India, particularly northern India, under Chandragupta Maurya. However, the original work is lost. What is available instead are quotations, excerpts, summaries and quotes by later writers.



The other equally popular source is Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Traditionally *Arthashastra* is ascribed to Kautilya, also known as Vishnugupta or Chanakya, who is believed to have been Chandragupta's chief minister. He helped him overthrow the Nandas. *Arthashastra* is a theoretical treatise, prescribing modes of statecraft, and not describing an actual state. A statistical study of *Arthashastra* reveals that some chapters could be dated to the first two centuries of the Common Era. However, many scholars consider it to be contemporaneous with the Mauryas. It reflects a complex administrative structure which was not achieved any time before the Mauryas.



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The texts like the *Divyavadana* and the *Ashokavadana* as well as Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles such as the *Mahavamsa* and the *Dipavamsa* and the king-lists in *Puranas*, again of a later period, refer to Mauryas.

The most significant source for the Mauryan period is undoubtedly the inscriptions of Ashoka. Ashoka's inscriptions mark the beginning of Indian epigraphy. What sets Ashoka's edicts apart is that they are issued in first person, thereby revealing the voice and ideas of the king himself. The edicts are written in the Prakrit language and Brahmi script, and occasionally in the Kharoshti script (in the north-western parts of the subcontinent). There are a few inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic as well. A bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription was found at Shar-i-Kuna near Kandahar in south-east Afghanistan and one in Taxila. Ashoka himself had designated these edicts as *Dhammalipi* (Edicts of Piety) and they are of the following types (Map 16.1):



- 1) Fourteen Rock Edicts or Major Rock Edicts (REs)
- 2) Two 'Separate' Rock Edicts or 'Kalinga' Rock Edicts
- 3) Two Minor Rock Edicts (MREs)
- 4) Seven Pillar Edicts or Major Pillar Edicts (PEs)
- 5) Minor Pillar Edict (MPE)
  - 6) Rock Edict from Bairat (Rajasthan)
  - 7) Two Minor Pillar Inscriptions
  - 8) Inscriptions engraved on the Barabar hills close to Gaya, Bihar.



The Major Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts occur at different places, with minor variations. The Minor Rock Edicts are considered among the earliest inscriptions, followed by the Major Rock Edicts. The Pillar Edicts are still later.



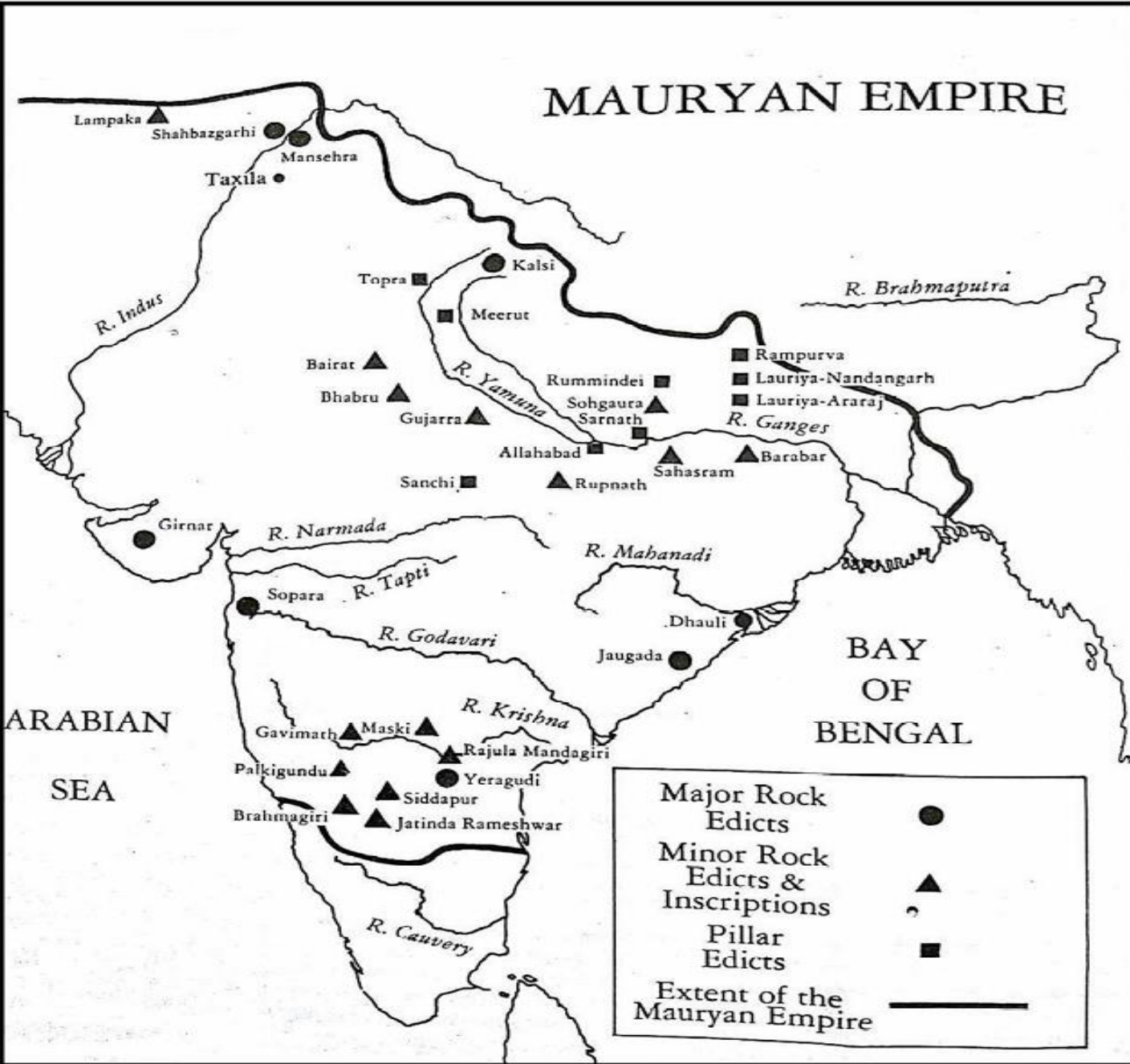
Fig.16.1: Hoard of Mauryan Punch Marked Coins. Credit: CNG Coins.



Other material sources for the study of the Maurya period include coins (Figure 16.1) and archaeological remains. Coins of this period are without legends. Punch-marked coins, mostly of silver, were issued during the Mauryan period. The punch marked coins of the Mauryas contain uniform symbols. Most probably, they were issued by the central authority. Known as *karshapana* coins, they do not specify the issuing authority; they do carry certain symbols that have been associated with Mauryan kings. These symbols include crescent-on-arches, tree-in-railing, and peacock-on-arches.

Archaeological remains from Bulandibagh (Figure 16.2) and Kumrahar (Figure 16.3) are associated with the Mauryan capital Pataliputra. Other important sites are Taxila, Mathura, and Bhita. What is a common feature of the finds is the great diversity of artefacts, and heightened urban elements. Thus, a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of the Mauryas rests on a combined analysis of the various sources.





## 16.3 THE MAURYAN DYNASTY: ORIGINS AND EXPANSION

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The foundation of the Mauryan empire was laid by Chandragupta Maurya, who overthrew the Nanda dynasty in 321/324 BCE. According to *Puranas*, the Mauryan rule lasted for 137 years, i.e., the Mauryas probably ruled till 187/185 BCE. Even if one takes these dates as approximate, one can conclude that the Mauryan period lasted from around the late fourth century BCE to the first quarter of the second century BCE.



## 16.3.1 Chandragupta Maurya

Details about Chandragupta's ancestry and caste status differ from text to text. The *Mudrarakshasa* describes him as being of low social origin. Dhundiraja, a commentator on the *Vishnu Purana*, states that Chandragupta was a Nanda scion, son of the Nanda king Sarvarthasiddhi with Mura, the daughter of a hunter. It is suggested that as the son of Mura, Chandragupta became known as Maurya, which went on to become the dynastic epithet. The 12<sup>th</sup> century text *Parishishta-parvan* written by Jaina author, Hemachandra, identifies Chandragupta as the grandson of the chief of peacock-tamers' clan (*mayura-poshakas*). Similarly, Greek accounts of Justin and Plutarch categorically state that Sandrocottus (i.e., Chandragupta) did not enjoy any royal descent. On the other hand, the Buddhist texts such as the *Digha Nikaya*, *Mahavamsa*, and *Divyavadana* trace the Mauryan ancestry to a *khattiya* (Pali for kshatriya) clan called the Moriyas, who ruled at Pippalivana. This stress on his noble birth was to legitimize his ascension to the throne.





**Fig.16.4: Bhadrabahu Cave, where Chandragupta Maurya is said to have died at Sravanabelgola, Karnataka. Credit: Amol Thikane. Source: Wikimedia Commons.**

What we do know from Greek accounts is that soon after Alexander's dispersal from India, Sandrocottus established a new dynasty and conquered a vast area. Greek sources also mention a treaty signed between Seleucus Nikator and Chandragupta Maurya. According to the terms of this treaty, Seleucus ceded to Chandragupta the territories of Arachosia (the Kandahar area of south-east Afghanistan), Gedrosia (south Baluchistan), and Paropomisadai (area between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent). Chandragupta is said to have reciprocated by gifting 500 war elephants to Seleucus. Alongside the treaty, the general rights of intermarriage between the Greeks and the Indians was also acknowledged. Chandragupta not only established control over the north-west but also the Ganga plains, western India and the Deccan. Kerala, Tamil Nadu and parts of north-east India were out of this ambit.



## 16.3.2 Bindusara

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusara, who ruled between 297 and 273 BCE. The *Mahabhashya* refers to Chandragupta's successor as Amitraghata, which literary means 'a slayer of enemies'. On the other hand, Greek accounts such as those of Athenaios and Strabo knew him as Amitrokhates or Alitrokhates. These names were probably royal epithets, which further indicate his military prowess. To Bindusara's credit, he succeeded in keeping the vast empire he had inherited, intact. The *Divyavadana* speaks of a revolt in Taxila during Bindusara's region. According to *Divyavadana* the subjects of Taxila were dissatisfied with rogue administrators (*dushtamatyas*; *amatyas* meaning ministers).





**Silver Coin (Karsapana) of the period of Bindusara. Credit: Jean-Michel Moullec.**

**Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:I42\\_1karshapana\\_Maurya\\_Bindusara\\_MACW4165\\_1ar\\_\(8486583162\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:I42_1karshapana_Maurya_Bindusara_MACW4165_1ar_(8486583162).jpg))**

Under Bindusara's reign, diplomatic relations with Greek rulers of West Asia continued. Bindusara is described as having requested the Syrian king, Antiochus I, to send him fine wine, figs and a sophist (philosopher). To this, Antiochus replied that while he would definitely send across the wine and figs, Greek laws do not permit the sale and purchase of sophists.

### 16.3.3 Ashoka

For a long time till 1837, not much was known about Ashoka. In that year James Prinsep deciphered a Brahmi inscription referring to a king called *Devanampiya Piyadasi* (Beloved of the Gods). Further, study of *Mahavamsa* made it clear that this epithet referred to Ashoka Maurya.

Ashoka succeeded his father Bindusara upon his death in 273 BCE. The *Asokavadana* says that when he was born, his mother Subhadraangi exclaimed 'I am now without sorrow' and that is how he came to be named Ashoka (the one who is without sorrow). During his father's reign, he was appointed as the Viceroy of Taxila and also Ujjain. It is believed that he was not the crown prince (*yuvaraja*). He was engaged in a struggle with his brothers for the throne.



Ashoka, like Bindusara before him, inherited a large part of the subcontinent as empire. The only significant area not under his suzerainty was Kalinga (modern day Odisha). It was in 260 BCE that Kalinga was finally brought under Mauryan control as a result of a fierce campaign led by Ashoka. Strategically Kalinga was important. It was rich in forest resources and also lay on the Mauryan trade route with the peninsula through the east coast. However, the campaign itself was very destructive, with thousands killed, and many more captured as prisoners. The large-scale destruction is said to have filled king Ashoka with remorse. In Rock Edict XIII, Ashoka, however, states that such death and destruction is inevitable when an unconquered area is conquered. He wished that his successors would avoid any more bloodshed. Despite being remorseful, Ashoka issued a warning to the troublesome forest people, reminding them that even in his repentance, he still had the power to punish. It is also noteworthy that Ashoka refrained from engraving his remorse at any location in Kalinga, where the Rock Edict XIII was in fact replaced by the Separate Edicts. The Separate Edicts contain instructions to his officers and emphasize the value of good administration.





**Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali, Bihar. Credit: Bpilgrim. Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashoka\\_pillar\\_at\\_Vaishali,\\_Bihar,\\_India.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashoka_pillar_at_Vaishali,_Bihar,_India.jpg))**

The victory in Kalinga war marked the official replacement of the war-drum (*bherighosha*) with the sound of *Dhamma* (*dhammaghosha*). The remorse over the Kalinga war sparked his interest in Buddhism and started his journey of conversion. It was not however an overnight conversion, as Ashoka's sympathy towards Buddhism had been brewing. He himself states in Minor Rock Edict I that he has been a lay devotee for two and a half years, indicating that he turned towards the Buddha's teaching only gradually and not suddenly.

The extent of Ashoka's empire can be traced through the spread of his inscriptions. From their distribution we know that the Mauryan Empire extended up to Kandahar in Afghanistan in the north-west. In the eastern frontier it extended to Odisha. According to Rock Edict XIII, the rest of the subcontinent was under Mauryan rule barring the extreme south, which was ruled by Cholas and Pandyas; and according to Rock Edict II by the Keralaputas and Satiyaputras. People of diverse origins and diverse cultures lived in his empire. For example, in the northwest are mentioned the Kambojas and Yavanas. They are mentioned along with other people like the Bhojas, Pitinikas, Andhras and Pulindas who can be located in parts of western India and the Deccan.

The Mauryan empire declined rapidly after Ashoka. The *Puranas* mention the names of later Mauryan rulers and make it clear that the duration of their reigns was relatively very short. The empire soon became weak and fragmented and is said to have suffered an invasion by the Bactrian Greeks. The Mauryan dynasty came to an end with the last king Brihadratha being killed by his own military commander Pushyamitra, who then established the Shunga dynasty in c.187 BCE.



## 16.6 ARTHASHASTRA AND THE SAPTANGA THEORY

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The *Arthashastra* is the first South Asian text which offers a theory of the State as being composed of seven constituent elements. Kautilya puts forward the concept of *saptanga rajya* to understand the State – a system of seven inter-related and interlacing constituent limbs or elements (*angas* or *prakritis*). This concept of the *saptanga-rajya* was accepted and found in much later texts including the *Dharmashastras*, the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*, with a few modifications.

These seven elements were, in the order below:

- 1) *svami* (the king)
- 2) *amatya* (ministers)
- 3) *janapada* (the territory and its people, i.e., subjects)
- 4) *durga* (a fortified capital)
- 5) *kosha* (the treasury)
- 6) *danda* (justice or force)
- 7) *mitra* (ally)



Monarchy is considered the norm by the *Arthashastra* and all its teaching is addressed to the king. For Kautilya, the fate of the king was closely tied to that of his subject population. If the king was energetic, then his subjects too would be energetic. Conversely if he was lazy, his subjects too would be lazy and eat into the kingdom's wealth. Thus, Kautilya advocated for a constantly alert, diligent and sensible king.

Ashoka's inscriptions give us a sense of kingship that was quite close to what Kautilya prescribed. We know from his Minor Rock Edicts that Ashoka adopted a very unassuming title, the *raja* of Magadha, as opposed the very grand titles of later times like *maharaja*, or *maharajadhiraja*. However, the preferred epithet in the inscriptions is '*Devanamapiya*' or the 'beloved of the gods', suggesting attempts to proclaim a divine connection. Ashoka also laid the foundations of a new kind of 'paternalistic kingship' by stating 'All men are my children' in Rock Edicts I and II. He elaborated further on his ideals of kingship by committing to ensure the welfare of all beings and his subjects in this world and the next.



## Amatya

The term '*amatya*' was an umbrella term that included all the high-ranking officials, counsellors and executive heads of department. The *Arthashastra* mentions two kinds of consultative bodies. The first was a small consultative body of *mantrins* (ministers) called the *mantra-parishad*. The other was a larger body of all the executive heads of the department, called the *mantri-parishad*.

An important functionary in Kautilya's administration was the *purohita* (royal priest). The *Arthashastra* states that the *purohita* should belong to a reputed family and should be thoroughly trained in the *Vedas*, the interpretation of divine signs and omens, as well as the science of politics. We can also assess the *purohita's* importance by looking at the figures of salaries given by Kautilya. According to Kautilya, the highest officials were paid extremely well, with the chief minister, the *purhoita*, and the army commander receiving 48,000 *panas* and the treasurer and the chief collector 24,000 *panas*. Even if Kautilya's estimates are only approximate, we can assume that the higher officials in the administration were extraordinarily well-paid, and their salaries would have constituted a large chunk of the total revenue collected.



## *Janapada*

This referred to a recognized territory as the realm of the empire. The *Janapada* was a major source of income for the king and the text demonstrates the various investments, rewards, and punitive strategies used by the State to maximize its tax income based on agricultural production. Additionally, attention to trade routes, port cities, demonstrates the extent that economic interests dominated the king's sense of his own greater territory.



## *Durga*

Crucial to the defense of the realm, fortified cities protect important border regions, serve as sanctuaries during times of attack, and house the major economic and administrative centers of the state. The ideal state of the *Arthashastra* possesses a number of fortresses, differing in geographical setting and purpose. The largest of the fortresses is the capital city, which operates as an administrative, economic, and military hub for the kingdom. Kautilya says that it should be constructed with mud ramparts and parapets built of brick and stone, the fort would be well-stocked with supplies of grain and necessities in case of a siege. Interestingly, the Greek accounts describe Pataliputra, the Magadhan capital, on a similar grand scale.

Kautilya also suggested stationing troops along the approaches to the fort. He refers to a standing army with four main divisions – infantry, cavalry, chariots, and elephants. From Ashoka’s edicts we know that after the Kalinga war, Ashoka made efforts at pacifism and committed himself to *dhamma-vijaya* (victory through *dharma*), rather than war. Yet, significantly, he did not disband the army.



## *Danda*

*Danda* can be understood as a reference to force or justice. The *Arthashastra* lays out the judicial system in detail with references to *dharmasthas* (judges) and *pradeshtris* (officers responsible for suppression of criminals). Punishments for offences and crimes ranged from fines to mutilation of limbs, or even capital punishment. For Kautilya, the nature of punishment depended not only upon the nature and gravity of the crime, but also on the *varna* of the offender. For the same crime, Kautilya set aside lighter punishments for higher *varnas*. For example, if a kshatriya had sexual relations with a brahmin woman, he was to pay the highest fine. For the same offence, a vaishya could have his entire property confiscated. The worst punishment was reserved for a shudra.



In Ashoka's inscriptions the judicial responsibilities lay with the city *mahamatas*. The edicts urge the *mahamatas* to be impartial and ensure that people are not imprisoned or punished without sufficient evidence. Pillar Edict IV contains Ashoka's claim that he had introduced *samata* in judicial procedure. According to some interpretations this meant that he had established a uniform rule of law, abolishing *varna* distinctions in punishments.

## Mitra

This element refers to ‘friends’ of the realm, or political allies. At the centre of Kautilya’s polity is the *vijigishu* – the would-be conqueror. The inter-state policy is about the several players around the *vijigishu* – the *ari* (enemy), *madhyama* (the middle king), and the *udasina* (the indifferent or neutral king). Kautilya further listed various policies and strategies that the king could adopt according to the circumstances, ranging from peace treaty (*sandhi*) if the enemy was stronger, to *vigraha* (hostility) if the enemy was weaker. Other options included military expeditions or teaming up with the enemy’s enemy and attacking together.



## 16.7.1 Central Administration

The central administration can be classified under the following categories:

- a) The king
- b) The council of ministers
- c) City administration
- d) Army
- e) Espionage network
- f) Law and justice
- g) Public welfare

91. Consider the following pairs :

<i>Site of Ashoka's major rock edicts</i>	<i>Location in the State of</i>
1. Dhauli	— Odisha
2. Erragudi	— Andhra Pradesh
3. Jaugada	— Madhya Pradesh
4. Kalsi	— Karnataka

How many pairs given above are correctly matched ?

- (a) Only one pair
- (b) Only two pairs
- (c) Only three pairs
- (d) All four pairs





