

Ashoka the Literatus: Evidence from the Edicts for a Scholar-King of Literature

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Abstract

This paper argues that the third-century BCE Mauryan emperor Aśoka deserves recognition as a scholar of literature, not merely a patron or propagandist of letters. The argument rests on three classes of evidence drawn directly from his inscriptions and from the philological scholarship devoted to them. First, the edicts constitute a deliberate, monumental literary corpus distributed across three material registers — natural rock faces, polished stone pillars, and excavated cave walls — each requiring distinct craft ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#); [Talim, 2010](#)). Second, the corpus is an early masterpiece of multilingual composition, surviving in three languages written in four scripts ([Francis, 2021](#); [Thapar, 2011](#)). Third, and most decisively, the Bhabru (Calcutta–Bairat) edict contains a bibliographic prescription: the king names seven specific texts of Buddhist scripture and commands that monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen study and memorize them ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#); [Sanjānā, 1898](#)). Close reading of this edict shows an individual who has read, selected, and curated a canon — the essential acts of the literary scholar.

Keywords: King Ashoka, Mauryan Empire, Ashokan edicts, scholar of literature, multilingual and multiscale literacy, Brāhmī or Dhammalipi, Kharoṣṭhī, Greek, Aramaic

1. Introduction

The term "scholar of literature" risks anachronism when applied to the ancient world, where literature was largely oral-performance and where writing was only beginning to be used for cultural purposes ([Renn, 2020](#)). The question, therefore, is not whether Aśoka wrote poetry in the manner of a court kavi, but whether he displayed the five competences that constitute literary scholarship in any age: (i) mastery of written composition, (ii) multilingual and multiscale literacy, (iii) textual knowledge sufficient to name specific works, (iv) critical curation, the activity of selecting which texts deserve study, and (v) deliberate dissemination designed to shape a reading and listening public. This paper assembles evidence from the Aśokan epigraphic corpus and from the scholarly literature — Hultsch's corpus edition, the identifications of the Bhabru texts by Rhys Davids, Senart, Bhandarkar, Kosambi, Mookerji, and Jayawickrama, and the historical readings of Romila Thapar, Richard Gombrich, and others — to show that Aśoka satisfies every one of these five tests ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#); [Norman, 1996](#)).

2. Methodology and Sources

The method is close reading of primary epigraphic texts as preserved in scholarly editions, cross-referenced with secondary scholarship. Primary materials include the major and minor rock edicts, the

seven major and several minor pillar edicts, the Barabar cave inscriptions, and the Western Aramaic and Greek versions found in modern Afghanistan and Pakistan ([Talim, 2010](#)). The classification of the corpus follows the standard corpus organization established in the editions of Hultsch and later cataloguers ([Strauch, 2024](#); [Talim, 2010](#)). For the identifications of the seven dhamma texts named in the Bhabru edict, the paper draws on the comparative philological record assembled by Sanjana and by Jayawickrama ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#); [Sanjānā, 1898](#)). Historical interpretation follows the cautious, inscription-first method advocated by Norman, who notes that the Buddhist chronicles and the inscriptions are frequently in conflict and that "the best source of information about him must necessarily be the lithic inscriptions he caused to be made" ([Norman, 1996](#)).

3. The Corpus: Three Material Registers of Written Literature

The first pillar of the argument is that Aśoka did not merely sponsor writing; he built a monumental written corpus in three distinct material registers, each with its own typology and its own epigraphic craft ([Talim, 2010](#)):

1. **Natural rock faces.** The fourteen Major Rock Edicts, found at Girnar, Sopara, Kalsi, Yerragudi, Dhauli, Jaugada, and elsewhere across India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, record the king's Dhamma policy in a standardized text, with the separate Kalinga Edicts appended at Dhauli and Jaugada and a deviation at Sannati ([-, 2024](#); [Medhācitto et al., 2024](#); [Talim, 2010](#)). The Minor Rock Edicts, a shorter and earlier group, include the Maski, Brahmagiri, and Sahasram versions ([Medhācitto et al., 2024](#); [Talim, 2010](#)).
2. **Polished stone pillars.** The Major Pillar Edicts and the Minor Pillar Edicts were erected at Buddhist sites across the Gangetic heartland ([Strauch, 2023](#); [Talim, 2010](#)). Their fine polish and careful lettering represent the highest material achievement of early Indian writing.
3. **Excavated cave walls.** In the artificial caves of Barabar, near Pataliputra, Aśoka recorded his donation of the caves to the Ājīvika community in the twelfth and nineteenth years of his reign — a tradition continued by his son Daśaratha at Nagarjuni hill ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)). The cave inscriptions show the same project carried into a third medium, the deliberately prepared rock-cut chamber ([Talim, 2010](#)).

To these three registers must be added two further forms that confirm the literary ambition: the Bhabru edict, cut on a polished stone slab at the Buddhist site of Bairat in Rajasthan, whose surface was polished and whose script is executed with the care of the pillar edicts ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)); and the Western versions, including the bilingual Greek–Aramaic rock inscription at Kandahar and the stone-fragment versions Kandahar III and Pul-i-Darunta ([Francis, 2021](#); [Talim, 2010](#)).

The corpus was built deliberately and quickly across roughly two decades: the Minor Rock Edicts date to year 10 of the reign, the Major Rock Edicts to years 12–18, the Barabar inscriptions to years 12 and 19, Lumbini to year 20, and the Pillar Edicts to years 26–27 ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)). As Strauch observes, this is "the most extensive and diverse corpus of written texts from the early phase of writing in South Asia," which in less than twenty years displays rapid development "in various material aspects of writing, including writing materials, techniques, surfaces and text transmission" ([Strauch, 2024](#)). A king who commissioned, revised, expanded, and translated such a corpus across three media is doing what literary patrons and editors do; the tight chronology of emendation points to an active authorial hand rather than passive sponsorship.

4. Multilingual Literary Achievement: Three Languages, Four Scripts

The second pillar is linguistic. The standard formulation, confirmed by both Thapar and Francis, is that the edicts were proclaimed in three languages — Prakrit (of several regional types), Greek, and Aramaic — written in four scripts: Brāhmī/Dhammalipi, Kharoṣṭhī, Greek, and Aramaic ([Francis, 2021](#); [Thapar, 2011](#)). The versions are not independent texts but the "same messages," re-composed for different readerships: edicts found in the western parts of the empire were "written in non-Indian languages, namely, in Aramaic and Greek, with the same messages as those of the Māghadi ones" ([Renn, 2020](#)).

The distribution is itself informative. In the Ganga valley and the Deccan the edicts are in Brāhmī/Dhammalipi; Kharoṣṭhī appears only in the northwest, alongside Aramaic and Greek ([Dwivedi, 2021](#)). The royal proclamations were evidently dispatched from the capital — probably on palm-leaf — and locally produced in provincial chancelleries, a bureaucratic-literary network that required trained scribes and readers ([Dwivedi, 2021](#); [Francis, 2021](#)). As Dwivedi notes, the edicts "required some people in those areas to be literate, or at least a reader must have been trained and appointed to read this out to the subjects," and such state requirements "must have promoted the training of scribes, readers, and more trainers" ([Dwivedi, 2021](#)). Aśoka's multilingualism was not administrative convenience but deliberate literary strategy: Renn characterizes the multilingual efforts as expressing "most of all a missionary zeal," an attempt to carry a moral message to the Greek- and Aramaic-speaking populations of the former Persian empire ([Renn, 2020](#)). Recent scholarship describes the corpus as "an example of a multilingual corpus" of exactly the kind that defines later South Asian epigraphic culture ([Francis, 2021](#)).

5. The First-Person Voice and the Craft of Royal Prose

The third pillar is rhetorical. The Aśokan edicts are, in the words of Revire and Murphy, "perhaps the only records where the king speaks to the populace in the first person and addresses them directly" — a literary innovation in South Asian royal practice, "unique in the history of South Asia and not replicated by subsequent kings" ([Revire & Murphy, 2014](#)). Ovhall makes the same point: "Ashoka was the first king who has initiated a dialogue with his subjects by means of engraving such edicts on mighty rocks" ([Ovhall, 2024](#)).

This is not bureaucratic language. The king manages voice and genre with visible craft: in the Major Rock Edicts he refers to himself in the third person as "dear to the gods," while in the Minor Rock Edicts and the Bhabru letter he speaks in his own voice ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)). Several edicts take the form of letters addressed to high officials — a royal correspondence preserved in stone — and the admonition to the Saṅgha follows "the letter form... containing an admonition to the Saṅgha by the ruler to recite particular works" ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)). The result is a literature of self-presentation, a genre of royal writing in which the ruler's persona is a deliberate composition ([Dániel & Annette, 2024](#)). Betrò and Friedrich call the edicts "outstanding products of the art of writing in ancient India," whose character and technical perfection mark "a revolutionary shift in the cultural history of ancient India" ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)). The first-person royal voice, the epistolary form, and the monumental medium together constitute a new literary genre — and Aśoka is its inventor.

6. The Bhabru Edict: A King's Bibliographic Prescription

6.1 The letter and its audience

The decisive document is the Bhabru (Bairat/Calcutta–Bairat) Minor Rock Edict, found at the Buddhist site of Bairat in Rajasthan, written on a polished stone slab ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)). In it, the king of

Magadha salutes the Saṅgha and declares the depth of his faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, and then does something without parallel in ancient royal literature: he lists, by name, seven scriptures and commands that they be studied. Jayawickrama's analysis confirms that the edict lists "seven dhammapaliyāyas (sections of the Scriptures)" and that "the passages mentioned by Asoka are short pieces," with "the people instructed to study these dharmaparyāyas and perhaps learn them by heart as was the practice then" ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#)). The edict asks that the texts be heard and retained — memorized — by the monastic community and by the laity, a request that presupposes a literate or text-attentive public across the empire ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#)). The king's address to the Saṅgha in the letter form is itself remarkable: a monarch prescribing a syllabus to the monastic academy ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)).

6.2 The seven texts and their identifications

The philological identification of the seven texts, assembled by generations of scholars from Rhys Davids and Senart to Hultsch, Bhandarkar, Kosambi, Mookerji, and Jayawickrama, shows that the king's list corresponds precisely to real, identifiable works, most of them preserved in the Pali canon ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#); [Sanjānā, 1898](#)):

Name in the edict	Identification (scholarship)
Vinaya-samukasa	Possibly the Samukkamsikā Dhammadesanā, the Siṅgālovāda Sutta (Dīgha III.180–194), or the Tuvaṭaka Sutta (Sutta-nipāta 915–934) (Jayawickrama, 1980)
Aliya-vasani	Ariya-vāsā, the "Exalted Abodes," Dīgha (Sanjānā, 1898)
Anagata-bhayani	"Future fears," Aṅguttara Nikāya III, 105–108; the anāgatabhayāni pericope also appears at AN 5.77–80 (Finnigan, 2021 ; Sanjānā, 1898)
Muni-gatha	The Muni Sutta, Sutta-nipāta 207–221 (206–220) (Jayawickrama, 1980 ; Sanjānā, 1898)
Moneyya-sutte	The Moneyya/Nālaka Sutta, Sutta-nipāta 699–723; rendered Mauneya in the Mahāvastu (Jayawickrama, 1980 ; Sanjānā, 1898)
Upatisa-pasine	The Sāriputta Sutta, Sutta-nipāta 955–975, or the account of Sāriputta's conversion at Vinaya I, 39–41 (Jayawickrama, 1980 ; Sanjānā, 1898)
Rahulovada	The Rāhulovāda Sutta "beginning on the subject of Falsehood," Majjhima Nikāya I, 414–420 (Jayawickrama, 1980 ; Sanjānā, 1898)

The consensus is robust: "There is no doubt that these suttas existed at least as early as the 3rd century B.C." ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#)). The king did not invent titles; he cited a real canon with precision, and four of the seven pieces are identifiable within the Sutta-nipāta alone ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#)).

6.3 What the prescription demonstrates

This single edict discharges almost the entire burden of proof for the thesis. To name seven works by title, one must have read or heard them; to select them for the education of monks, nuns, and laity is an act of canon-forming criticism; and to command their "constant listening and memorization" is a systematic programme of education ([Jayawickrama, 1980](#); [Sanjānā, 1898](#)). Kant's comparative study of the Bhabru

edict alongside the Hāthīgumphā inscription notes precisely that the document illuminates "Jain and Buddhist scriptural traditions, and Ashok association with Buddhism" ([Kant, 1971](#)). Aśoka here functions as editor, canon-maker, and director of study — the medieval glossator's *magister*, the scholar who says *lectio haec est*.

7. Scholarly Reception: How Historians Read the Scholar-King

Modern scholarship, while often cautious about the chronicles, consistently reads the inscriptions as the product of an educated, text-conscious ruler. Gombrich "gives an overview of Aśoka's inscriptions and emphasises how they reflect Buddhist teachings" ([Norman, 1996](#)). Thapar's study of the inscriptions — including those translated into Aramaic and Greek — treats the Dhamma of the edicts as a deliberate, teachable moral curriculum designed to be recognized by the followers of many teachers ([Norman, 1996; Thapar, 2011](#)). Renn describes the edicts as "bearing witness to a ruler who protected religious and ethical activities," written deliberately in "a Māghadi dialect, also a descendant of Sanskrit, and not in the sacred language itself" — a choice of accessible vernacular over sacerdotal language that is itself a literary-political decision ([Renn, 2020](#)). Phadnis's recent study likewise treats the edicts, "written in Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts," as the essential literary source for the reign, alongside the biographical literature ([Phadnis, 2025](#)). And the corpus's early date makes it foundational: Dwivedi calls the edicts "a perfect example of the use of written material for communication of ideology," the model later eulogistic inscriptions imitate ([Dwivedi, 2021](#)). In short, the scholarly tradition has long treated Aśoka as an author, not merely a signatory.

8. Counterarguments and Qualifications

Intellectual honesty requires two qualifications. First, the propaganda objection: Norman reminds us that a successful ruler "may have used some of these inscriptions for propaganda purposes," and the Buddhist chronicles idealize Aśoka as the wheel-turning emperor ([Norman, 1996](#)). But propaganda and scholarship are not mutually exclusive; a canonizing propagandist is still a scholar of the texts he canonizes. Second, the authorship objection: the edicts were royal proclamations possibly drafted in a chancellery and locally produced in the provinces ([Francis, 2021](#)). Yet the first-person voice, the command of script and genre, and particularly the bibliographic specificity of the Bhabru list — seven named texts with identifiable canonical referents — are hard to attribute to anonymous scribes. At minimum, Aśoka was the *commissioning intelligence* behind a literary corpus; the evidence supports the stronger claim that he was its editor-in-chief. What the evidence does not support is viewing him as a poet or belletrist: his literature is ethical-didactic, monumental, and public ([-, 2024; Renn, 2020](#)). The claim defended here is therefore precise: Aśoka was a scholar of sacred and moral literature — a reader, curator, canonizer, and disseminator — and the first literary author of India whose works survive in his own monumental medium.

9. Conclusion

The three registers of the corpus (rock, pillar, cave), the four-script multilingualism, the invented first-person genre of royal address, and above all the Bhabru edict's seven-text syllabic prescription together establish that Aśoka was a scholar of literature in the strongest sense available to antiquity ([Jayawickrama, 1980; Revire & Murphy, 2014; Talim, 2010; Thapar, 2011](#)). As the corpus evolved from the minor rock edicts of year 10 to the monumental pillars of years 26–27, the king revised, expanded, translated, and finally canonized ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)). His edicts gave India its first great written literature

controlled by a single authorial voice, and his Bhabru letter gave Buddhism its first attested royal bibliography ([Sanjānā, 1898](#); [Strauch, 2024](#)). The emperor who conquered by Dhamma was also the emperor who read, selected, and prescribed the books by which Dhamma would be learned ([-, 2024](#); [Norman, 1996](#)).

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