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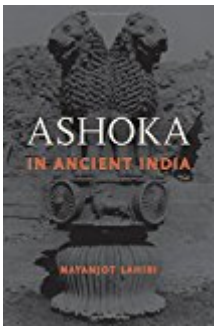
Nayanjot Lahiri. *Ashoka in Ancient India.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 408 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05777-7.



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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Ashoka is one of the most remarkable figures of the ancient world. We are fortunate to have a new biography of him by the eminent historian and archaeologist of ancient India Professor Nayanjot Lahiri of, aptly, the newly created Ashoka University. Professor Lahiri aimed to write a biography of Ashoka for a general audience, and in doing so to relieve the grind of an administrative job at Delhi University, where she then was. She has succeeded admirably at the first and, I take it from the cheery good nature evident in the writing, at the second as well. Issues of evidence and interpretation, large and small, are elucidated clearly and briefly. The tone is light and the pace brisk. She engages the vexing problems and the scholarly debates they have provoked but she does not linger over them. She turns to other societies of the ancient world when comparison is illuminating. There is no academic throat-clearing and portentous speech meant to signal the writer's authority. It is a pleasure to read. She succeeds so well in the accessibility and plain-speaking department that scholars may get the idea that it is intended for beginners. They would be making a mistake.

The nub of the matter is Ashoka's great change of heart, occasioned by his successful war of annexation against Kalinga, c. 260 BCE. This was perhaps the final act in the first unification of India, begun by his grandfather Chandragupta, and it was roughly contemporaneous, Lahiri points out, with the onset of Rome's wars against Carthage (264-146) that prepared the way for the formation of the Roman Empire, and the first unification of China under the Qin (221 BCE). What makes Ashoka stand out among ancient kings is his public remorse over the suffering inflicted in the course of his victory, which he reckoned as 150,000 displaced persons, 100,000 killed on the battlefield, and many more who died subsequently, plus the unmerited suffering of noncombatants. "The triumph is recorded as a disaster. Defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory," Lahiri writes (p. 117). Ashoka sets off on a new path, with the concept of nonviolence (***ahimsa***) at the

fore. It is "a staggering reversal of the very conception of kingship."

The scale of the reversal may be judged from the terms of the first unification. From Megasthenes, Hellenistic ambassador to Chandragupta, we get the picture of the Mauryan war machinery by which it was accomplished: an enormous army, with divisions of infantry, cavalry, chariots, and war elephants; the army a professional one, maintained out of what had to have been an enormous treasury built up by heavy taxation, the army's manpower having no peacetime duties, that is, not a self-sufficient landowning yeomanry or aristocracy; and a royal monopoly of the means of making war, namely, horses, elephants, and arms. Ashoka inherited this machinery and deployed it in the enlargement of an empire that stretched across most of India as far as Kandahar, where Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of Ashoka were found in the 1950s. In adding Kalinga to the Mauryan Empire, he became the supreme Indian ruler of his time.

The edicts of Ashoka, though they survived the ages, were written in scripts that had become unreadable until they were deciphered in the 1830s by the combined efforts of Indian and European scholars under the leadership of James Prinsep of the Asiatic Society. It is an accomplishment that belongs with the more celebrated decipherments of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Mesopotamian cuneiform, in what was truly a great age of decipherment that made the ancient world suddenly more legible. Once deciphered, the Ashokan edicts showed that the key to his life lay not in some trauma of childhood but in his remorse over the suffering he had caused during the military conquest of Kalinga. He considered his new policy to be without precedent, and hoped that future kings might continue it forever after.

This most interesting Ashoka, concealed in plain sight in his edicts, was lost until the great decipherment. A more conventional Ashoka, who was a pious Buddhist monarch, was preserved in Buddhist writings. These writings, in the form they have come down to us, were composed centuries after the events of which they tell. They are not completely disqualified simply because they are not contemporary with the events they describe; indeed, we suppose they come out of traditions some of which go back to those times, and are not pure fabrications. Lahiri herself accepts the testimony of the texts that Ashoka was not the heir to the throne and fought his way to it after the death of his father, the emperor Bindusāra. The main problem with these sources lies elsewhere, in their point of view, as monkish productions that attribute Ashoka's change of heart exclusively to the Buddhist doctrine and the monkhood. Both, of course, were hugely important. By his own account, Ashoka had become a Buddhist layman before Kalinga, and grew more zealous in the religion as a result of of Kalinga. But the Buddhist writings make no mention of the Kalinga war and Ashoka's remorse over it, or of his effort to conform state policy to the principle of nonviolence. In the *Ashokavadana* (c. second century CE, by a monk of Mathura) the early Ashoka is known for his cruelty, the late Ashoka not for nonviolence (***ahiṁsā***) but as a hero of royal gifts (***dāna***) to the Sangha and zealous in his violence against Jains, rather than for the religious tolerance he espouses in his inscriptions. In the ***Mahavaṁsa*** of Sri Lanka, written by monks of the Mahavihara monastery of the island in the sixth century CE, the emphasis is on the transmission of Buddhism to the island's king and the establishment of the Mahavihara. Again there is no mention of the Kalinga war as the cause of Ashoka's change of heart and his subsequent zeal for nonviolence.

When we compare the two Ashokas, as it became possible to do after the decipherment, the Aśoka of the inscriptions is seen to be so much more believable, and much more appealing, than the Ashoka of the Buddhist stories written from a monkish point of view. As Hendrik Kern has said, "If we knew Ashoka only through the Buddhist sources of the North [***Ashokavadana***] and the

South [*Mahavaṁsa*], we would conclude that he was a monarch of rare insignificance, remarkable only in that he was half monster and half idiot. His coreligionists have transmitted us neither a good deed of his, nor an elevated sentiment, or a striking speech."[1]

Lahiri set herself the task of telling Ashoka's life in a chronological narrative, following a logic of before and after, of development through time. This is not easy to accomplish. The project comes up against the unevenness of sources. Until the tenth year of Ashoka's reign, and at the very end of his life, we have no contemporary source, as the edicts say nothing of his ancestors and early life and, of course, his last days. What may be known of his beginnings and his end comes from the uncertain light of the later Buddhist texts. Most biographers have preferred to cope with this problem by partitioning the reliable sources among chapters arranged by themesrather than in chronological succession. Lahiri's interpretation engages with the Buddhist legends critically, and employs an archaeological way of seeing to widen the context in which the life is displayed.

The outcomes have three notable tendencies. First, there is a focusing in upon the local particularity of each of the sites of Ashoka's life and deeds. This includes, as far as it may be known or inferred, the local reception of the royal edict, which, it is sometimes possible to show, was not enthusiastic. An example is the royal promotion of vegetarianism in Afghanistan—archaeological sites show no diminution in bones of fish or large mammals. This aspect of the book often involves close consideration of the reasons a site was chosen for the inscription of Ashokan edicts. Second, much attention is devoted to reading the landscapes, the regional geography in which such sites are placed. And finally, some of the most interesting analysis concerns the reconstruction of the journeys taken by Ashoka from one region to another—the time they took, the means of transport, the probable itinerary, and so forth.

In each of these tendencies Lahiri's work has the advantage of excellent recent scholarship. Harry Falk's photographs and rereading of the Aśokan edicts in their original locations is a treasure house of what may be learned by systematic study and attention to local details. Dilip Chakrabarti's works on the geography of ancient Indian regions are frequent touchstones for Lahiri's book. Jean Deloche's valuable studies of transportation have shown us that ancient India was many times larger than the India of today, because of the slower means of transportation and the high cost of transport before the age of fossil fuels, and are useful in the reconstruction of Ashokan journeys. These and other works of the more recent scholarship Lahiri finds useful and a directionality congenial to her own.

Lahiri made it her method to visit personally as many of the sites as her administrative duties permitted. This choice follows from her training in archaeology. Fieldwork gives her book the feel of having been made outdoors, and informs its orientation toward the concreteness of place and context, in which it excels.

The strength of her book lies here, in its feeling for the particularities of a given locality, of its region and landscape. In one passage, on the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of Ashoka in Afghanistan, she asserts it in the form of a critique of existing biographies of Ashoka and histories of ancient India more generally. In her view the shortcoming of the first is to make the degree of centralization the central issue in analyses of his administration and the relations of the core with the periphery; that of the second is the tendency to focus on large states to the exclusion of formations deemed peripheral. The argument is that "macro analyses" taking the point of view of the large state tend to assume "singular ground realities across diverse regions" (p. 172), such that autonomy, subversion, resistance, local histories, and non-state societies are mostly flattened out and lost to view. It is an argument against the

very concept of the peripheral, or at least of its reductive tendency. Professor Lahiri argues instead for local histories in the overall project of ancient history. I do not think that the view she advances is the negation of the one she criticizes, and incline to take both as complementary perspectives on a complex subbject. As Ashoka was ruler of a very large state, any biography of him must include the view from the center, but Lahiri endeavors to capture the specifics of reception. Readers will find this book a breath of fresh air, and a new way of looking at an irresistible figure of history.

Note

[1]. H. Kern, ***Histoire du bouddhism dans l'Inde,*** vol. 2 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1901-03), 335.