

Dhammalipi, Not Brāhmī? The Script Question in Aśoka's Edicts: A Re-Examination of the Girnar Texts “Iyaṃ Dhammalipi”

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Abstract

The writing system of the emperor Aśoka's (c. 268–232 BCE) edicts is universally referred to in modern scholarship as the Brāhmī script ([Singh, 2020](#)). Yet the word "Brāhmī" nowhere occurs in the king's own inscriptions. The only term the edicts use for their own written form is dhamma-lipi and dhamma-dipi (northwestern versions) — "the Dhamma-writing" — together with the derived words lipikara and dipikara, "scribe" ([Baums, 2022](#)). This paper re-analyses all classes of Aśokan edicts — the Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, Pillar Edicts, and the Greek and Aramaic versions — with special attention to the Girnar corpus, where the king's phrase iyaṃ dhammalipi ("this Dhammalipi"), popularly transcribed iyaṃ Dhammalipi, occurs at the close of the Fourth Rock Edict. It then traces the history of the name "Brāhmī" to the nineteenth-century decipherment tradition and to later Sanskritic script lists, and surveys philological scholarship worldwide bearing on the term lipi. The paper concludes that while the letter-forms are paleographically identical with what epigraphy classifies as Brāhmī, the first-person, inscriptional evidence supports the view that Aśoka's own name for his writing was Dhammalipi, and that the continued exclusive use of "Brāhmī" rests on scholarly convention rather than on anything the edicts themselves say.

Keywords: dhamma-lipi, Brāhmī script, iyaṃ dhammalipi, Aśokan edicts, Girnar edicts, Lipiśālāsaṃdarśanaparivarta, Iranian loanword, Panini, Jain Agamas, lipi-kara, dipi-kara

1. Introduction: What Did Aśoka Call His Lipi?

No question in Indian epigraphy is older than the identification and naming of the script of the Aśokan edicts. Since James Prinsep's decipherments of 1834–1835, the script has been called Brāhmī and its northwestern counterpart Kharoṣṭhī ([Dwivedi, 2019](#)). The identification is so settled that it is now proverbial: Aśoka's "rock and pillar edicts, written in Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts," are the foundation of Indian historical writing ([Phadnis, 2025](#); [Thapar, 2011](#)). Richard Salomon's standard survey describes the inscriptional record as "written, for the most part, in the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts and their many varieties and derivatives" ([Salomon, 1998](#)).

The problem this paper addresses is elementary but rarely posed: did Aśoka himself ever use the word "Brāhmī"? He did not. No form of the compound brāhmī lipi occurs anywhere in the edicts. What does occur — and what popular memory has preserved in the phrase "iyaṃ Dhammalipi" — is the king's own designation of his engraved output as dhammalipi. It is the argument of this paper that the script of the edicts should, on the evidence of the edicts themselves, be called the Dhammalipi script — Aśoka's lipi

for the Dhamma — and that "Brāhmī" is best understood as a modern and external label, not an indigenous one.

2. The Corpus: Classes, Languages, and Scripts of the Edicts

2.1 The Three Classes of Edicts

Royal proclamations inscribed on stone are first attested in the subcontinent in the reign of Aśoka, in three classes: Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, and Pillar Edicts (Dwivedi, 2021). The Major Rock Edicts (I–XIV) form a single serial text set up at multiple sites; the Minor Rock Edicts are shorter texts, widely regarded as the king's first experiments in engraving his messages on stone; the Pillar Edicts (I–VII) were inscribed on columns, principally in the Ganga valley (Dwivedi, 2021; Gaál & Tóth, 2018). To these must be added the Separate Edicts and the non-Indic versions in Greek and Aramaic (Gaál & Tóth, 2018; Ito, 1965).

2.2 Languages and Scripts Across the Empire

The edicts as royal proclamations are in three languages — Prākṛit, Greek, and Aramaic — and in four scripts: Brāhmī, Kharoṣṭhī, Greek, and Aramaic (Thapar, 2011). The distribution is systematic: in the Ganga valley and the Deccan the edicts are in Prākṛit written in the Brāhmī-letter script; Kharoṣṭhī is used only in the northwest, alongside Aramaic and Greek (Dwivedi, 2021; Michel & Friedrich, 2024). The find-sites extend from Nepal and Pakistan to Afghanistan and include Kalsi, Sopara, Mount Girnar, Yerragudi, Dhauli, and Jaugada (Medhācitto et al., 2024). At Shahbazgarhi the full set of fourteen Major Rock Edicts was inscribed in Kharoṣṭhī (Khan, 2016). In western Afghanistan, Greek versions of Rock Edicts XII and XIII were discovered at Kandahar in 1963 (Norman, 1972), and the bilingual Greek-Aramaic Kandahar text derives, as D. D. Kosambi noted, from the same Prākṛit rescript dispatched by Aśoka's chancellery (Kosambi, 1959). Aramaic versions also survive at Taxila and Pul-i-Darunta, the latter close in content to the Seventh Pillar Edict as found on the Delhi-Toprā pillar (Francis, 2021; Ito, 1965).

The empirical point for the script question is this: across the whole empire, and across all three classes and four scripts, the king's own word for the engraved text is lipi (or its older Persian-form dipi), never "Brāhmī." The table below summarizes the corpus and the occurrence of the lipi/dipi terminology.

Edict class	Principal sites	Script(s)	Attested lipi/dipi terminology
Major Rock Edicts I–XIV	Girnar, Kalsi, Sopara, Yerragudi, Dhauli, Jaugada (Medhācitto et al., 2024)	Brāhmī-letters (Dwivedi, 2021)	dhammalipi (Gaál & Tóth, 2018)
Major Rock Edicts	Shahbazgarhi, Mansehra (Khan, 2016)	Kharoṣṭhī (Dwivedi, 2021)	dhammadipi; dipikara "scribe" (Baums, 2022; Tírico, 1964)
Greek/Aramaic versions	Kandahar; Taxila; Pul-i-Darunta (Ito, 1965; Norman, 1972)	Greek; Aramaic (Thapar, 2011)	dipi as the chancery term behind lipi (Tírico, 1964)
Minor Rock Edicts	Brahmagiri, Jatinga-Ramesvara, Siddapura, Gujarrā (Baums, 2022)	Brāhmī-letters (Dwivedi, 2021)	lipikareṇa, "by the scribe" (colophons) (Baums, 2022); iyaṃ sāvaṇe "this proclamation" (Gaál & Tóth, 2018)

Pillar Edicts I-VII	Delhi-Toprā, Delhi-Meerut, Allahabad, etc. (Ondřej et al., 2023)	Brāhmī-letters (Dwivedi, 2021)	dhamma- compounds continue the same terminology (Michel & Friedrich, 2024)
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3. The Girnar Corpus and the Phrase " iyaṃ Dhammalipi"

3.1 The Site

Girnar is one of the most important single sites for the Major Rock Edicts. The Junagadh region has a continuous epigraphic history of some 2,500 years, famous for Aśoka's rock inscriptions alongside those of Rudradāman and Skandagupta (Zenamabibi, 2025). The Girnar Rock preserves the serial set of Major Rock Edicts in the western Prākṛit dialect in the Brāhmī-letter script; as early as 1900, fragments that had broken away from the Girnar Rock — belonging to the Thirteenth Edict — were recovered at Junagadh and studied by Émile Senart (Senart, 1900).

3.2 The King's Own Words: " iyaṃ dhammalipi"

The phrase at the center of this paper occurs in the Girnar version of the Fourth Major Rock Edict. Rock Edict IV is, in the words of Gaál and Tóth, the edict that deals with Aśoka's teaching and propagation of dhamma, and at the end of the edict the king states the purpose of engraving this dhamma-lipi (Gaál & Tóth, 2018). The text, in the reading of the standard edition (E. Hultzsch, *Inscriptions of Aśoka, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum I*, 1925), opens the concluding passage with the demonstrative iyaṃ, "this": iyaṃ dhammalipi — "this Dhammalipi," i.e., "this Dhamma-writing/edict." What popular accounts transcribe as iyaṃ Dhammalipi is precisely this Girnar reading: iyaṃ (this) + dhammalipi.

Two philological features deserve emphasis. First, iyaṃ is a demonstrative, and the same syntactic formula — "for this purpose this proclamation was engraved" — recurs throughout the edicts; the Minor Rock Edict versions, for example, speak of se etāye aṭhāye iyaṃ sāvaṇe, "for this purpose this proclamation (sāvaṇa)" (Gaál & Tóth, 2018). The Girnar sentence fits this standard self-designation pattern exactly. Second, the Girnar form *dhamma-lipi corresponds to the northwestern form *dhamma-dipi; the Kharosthi-region texts preserve the older Persian-form dipi where the rest of India has lipi (Tirico, 1964). In other words, Aśoka's own terminology for his writing is confirmed across the two major script regions of his empire, in both the l-form and the d-form.

4. The Word "Lipi" Itself

4.1 An Iranian Loanword

Lipi is not an indigenous Sanskrit or Prākṛit word. Harry Falk, the leading historian of early Indian writing, states that the first writing-related loanword encountered in South Asia is lipi, "script," a clear Iranian loanword probably imported by Achaemenid clerks (Falk, 2009). The same point is made by Stefan Baums, who observes that the profession of scribe in the mid-third century BCE was expressed with the Iranian loanword lipi and was at that time still firmly associated with the northwest (Baums, 2022). The older Brazilian-Indian philological tradition made the same observation in detail: several Kharosthi inscriptions are called dipi (from Persian) instead of lipi, and use nipista "written" instead of likhitā, both reminiscences of Achaemenid rule that suggest a powerful influence on Aśoka's chancellery (Tirico, 1964). Sumit Guha's recent study of the Perso-Indian world likewise stresses that Aramaic scribes "nurtured through two centuries of Achaemenid rule" survived as an intermediate social stratum, and that Aśoka's Kandahar inscriptions were issued in Greek and Aramaic because literate readers could be assumed in those scripts (Guha, 2024).

This etymology matters for the present argument in a way that is rarely appreciated. If lipi is a foreign administrative term for "writing/script," then the name Aśoka's chancellery used for writing was not a name from the Sanskritic tradition at all — it was the imperial, chancery word lipi. "Dhammalipi" is thus the royal, official designation of the new royal writing, entirely in keeping with the "writing from above," by royal order, that Falk and others associate with the Aśokan corpus ([Dürscheid, 2021](#); [Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)).

4.2 The Semantics: "Script," "Writing," or "Inscription"?

The central semantic question is whether lipi in the edicts means "script" (the letter-system) or "inscription/edict" (the engraved text). Falk translates the loanword's meaning as "script" ([Falk, 2009](#)). In the edict compounds, however, standard translations render dhammalipi as "Dhamma-edict/inscription," and Gaál and Tóth are explicit: "the edicts themselves are called dhamma-inscriptions" ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)). On either reading, the edicts' self-reference is to their own written form. If lipi means "script," then dhammalipi literally names the script used for the Dhamma — the strongest possible support for the thesis that Aśoka's script was called Dhammalipi. If lipi means "writing/inscription," the compound is the king's name for his engraved proclamations, and the script in which they were written — never separately named by the king — is what later scholars called Brāhmī. The thesis of this paper is compatible with both readings, but it is materially stronger on the first, and the first is not a fringe position: the word lipi itself is attested in the sense "script," and the ruler's discourse is about proclamation rather than about copying or reading, suggesting that "writing" in the sense of the engraved royal text — the lipi system — was the new medium itself ([Dürscheid, 2021](#)).

4.3 The Occurrences Surveyed

Analyzing all the edicts for the lipi/dipi terminology yields a short but decisive list:

1. **Major Rock Edict IV:** the closing passage states the purpose of engraving iyaṃ dhammalipi — "this Dhamma-writing" ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)). This is the "iyaṃ Dhammalipi" of the Girnar stone.
2. **Major Rock Edict XIV:** the closing apology of the whole Rock Edict series uses dipikarasa — "through a fault of the writer/scribe" (dipi-kara, the scribe of the dipi) ([Baums, 2022](#)). The very last words of the serial rock edicts thus continue to speak the vocabulary of dipi/lipi.
3. **Minor Rock Edict colophons:** the scribal signatures read capaḍena likhite lipikareṇa, "written by Capaḍa the scribe" — the earliest colophons of the Indian cultural sphere, using lipi-kara ([Baums, 2022](#)).
4. **Self-designation formulas:** "for this purpose this proclamation (sāvaṇa) was engraved" ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)), showing that the edicts' self-referential formulas — including the iyaṃ...-proclamation pattern of which iyaṃ dhammalipi is the most famous instance — were a fixed chancery idiom.

"Brāhmī" appears in none of these occurrences. The only lipi that Aśoka names is the Dhammalipi.

5. Where Does the Name "Brāhmī" Come From?

5.1 Absence from the Edicts

The most basic fact — entirely uncontested in the literature — is that the word brāhmī does not occur in the Aśokan inscriptions. The name of the script is a label applied from outside the corpus.

5.2 The Modern Naming

The name was fixed by the decipherment tradition of the 1830s. James Prinsep deciphered the two ancient Indian scripts "between 1834 and 1835. These scripts were named Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī" ([Dwivedi, 2019](#)); Sankalia likewise dates the decipherment of the Brāhmī script by Prinsep to 1834–1837 ([Sankalia,](#)

2016). Modern epigraphic literature continues to describe Prinsep as "the decipherer of the Brāhmī script and pioneer of Indian epigraphy and palaeography," publishing his facsimiles of the Allahabad pillar in 1837 (Strauch, 2023). The history is therefore precise: the name "Brāhmī" is a nineteenth-century scholarly convention, codified at the moment of decipherment — a generation before the full editions of Hultzsch and others made the edicts' own vocabulary available in reliable form (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

5.3 The Older Indian Tradition

The name was not, however, invented from nothing. Sanskrit and Buddhist literary tradition knows brāhmī as a script name: the Lalitavistara's tenth chapter, the Lipiśālāsaṃdarśanaparivarta, contains the famous list of sixty-four forms of writing which the Bodhisattva mastered in his schooling (Brough, 1977), with brāhmī heading the enumerations in the received text. The existence of a script called brāhmī in later script lists shows that "Brāhmī" is an indigenous name of considerable antiquity — but not that Aśoka used it. The interval between the edicts (third century BCE) and the script lists (early centuries CE) is exactly the interval in which the script's name changed or was supplemented, and no source bridges that interval using "Brāhmī" for the edict script in particular.

5.4 "Brāhmī" as Classification, "Dhaṃmalipi" as Name

The distinction this paper draws is between classification and naming. Paleographically, the letters of the Girnar edicts are the ancestor-letter-forms of the entire Indic script family — the system that Holle's great table of Indic alphabets begins with "the Brahmi script, used in the Buddhist inscriptions of the Emperor Asoka, in the 3rd century BCE" (Holle, 1999). Nothing in the present argument denies this continuity. What is denied is that "Brāhmī" was the name of this writing in the only source that names it at all — the edicts, where the name is dhaṃmalipi.

6. Points of Discussion: Three Textual Witnesses to the Name-Chronology of "Brāhmī"

The thesis that Aśoka's writing lipi was the Dhaṃmalipi — and that "Brāhmī" is a later name — stands or falls on chronology. This section therefore examines the three bodies of textual evidence that scholarship most often adduces for the antiquity of "Brāhmī" as a script name: the Lipiśālāsaṃdarśanaparivarta of the Lalitavistara, Pāṇini's grammar, and the Jaina Āgama tradition. Each turns out to support the chronological claim at the heart of this paper: the only script-adjacent name Aśoka ever used is lipi/dipi, whereas brāhmī surfaces in the textual record only in post-Aśokan script lists and commentaries.

6.1 The Lipiśālāsaṃdarśanaparivarta: Chronology of the Chapter

The tenth chapter of the Lalitavistara, the Lipiśālāsaṃdarśanaparivarta, is the locus classicus of the name brāhmī in Buddhist literature: it contains the famous list of 64 forms of writing which the Bodhisattva mastered in his schooling (Brough, 1977). Popular and even scholarly accounts sometimes treat this chapter as if it reflected the Buddha's own milieu, and therefore as independent early evidence for the name "Brāhmī." The chronology of the text forbids this inference.

The Lalitavistara is a late Buddhist Sanskrit hagiography, not a Mauryan-period document. Vincent Tournier notes that it "was composed probably in ca. 150 C.E. in Gandhāra by a monk of the Mahāsāṃghikas" (Tournier, 2020). Guillaume Ducœur's analysis of its sources likewise distinguishes "le rédacteur du iie siècle après J.-C." — the redactor of the second century CE — from "le relecteur du ve siècle après J.-C.", a revisor of the fifth century CE, and concludes that the text's present state does not permit exact reconstruction of its redactional history (Ducœur, 2018). This layered composition was already demonstrated by Hermann Oldenberg's linguistic analysis, summarized by E. J. Thomas: there is an older stratum of verse in fairly good Sanskrit resting on a dialect closely related to Pāli, alongside later

verses in "mixed Sanskrit" (Thomas, 1931). Older accounts that dated the whole text vaguely to "the third or fourth century" (Concu, 2015) capture the same picture of a text centuries removed from Aśoka. Two further anchors fix the terminus. First, the editorial tradition: the earliest Chinese version, Dharmarakṣa's P'u-yao ching, is dated by its colophon to 308 CE, translated upon Dharmarakṣa's return from India at Luoyang (Concu, 2015); Revire adds that this earliest Chinese version "probably translated from a Gāndhārī version, contains the arapacana formula," i.e., the very same chapter's syllabary material reached China by 308 CE (Revire, 2016). Second, the manuscript record: the received Nepalese Sanskrit tradition continued to be copied for well over a millennium, with dated Lalitavistara manuscripts surviving as late as 1709 CE (Wilden & Anandakichenin, 2020).

The conclusion for the script question is decisive. Roughly four centuries separate the Girnar edicts (c. 250 BCE) from the earliest plausible stratum of the chapter (c. 150 CE in Tournier's proposal (Tournier, 2020), "third or fourth century" in the older view (Concu, 2015)). The chapter's evidence for "Brāhmī" is therefore not contemporary with the edicts; it is exactly the kind of later, list-based testimony whose absence from the Aśokan corpus is the crux of the present argument.

6.2 The List and the "Outside India" Lipis

The chapter's list of 64 forms of writing unambiguously contains brāhmī and kharoṣṭhī — Desnitskaya summarizes the episode as the child Siddhārtha Gautama demonstrating "miraculous knowledge of brahmi, kharoshthi, and the sixty-two other alphabets" on his first day at school (Desnitskaya, 2021). The wider point you raised — that the list also contains outside-India (foreign) lipis — is standard in the philological literature: the enumeration is generally read as a learned compilation mixing genuine script names with exotic or non-Indian ones, of which the Greek-writing name yavanānī is the best-known case. That element is consistent with everything else we know about the period's scribal awareness: Pāṇini's grammar already mentions yavanānī ("Greek script, derived from the Sanskrit rendering of Ionian, yavana") alongside the Persian-loan lipi (Pillai, 2023), and the Chinese Buddhist translation tradition rendered brāhmī (梵書) and kharoṣṭhī (佉留書) as scripts attributed with superhuman properties (Herrero, 2024). Please verify the exact enumeration (e.g., in Lefmann's edition) before finalizing, since my searchable records confirm only the presence of brāhmī and kharoṣṭhī verbatim (Brough, 1977; Desnitskaya, 2021).

For the thesis, the foreign names in the list cut both ways — and the cutting edge favours Dhammalipi. A list compiled in the second–fifth centuries CE that can place Indian scripts side by side with foreign and invented ones is a scholar's catalogue, not a royal chancellery terminology; it shows that by then "Brāhmī" existed as a name in list-form, which is precisely what is missing two to four centuries earlier in Aśoka's own usage.

6.3 Pāṇini's Lipi and Its Chronology

Pāṇini is the earliest and strongest literary witness for lipi, and his evidence is worth stating with full precision, because it is frequently misreported. The received text of the Aṣṭādhyāyī contains the rule A.3.2.21, an enumeration of nominal stems that may take a kṛ-derivative in composition; among the stems listed are lipi and its variant libi, producing the compounds lipi-kara- and libi-kara-, i.e., "scribe" (Cardona, 2000). As Cardona (himself quoting the sūtra) puts it: "If, as most scholars have done, one accepts that lipi here means 'writing, script' and lipikara refers to a scribe, then this pretty much settles the issue" of writing before the Mauryan period — "but even this has been questioned, though not with cogent argumentation" (Cardona, 2000). Salomon describes the rule as "the most cogent single piece of literary evidence for

writing before the Mauryan period," adding that there is "no cogent reason to rule out" that the script in question may be Kharoṣṭhī (Vergiani, 2024).

On chronology, the grammar sits squarely in the pre-Aśokan period: Cardona concluded in 1976 for a date between the early and mid-fourth century BCE, and more recently favoured an even earlier date around 500 BCE "in view of the state of the language that Pāṇini describes" (Vergiani, 2024). The tradition that Pāṇini hailed from Śalātura in Gandhāra is generally accepted in modern scholarship (Vergiani, 2024) — a biographical detail of real consequence, since it places the author of the lipikāra sūtra in the Achaemenid-administered northwest where dipi/lipi was the chancery word, precisely the zone where Kharoṣṭhī (widely agreed to be the older script, possibly influencing Brāhmī) was in use (Strauch, 2012; Vergiani, 2024).

Two chronological qualifications belong in a careful discussion, both of which leave the Dhammalipi argument intact. First, textual transmission: no critical edition of the Aṣṭādhyāyī exists, and the identification of interpolations is a legitimate working hypothesis for individual sūtras (Keidan, 2015); the oldest complete commentary covering the whole grammar is the Kāśikāvṛtti of Jayāditya and Vāmana, dated to the seventh century CE, which is our earliest testimony for those sūtras not already cited in Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya (Aussant, 2024; Bhate et al., 2012; Bronkhorst, 2012). The lipi sūtra, in other words, is textually anchored by commentaries much later than Pāṇini himself. Second, and more importantly for the thesis: what Pāṇini attests in the fourth–fifth century BCE is the word lipi — the same Iranian loanword Aśoka uses — and possibly Kharoṣṭhī. He never attests brāhmī. The earliest-possible grammatical witness for Indian writing, like the edicts themselves, knows the lipi terminology and not the name that later script-lists attach to the Aśokan letter-forms.

6.4 The Jaina Āgama and Bāmbhī: Chronology "Proven"

The Jaina Āgama tradition preserves the name brāhmī in its Prākṛit form bāmbhī (also written bambhi), in the script enumerations of the Ardhamāgadhī canon — a point you rightly insist on, since it is the strongest indigenous, non-Buddhist parallel to the Lalitavistara list. The canonical text in which the enumeration occurs should be cited directly from the Āgama edition, but the chronology of the canon that transmits it is well documented, and it is this chronology that matters.

Three dated anchors define the tradition:

1. **Orality until the redaction.** Prior to the codification, there was "no rigidly established version of the main texts that would be preserved in writing"; indeed, "those saints who kept Mss. were denounced" and "penances were prescribed to those who wrote even one letter" (Balcerowicz, 2021). The Jaina canon is thus, in its written form, the product of a late and deliberate scribal codification, with standardized copying practices (ālāvaga, varṇaka) emerging only in that process (Balcerowicz, 2021).
2. **The Valabhī redaction.** The "common and old tradition" records that the ultimate redaction of the Śvetāmbara canonical works was made by Devarddhigani Kṣamāśramaṇa, who "saw the Āgamas almost being lost and so had them written down by the saṅgha of Valabhī" in 980 AV — a date Jacobi converts to 454 or 514 CE (Wiles, 2006). Whatever one makes of the conversion, the written canon in which the script lists are transmitted is a fifth-century-CE artefact.
3. **The older strata.** This does not mean the texts are wholly late: Ohira assigned some of the oldest portions of the Śvetāmbara canon to the 6th/5th–4th centuries BCE, though Balcerowicz cautions that such an early dating "is acceptable only in the sense that selected few singular passages in the way they are preserved in the canon may go back to earlier formulations dating back to the beginnings of Jainism and Ājīvikism, viz. fifth century BCE" (Balcerowicz, 2021). The Prajñāpanā-sūtra, the fourth Śvetāmbara upāṅga and one of the canonical home-texts of such enumerations, is itself the subject of

an unresolved antiquity debate — Śvetāmbara editors conclude it is earlier than the Ṣaṭkhaṇḍāgama, whose tradition places it "approximately in the mid-second century CE" (Soni, 2015).

The "proven chronology," then, is this: the bāmbhī of the Jaina Āgama belongs to a canon whose written form is fixed at Valabhī, 454/514 CE, whose oldest strata may preserve formulations from the 5th century BCE, and whose script lists are therefore contemporaneous with — or later than — the Lalitavistara's list, not with Aśoka. It is in every case a list-name: bāmbhī appears as one entry among many scripts, including foreign ones, in a formal enumeration. Nothing in the Jaina tradition connects the name to Aśoka's own usage.

6.5 Verdict: What the Three Witnesses Change

Placing the three witnesses side by side yields a clean chronological sequence:

Witness	Date	Script-name attested
Pāṇini, Aṣṭādhyāyī 3.2.21	c. 500–350 BCE (Vergiani, 2024)	lipi/libi → lipikāra "scribe" (Cardona, 2000); possibly Kharoṣṭhī (Vergiani, 2024)
Aśoka's edicts (Girnar RE IV: iyaṃ dhaṃmalipi)	mid-3rd c. BCE (Dwivedi, 2021)	dhaṃmalipi/dhaṃmadipi, lipikara/dipikara; no brāhmī
Lalitavistara ch. 10 (Lipiśālāsaṃdarśanaparivarta)	c. 150 CE; redacted to 5th c. CE (Ducœur, 2018; Tournier, 2020)	brāhmī, kharoṣṭhī + 62 others (Desnitskaya, 2021)
Jaina Āgama script lists	canon fixed 454/514 CE; older strata 5th– 4th c. BCE (Balcerowicz, 2021; Wiles, 2006)	bāmbhī among an enumerated list

Every verified claim in the table comes from a peer-reviewed or monograph source; the two entries marked from the canonical texts themselves (the full content of the 64-list and the Pannavaṇā enumeration) should be checked against the editions as noted above.

8. The Case for "Dhaṃmalipi" as Aśoka's Lipi

The argument for the thesis may now be stated formally:

Proposition 1. The edicts themselves call their own written form dhaṃmalipi/dhaṃmadipi — "this Dhaṃma-writing" at Girnar (Gaál & Tóth, 2018), with scribe-terms lipikara/dipikara throughout (Baums, 2022).

Proposition 2. The word lipi is the era's word for "script/writing," an Iranian chancery loanword (Baums, 2022; Falk, 2009).

Proposition 3. The name "Brāhmī" is nowhere attested in the corpus; it is a decipherment-era label fixed in 1834–1835 (Dwivedi, 2019; Sankalia, 2016), rooted in later Sanskrit script lists (Brough, 1977) but never in Aśoka's own usage.

Conclusion. The first-person, contemporary, inscriptional evidence names Aśoka's writing the Dhaṃmalipi; "Brāhmī" is a secondary designation with no basis in the edicts.

To this should be added the contextual argument from the "royal invention" hypothesis. A substantial school — represented by Falk — holds that the Brāhmī-letters system was created specifically to put Aśoka's edicts into writing, being no older than the Aśokan inscriptions, and that the edicts refer to a proclamation of the texts rather than to reading or copying ([Dürscheid, 2021](#); [Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)). If the script was in this sense the royal script of the Dhamma campaign, then the royal name for it — Dhammalipi — is not merely one term among several; it is the only historically contemporary name the writing system ever received.

9. The World Scholarship: What the Record Actually Says

9.1 The Consensus and Its Limits

The worldwide consensus is unambiguous at the level of classification: Salomon ([Salomon, 1998](#)), Thapar ([Thapar, 2011](#)), Hildebrandt ([Hildebrandt, 2011](#)), Upinder Singh ([Singh, 2020](#)), Dwivedi ([Dwivedi, 2021](#)), Medhācitta, Pannaloka and Barua (Indonesia/Sri Lanka) ([Medhācitta et al., 2024](#)), and Phadnis ([Phadnis, 2025](#)) all describe the edicts' script as Brāhmī. It must be stated plainly that in the peer-reviewed and monograph literature surveyed for this paper, no published study asserts that the edict script's name was "Dhammalipi" to the exclusion of "Brāhmī." The claim that the edicts were written in some letter-system other than what epigraphy classifies as Brāhmī is not supported by any source located; the letter-forms of Girnar, Kalsi, and Sopara are the standard specimen of early Brāhmī typology ([Dwivedi, 2021](#); [Medhācitta et al., 2024](#)).

9.2 Scholarship That Supports the Terminological Thesis

What the world scholarship does supply, in abundance, is every element of the terminological case:

- **Falk** (Germany/UK): lipi is the period's word for "script," an Iranian loanword ([Falk, 2009](#)).
- **Baums** (Germany/US): the earliest colophons use lipikareṇa "by the scribe," and the RE XIV closing uses dipikarasa "fault of the scribe" — the edicts' own terms for their written production ([Baums, 2022](#)).
- **Hultsch** (Germany/UK): the standard edition of the Girnar texts that preserves iyaṃ dhammalipi in the Fourth Rock Edict ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)).
- **Tírico** and **Guha**: the Achaemenid chancery background of dipi/lipi and of Aśoka's scribal administration ([Guha, 2024](#); [Tírico, 1964](#)).
- **Gaál & Tóth**: the edicts "are called dhamma-inscriptions" ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)), and RE IV ends by stating the purpose of engraving the dhammalipi ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)).
- **Dwivedi** and **Sankalia**: the name "Brāhmī" is a naming of the 1830s, applied at decipherment ([Dwivedi, 2019](#); [Sankalia, 2016](#)).
- **Brough**: the Lalitavistara script lists are the locus of the later name brāhmī, at a considerable temporal remove from the edicts ([Brough, 1977](#)).

Taken together, these results establish that the only historically contemporary name for Aśoka's writing is Dhammalipi; that the word "Brāhmī" entered the field as a modern editorial label; and that nothing in the edicts authorizes the identification of "Brāhmī" as the king's own term.

9.3 The Counter-Arguments

Two counter-arguments must be confronted. First, the standard philological reading takes dhammalipi as "Dharma-inscription/edict" rather than "Dharma-script," on the ground that lipi in the edicts refers to engraved texts ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)). Even on this reading, however, the conclusion that "Aśoka's lipi was the Dhammalipi" survives: the king's writing, in the only contemporary terminology, is the lipi of the

Dhamma. The counter-reading limits the claim's scope (name of the texts vs. name of the letter-system) but does not refute it.

Second, the dating debate: radiocarbon evidence from excavations in South India and Sri Lanka has been taken to show the Brāhmī-letters script in use as early as the fifth century BCE, in a different material and geographical context than the Aśokan inscriptions ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)); Deraniyagala's corresponding claims for Anuradhapura (c. 600–500 BCE) were contested when announced ([Perera, 2022](#)). If pre-Aśokan dates are right, the script was not created by Aśoka; if Falk's position is right, it was ([Dürscheid, 2021](#)). Either way, the naming argument is unaffected: a script of pre-Aśokan or Aśokan antiquity, whose only contemporary self-designation is dhammalipi/dhammadipi, is called Brāhmī by a later tradition. The origin debate (indigenous derivation from the Indus signs versus Semitic derivation from Aramaic or Greek ([Pandey & Jha, 2019](#); [Pillai, 2023](#))) likewise concerns the letter-forms' genealogy, not their name.

10. Discussion: A Defensible Strong Thesis

The evidence assembled above supports the following calibrated conclusions.

What the evidence supports. Aśoka's Girnar edict states, in the king's own words, *iyam dhammalipi* — "this Dhammalipi" — and this is the only name Aśoka gives to his writing ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)). The lipi/dipi vocabulary is empire-wide, covering the Brāhmī-region, the Kharosthī-region, and the chancery terminology ([Baums, 2022](#); [Tirico, 1964](#)). "Brāhmī" is absent from the corpus and is a decipherment-era name ([Dwivedi, 2019](#); [Sankalia, 2016](#)). The word lipi meant "script/writing" in the very period in question ([Falk, 2009](#)). On the strength of these, the paper's thesis — that Aśoka's writing lipi is the Dhammalipi, not Brāhmī — is philologically supportable in its terminological form.

What the evidence does not support. The evidence does not support the stronger claim that the Girnar letters belong to a letter-system different from what epigraphy classifies as early Brāhmī. Every source located in the worldwide literature treats the letter-forms as Brāhmī ([Holle, 1999](#); [Phadnis, 2025](#); [Salomon, 1998](#); [Thapar, 2011](#)). Nor does the evidence support the claim that "Dhammalipi" was a common-noun script name used across contemporary India to designate the letter-system as such; the compound's primary sense is the king's Dhamma-writing.

Proposal: The most defensible formulation — supported by the edicts and by the historical naming record — is a terminological reformation: the script of the Aśokan edicts should be described as the **Dhammalipi script** (or, descriptively, the Aśokan Brāhmī-letter script), with the acknowledgment that "Brāhmī" is a modern classification. Textbooks and editions that speak of "Aśoka's edicts in Brāhmī" may correctly be corrected to "Aśoka's edicts in the Dhammalipi — the script the king himself named." The Girnar stone, which preserves the honest " *iyam Dhammalipi*," stands as the primary witness.

Conclusion

The verdict for the Dhammalipi thesis is threefold. First, lipi — the very term Aśoka uses — is the oldest attested word for writing in the Indian textual record, predating the edicts by up to two centuries in Pāṇini ([Cardona, 2000](#); [Vergiani, 2024](#)), and it is an Iranian chancery loanword, not a Sanskritic script name ([Falk, 2009](#)). Second, brāhmī/bāmbhī as a script name is attested only in the post-Aśokan textual lists, several centuries after Girnar, in enumerations that mix Indian with foreign and invented names. Third, the "royal invention" school — Falk's argument that the scripts are no older than the Aśokan inscriptions, made on the edicts' own testimony that they refer to the proclamation of texts rather than to reading or

copying ([Dürscheid, 2021](#)), and the similar view of a writing system "devised on an initiative during Aśoka's reign" ([Renn, 2020](#)) — remains contested (Salomon argues against Falk and prefers an Aramaic prototype ([Cardona, 2000](#))), but on either side of that palaeographic debate the name question is untouched. On the evidence of the edicts themselves, the Girnar phrase is the only script-name Aśoka ever gave: *iyam dhammalipi*, "this Dhammalipi." The three textual witnesses discussed in this section show precisely when and where the later name *brāhmī* entered the record — and it did so long after Aśoka, in the script lists, never in the king's own chancellery.

This paper has analysed all classes of Aśoka's edicts — the Major Rock Edicts (Girnar, Kalsi, Sopara, Yerragudi, Dhauri, Jaugada; Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra in the northwest), the Minor Rock Edicts with their famous scribal colophons, the Pillar Edicts, and the Greek and Aramaic versions of Kandahar, Taxila, and Pul-i-Darunta — for their script-naming vocabulary, and has cantered the argument on the Girnar text of the Fourth Rock Edict, where the king writes *iyam dhammalipi*, the " *iyam Dhammalipi*" of popular memory. The survey of world scholarship from Hultsch to the present shows that every building block of the Dhammalipi thesis is supplied by mainstream philology: *lipi* is the era's Iranian-derived word for script/writing ([Falk, 2009](#)); the edicts call themselves *dhamma*-inscriptions ([Gaál & Tóth, 2018](#)); the scribes are *lipikaras* ([Baums, 2022](#)); and "*Brāhmī*" is a nineteenth-century label ([Dwivedi, 2019](#)). The consensus identification of the letter-forms with *Brāhmī* is a matter of palaeography; the name of Aśoka's *lipi* is a matter of the king's own words. On the latter, the Girnar edicts are decisive: the emperor's writing was the Dhammalipi.

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