

The Empire Under One Umbrella: Espionage, Reporting and the Communications System of the Mauryan State in the Aśokan Edicts, the Contemporary Textual Sources and Recent Scholarship

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Abstract

This paper argues that the Mauryan empire could not have been held together under a single authority without a system for acquiring, moving and verifying information, and that this proposition — which no surviving document states in so many words — can be established by correlating four independent bodies of evidence: the Aśokan inscriptions, the *Arthaśāstra*, the Greek testimony as transmitted by later authors, and the Buddhist literary tradition. It sets out the *Arthaśāstra*'s architecture of secret activity — the recruitment of agents "from all groups," their deployment "in two basic groups (*saṁstha* and *saṁchār*)," their dispersal "for early detection in one's own country, an enemy country, a friendly country, and a neutral country," and the establishment of "a permanent wing for collection and analysis of latest information" with agents stationed in the courts of "the enemy, the ally, the Middle, and the Neutral kings to spy on the kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials" (Sumaryani, 2021)(Sihag, 2017) — together with its repertoire of covert action: the assassination of enemy officers, the engineering of quarrels among them, and disinformation designed to demoralise enemy troops (Boesche, 2003)(Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020). It then reconstructs the communications substrate on which any such system must run: the Uttarāpatha and Dakṣiṇāpatha routes and the royal road from Taxila to Pataliputra with pillars marking distances and byroads every ten stadia (Dwivedi, 2021)(Laizet, 2021), the supervised ferry and seafaring traffic and the navarch who hired vessels to travellers and sea traders (Dwivedi, 2021)(Laizet, 2021), the ports at river estuaries from Barygaza to Tamralipti (Dwivedi, 2021)(Arunachalam, 2025), and the fourfold army with its officers of horses, elephants, chariots and infantry (Reden, 2019)(Dwivedi, 2021). It examines three episodes as corroborating instances: the revolt at Taxila, which Aśoka handled as a prince and which the scholarship treats as the experience that determined his attempt on the throne (Thapar, 2012); the capture of the throne at Pataliputra, where "Aśoka was not the crown prince, and... there was a struggle among the princes for the throne" (Thapar, 2012), resolved when he "raised an army against, and possibly killed, his brother Sumana-Susima" (Testa, 2014); and the conquest of Kalinga, where Rock Edict XIII records the outcome and the remorse but not the method (Chassanite, 2015)(Bartles-Smith et al., 2020), and where the inference of prior intelligence and covert preparation is offered as a hypothesis rather than a finding. The paper's central structural argument is supported by a recent formal estimation of Mauryan institutions, which recovers the monitoring-cost parameter from GIS-derived travel times across the Gangetic plain

and dendrochronological monsoon variation, and finds that an average oversight distance of approximately 850 km combined with output volatility of $\sigma\theta \approx 0.31$ generated the empire's distinctive institutional choices endogenously — a fixed one-sixth tax share and an 800:1 wage ratio between senior councillors and junior clerks — and that replacing Mauryan direct administration with Roman-style tax farming would have shortened imperial survival by roughly 45 years (Kamat, 2025). The paper concludes that the importance of the Mauryan information system lies in its design rather than its surviving outputs, and that the appropriate description of the evidence is a *reporting and inspection system* of documented architecture operating within an information environment that recent scholarship shows to have been severely constrained.

Keywords: King Ashoka, Ashoka edicts, Arthashastra, intelligence system, communication system, Kalinga war, Pataliputra

1. Introduction: The Argument from Necessity

There is a proposition about the Mauryan empire that almost everyone accepts and almost no document states. It is this: a territory extending from Bengal in the east to Afghanistan in the northwest (Tambiah, 1976), politically unified within three generations and administered from a single capital, could not have remained intact under one authority without a system for collecting, moving and checking information about what was happening in it.

The proposition is not a rhetorical flourish. It has a quantity attached to it. A recent formal study of Mauryan institutions recovers the monitoring-cost parameter from GIS-derived travel times across the Gangetic plain, combined with dendrochronological evidence of monsoon variation, and reports that the empire's defining institutional choices arose endogenously from the combination of "high geographic dispersion (average oversight distance ≈ 850 km)" with "substantial output volatility ($\sigma\theta \approx 0.31$)" (Kamat, 2025). The same study finds that "Kautilyan design deliberately favoured systemic resilience against shocks over short-term extractive efficiency, offering an early illustration of mechanism design in environments marked by severe information constraints" (Kamat, 2025). That is the argument of this paper stated in the language of institutional design: the Mauryan empire was an information-poor polity that built institutions calibrated to its poverty.

The methodological principle. The claim cannot be demonstrated by direct evidence, because none exists. No Mauryan intelligence archive survives. No register of agents has been recovered. No operational report, no dossier, no watch-list. The inscriptions name officers but not spies; the *Arthasāstra* prescribes a system but records no instance of its operation; the Greek testimony describes a state from outside; and the Buddhist tradition narrates events centuries after the fact and, as the scholarship observes, in versions "adapted to suit religious purposes" (Thapar, 2012).

Ancient history, therefore, does not proceed here by documentary proof. It proceeds by **correlation**: the assembling of independent bodies of evidence, each insufficient alone, whose convergence on a single institutional reality is the strongest support available. A hypothesis is not thereby proved; it is rendered probable to a degree that the evidence can bear, and the degree should be stated rather than assumed.

This paper therefore grades its claims. It distinguishes four levels, and it applies them throughout:

- **Attested** — the claim rests on a contemporary document, epigraphic or textual, that states the matter directly.
- **Corroborated** — two or more independent streams converge on the claim without either stating it.

- **Inferred** — the claim follows from administrative necessity, comparative practice, or the logic of the documented apparatus, but is not evidenced directly.
- **Hypothetical** — the claim is a conjecture consistent with the evidence, advanced to be tested, and flagged as such.

The three cases. The paper's middle sections examine three episodes that a hypothesis of an operating intelligence system would predict and that a hypothesis of its absence would leave unexplained: the revolt at Taxila, which Aśoka handled as a prince ([Thapar, 2012](#)); the capture of the throne at Pataliputra amid a struggle among the princes ([Thapar, 2012](#))([Testa, 2014](#)); and the conquest of Kalinga, recorded in Rock Edict XIII as an event and as a remorse, but not as a method ([Chassanite, 2015](#))([Bartles-Smith et al., 2020](#)). These are offered as **corroborating instances, not as proofs** — a distinction that is essential to the paper's integrity and which Section 7 states in full.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the method of correlation in detail. Section 3 states the sources and their standing. Section 4 reconstructs the *Arthaśāstra*'s secret services and its repertoire of covert action. Section 5 reconstructs the communications system — roads, water, ports, and the cavalry and army that were its fastest instrument. Section 6 sets out the epigraphic evidence for reporting, command and inspection. Sections 7 to 9 examine the three cases. Section 10 treats the edicts as instruments of integration. Section 11 examines the purification of the saṅgha as the clearest attested instance of state intelligence operating on an institution. Section 12 assesses the Greek testimony. Section 13 sets the Mauryan case against Assyrian, Ptolemaic and Roman comparand. Section 14 states what the system was for. Section 15 records the knowledge gaps, and Section 16 concludes.

2. Methodology: Correlation as Evidence

2.1 Why Direct Evidence Is Absent

The absence of a Mauryan intelligence archive is not an accident of excavation. It follows from three features of the evidence.

The record is monumental, not administrative. What survives from the Mauryan court are proclamations cut into rock and stone pillars — texts intended for public permanence. Administrative records were written on perishable material, and none has survived. The stone tells us what the state wanted said; it cannot tell us what the state wrote to itself.

The technical literature is prescriptive, not documentary. The *Arthaśāstra* is a treatise. The scholarship dates it to around the middle of the first century CE, drawing "on sources that predate him by a century or more" ([Olivelle, 2020](#)), and describes it as belonging to "a wide array of normative texts (the *śāstras*, pertaining to general livelihood, morality, legality, and administrative matters)" ([Reden, 2019](#)). A *śāstra* states what should be done. Its provisions are therefore evidence of a *doctrine* of intelligence, and only by inference evidence of a *practice*.

The narrative sources are late and purposive. The *Aśokāvadāna*, the Pāli *vaṃsa* literature and the later commentaries are religious texts. The scholarship on Aśoka's early life concludes by noting the existence of "various versions of the life of Aśoka which were adapted to suit religious purposes" ([Thapar, 2012](#)), and the Aśokan legend's most dramatic episodes — the prophecy of the dirt-offering, the accession struggle, the purification of the saṅgha — are recorded in exactly this register.

2.2 How Correlation Works Here

Correlation in this case operates by three distinct mechanisms, and they should be distinguished because they carry different weights.

Convergence of independent streams. Where an inscription, a Greek envoy and a technical treatise describe the same institutional feature, the feature is established even if no single source states it. The five-yearly tour of officials, for example, is attested in the inscriptions and independently reconstructed by modern epigraphic scholarship ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)), and its logic is paralleled in the Ptolemaic inspection memorandum ([Knopf, 2022](#)). The convergence is the evidence.

The argument from administrative necessity. Where a polity's documented scale and documented obligations exceed what can be discharged without a given capability, the capability is inferred. This is the form of the argument in Section 1, and the recent formal work gives it precision by quantifying the monitoring problem ([Kamat, 2025](#)).

The argument from design. Where an institution's architecture is documented in detail, the purposes it can serve are inferable even where no instance of its operation survives. A chain of command that runs from the king through high officials to the chief functionary to the regional functionaries ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)) is a channel that carries commands downward and information upward, whether or not any particular report is preserved.

2.3 The Discipline of the Method

The method has two temptations, and the paper resists both.

The first is **transference**: reading the *Arthaśāstra*'s prescriptions as descriptions of Mauryan practice. The two are separated by centuries of composition and by the difference between a treatise and an administration. Where this paper uses the *Arthaśāstra*, it says so, and it treats the text as evidence of the repertoire available to a Mauryan-adjacent court rather than as a record of what that court did.

The second is **retrofitting**: reading modern intelligence categories back onto ancient institutions. The vocabulary of "espionage," "counterintelligence" and "asset management" is useful for comparison and misleading if taken literally. The comparative scholarship is explicit that it seeks "both universal principles—such as verification, adaptation, and strategic use of information—and context-specific practices shaped by geography, political scale, and cultural norms" ([Robin, 2025](#)). That is the correct register: universal functions, local forms.

3. The Sources and Their Standing

The epigraphic corpus. The fourteen Major Rock Edicts, the Pillar Edicts, the Minor Rock and Minor Pillar Edicts, and the Separate Edicts of Kalinga constitute the only contemporary documentation emanating from the Mauryan court. They throw "light upon the Asoka's administration, international relations, and law and order systems of his empire" ([-, 2024](#)). Their evidentiary value here is specific: they are the only source in which the Mauryan state describes its own reporting arrangement and names its own officers.

The *Arthaśāstra*. The principal Indian textual source on statecraft and the appropriate frame for the period: the study of Mauryan socio-economic structures contrasts "foreign narratives" such as Megasthenes' *Indica* with "indigenous sources like Kautilya's Arthashastra and Ashokan edicts" that "provide a more systematic and state-driven account of governance, taxation, public welfare, and military strategy" ([Suman, 2025](#)). Its treatment of trade is dispersed across four areas: "the treasury and its need for luxury goods"; "military needs: horses and elephants"; "developing and guarding land and water routes and shipping"; and "duties and taxes on imported goods" ([Olivelle, 2020](#)). Its date and unity are contested, and Section 2.3 has stated the consequence.

Megasthenes' *Indica*. The only external contemporary testimony, surviving only in fragments: "the original work did not survive but certain parts are quoted in other works, including those of Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Arrian, and Pliny, and others are available in fragments," with "many factual inaccuracies, with fantastic descriptions of one-horned horses with heads like those of deer and huge snakes" ([Ghosh, 2021](#)). Megasthenes was ambassador to "the court of Candragupta Maurya in Pataliputra" and knew India "better than any other Greek" ([Stoneman, 2019](#)), but his limitations are recorded as "cultural biases, misinterpretations, and a lack of access to rural life" ([Jansari, 2020](#)).

The Buddhist literary tradition. The *Aśokāvadāna* and the Pāli *vaṃsa* literature supply the narrative material on the accession struggle, the Taxila episode, the Third Council and the missions ([Tambiah, 1976](#))([Lanh, 2025](#)). It is used here as tradition, and Section 7.3 states precisely what it can and cannot bear.

Recent scholarship. The comparative reconstruction of ancient intelligence systems ([Robin, 2025](#))([Robin, 2025](#)); the descriptive and formal treatments of the *Arthaśāstra*'s espionage provisions ([Sumaryani, 2021](#))([Prabhu & Dwivedi, 2015](#))([Kamat & Kamat, 2025](#))([Kamat, 2025](#)); the structural estimation of Mauryan monitoring frictions ([Kamat, 2025](#)); and the comparative study of Roman counterintelligence ([Spiridonov, 2025](#)) together constitute the modern apparatus on which this paper draws.

4. The *Arthaśāstra*: The Architecture of Secret Activity

4.1 *Samstha* and *Sañcāra*: The Two Modes

The *Arthaśāstra*'s intelligence provisions are organised around a distinction reported with precision in the scholarship: "Intelligence activity was directly under the authority of the ruler with the formation of secret service organizations, through the recruitment of secret agents from all groups and the deployment of secret agents in two basic groups (*samstha* and *samchār*)" ([Sumaryani, 2021](#)).

The two categories correspond to two operational modes: agents established in place, with an ostensible occupation, and agents in motion between places. The distinction defines the system's two simultaneous requirements — coverage of fixed points and circulation between them — and it is the *Arthaśāstra*'s recognition that a network which only sits is blind to movement, while a network which only moves has no purchase anywhere.

4.2 The Four Fields and the Purpose of Dispersal

The purpose is stated with equal precision: "The method of spreading secret agents in Arthasastra aims for early detection in one's own country, an enemy country, a friendly country, and a neutral country to find out the strengths and weaknesses of each element of the country" ([Sumaryani, 2021](#)).

The four concentric fields are the structural fact most relevant to a study of imperial control. The first field is the king's own territory. The Mauryan intelligence model, as the text presents it, is therefore not primarily a foreign service with domestic extensions but a **domestic service with foreign extensions** — and that is exactly what the problem of holding a vast, recently conquered and internally diverse territory requires.

The Indian-language scholarship on the Mauryan secret service states the same requirement in administrative terms: for the good governance of the Magadha empire, "from the Himalayas in the north and the Hindukush mountain in the west to the sea," it was necessary that "its amatya, ministers, officials, pur-janapad and generals... keep a close watch on their activities" and that the centre "get regular information's about... end border states," with Kauṭilya "successfully us[ing] the spies to guide the victory

of the mighty king Chandragupta," a precedent that served "later Mauryan king[s] and also... the modern nation-states" (Kumar, 2014).

4.3 The Permanent Analytical Wing and the Eighteen Officials

The placement provisions are reported in detail. The advice attributed to Kauṭilya is that "No enemy shall know his secrets. He shall, however, know all his enemy's weaknesses. Like a tortoise, he shall draw in any limb of his that is exposed," and that a king "shall have his own set of spies, all quick in their work, in the courts of the enemy, the ally, the Middle, and the Neutral kings to spy on the kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials," adding that "He shall always station envoys and clandestine agents in all states of the circle. These shall cultivate those acting against the interests of the conqueror and, while maintaining their own secrecy, destroy repeatedly such inimical persons" (Sihag, 2017).

Three features deserve isolation.

The target set includes officials, not only rulers. The agents are to observe "the kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials" (Sihag, 2017). A system designed to report on a bureaucracy is a system designed for administrative intelligence, not diplomatic gossip.

The functions include cultivation as well as observation. The agents "shall cultivate those acting against the interests of the conqueror" (Sihag, 2017) — recruitment and asset management within the target state, not merely reporting on it.

The institution is permanent and analytical. The recommendation is "to establish a permanent wing for collection and analysis of latest information" (Sihag, 2017). The distinction between collection and analysis is the distinction between a network and a service.

4.4 Verification: Compartmentalisation and the Safety Elbow

The most consequential structural feature is the treatment of the reliability problem. "Kauṭilya's Arthashastra (c. 300 BCE) prescribes compartmentalised spies whose reports require multi-source cross-verification" (Kamat, 2025).

Compartmentalisation and cross-verification are defences against two distinct threats: the first limits what a compromised agent can reveal, the second addresses the fact that agents have interests of their own and that a single report is therefore not evidence.

The formal reconstruction of this protocol reports its results in exact terms. "In a frictionless benchmark, $n=4$ minimises expected loss. Under Mauryan conditions, high coordination friction ($\gamma=15$), non-negligible collusion ($\rho=0.1$), and structural labour market dualism over threat priors and administrative costs... the minimax criterion (minimising worst-case loss over plausible ranges) yield $n=3$ as the robust optimum, termed the Safety Elbow. This small- n equilibrium hedges against unobservable structural features, including labour market dualism with an inelastic elite pool." The protocol is adaptive: "Elevated threat priors in crises ($\pi=0.3$) shift the robust optimum toward $n=2$. Modern digital regimes, with near-zero frictions, support larger networks." The conclusion is that "the regimes highlight how ancient institutions achieved robustness under severe informational constraints" (Kamat, 2025).

Why this matters. The formal result demonstrates that the *Arthasāstra*'s small agent-numbers were not a primitive deficiency but a rational response to conditions. Where coordination is costly and collusion plausible, fewer independent sources is better than more. The Mauryan state was information-poor by necessity, and its design was an adaptation to that poverty.

The companion study extends the same logic to the empire's fiscal architecture, recovering the monitoring-cost parameter through simulated method of moments and finding that "the distinctive Mauryan choices: a fixed one-sixth tax share and an extreme 800:1 wage ratio between senior councillors and junior clerks,

arise endogenously from high geographic dispersion (average oversight distance ≈ 850 km) combined with substantial output volatility ($\sigma\theta \approx 0.31$)," with counterfactual simulations indicating that "replacing Mauryan direct administration with Roman-style tax farming would have shortened imperial survival by roughly 45 years" (Kamat, 2025). A state that pays its senior councillors eight hundred times what it pays its junior clerks is a state purchasing loyalty at the top because it cannot monitor performance at the bottom. That is an intelligence finding expressed as a salary schedule.

4.5 The Repertoire of Covert Action

The *Arthaśāstra* does not confine itself to information. The scholarship records its operational repertoire in detail.

Assassination. "Kautilya prescribed the use of any possible means to assassinate an enemy king—drown him, burn him with fire, suffocate him with smoke, or even use crocodiles as assassins, not to mention employing women and children as poison-givers," tactics that "contrasted the prescriptions laid down in the Dharmasutras where the authors directed that a king should not 'strike with barbed or poisoned weapons'" (Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020). The comparison with the *Laws of Manu* is drawn in the same literature: "Fighting in battle, [the king] should not kill his enemies with weapons that are concealed, barbed, or smeared with poison or whose points blaze with fire" — and the observation that "Spies were common in Indian history, but not spies who assassinated enemy officials and started quarrels among enemy leaders" (Boesche, 2003).

The engineering of internal quarrels. "Aside from assassination, another method used to defeat an enemy without full-scale battle was to arrange for the enemy to quarrel and fight among itself. Kautilya believed that the promise of power has the potential to ignite quarrels among high officers or officials. Therefore, as a means to acquire greater power he discusses the need and way to employ spies and secret agents" (Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020). The scholarship records the technique in operation in the text: "an elaborate account is provided in one of the passages of the Arthashastra, in which Kautilya details on how one should arrange for a secret agent, disguised as an astrologer, to tell a high officer that he has all the marks of a king, and similarly arrange for a female secret agent, the wife of this officer, to complain that the king wants to keep her in his harem. A third secret agent who is a cook or a waiter should lie, saying that the king has ordered him or her to poison the high officer" (Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020).

Disinformation. "Another military tactic that Kautilya praised was what we now call disinformation or propaganda designed to demoralize or frighten enemy soldiers. For example, secret agents should appear as messengers to troops saying, 'Your fort has been burnt down or captured; a revolt by a member of your family has broken out; or, your enemy or a forest chief—'" (Boesche, 2003).

This repertoire is important to the paper's three cases, and its evidentiary status must be stated precisely. It is evidence of what a Mauryan-adjacent court *could* have done. It is not evidence that it did any of it. Sections 7 to 9 apply it accordingly.

4.6 The Economic Intelligence Function

One further aspect of the *Arthaśāstra* bears on the argument, because it shows that the information the state sought was not only political. The text's treatment of customs is an exercise in eliciting truthful disclosure: the scholarship analyses "an auction-like procedure described in the text" whose purpose is to address "the incentive for importers to undervalue their goods," the author "suggest[ing] the auction procedure and accompanying penalty payments to elicit truthful revelation of importers' valuations and to maximize customs levy collections," a comparison with "modern-day regulations intended to combat tax

evasion" yielding "early evidence of the use of sophisticated mechanisms to elicit truthful value revelation" (Viswanath, 2024).

The same concern appears in the list of revenue sources. The Collector is instructed to oversee "fort, province, pit mine, irrigation works, forest, herd, and trade route," and among the sources constituting "province" are "agriculture, share, tribute, tax, trader, river warden, ferry, boat, port, pasture, road toll, land survey, and capture of thieves" (Reden, 2019). *River warden, ferry, boat, port, road toll* — the fiscal apparatus and the communications apparatus are the same apparatus, and both require knowing who is moving what, where, and with whose permission.

5. The Communications System

An information system requires carriage. This section reconstructs the four elements the user's framing identifies — roads, ports, water navigation, and cavalry — and shows that each served both commerce and intelligence.

5.1 Roads

The named routes. "Such corridors of travel and communication appear in texts from the sixth to fifth centuries onward. Of interest here are the Uttarāpatha ('north-ward route') and the Dakṣiṇāpatha ('southward route'). The term Uttarāpatha is found in one of the earliest surviving Sanskrit grammatical texts, Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, dated between the fifth and fourth centuries," and "the networking routes are said to have filled important roles for administrative purposes. They were hubs, semiautonomous regional centers, and clusters of cultic activities]" (Reden, 2019).

The royal road and its construction. Megasthenes "describes royal roads with pillars to mark distances and byroads at every 10 stadia, extending from Susa in Iran to Palibothra under the Mauryas even before Aśoka. The two Aramaic edicts of Aśoka from Laghman also mention the term KRPTY (*karapathi*), which is considered to mean 'royal road'" (Dwivedi, 2021). The same study records the physical dimensions: "At Ujjain, a road about 8 m wide has been reported. This is close to the normative guideline (four *daṇḍa* = 7.28 m wide) for the most common types of roads (on dikes, in forests, and in cities), though texts also mention different sizes for other types of roads. The royal highways (*rājamārga*) and roads (*patha*) leading to the capital, provinces, military encampments, cemeteries, and villages experiencing heavy footfall and processions are the broadest (eight *daṇḍa* = 14.56 m wide)" (Dwivedi, 2021).

The Achaemenid model and the northern highway. "The Maurya have in fact improved, if not constructed, a set of roads, one of which, called 'royal', between Taxila and Patna, follows the Achaemenid model. According to Eratosthenes, it runs along the Himalayan border for ten thousand stadia and leads, on the one hand toward the mouth of the Ganges, and on the other toward Bactriana and Hecatompylos. It is not the only developed communication route, and this despite geographical difficulties" (Laizet, 2021).

The measured itinerary. The Greek measurement of the road is itself an act of intelligence: Megasthenes, "on behalf of Seleucus, reconnoitred and measured in *schoeni* the Royal Highway or *basilike hodos* in Sanskrit *rajavithi* which crossed India from west to east, linking the Hydaspes to the mouths of the Ganges," and Pliny "kept the topographical record compiled by Megasthenes and added to it corrections supplied later by other bematists," the itinerary running from the Hypasis to the River Sydrus, 169,000 paces, and onward through named stages to Palibothra and the mouth of the Ganges (Werner, 1988). The same source records that "Already by the time of the Mauryas, a great communication artery connected

Taxila to Tamralipti, present-day Tamluk on the east coast, by way of Mathurā, Kauśāmbi and Pataliputra" (Werner, 1988).

What the roads were for. The scholarship on the road system draws the administrative conclusion: the routes "facilitated long-distance journeys through networks of roads toward northerly regions with multiple functions and associations depending on geographical contexts," and "filled important roles for administrative purposes" (Reden, 2019). A road with distance pillars every Stadion and byroads every ten stadia is a road built to a specification; a specification implies a schedule; a schedule implies reports. The Mauryan road was an instrument of government before it was an instrument of trade, and it served both because it served the movement of information.

5.2 Water Navigation

State supervision of vessels and ferries. "The Arthaśāstra also mentions supervision of seafaring vessels, and ferries at river mouths and across natural and artificial lakes" (Dwivedi, 2021). The same source records the practice in operation: "The *Periplus* refers to local fishermen in the king's service guiding seagoing vessels through the narrow delta by the port of Barygaza and up the river to the city," and at Pattanam "remains of a platform made of lateritic rubble and lime with brick lining at the water level have been interpreted as an indicator of a wharf," perhaps "a ferry site from where the boats might have transferred cargos from the ships moored offshore" (Dwivedi, 2021).

The navarch. The clearest statement of a Mauryan maritime administration is the Greek testimony as analysed in the French scholarship: the port cities of Sopara on the west coast and Tamralipti at the mouth of the Ganges "are the manifest sign of the rise of maritime routes," and in this domain as in others "the Mauryan administration intervenes through its navarch 'who rents, whether to travellers or to sea traders, the vessels they need,'" while "weights and measures are standardized" and "the coinage, of the punch-marked silver type, is unified, at least attempted to be" (Laizet, 2021).

The navarch is the single most important figure in this section. An officer who rents state vessels to travellers and merchants is, by the nature of the function, an officer who knows who is travelling, where, with what cargo, and on whose authority. The port administration is a registry. That is an intelligence function conducted as a commercial service — and it is the maritime counterpart of the road toll and the river warden on the *Arthaśāstra*'s revenue list (Reden, 2019).

Watercraft and their uses. "According to Bhoja's *Yuktikalpataru*, watercraft were divided into two main categories — '*Samanya*' (boats used for river routes) and '*Vishesha*' (sea-going vessels)," with references in the *Periplus* to "'Eppaga' and 'Kotumba'," a boat with a tripod mast and a steering oar at the stern discovered at Chandraketugarh near Kolkata, and in the Ajanta paintings "a representation of a large sea-going ship with three masts," built principally of wood, "especially Indian teak" (Kundu, 2025). The same study records the crucial point for this paper: "The watercraft were mainly used for trade. However, at times they were also involved in military activities" (Kundu, 2025). And it records the social organisation of maritime movement — merchants undertaking sea voyages "aboard ocean-going vessels... identified as *potavanik* and were also referred to as *sanyatrik*," with the capital-intensive ship-owning merchants known in Sanskrit sources as *naivittika* (Kundu, 2025). A class of identifiable, registered, capital-holding maritime operators is a class that a state can tax, license, and question.

5.3 Ports

The estuary principle. "Most of the important ancient ports were located at the mouth of river estuaries rather than on the coast directly. The best examples are Barbarikon on the Indus River, Barygaza in the estuary of the Narmada River, Muziris at the Periyar River, Poompuhar at the Kaveri Delta, Tamralipti at

the mouth of the Ganga River, Godavaya at the delta of Walawe Ganga, among many others," and "the location of ports and harbors on riverine routes makes them part of a history of growing connectivity" (Dwivedi, 2021). The consequence for intelligence is direct: a port at a river mouth controls a *route*, not merely a harbour, and therefore sees both the maritime and the inland traffic of its hinterland.

The western coast. The major seaports enumerated from the *Periplus*, Ptolemy and Indian literary sources include "Barygaza, Ashtacampra, Gundigar, Kammoni, Khambhat, Bardaxema, Suparaka, Calliena, Semylla, Sanjan, Naura, Tyndis, Muziris, Nelcynda and other seaports," with the "over 7500 km-long coastline of India... well known for its seaports located at river mouths or outlets to the sea," and archaeological investigation at many of these port towns yielding "material evidence exhibiting their dominant role in transoceanic trade and commerce" (Dayalan, 2019).

Kalinga's maritime economy. The coastal economy of the region Aśoka conquered is separately documented: "Since the heydays of the Magadha Empire in the pre-Christian era, Kalinga was a prosperous maritime state. During the reign of Ashoka, the great Magadha emperor in Magadha was away from the coast and could be reached only through the lower Hooghly River. The old ports of Odisha could access Tamralipti through coasting voyages for trading. These voyages were never far from the coast and were along sandy shores that could be crossed in row boats. Oar poles were used to constantly check the depths, since the depths were liable to constant changes due to heavy sedimentation from the many mouths of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers" (Arunachalam, 2025).

This passage does double work. It establishes Kalinga as a maritime polity with a developed coasting trade to Tamralipti, and it describes the navigational technique — sounding with oar poles, following sandy shores — of the very waters whose control a conquest would secure. It is the strongest available support for the proposition that the Kalinga campaign had a maritime dimension, and Section 9.3 states precisely what that support does and does not amount to.

5.4 Cavalry and the Army as an Instrument of Information

The fourfold army. "The most common organizational types were *caturanga-bala* and *caturang-vāhini*, which referred to the traditional fourfold division of the army, including infantry, chariots, cavalry, and elephant corps. Moreover, in special instances, we also come across references to the 'six-fold' and 'eight-fold' divisions of the army. The six-fold army includes 'treasure' (*koṣa*) and 'machines' (*yantra*). The 'eight-fold' army is more elaborate, as it also has officers, spies, military guides, and workmen like mechanics, tunnel makers, bridge builders, etc." (Dwivedi, 2021).

The eight-fold army is the decisive datum in this section. A formation whose enumerated constituents include *spies* alongside engineers and bridge-builders is an army organised as an information-gathering body as well as a striking force. The spies are not an attachment to the army; they are one of its listed divisions.

The specialist officers. "The KA refers to officers of horses, elephants, chariots, and infantry (*aśvādhyakṣa*, *hastyadhyakṣa*, *rathādhyakṣa*, and *pattyadhyakṣa*)" (Reden, 2019). The existence of a superintendent of horses as a distinct office reflects the fact that the mounted arm was the state's fastest means of communication as well as its shock arm — and that horses, unlike infantry, were an imported and therefore strategic commodity. The *Arthaśāstra*'s treatment of trade lists "military needs: horses and elephants" as one of its four principal areas of commercial concern (Olivelle, 2020), and the scholarship records that "specialized units required not only equipping the soldiers with weapons and armour, but also with the acquisition and training of horses and elephants for warfare" (Dwivedi, 2021). A state that must

import its cavalry horses must know where they come from, who is selling them, and whether a rival is buying them first.

The scale. The army's size is reported from the Greek side: "Pliny—borrowing from Megasthenes, the ambassador of Seleucus to Chandragupta—wrote that Chandragupta's army totalled about six hundred thousand infantry, thirty thousand cavalry, eight thousand chariots, and nine thousand elephants" (Boesche, 2003). The modern comparative study reports the same figures — "approximately 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9,000 war elephants, and 8,000 chariots" — and argues that "the Mauryan state represented a structurally superior imperial formation in terms of demographic base, replenishment capacity, and territorial consolidation" (Dubey, 2026).

Why scale bears on intelligence. Thirty thousand cavalry is not merely a battlefield asset; it is a courier capacity. The formal study's finding that the empire's average oversight distance was approximately 850 km (Kamat, 2025) defines the problem that mounted messengers solve. A mounted relay is the only pre-modern technology that reduces that distance to days rather than weeks, and a state that maintains thirty thousand horses has, by that fact alone, the physical means of a reporting system. The cavalry is the *hardware* of the intelligence system described in the next section, and this is the sense in which the two are not separable subjects.

The army's administrative integration. The threefold division of Mauryan administration recorded in the scholarship places the military alongside the civil and municipal functions: "One managed the affairs of villages, ensuring irrigation, recording land ownership, monitoring tools supply, enforcing hunting, wood products, and forest-related laws, and settling disputes. Another administrative structure managed city affairs, including all matters related to trade, merchant activity, visits of foreigners, harbors, roads, temples, markets, and industries. They also collected taxes and ensured standardized weights and measures. The third administrative body overlooked the military, its training, its weapons supply, and the needs of the soldiers" (Shukla, 2021).

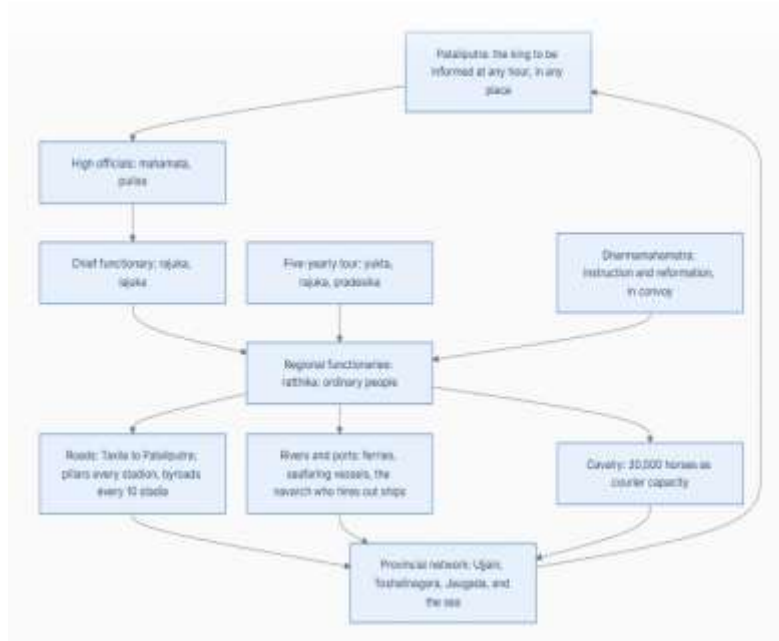
The city administration is an intelligence organ. "Visits of foreigners, harbours, roads" (Shukla, 2021) — a municipal office charged with monitoring the movement of foreigners, the operation of harbours and the condition of roads is, whatever else it is, a surveillance office. And "visits of foreigners" is the functional ancestor of every port-of-entry registry in administrative history. The municipal administration of the Mauryan city performed, as routine civil business, the tasks that the *Arthaśāstra* assigns to intelligence agents in foreign territory.

5.5 The Provincial Network

The internal communications network is documented epigraphically. "It is also clearly evident from the Edict that there was regular and non-stop communication between Pataliputra (imperial capital) with Ujjain and Toshalinagara (provincial headquarters) as the Mauryan emperor was concerned about the people of the war-ravaged Kalinga and was sending regular convoys of officials like Dharmamahamatras to Toshalinagar for better administration and reformation. Toshalinagara was also connected with its second provincial capital located at Khapingala hill areas at Jaugada (where another Ashokan Edict has been located). All these areas were well connected with the seacoast and other parts of the Continent" (Tripathy, 2019).

Three features are decisive. **The communication is described as regular and non-stop** — a standing flow, not a crisis channel. **The traffic includes officials in convoy**, the *dharmamahāmātras* moving to a provincial headquarters "for better administration and reformation" (Tripathy, 2019). And **the network is connected to the sea**: the provincial capitals were "well connected with the seacoast and other parts of

the Continent" (Tripathy, 2019). The road, the river and the port are one system, and the officials who used it were both



6. The Epigraphic Evidence for Reporting, Command and Inspection

6.1 Rock Edict VI: The King's Ear

The inscriptions contain the state's own account of its reporting arrangement, and it is specific. "The edict proclaims that Aśoka initiated the arrangement by which he was to be informed of affairs of the people at any time of the day, irrespective of where he was," and "the edict lists issues to be reported immediately to the king with no delay" (Reden, 2019). The passage and its apparatus are reproduced in the source-critical treatment of Indic sources for the same period (Dwivedi, 2019).

Two features should be isolated. **The arrangement is presented as an innovation** — not inherited but initiated (Reden, 2019) — and a claim of innovation in a public inscription is a claim the officials who operated the system could check. **The requirement is continuous and location-independent**: "at any time of the day, irrespective of where he was" (Reden, 2019). A reporting obligation of that kind presupposes both a corps of reporters and a transport capacity capable of delivering them, which returns the argument to Sections 5.1 and 5.4.

6.2 The Chain of Command

The clearest epigraphic statement of the administrative hierarchy is documented in the analysis of the Minor Rock Edicts, which records that "There is constant reference in the text to the different levels of hierarchy the royal command must pass through in order to reach its final destination. It appears that the command is addressed directly to the high officials (*mahāmāta*, *pulisa*) who are to hand it over to the chief functionary (*rajūka*, *lajūka*)," and that it is "this chief functionary, often referred to in Aśoka's Major Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts, who is entrusted with the task of delivering the message to the ordinary people and the regional functionaries (*rathika*)" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

The chain therefore runs: king → high officials → chief functionary → ordinary people and regional functionaries. Three observations follow. **The hierarchy is documented, not inferred**, the officers being

named in the edicts themselves. **The command is addressed to officials who transmit**, and the text specifies "the persons to whom these precepts are intended and the circumstances under which they are to be performed" — a level of specification for which, as the study notes, "commentators have failed to offer a satisfactory explanation" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), which is itself evidence that the text was written for operators rather than for posterity. And **the two directions of flow are the same channel**: if the command descends through the *rajūka* to the *raṭhika*, the reports of the *raṭhika* ascend the same path. The infrastructure of dissemination is the infrastructure of reporting.

6.3 The *Dharmamahāmātra* and the Five-Yearly Cycle

The specialised officers of the *dhamma* programme are documented as an institution. The king "emphasises his manifold proclamations of dharma and the activities of his officials in order to distribute and to explain it, including instruction in the dharma (*dhammānusāthi*, Skt. *dharmānuśāsti*)," and "in this context, the text also refers to the appointment of special officers responsible for the dharma (Skt. *dharmamahāmātra*)" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024). Further, "the text of the RE 3 shows that these activities and dharma instructions (Skt. *dharmānuśāsti*) included inspection tours of officials that took place every five years" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

The reconstructed text in the language of Pataliputra specifies the officers: *kaṃmane* — "Everywhere in the country my [officials, namely] the *yuktas*, the *rājūka* and the *prādeśika* shall go out on a tour every five years for this purpose, [namely] for the instruction in the dharma and also for other work" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024). The synoptic text names the *dharmayātrā* and its content: *samana-bambhanānaṃ dasane ca dāne ca vuḍḍhānaṃ dasane ca hilaṃnapaṭivīdhāne ca jānapadasa janasa dasane dhammānu-sāthi ca dhammapalipuchā ca* — "seeing and giving to ascetics and brahmins, seeing and supporting the aged, seeing the people of the countryside, instruction in the dharma and interrogation regarding the dharma" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

The inspection cycle is the institutional core of the paper's argument. A five-yearly tour of officials by officials is an audit cycle. It presupposes records to audit, a standard against which performance can be measured, and a reporting obligation whose fulfilment can be checked. The *dharmamahāmātra* is best understood not as a moral instructor alone but as an **inspector with a dhamma brief** — and the *dharmaparipṛcchā*, "interrogation regarding the dharma" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), is the point at which dissemination and reporting become the same activity.

The Buddhist study of Aśokan state administration reaches a compatible conclusion: the state "had to manage the public services in order that the people in the state would not be foolish, would not assemble for unlawful purposes, would not suffer physically and mentally by being exploited by other people and to protect human beings and animals," and "the government officials had to perform their duties as assigned by their respective government offices and their works for the government as the whole were to teach Dhamma for sustaining peace and good living of the people" (Nakkarnrien, 2018). "Would not assemble for unlawful purposes" is a surveillance objective stated as a welfare objective, and the fusion of the two is characteristic of the Aśokan self-presentation.

6.4 The Separate Edicts of Kalinga

One further epigraphic fact belongs in this section because it links the machinery directly to the conquered province. "These inspection tours in a five-years cycle are also referred to in the SepE 2 from Kalinga (see Schneider 1978, 93–94)" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

The Separate Edicts are the Kalinga recension of the Aśokan programme, and their content is administrative: the register of official activity preserved at Dhauli specifies "visiting and offering to

śramaṇas [i.e. ascetics] and Brahmins, visiting of old people and supporting [them] with gold, visiting the people of the countryside, and [providing them with] instruction in the dharma, and a corresponding interrogation about the dharma" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

Two points follow. **Kalinga was governed under a special regime**, its edicts issued separately from the main corpus and its administration described in its own terms. And **the inspection cycle applied there specifically** — the five-yearly tour is referred to in the Kalinga Separate Edicts themselves (Michel & Friedrich, 2024). A conquered province whose administration is restructured, whose officials are given a written register of duties, and which is subjected to a documented five-yearly inspection is a province under a reporting obligation. That is the closest the epigraphic record comes to describing the apparatus of control in operation, and it comes from Kalinga.

7. Case One: The Revolt at Taxila

7.1 The Event and Its Evidentiary Status

The revolt at Taxila is the first of the three episodes, and it is the one for which the tradition is most nearly consistent. The scholarship on Aśoka's early life records that "Aśoka probably realised his potentialities as a ruler through his ability in handling the revolt at Taxila and his successful viceroyalty at Ujjain, which probably determined him to make an attempt for the throne" (Thapar, 2012).

The evidentiary status must be stated at once. **The Taxila revolt is not recorded in any Aśokan edict.** It is known from the Buddhist literary tradition, which the scholarship describes as containing "various versions of the life of Aśoka which were adapted to suit religious purposes" (Thapar, 2012). The event is therefore **tradition, not attestation** — and the same study's formulation is careful in exactly the right way: Aśoka "probably" realised his potentialities, and this "probably" determined his attempt on the throne (Thapar, 2012). Two probabilities, not a documented sequence.

7.2 What the Episode Corroborates

Granted that caution, the episode corroborates the paper's hypothesis in three ways, and they should be distinguished from one another.

It establishes that Taxila required management. Taxila was not a secure possession but a place that revolted. Its standing as a northern capital whose loyalty could not be assumed is independently visible in the later record: "The death of the Buddhist ruler Aśoka was one of the most important moments of Taxila, politically and economically. During the subsequent institutional vacuum, the city ended up in the hands of local rulers strongly influenced by trade guilds. The power of the guilds is a revolution that will leave a mark in Taxila, as monetary findings in the city amply demonstrate. The guilds, associations of craftsmen and traders headed by a chief, once having increased their power and influence, began to issue their own coins, oblong in shape and with inscriptions bearing *Negamā* ('guild') or *Pamcanekame* ('five guilds')" (Magnani, 2024). A city whose guilds issued their own coinage in the vacuum following Aśoka's death was a city with an autonomous economic and political capacity. Such a city could revolt, and did (Thapar, 2012)(Magnani, 2024).

It establishes that the resolution was administrative as well as military. Aśoka's success at Taxila is described as his "ability in handling the revolt," and it is placed alongside "his successful viceroyalty at Ujjain" (Thapar, 2012) — that is, alongside an administrative tenure. Handling a revolt at a distant provincial capital and administering a province are both, in the first instance, information problems: knowing who is disaffected, which guild or family is leading, what the grievance is, and what concession

would settle it. The scholarship's account does not describe the method, and this paper does not supply one.

It establishes a pattern of princely postings. The combination of Taxila and Ujjain places the future emperor successively at a northern frontier capital and at a western provincial headquarters (Thapar, 2012). Whatever else princely viceroyalty was for, it was the mechanism by which the court obtained knowledge of its provinces — and by which the provinces obtained a stake in the succession.

7.3 The Correlation

The correlation here runs as follows. **Attested:** that Aśoka held postings at Taxila and Ujjain and later sought the throne (Thapar, 2012); that Taxila's loyalty was contingent and that its guilds were powerful enough to issue coin after Aśoka's death (Magnani, 2024). **Inferred:** that the handling of a revolt at a provincial capital required local information of a kind a central court could not obtain by correspondence alone; and that the *Arthaśāstra*'s specification of agents "in one's own country" as the first field of detection (Sumaryani, 2021) describes precisely the capability that such an episode requires.

Hypothetical: that Aśoka used agents of the *saṁstha* type during his Taxila posting. No source suggests it, and the paper advances it only to mark the boundary of what can be claimed.

8. Case Two: The Capture of the Throne at Pataliputra

8.1 The Succession Struggle

The second episode is the accession, and it is the one in which the intelligence requirement is most acute, because a contested succession is a contest in which information is the decisive weapon.

The scholarship is explicit that Aśoka was not the heir: the chapter on his early life "discusses the controversy concerning his actual accession given the general agreement that Aśoka was not the crown prince, and that there was a struggle among the princes for the throne" (Thapar, 2012). The narrative account records the sequel: "At the death of Bindusara in about 273, Asoka immediately became involved in an unclear succession dispute, resolved only when he raised an army against, and possibly killed, his brother Sumana-Susima" (Testa, 2014). The same source records that Aśoka "strengthened his empire's administration and commerce" as the successor of a grandfather who had achieved unification and a father about whom "we know little" (Testa, 2014), while the political-theory literature records the transmission of the empire intact: "Chandragupta Maurya consolidated an empire and passed it down intact to his son Bindusara, about whom we know little, and to his grandson Ashoka" (Boesche, 2003). The recent survey of the literary tradition likewise notes "differing narratives regarding his ascension to the Mauryan throne" (Phadnis, 2025).

The Aśokāvadāna's version is cast as prophecy and belongs to a different genre. The legend of the donation of dirt records the Buddha's prediction: "Because of that meritorious deed, Ānanda, one hundred years after the Tathāgata has attained parinirvāṇa, that boy will become a king named Aśoka in the city of Pataliputra. He will be a righteous *dharmarāja*, a *cakravartin* who rules over one of the four continents, and he will distribute my bodily relics far and wide and build eight-four thousand *dharmarājikās*" (Chryssides, 2004). The boy's vow is recorded as: "By this root of good merit, I would become king and, after placing the earth under a single umbrella of sovereignty, I would pay homage to the Blessed Buddha" (Chryssides, 2004). The textual scholarship analyses the same vow in its Sanskrit form — the future *cakravartin* will be "king of the earth under one parasol" (*ekachatrāyām pṛthivyām rājā syām*) (Vermeersch, 2004) — and notes that the Aśokāvadāna's peculiarity is that "a vow (*praṇidhāna*) is taken not to enter a religious career... but to become a 'universal monarch' (*cakravartin*)" (Vermeersch, 2004).

Two features of this material are worth extracting, precisely because it is legend. **The tradition's own image of Mauryan empire is "the earth under a single umbrella"** (Chryssides, 2004)(Vermeersch, 2004) — a formulation of unity as an administrative fact, and one that recurs in the imagery of the period. **And the tradition assigns to the accession a ministerial instrument:** by the revelations of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja later in the *Aśokāvadāna*, "it becomes clear that Vijaya was supposed to be Aśoka's future minister Rādhagupta" (Chryssides, 2004) — that is, the companion of Aśoka's childhood in the legend is the minister of his reign, a narrative encoding of the fact that a succession is won by a combination of a claimant and an apparatus.

The study of Aśoka's reign in the *avadāna* tradition also preserves the dichotomy within his own figure: the tradition distinguishes *Caṇḍāśoka*, "Aśoka the Fierce," from the converted Aśoka, and represents the dichotomy in the figure of his brother *Vitaśoka*, "who has to be converted from his belief in heretic teachings to the Buddhist Dharma by Aśoka" (Vermeersch, 2004). A reign that begins with a killing and is retrospectively divided into a fierce phase and a dharmic phase is a reign whose founding act required justification.

8.2 Why a Succession Struggle Requires an Intelligence Apparatus

The logic is not speculative; it is the logic of the *Arthaśāstra* itself, and it applies to a contested accession with unusual force.

A claimant who is not the crown prince (Thapar, 2012) must know, before he moves, four things: which ministers and officers will support him; which will oppose him; which will remain neutral; and where the physical instruments of power — the treasury, the army, the gates — actually stand. The *Arthaśāstra*'s specification of agents stationed "in the courts of the enemy, the ally, the Middle, and the Neutral kings" (Sihag, 2017) is a foreign-policy analogue of exactly this domestic requirement; and its prescription that a king "shall have his own set of spies, all quick in their work... to spy on the kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials" (Sihag, 2017) describes a capability that, applied to one's own court, is the capability a claimant needs.

The repertoire of Section 4.5 is even more directly apposite. A struggle among princes is a struggle among "high officers or officials" whose allegiance can be shifted, and the *Arthaśāstra* prescribes precisely the technique of "arrang[ing] for the enemy to quarrel and fight among itself," on the reasoning that "the promise of power has the potential to ignite quarrels among high officers or officials," implemented through agents posing as astrologers, as the wife of the target, and as a cook or waiter bearing a false report of a poisoning order (Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020).

The evidentiary position must again be stated plainly. **There is no evidence that any such technique was used in the Mauryan succession.** The *Arthaśāstra* is a treatise; the accession narrative is a Buddhist legend adapted to religious purposes (Thapar, 2012). What the correlation establishes is narrower and still significant: that the kind of event the tradition describes — a succession resolved by force and possibly by fratricide (Testa, 2014) — is an event whose outcome is determined by information about the allegiance of named individuals, and that a court which possessed the *Arthaśāstra*'s repertoire possessed the means of obtaining it.

8.3 The Correlation

Attested: that Aśoka was not the crown prince and that there was a struggle among the princes for the throne (Thapar, 2012); that the dispute was resolved when he "raised an army against, and possibly killed, his brother Sumana-Susima" (Testa, 2014); that Bindusara's reign is poorly documented (Boesche, 2003)(Testa, 2014). **Corroborated:** that the tradition's own image of Mauryan rule is sovereignty "under

a single umbrella" (Chryssides, 2004)(Vermeersch, 2004), and that the tradition pairs the claimant with a minister (Chryssides, 2004) — a pairing which, whatever its historicity, registers the dependence of a succession on an apparatus.

Inferred: that a contested accession among princes required knowledge of the allegiance of named officials and of the disposition of the instruments of power; and that the *Arthaśāstra*'s domestic-observation provisions (Sumaryani, 2021)(Sihag, 2017) describe the capability such an episode requires.

Hypothetical: that the Mauryan court maintained a standing domestic watch on the princes and the high officials during Bindusara's reign. The evidence is consistent with it; it does not establish it.

9. Case Three: Covert Action and the Conquest of Kalinga

9.1 The Record of the Event

Kalinga is the episode for which the outcome is best attested and the method least so, and it is therefore the case that most clearly demonstrates the difference between correlation and proof.

The event is epigraphic. Rock Edict XIII records the conquest and the remorse. The figures are recorded in the scholarship: "one of his inscriptions describes his regret at the huge death toll of 100,000 casualties and other suffering caused by his war of expansion in the Kalinga region (modern Orissa in eastern India)" (Bartles-Smith et al., 2020). The French scholarship reproduces the edict's own numbers: "Eight years after his consecration the king, friend of the gods, of friendly regard, conquered Kalinga. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were deported; one hundred thousand were killed there; several times that number perished. [...] For the conquest of an independent country is then murder, death or captivity for the people: a thought that the friend of the gods feels strongly, which weighs upon him" (Chassanite, 2015).

The event is also characterised in the secondary literature. "About 260, Asoka invaded Kalinga, a rebellious semitribal area on India's eastern coast, with a large army. Although the invasion was successful, Asoka was disgusted by the wholesale slaughter he witnessed" (Testa, 2014). The same body of scholarship records the transformation: "it was the conquest of Kalinga, seen as the bloodiest and most lethal, which left him shattered and transformed him from a fierce vengeful ruler to a peaceful and non-violent emperor" (Halasiddappa, 2019). And the economic-history literature records the consequence for policy: "Aśoka is also known to have added the Kalinga region to the Mauryan sphere of influence after a battle recorded in RE XIII, which expresses remorse for the losses suffered in war," in the context of the shift "from *bherighoṣa* to *dhammaghoṣa* — from announcements of war to propagation of dhamma — as declared in RE IV" (Reden, 2019).

9.2 Three Corroborating Features

Three features of the Kalinga record corroborate the paper's hypothesis, and they are of different strengths.

The description "rebellious." The secondary literature characterises Kalinga as "a rebellious semitribal area" (Testa, 2014). The adjective implies a prior relation — that Kalinga had been claimed, or had submitted, or had been within the Mauryan orbit and had thrown it off. If that is right, the conquest of Kalinga was not a first contact but the reassertion of a claim, and a reassertion of a claim presupposes knowledge of the territory and of the disposition of its chiefs. The word is used loosely in the literature and should not be pressed; but it is worth registering, because it is the only characterisation in the sources that bears on the question of prior intelligence.

The edicts of the conquered province are administrative. As Section 6.4 established, Kalinga received its own Separate Edicts, whose content is a register of official duties, and the five-yearly inspection cycle

is referred to in the Kalinga Separate Edicts themselves ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)). A province that is conquered, then given a special administrative regime, then subjected to a documented audit cycle, is a province whose integration was conducted as an administrative project — and administrative projects of that kind are conducted with reports.

The maritime dimension. Kalinga was "a prosperous maritime state" whose "old ports of Odisha could access Tamralipti through coasting voyages for trading," the voyages proceeding "along sandy shores that could be crossed in row boats," with oar poles used "to constantly check the depths, since the depths were liable to constant changes due to heavy sedimentation from the many mouths of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers" ([Arunachalam, 2025](#)). A maritime neighbour with its own port network, in a period when the Mauryan administration was operating a navarch who hired vessels to travellers and sea traders ([Laizet, 2021](#)) and when state officials supervised "seafaring vessels, and ferries at river mouths and across natural and artificial lakes" ([Dwivedi, 2021](#)), is a neighbour whose commercial and naval capacity was knowable, and whose control would matter.

9.3 What the Kalinga Record Does Not Support

This is the point at which the paper must be most careful, because the temptation to overreach is greatest. **No source describes covert action before or during the Kalinga campaign.** Rock Edict XIII records the conquest, the casualty figures and the remorse ([Bartles-Smith et al., 2020](#))([Chassanite, 2015](#)). It does not describe the method. No edict, no Greek fragment, and no Buddhist narrative in the material examined for this paper records the use of agents, disinformation, or the engineering of quarrels in Kalinga.

The *Arthaśāstra*'s repertoire is evidence of capability, not of use. The prescription of assassination, of the sowing of quarrels among high officers, and of demoralising disinformation ([Boesche, 2003](#))([Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020](#)) establishes what a Mauryan-adjacent court could have done. Section 4.5 has stated this, and the distinction must be held firmly: a treatise's prescriptions are not an administration's record.

The maritime argument is circumstantial. Kalinga's maritime prosperity ([Arunachalam, 2025](#)) and the Mauryan state's maritime administration ([Laizet, 2021](#))([Dwivedi, 2021](#)) establish that the two were engaged in the same commercial world. They do not establish that maritime rivalry caused the war, and the paper does not claim that it did. The conquest of a prosperous maritime neighbour by a power with an active maritime administration is a fact that invites the inference of commercial motive; it does not compel it.

The casualties prove nothing about method. The figures — 100,000 killed, 150,000 deported, "several times that number" perished ([Chassanite, 2015](#))([Bartles-Smith et al., 2020](#)) — attest the scale of the violence, not the means by which the campaign was prepared. A large army, which Aśoka had ([Boesche, 2003](#))([Dubey, 2026](#)), accounts for the outcome without requiring any intelligence explanation.

9.4 The Correlation, Stated Precisely

Attested: the conquest, its date, its casualty figures, and the remorse recorded in Rock Edict XIII ([Bartles-Smith et al., 2020](#))([Chassanite, 2015](#))([Reden, 2019](#)); Kalinga's status as a prosperous maritime state with a developed coasting trade ([Arunachalam, 2025](#)); the special administrative regime applied to Kalinga and the reference to the five-yearly inspection in its Separate Edicts ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)).

Corroborated: that the Mauryan state possessed both the repertoire of covert action ([Boesche, 2003](#))([Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020](#)) and the apparatus of maritime supervision ([Laizet, 2021](#))([Dwivedi, 2021](#)) that a campaign against a maritime neighbour would engage.

Inferred: that a campaign against a territory previously within or adjacent to the Mauryan orbit — if the characterisation "rebellious" is sound (Testa, 2014) — would have been preceded by the local knowledge that the *Arthaśāstra*'s first field of detection, "one's own country," is designed to supply (Sumaryani, 2021); and that the administrative reconstruction of Kalinga after the conquest, with its own edicts and its own inspection cycle (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), presupposes the reporting apparatus the epigraphic record describes.

Hypothetical: that covert action in the *Arthaśāstra*'s sense — agents in the enemy's counsels, the cultivation of disaffected officers, disinformation among the defending troops — was employed in preparation for the Kalinga campaign. This is a conjecture consistent with the evidence and supported by nothing more than consistency. It is advanced here to be tested and to be labelled, and it should not appear in any account of the war as though it were established.

10. The Edicts as Instruments of Integration

The inscriptions are not only evidence *about* the Mauryan information system; they were a functioning component of it, and the scholarship has said so in memorable terms.

"The identity cards of his empire." "The major rock edicts of the Ashoka are like the identity cards of his empire. These major rock edicts are distributed all over Indian subcontinent and can also be found in Afghanistan & Pakistan. Arguably these major rock edicts encapsulate the boundaries of ancient Mauryan Empire and found at those locations which are specifically chosen by King Ashoka for their construction. The location for the construction of these major rock edicts is arguably chosen on the basis of importance of the area, trade & population of that area" (–, 2024). The same study records that "Ashoka was the first king who has initiated a dialogue with his subjects by means of engraving such edicts on mighty rocks" (–, 2024).

Three implications follow. **The corpus maps the empire**, the distribution of find-spots encapsulating its boundaries. **The locations were chosen by criteria** — "importance of the area, trade & population" (–, 2024) — which is a siting policy, and a siting policy presupposes information about where trade and population were concentrated. The edicts are therefore not only outputs of the information system; their placement is an index of what the system knew.

A multilingual and multiscript message. The inscriptions are "dispersed across various locations in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, with notable findings in places like Kalsi, Sopara, Mount Girnar, Yerragudi, Dhauri, and Jaugada, composed in languages like Prakrit, Greek, and Aramaic, are preserved in various scripts such as Brāhmī, Kharosthi, Greek, Aramaic, and bilingual Greek-Aramaic," the king having "utilized inscriptions as a means to disseminate his message of peace and harmony," the purpose being "to establish the Dhamma or righteousness teachings to the society" (Medhācitto et al., 2024). A message issued in Prakrit, Greek and Aramaic in four scripts is a message designed for a multi-ethnic empire — and the choice of languages is itself an act of intelligence about who lived where.

The operative medium was speech. The most important qualification to any account of the edicts as a communication system is that the inscribed text was not the primary medium. The king "emphasises his manifold proclamations of dharma and the activities of his officials in order to distribute and to explain it," and the analysis records that "the main activities were realised through oral dissemination and enforcement by state officials" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024). The inscriptions are the durable residue of a programme whose operative instrument was speech and whose agents were officials. The stone guaranteed that the message could not drift as it passed down the chain of command (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

Presence at sites of practice. The Aśokan Minor Rock Edict 1 addresses "people gathering at places where religious festivals involving animal sacrifices and the consumption of alcohol and other substances took place," the king presenting himself as "a Buddhist convert who aims at establishing the basic moral codes of Buddhism in the broader society (particularly non-violence, Sanskrit *ahimsā*)," and the analysis observes that the king "apparently wishes to demonstrate his presence at these sites in the form of his inscriptions, but there is no visible intention to dominate the place" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024). The choice of such sites again required information: about where festivals occurred, which involved sacrifice, and what was consumed.

11. Inward Intelligence: The Saṅgha and the Schism Edicts

The clearest documented instance of Aśokan intelligence operating upon an institution is not administrative but religious, and it is the more instructive for being unexpected.

The purification of the monastic community. "The stories recorded in texts such as the *Aśokāvadāna*, the *Mahāvamsa*, and his royal edicts inscribed on stone pillars agree, however, that he also purified the monastic community, expelling non-Buddhists who had allegedly infiltrated the saṅgha and created a schism by promoting heretical teachings," and "the so-called 'schism edicts' corroborate legends that Aśoka purged the monastic community of members who caused discord, exacting punishment more severe than prescribed by the monastic code, despite the place of schism-making as one of the five acts of immediate retribution" (Bloom, 2022).

Three observations follow, and they constitute the strongest evidence in this paper.

The epigraphic and literary records agree. The passage explicitly notes that the *Aśokāvadāna*, the *Mahāvamsa*, and "his royal edicts inscribed on stone pillars" concur (Bloom, 2022). Where a legend and an inscription agree, the evidentiary weight exceeds either alone — and this is the one place in the paper where the correlation passes into corroboration of the strongest kind.

The operation presupposed identification. To expel "non-Buddhists who had allegedly infiltrated the saṅgha" (Bloom, 2022), the state had to determine who was a genuine member and who was not: it had to conduct an inquiry into the composition of an institution within its territory. This is surveillance in the strict sense, directed at a body that was not itself an organ of the state.

The sanction exceeded the institution's own code. The expulsion was accompanied by punishment "more severe than prescribed by the monastic code" (Bloom, 2022). The state's coercive power was applied where the saṅgha's own disciplinary machinery was judged insufficient — precisely the pattern the *Arthaśāstra*'s internal-security provisions would predict, and precisely the pattern that complicates any reading of the Aśokan programme as purely persuasive.

The associated tradition. The scholarship records the Third Council in the same register: "According to Pāli traditions, it was King Aśoka who also convened the Third Council at Pāṭaliputra to resolve another potential schism—this one within the Sthavira school of Buddhism, between the Vibhajyavāda and the Sarvāstivāda—and to purge the saṅgha of those monks who were heretics or who had unorthodox views" (Bloom, 2022). The Aśoka scholarship records the more dramatic version, with "the expulsion of 80,000 heretics under the direction of the great monk-elder, Mogaliputta Tissa," alongside "the legend of the nine missions sent to spread the message of Buddhism" (Tambiah, 1976), the missions including "to Aparantaka the Yona named Dhammarakkhita" and the dispatch of nine missions "to different countries" (Lanh, 2025). The figure of 80,000 is a hagiographic topos and should be read as such; what the tradition attests, even at that magnitude, is the *principle* of comprehensive screening.

And the apparatus could act with violence. The *Samantapāsādikā*, "a fifth-century commentary on the vinaya, describes Ashoka's horrified regret when a minister, whom he had sent to sort out problems within the Sangha, becomes punitively violent, executing some of the monks" (Bartles-Smith et al., 2020). A minister dispatched to resolve a problem within an institution and resorting to executions is an agent of the state operating inside a religious body with lethal force — and the king's recorded response is regret, which presupposes that the act was his to regret.

The significance for the argument. An apparatus capable of screening a monastic order is capable of screening anything. The schism edicts are the point at which this paper's reconstruction ceases to be inferential: the state is documented as identifying, judging and expelling persons on the basis of an assessment of their conformity, and it is documented as doing so within a religious institution rather than a political one. Whatever else the Aśokan information system was for, this is what it did.

12. The Greek Testimony and Its Limits

Megasthenes supplies the only contemporary external account of Mauryan administration, and it must be handled with the caution its transmission requires.

What it offers. The ambassador's credentials are strong: he "travelled to India as ambassador for King Seleucus to the court of Candragupta Maurya in Pataliputra," and "as a result of this experience, he knew India better than any other Greek, and was able to write from authoritative knowledge and deep experience" (Stoneman, 2019). The work "was the first work to provide a Greek audience with first-hand knowledge of the Indian interior and Mauryan court" (Stoneman, 2019), and it "offers detailed accounts of the political, social, and economic systems of the Mauryan Empire, describing the grandeur of its capital, Pataliputra, and its military and administrative organization" (Stoneman, 2019). It supplies the capital's dimensions and defences: Pataliputra "was probably the largest city in the world at that time, a city eight miles long and a mile and one-half wide, with 570 towers and sixty-four gates, all surrounded by a moat six hundred feet wide and forty-five feet deep," with wooden walls "with slits to be used by archers," and it "was about twice as large as Rome under Emperor Marcus Aurelius" (Boesche, 2003). It supplies the army figures (Boesche, 2003) and the measurement of the royal road (Werner, 1988).

What it cannot bear. The text survives only in fragments quoted by later authors (Ghosh, 2021), and the most careful recent study refuses to treat the work "as a mine for information," instead evaluating "the remaining fragments chronologically, and according to the type and range of information derived from Megasthenes," in order to understand "why certain parts of the *Indica*, and information about Megasthenes himself, have survived" (Jansari, 2020). Its limitations are recorded as "cultural biases, misinterpretations, and a lack of access to rural life, which can skew perceptions of the broader socio-economic reality of the empire" (Jansari, 2020). It contains "fantastic descriptions of one-horned horses with heads like those of deer and huge snakes" (Ghosh, 2021).

The specific consequence. Megasthenes' account of the Mauryan administrative classes — the overseers, the market officers, the officials charged with foreigners — is precisely the material that would be most valuable here and most vulnerable to the caution. This paper therefore rests no structural claim about intelligence on the Greek testimony. What the Greek material securely establishes is the road network and its measurement (Werner, 1988), the army's reported scale (Boesche, 2003), the capital's dimensions and its sixty-four gates (Boesche, 2003), and the reciprocal embassies with the Hellenistic kingdoms (Werner, 1988) — that is, the infrastructure on which any information system must run, and the foreign service through which external reporting would occur.

The comparative study of the sources frames the methodological point exactly: foreign narratives and indigenous sources are complementary, with the indigenous ones providing "a more systematic and state-driven account of governance," and the combined reading offering "a more holistic understanding of the Mauryan socio-economic system, revealing the complexities of governance, economic regulation, and social hierarchy" ([Suman, 2025](#)). That is the appropriate use of the Greek material: as corroboration of infrastructure, not as evidence of institutions.

13. Comparative Register: Intelligence in the Ancient World

13.1 The General Finding

The comprehensive study of ancient intelligence systems "spanning Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the Indian and Chinese subcontinents" examines, on the basis of "a wide range of primary sources, including the Arthashastra, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Roman administrative records," the "organisation, methods, and operational principles of early espionage and information management," including "the integration of intelligence into political and military hierarchies, institutionalisation and bureaucratic practices, multi-modal methods of information gathering, counterintelligence strategies, and the communication infrastructures that facilitated the flow of information across expansive territories" ([Robin, 2025](#)).

Its conclusion is directly relevant: "The study demonstrates that intelligence was a deliberate and systematic component of ancient statecraft, essential for maintaining political authority, military advantage, and administrative control," with the comparative approach highlighting "both universal principles—such as verification, adaptation, and strategic use of information—and context-specific practices shaped by geography, political scale, and cultural norms" ([Robin, 2025](#))([Robin, 2025](#)).

Verification, adaptation and strategic use of information — the same three principles the *Arthasāstra* material exhibits in its cross-verification requirement ([Kamat, 2025](#)) and its adaptive small-n optimum ([Kamat, 2025](#)). The Mauryan case is an instance of a general pattern, not an outlier.

13.2 Assyria: The Empire of Informers

The most striking comparandum is the Assyrian succession covenant of 672 BC, in which "Esarhaddon, King of Assyria, imposed a succession covenant (*adē*) on his subjects," requiring "the empire's population to monitor one another, and themselves, for signs of disloyalty to the monarch and his chosen successor, Ashurbanipal," the study examining "the aims and outcomes, desired and undesired, of imposing this duty of vigilance across the Assyrian Empire" ([Tushingham, 2024](#)).

The Assyrian case is the inverse of the Mauryan one in a way that clarifies both. Assyria sought to universalise the reporting duty — every subject an informer — whereas the *Arthasāstra* prescribes a small, compartmentalised professional cadre precisely because popular denunciation is unreliable and manipulable. The formal finding that the robust optimum under collusion risk is *few* independent sources rather than many ([Kamat, 2025](#)) is, in effect, a demonstration of why the Assyrian solution is unstable and the Kauṭilyan one is not.

13.3 Ptolemaic Egypt: Inspection and Denunciation

The Ptolemaic material supplies a middle case, and the parallels are close. A memorandum from a *dioiketes* to an *oikonomos* "recommends (ll. 40–45) tours of inspection to motivate the king's subjects by words, but also by listening to their complaints about *komogrammateis* and *komarchai*, especially in connection with agricultural work," and "it is, first of all, obvious that the central government approached local officials with skepticism, not to say distrust, for inspection tours are clearly a sign of a strong will for direct control

and, ultimately, strong statehood," though "the main goal of this advice may have been to prevent harm to the royal revenues" (Knopf, 2022). The conclusion is that "the central government did not conceive the local *komogrammateis* and *komarchai* as absolutely reliable" (Knopf, 2022).

The denunciation provisions are documented in the same body of work: "the second strategy to ensure enforcement was the encouragement of denunciations," with "denunciation clauses mainly occur[ring] in *protagmata* and in connection with fiscal affairs," the king promising "rewards to all those who report violators of the ordinances to officials," informers of undeclared livestock receiving "a part of the penalty exacted, as well as a third part of the property confiscated to the crown," and, for slaves, "a sum of 300 *drachmai* for the indication of each unauthorized enslaved person" (Knopf, 2022). The analysis concludes that "it stands to reason that these provisions were intended to make members of the local communities complicit with the crown," since local residents "were certainly among the first to become aware of any misbehavior," their involvement meaning "a better chance of detecting offenders at low administrative costs," and that "this method was much more efficient than attempting to create an all-knowing coercive and intrusive bureaucracy" (Knopf, 2022).

Three comparative observations follow.

Inspection tours recur across cases, and their logic is identical. The Ptolemaic *dioiketes* recommends tours to listen to complaints about local officials (Knopf, 2022); Aśoka's administration sent the *yuktas*, *rājūka* and *prādesika* out every five years for instruction in the dharma and "also for other work" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024). In both cases the central authority distrusts its own local agents and uses movement as the instrument of verification — and in both cases the declared purpose is accompanied by a fiscal or control purpose (Knopf, 2022).

Fiscal affairs are the centre of gravity. Ptolemaic denunciation clauses cluster "in connection with fiscal affairs" (Knopf, 2022), and the Ptolemaic memorandum's welfare language is qualified by the observation that its main goal "may have been to prevent harm to the royal revenues" (Knopf, 2022). The Mauryan material points the same way: the *Arthaśāstra*'s revenue list includes "river warden, ferry, boat, port, pasture, road toll, land survey, and capture of thieves" (Reden, 2019), and the customs provisions are explicitly designed "to maximize customs levy collections" (Viswanath, 2024). An information system is, first and last, a revenue system.

The Mauryan case is distinguished by the absence of the denunciation mechanism. No Aśokan edict is reported as offering rewards to informers, and the *Arthaśāstra*'s system is professional rather than popular (Sumaryani, 2021)(Kamat, 2025). If Assyria and Ptolemaic Egypt represent the two poles of mass-informer and paid-denunciator systems (Tushingham, 2024)(Knopf, 2022), the Mauryan case as reconstructed here sits with neither: a small professional cadre with a rigorous verification protocol and a periodic audit cycle (Kamat, 2025)(Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

13.4 Rome: Counterintelligence as Institutional Design

The Roman comparandum supplies the closest analogue in kind. The study of Roman counterintelligence "analyzes how mechanisms of loyalty enforcement, internal surveillance, and political control evolved alongside the consolidation of imperial authority," examining "the role of counterintelligence in managing elite rivalries, military allegiance, and threats to imperial stability," and argues "that Roman counterintelligence was not merely reactive but constituted a systematic approach to preserving political order" (Spiridonov, 2025).

The parallel with the Mauryan case is the treatment of **elite rivalry and military allegiance** as intelligence problems rather than merely disciplinary ones (Spiridonov, 2025). This is precisely the domain of Section

8: a succession struggle is a contest over the allegiance of named elites, and the *Arthaśāstra*'s provisions for observing "the kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials" ([Sihag, 2017](#)) are a specification of the same object of surveillance. The formal Mauryan study's finding of an 800:1 wage ratio between senior councillors and junior clerks ([Kamat, 2025](#)) is, in this light, a price paid for elite loyalty — that is, a counterintelligence expenditure.

14. The Importance: What the System Was For

The question the user's framing places at the centre — the importance of the system for controlling the entire empire — can now be answered in five propositions, each with its warrant stated.

First, it substituted for the sovereign's presence. The empire "extended from Bengal in the East to Afghanistan in the Northwest" ([Tambiah, 1976](#)), and the recent formal study quantifies the resulting problem as an "average oversight distance ≈ 850 km" combined with output volatility of $\sigma\theta \approx 0.31$ ([Kamat, 2025](#)). The reporting arrangement of Rock Edict VI — information "at any time of the day, irrespective of where he was" ([Reden, 2019](#)) — is the administrative substitute for presence. And the *Arthaśāstra*'s first field of detection is "one's own country" ([Sumaryani, 2021](#)), which is to say that the system's primary function was the government of the interior.

Second, it produced the empire's fiscal architecture. The formal estimation finds that the distinctive Mauryan choices — "a fixed one-sixth tax share and an extreme 800:1 wage ratio between senior councillors and junior clerks" — arose endogenously from geographic dispersion and output volatility, and that "replacing Mauryan direct administration with Roman-style tax farming would have shortened imperial survival by roughly 45 years," the results indicating "that Kautilyan design deliberately favoured systemic resilience against shocks over short-term extractive efficiency, offering an early illustration of mechanism design in environments marked by severe information constraints" ([Kamat, 2025](#)). The information system is not ancillary to the empire's institutions; it is the reason for their shape.

Third, it served the ideological programme as much as the coercive one. One reading holds that *dhamma* was "a sophisticated and calculated political ideology designed to consolidate and legitimize imperial power," functioning as "the ideological glue binding the disparate elements of the Sanatana—Swami (the ruler), Amatya (the bureaucracy), Janapada (the territory and populace), Durga (the fort), Kosha (the treasury), Danda (the army/coercion), and Mitra (the ally)—into a cohesive, stable, and centrally controlled empire," deployed "to address the inherent vulnerabilities within each 'limb' of the state" ([Kumar, 2024](#)). Another reads it as pragmatic statecraft engineered for "a vast, diverse, and recently conquered empire" ([Jayswal, 2025](#)). A third treats it as ethical statecraft aimed at "social harmony, tolerance, non-violence and welfare of common mass" ([Suna & Gadgil, 2026](#)). A fourth observes that unification "most likely necessitated the establishment of an ideology capable of incorporating regional and local diversity," Aśoka being perhaps "the first monarch to recognise the necessity of an ideology to guarantee the consolidation of power within the empire" ([Naulakha, 2023](#)). A fifth reads *dhamma* as an ideational variable bound up with material interests serving Aśokan hegemony ([Sadiq, 2009](#)).

The readings disagree on motive and agree on function, and the function is cohesion ([Kumar, 2024](#))([Jayswal, 2025](#))([Suna & Gadgil, 2026](#))([Naulakha, 2023](#))([Sadiq, 2009](#)). An ideological campaign conducted through officials ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)) and audited on a five-year cycle ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)) is a campaign that requires information about its own reception. The *dharmapariṣcchā* — "interrogation regarding the dharma" ([Michel & Friedrich, 2024](#)) — is the point at which dissemination

and reporting are the same activity, and it is the single clearest instance in the epigraphic record of the Mauryan state building a feedback loop into its own propaganda.

Fourth, it was inseparable from commerce, and commerce from it. The *Arthaśāstra* devotes a principal area of its commercial concern to "developing and guarding land and water routes and shipping" (Olivelle, 2020). The navarch hired out state vessels to travellers and sea traders (Laizet, 2021). The state supervised "seafaring vessels, and ferries at river mouths and across natural and artificial lakes" (Dwivedi, 2021). The city administration managed "all matters related to trade, merchant activity, visits of foreigners, harbors, roads, temples, markets, and industries" (Shukla, 2021). The revenue list includes "river warden, ferry, boat, port, pasture, road toll" (Reden, 2019). Customs procedure was engineered "to elicit truthful revelation of importers' valuations" and "to maximize customs levy collections" (Viswanath, 2024). Every one of these functions generates a record of who moved what, where and with whose licence. The commercial administration of the Mauryan state *was*, in operation, an information system.

Fifth, it extended to the corporate institutions of the realm. The schism edicts and the purification of the saṅgha (Bloom, 2022), the Third Council and the dispatch of the nine missions (Tambiah, 1976)(Lanh, 2025), and the minister who executed monks while resolving a problem within the Saṅgha (Bartles-Smith et al., 2020) together establish that the state's knowledge-extending capacity operated on corporate bodies as well as on individuals and localities. This is the most complete evidence of an intelligence function in the Aśokan record, and it is the element a purely moralising reading of the edicts cannot accommodate.

What the importance was *not* is equally important to state. There is no Mauryan intelligence archive, no register of agents, no operational dossier, no surviving report. The *Arthaśāstra*'s provisions are prescriptions (Olivelle, 2020)(Reden, 2019); the edicts' description of the reporting arrangement is a claim (Reden, 2019); and the comparative material shows that pre-modern states achieved "robustness under severe informational constraints" (Kamat, 2025) precisely because their information was thin. The importance of the Mauryan information system lies in its *design* — the chain of command, the audit cycle, the verification protocol, the road and river network, the siting of proclamations — rather than in its *outputs*, which are lost.

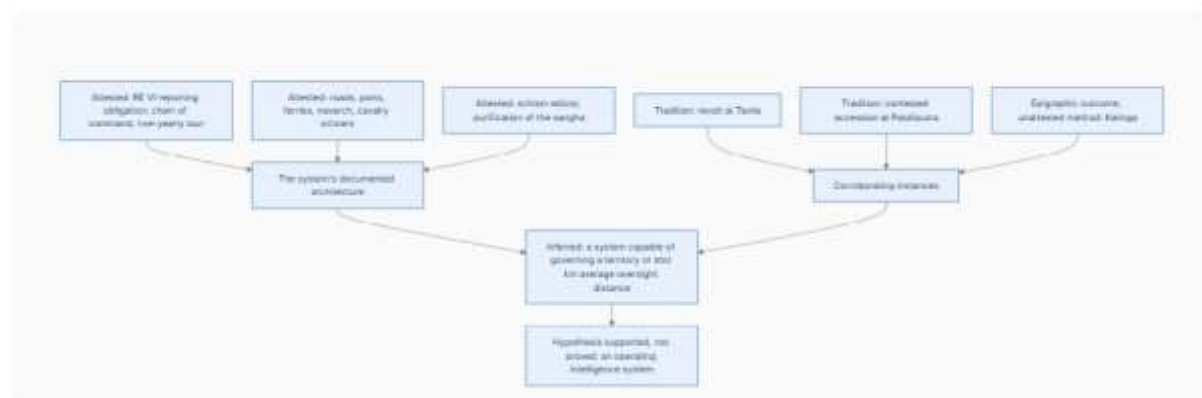
15. The Three Cases: A Consolidated Assessment

Table 1. Evidentiary grade of the claims advanced for each case

Case	Attested	Corroborated	Inferred	Hypothetical
Taxila revolt	Aśoka's postings at Taxila and Ujjain, and the later determination to seek the throne (Thapar, 2012); Taxila's guilds issuing their own coinage after his death (Magnani, 2024)	That a northern capital of this kind required active management	That handling the revolt required local information a central court could not obtain by correspondence; that the <i>Arthaśāstra</i> 's first field of detection describes the requisite capability (Sumaryani, 2021)	That agents of the <i>saṁsthā</i> type were used during the posting

Capture of the throne	That Aśoka was not crown prince and that there was a struggle among the princes (Thapar, 2012); that the dispute was resolved when he "raised an army against, and possibly killed, his brother Sumana-Susima" (Testa, 2014)	The tradition's image of rule "under a single umbrella" (Chryssides, 2004)(Vermeersch, 2004); the pairing of claimant and minister (Chryssides, 2004)	That a contested accession required knowledge of the allegiance of named officials and of the instruments of power; that the <i>Arthaśāstra</i> 's observation of high officials describes that requirement (Sihag, 2017)	A standing domestic watch on princes and high officials during Bindusara's reign
Kalinga	The conquest, its casualty figures and the remorse in RE XIII (Bartles-Smith et al., 2020)(Chassanite, 2015); Kalinga's maritime prosperity and coasting trade (Arunachalam, 2025); the Separate Edicts and the five-yearly inspection in Kalinga (Michel & Friedrich, 2024)	The coexistence of a covert-action repertoire (Boesche, 2003)(Bhattacharya & Saikia, 2020) and a maritime supervision apparatus (Laizet, 2021)(Dwivedi, 2021) in the same state	That prior local knowledge would have preceded a campaign against a territory characterised as rebellious (Testa, 2014); that the post-conquest administrative regime presupposes a reporting apparatus (Michel & Friedrich, 2024)	That covert action in the <i>Arthaśāstra</i> 's sense was employed in preparation for the campaign

The table's purpose is to prevent the paper's argument from being read as stronger than it is. All three cases corroborate the hypothesis of an operating information system. None proves it. What proves it, so far as anything in this record proves anything, is not the cases but the *system's documented architecture*: the reporting obligation of Rock Edict VI (Reden, 2019), the named chain of command (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), the five-yearly audit cycle (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), the *dharmamahāmātra* and the *dharmapariprcchā* (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), the roads with their distance pillars and byroads (Dwivedi, 2021), the navarch hiring out vessels (Laizet, 2021), the supervised ferries and seafaring vessels (Dwivedi, 2021), the fourfold army with its officers of horses and elephants (Reden, 2019), and the eight-fold army with spies among its listed divisions (Dwivedi, 2021).



16. Knowledge Gaps

Six gaps should be recorded, because they define what a stronger study would require.

No administrative archive. The Mauryan state's own records do not survive, and the reconstruction therefore rests on prescriptive texts and public inscriptions. The formal work is explicit that it is a rational reconstruction of a protocol, not a description of an observed institution ([Kamat, 2025](#)).

No agent-level evidence. Nothing in the corpus identifies a Mauryan intelligence officer, and the reporting personnel presupposed by Rock Edict VI ([Reden, 2019](#)) are unnamed in the sources examined here. The *Arthaśāstra*'s categories — *saṁstha* and *sañcāra* ([Sumaryani, 2021](#)) — are doctrinal, not personnel.

No quantified network. The formal analysis's parameters — coordination friction $\gamma=15$, collusion $\rho=0.1$, crisis threat prior $\pi=0.3$ ([Kamat, 2025](#)) — are stipulated for the model rather than measured from evidence, and they should be reported as modelling assumptions. The same caution applies to the structural estimation's recovered parameters ([Kamat, 2025](#)): they are estimated from GIS and dendrochronological proxies, not from Mauryan documents. No empirical estimate of the size of any Mauryan network exists.

The dating and unity of the *Arthaśāstra*. The text is dated by its most recent editor to around the middle of the first century CE, drawing on sources a century or more older ([Olivelle, 2020](#)), and its use as a description of Mauryan practice is an inference. This is the single largest vulnerability in any reconstruction of the kind attempted here.

The Greek testimony's transmission. Megasthenes survives only through later authors with their own agendas ([Jansari, 2020](#)), and his account of administrative classes is the material most needed and least reliable.

The narrative sources' purposes. The Taxila episode and the accession struggle are known from a tradition whose versions were "adapted to suit religious purposes" ([Thapar, 2012](#)). The episodes may be historical; their literary form is not historical writing.

17. Conclusion

The argument of this paper can be reduced to seven propositions.

First, the Mauryan empire could not have been administered without an information system, and this proposition can be given a quantity: a recent structural estimation recovers an average oversight distance of approximately 850 km across the Gangetic plain combined with output volatility of $\sigma\theta \approx 0.31$, and finds that the empire's distinctive fiscal and salary institutions arose endogenously from that combination, with Roman-style tax farming as a counterfactual shortening imperial survival by roughly 45 years ([Kamat, 2025](#)).

Second, the *Arthaśāstra* prescribes a professional rather than a popular intelligence architecture: agents "recruited from all groups" and deployed "in two basic groups (*saṁstha* and *sañchār*)," dispersed "for early detection in one's own country, an enemy country, a friendly country, and a neutral country" ([Sumaryani, 2021](#)), with "a permanent wing for collection and analysis of latest information" and agents stationed in four classes of court "to spy on the kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials" ([Sihag, 2017](#)).

Third, the system's reliability protocol is compartmentalisation plus multi-source cross-verification ([Kamat, 2025](#)), and the formal analysis shows that under high coordination friction ($\gamma=15$), non-negligible collusion ($\rho=0.1$) and structural labour-market dualism, the minimax-robust optimum is $n=3$ — the "Safety Elbow" — shifting to $n=2$ under elevated threat priors ($\pi=0.3$) ([Kamat, 2025](#)). The Mauryan state was information-poor by necessity, and its design was an adaptation to that poverty.

Fourth, the communications system on which the apparatus ran is documented in all four of its elements: roads with "pillars to mark distances and byroads at every 10 stadia" extending from Susa to Pataliputra, with a reported road at Ujjain about 8 m wide against a normative 7.28 m for common roads and 14.56 m for royal highways (Dwivedi, 2021), and the royal road from Taxila to Patna following the Achaemenid model (Laizet, 2021); water traffic supervised by the state, with "seafaring vessels, and ferries at river mouths and across natural and artificial lakes" (Dwivedi, 2021) and a navarch "who rents, whether to travellers or to sea traders, the vessels they need" (Laizet, 2021); ports at river estuaries from Barbarikon and Barygaza to Muziris, Poompuhar and Tamralipti (Dwivedi, 2021), including Kalinga's coasting trade to Tamralipti (Arunachalam, 2025); and a fourfold army with officers of horses, elephants, chariots and infantry (Reden, 2019) numbering in the classical report "about six hundred thousand infantry, thirty thousand cavalry, eight thousand chariots, and nine thousand elephants" (Boesche, 2003)(Dubey, 2026), whose eight-fold form includes "officers, spies, military guides, and workmen like mechanics, tunnel makers, bridge builders" (Dwivedi, 2021).

Fifth, the epigraphic record documents the reporting arrangement and the audit cycle: an arrangement by which the king "was to be informed of affairs of the people at any time of the day, irrespective of where he was," with "issues to be reported immediately to the king with no delay" (Reden, 2019); a chain of command running from the high officials (*mahāmāta*, *pulisa*) through the chief functionary (*rajūka*, *lajūka*) to the ordinary people and regional functionaries (*raṭhika*) (Michel & Friedrich, 2024); and a five-yearly tour by the *yuktas*, *rājūka* and *prādeśika* "for the instruction in the dharma and also for other work" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), whose content included "instruction in the dharma and interrogation regarding the dharma" (Michel & Friedrich, 2024).

Sixth, the three cases corroborate the hypothesis without proving it. The revolt at Taxila (Thapar, 2012) and the later autonomy of its guilds (Magnani, 2024) establish that a northern capital required active management; the contested accession establishes that Aśoka "was not the crown prince, and... there was a struggle among the princes for the throne" (Thapar, 2012), resolved when he "raised an army against, and possibly killed, his brother Sumana-Susima" (Testa, 2014); and Kalinga is attested as an event with 100,000 killed and 150,000 deported (Bartles-Smith et al., 2020)(Chassanite, 2015), administered afterwards under its own Separate Edicts with the five-yearly inspection referred to in them (Michel & Friedrich, 2024), but with **no source whatsoever describing the method of its preparation**. The inference of covert action in Kalinga is advanced here as a labelled hypothesis and should be treated as such.

Seventh, the strongest single piece of evidence for a functioning state intelligence capacity is the purification of the saṅgha, where "the Aśokāvadāna, the Mahāvamsa, and his royal edicts inscribed on stone pillars agree" that Aśoka "purified the monastic community, expelling non-Buddhists who had allegedly infiltrated the saṅgha and created a schism," with the schism edicts recording punishment "more severe than prescribed by the monastic code" (Bloom, 2022) — and where a minister sent to resolve a problem within the Saṅgha "becomes punitively violent, executing some of the monks" (Bartles-Smith et al., 2020).

The final point is the one your framing of the problem implies and the evidence supports. Ancient history in this case does not deliver proof, and it should not pretend to. What it delivers is a convergence: a state that claims to be informed of its people's affairs at every hour and in every place (Reden, 2019); a chain of command named in its own inscriptions (Michel & Friedrich, 2024); an audit cycle of five years (Michel & Friedrich, 2024); a road network with distance pillars and byroads, a river and coastal traffic supervised

by state officers, a navarch who hired out vessels, and thirty thousand horses (Dwivedi, 2021)(Laizet, 2021)(Dwivedi, 2021)(Boesche, 2003); a treatise prescribing agents in four concentric fields and a permanent analytical wing (Sumaryani, 2021)(Sihag, 2017); a monastic order screened and purged (Bloom, 2022); a coinage unified and a customs procedure engineered to defeat undervaluation (Laizet, 2021)(Viswanath, 2024); and a formal reconstruction showing that the empire's institutions were shaped by the cost of monitoring a territory 850 km across (Kamat, 2025). No single document says "there was an intelligence system." The correlation of these independent streams says it, and says it in the only voice available to a historian of a polity that left no archive: not proof, but the strongest inference the evidence will bear. An empire of that scale, held together under one umbrella (Chryssides, 2004)(Vermeersch, 2004), cannot have been administered otherwise.

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