

Who was King Asoka the Great? Kalasoka or Asoka of the Maurya dynasty?

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Archaeologists have found the following rock and pillar inscriptions of Devanampriya Priyadarshi written in Brahmi and Kharoshthi in India.

- ❖ Major Rock edicts (14 edicts) have been found in 9 places from Shahbazgarhi Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Sannati (Gulbarga district), Karnataka.
- ❖ Pillar edicts (7 edicts) have been found in 11 places from Ranighat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh
- ❖ Minor Rock edicts have been found in 19 places from Mahasthan, Bangladesh to Brahmagiri, Karnataka.
- ❖ Minor Pillar edicts have been found in 2 or 3 places (Lumbini, Nigali Sagar and Orissa?)
- ❖ All these edicts and inscriptions refer to the reigning king as “Devanampriya Priyadarshi”. But the minor edicts found at Gujarra (Madhya Pradesh), Maski, Nittur, & Udegolam (Karnataka) mention the name of the King as Asoka.
- ❖ The following Greek and Aramaic inscriptions have also been found in Kandhar, Kabul and Takshashila region.
 - Two Greek inscriptions found in Kandhar.
 - Six Aramaic inscriptions found in Kabul and Takshashila region.

I have already explained in my last article how historians mistakenly identified these Greek and Aramaic inscriptions as Asokan edicts because some of these inscriptions refer to the reigning king as “Priyadarshana”, “Piodasses” etc. But these inscriptions do not mention the famous title “Devanampriya” of Asoka. The text of these inscriptions also drastically differs from that of Brahmi and Kharoshthi inscriptions. Historians somehow tried to speculate that the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions may be the abridged versions of certain portions of Asokan edicts.

Now the question is who was the King “Devanampriya Priyadarshi Asoka”? Modern historians identified Asoka the great as the King of Maurya dynasty and the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya. Let us survey various sources for the history of Asoka.

1. North-Indian Buddhist Tradition: (Short Chronology)

1. Vinaya-Pitaka mentions that the difference between the coronation of Asoka and Buddha Mahaparinirvana was 100 years.
2. Divyavadana (Panshupradanavadana) gives the genealogy of Asoka: Bimbisara - Ajatashatru - Udayi or Udayibhadra - Munda – Kakavarni – Sahali – Tulakuchi – Mahamandala – Prasenajit – Nanda – Bindusara. Bindusara was ruling in Pataliputra. His son was Susim. Incidentally, a Brahmana of Champa city went to Pataliputra along with his daughter Subhadrangi. This Brahmana had an intuition that the son of Subhadrangi

will be a great King. At the request the Brahmana, Subhadraṅgi has been sent to the “antahpura” of Bindusara but she has been given a job of hair-dresser. One day, she met the King Bindusara and became his wife. Asoka and Vitasoka were born to Subhadraṅgi. Asoka was not a good looking guy and therefore, he was not liked by his father. Probably, Asoka was referred to “Kalasoka” because of his physical appearance. Bindusara appointed Asoka as the governor of Takshasila to counter the mutiny in north-western region. Bindusara wanted to coronate his son Susim but Asoka revolted. Khallataka and Radhagupta, the ministers of Bindusara also wanted Asoka as king. When Bindusara died, Asoka took control over Pataliputra and killed Susim. Thus, Asoka became the king of Pataliputra 100 years after Buddha nirvana and installed 84000 Pillars. (varsha-sata-parinirvritasya mama Pataliputre nagare Asoko nama raja bhavishyati chaturbhaga-chakravarti dharmarajah... Chaturashiti-Dharma-rajika-sahasram pratishthapayishyati...).

3. Tibetan sources also follow the genealogy of Asoka given in Divyavadana. Most of the Tibetan and Chinese sources mention that Asoka reigned 100 or 110 years after Buddha nirvana.
4. Rajatarangini records that Hushka, Jushka and Kanishka reigned 150 years after Buddha nirvana which clearly indicates that Asoka, the king of Kashmir might have reigned 100 years after Buddha nirvana.
5. In entire North-Indian Buddhist tradition, only a Khotanese chronicle places the reign of Asoka 234 years after Buddha nirvana.
6. **First Buddhist Council:** It was held at Rajagriha within 3 months after Buddha Nirvana and during the reign of Ajatashatru.
7. **Second Buddhist Council:** It was held at Vaishali during the reign of Asoka.
8. **Third Buddhist Council:** It was held in Kashmir or Jalandhar during the reign of Kanishka. Vasumitra headed the council. Commentaries on Abhidharma of Sarvastivada were compiled in Sanskrit instead of Prakrit. King Kanishka made Mahayana Buddhism the state religion. We have to research further to find out whether this Kanishka was a Turushka king or Kushana king. If he was the Turushka king, the 3rd Council might have held 200 years after Buddha nirvana. If he was the Kushana King, the 3rd Council might have held 600 years after Buddha nirvana.

2. South-Indian Buddhist tradition: (Long chronology)

1. Srilankan chronicles like Dipavamsa & Mahavamsa give the genealogy of Asoka as follows:

	Dipavamsa	Mahavamsa
1	Bimbisara (52 Y)	Bimbisara (52 Y)
2	Ajatashatru (32 Y)	Ajatashatru (32 Y)
3	Udayabhadda (16 Y)	Udayabhadda (16 Y)
4	Nagadasaka (24 Y)	Anuruddha Munda (8 Y)
5	Sisunaga (10 Y)	Nagadasaka (8 Y)
6	Kalasoka (28 Y)	Sisunaga (18 Y)
7	10 sons of Kalasoka (22 Y)	Kalasoka (28 Y)
8	Nine Nandas (22 Y)	10 sons of Kalasoka (22 Y)
8	Chandragupta (24 Y)	Nine Nandas (22 Y)

10	Bindusara (28 Y)	Chandragupta (24 Y)
11	Asoka (37 Y)	Bindusara (28 Y)
12		Asoka (37 Y)

2. Burmese tradition is influenced by Mahavamsa and it gives the genealogy exactly same as given in Mahavamsa.
3. According to Buddhist sources, Asoka had 10 sons, Bhadrasena, Korandavarna, Mangara, Sarvanjaha, Jalika or Jaloka, Ubhaka, Sanjaya, Koravya, Nandivardhana and Panchamaka. They reigned simultaneously.
4. According to Mahavamsa, Ajatashatru killed his father Bimbisara. Udayabhaddaka killed his father Ajatashatru, Anuruddha killed his father Udayabhaddaka, Munda killed his father Anuruddha, Nagadasaka killed his father Munda and so on. This was a dynasty of patricides. At the end of the 10th year of Kalasoka's reign a century had gone after Buddha nirvana.
5. **First Buddhist Council:** It was held at Rajagriha immediately after Buddha nirvana and during the reign of Ajatashatru. Mahakassapa headed the 1st Council and compiled Dhamma in seven months. Ananda compiled Sutta Pitaka and Upali compiled Vinaya Pitaka.
6. **Second Buddhist Council:** All theras met at Valikaarama in Vaishali under the leadership of the Thera Revata & Yasa and 2nd Buddhist was convened during the reign of Kalasoka and compiled Dhamma in eight months.
7. Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Samantapasadika etc. tell us that Asoka, the son of Bindusara, ascended the throne 218 years after Buddha nirvana.
8. **Third Buddhist Council:** The 3rd Council was held at Asokarama, Pataliputra in the 18th regnal year (or in 236th year after Buddha nirvana) of King Asoka. Moggaliputta Tissa headed the Council and compiled Kathavattu, 5th of 7 books of Abhidhamma Pitaka. Various Buddhist Theras were sent to propagate Buddhism. Mahinda and Sanghamitra went to Sri Lanka. Maharakshita Thera went to Yavana Janapada and Sona Thera & Uttara Thera went to Suvarnabhumi (Thailand and Cambodia).

3. Puranas

1. Puranas give the chronology of Sisunaga, Nandas and Mauryas. It completely avoids the history of Haryanka dynasty (Bimbisara and his descendants). There is no reference of Kalasoka in Puranas. According to Puranas, 24 kings of Ikshvaku, 27 Kings of Panchala, 24 Kings of Kasi, 28 kings of Haihayas, 32 Kings of Kalinga, 25 Kings of Ashmaka, 36 kings of Kauravas, 28 Kings of Mithila, 23 Kings of Shaurasena (Mathura) and 20 kings of Vitihotras reigned simultaneously during the reign of Sisunagas.
2. It appears that Magadha empire became weak during the reign of Sisunagas. Haryanka dynasty was a branch of Ikshvaku dynasty. Probably, it was Bimbisara or his father who conquered Rajagriha. Sisunagas might have settled at Vaishali as mentioned in Avantisundarikatha. According to Avantisundarikatha, Mahanandin, the last Sisunaga king was ruling in Vaishali.
3. The Haryanka dynasty lost their reputation because it was the dynasty of Patricides. Moreover, Kalashoka promoted Buddhism. These may be the reasons why Puranas give only the account of Sisunagas and not Haryankas.

4. Jain Tradition

1. Later Jain sources (Parishishtaparva etc.) give the genealogy of Asoka: Shrenika or Bhambhasara – Kunika – Udayin or Udayana – Nine Nanda Kings – Chandragupta – Bindusara – Asoka. Udayi or Udayana was the brother-in-law of Palaka who succeeded his father Chanda Pradyota, the King of Avanti. Chanda Pradyota died on the same night of Mahavira nirvana.

Modern historians attempted their best to reconcile the account of four different sources as given above but failed to do so in the distorted chronology. They came to a conclusion that these cannot be reconciled chronologically. Therefore, they resorted to their tested methodology of selective acceptance and rejection. Historians rejected the short chronology of North-Indian tradition and accepted the long chronology of South-Indian or Sri Lankan tradition. Unable to explain the account of Puranas, Jain and Buddhist sources, historians blamed that Indians had no discipline of writing their history. They fixed the date of Buddha nirvana around 483 BC and propagated that Maurya Asoka reigned 218 years later. They selectively ignored the account of Kalasoka of South-Indian tradition. They accepted the Asoka of Kashmir but opined that Asoka of Kashmir was the contemporary of Maurya Asoka without any evidence.

Let us try to reconcile the chronological account of all four sources.

First of all, we have to understand the chronological errors committed by later Jain scholars. It was well known in the Jain tradition that Bhadrabahu was the contemporary of Chandragupta of Avanti but later Jain scholars mistakenly identified him to be Chandragupta Maurya. Thus, they also identified Shrenika or Bhambhasara as Bimbisara and Kunika as Ajatashatru. These mistaken identities have led to enough confusion in the chronology. I have already explained that Buddha attained nirvana in 1865 BC whereas Mahavira attained nirvana in 1189 BC. Therefore, Chandragupta Maurya cannot be the contemporary of Bhadrabahu and Bimbisara & Ajatashatru cannot be linked with Shrenika and Kunika.

All Buddhist sources and Kalhana clearly place Asoka 100 years after Buddha nirvana. He was undoubtedly the Kalasoka of South-Indian tradition. He installed 84000 Pillars (edicts?) all over India. He ruled from Purushapura (Peshawar), Takshasila & Kashmir in North-west to Pundravardhana (Bangladesh) in East and Karnataka in South. The 2nd Buddhist Council was held during the reign of Kalashoka. It appears that Buddhism split into two sects, Sarvastivada & Theravada. Theravada spread to South India, Sri Lanka & Burma after 3rd council. Thus, South Indian tradition of Buddhism separated from North Indian tradition of Buddhism.

The Chronology:

	The Birth of Buddha	1945 BC
	Bimbisara reigned 52 years	1925-1873 BC
	Ajatashatru ascended the throne 8 year before Buddha nirvana and reigned for 32 years.	1873-1841 BC
	Buddha Mahaparinirvana	1865 BC

	1 st Buddhist Council	1865 BC
	Udayabhadda reigned 16 years	1841-1825 BC
	Anuruddha reigned 8 years	1825-1817 BC
	Nagadasaka reigned 24 years	1817-1793 BC
	Sisunaga reigned 18 years (Only Divyavadana mentions that Bindusara was the father of Kalasoka. Divyavadana is a later work and might have written when Jains identified Chandragupta Maurya to be contemporary of Bhadrabahu.)	1793-1775 BC
	Mahavamsa & Dipavamsa mention that Kalasoka ascended the throne 90 years after Mahaparinirvana whereas all North-Indian sources mention that Asoka ascended 100 years after nirvana. (a 10-year gap has to be adjusted)	1775-1765 BC
	Asoka or Kalasoka (Chandasoka, Kamasoka & Dharmasoka) reigned 28 years (Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa).	1765-1737 BC
	2 nd Buddhist Council	1765 BC
	10 sons of Kalasoka reigned 22 years (Jaloka reigned in Kashmir)	1737-1715 BC
	Nanda dynasty ruled for 100 or 108 years (Dipavamsa & Mahavamsa mention that Nandas ruled for 22 years which is incorrect. Actually, Burmese started an epoch of Buddha religion or Jinachakka that commenced from the 2 nd Council i.e. 1765 BC. Later, it has been assumed that Jinachakka era and Buddha nirvana identical. This error led to reduction of the duration of Nanda dynasty from 100 years to 22 years. Tibetan and Nepali Buddhist tradition clearly tell us that Nandas reigned for 108 years.)	1715-1609 BC
	Chandragupta Maurya reigned for 34 years	1609-1575 BC
	Bindusara reigned for 28 years	1575-1547 BC
	Asoka reigned for 36 Years	1547-1511 BC
	Maurya Asoka ascended the throne 218 years later from the epoch of Jinachakka i.e. 1765 BC	1547 BC
	3 rd Buddhist Council held 236 years later from the epoch of Jinachakka i.e. 1765 BC	1529 BC
	Buddhist missions sent to Sri Lanka, Thailand and Yavana Janapada	1529 BC

Conclusion:

In view of the above, it is certain that the Asoka who reigned 100 years after Mahaparinirvana can only be **Asoka, the great**. He was referred to Kalasoka in Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa. He was also the king of Kashmir as mentioned in Rajatarangini. He was the author of all rock and pillar edicts written in Brahmi & Kharoshthi scripts. By the time of Mauryas, Buddhism split into two major sects i.e. Sarvastivada and Theravada. Maurya

Asoka patronized Theravada and convened the 3rd Council 236 + 100 years after Mahaparinirvana. Theravada became popular in South whereas Sarvastivada dominated in the north. Since Theras headed the 3rd Council, North-Indian tradition did not recognize the Council of Pataliputra. According to North-Indian tradition, the Council held during the reign of Kanishka was the 3rd council.