ChronicleIAS

Post-Mauryan India

Class 7th NCERT

Chapter 6

CHAPTER 6

The Age of Reorganisation

By continuous living tradition and a vital power of rejuvenescence, this land has readjusted itself through unnumbered transformations.

— Jagdish Chandra Bose (1917)

Fig. 6.1.1. A glimpse of the art from the age of reorganisation

The Big Questions

1. *Why is the period that followed the Maurya empire sometimes called the 'Age of Reorganisation'?*
2. *What were the values or principles that guided emperors of that period?*
3. *How did foreign invaders assimilate into Indian society and contribute to cultural confluence?*

0781CH06

Bhavisha and Dhruv had recovered from their journey to the Maurya empire and were itching for another adventure. They decide to use Itihāsa again and landed in a new historical period. They came across a collection of art pieces, each one quite different from the other. (See Fig. 6.1.1) They wondered—could these artefacts belong to multiple kingdoms rather than just one? They guessed right. In this chapter we will travel over a fairly long period. Here we go…

Fig. 6.1.2.

Very little is known about Aśhoka's successors to the throne. It is generally accepted, however, that the last Maurya emperor was assassinated around 185 BCE by his commander-in-chief Puṣhyamitra Śhunga. This led to a breakup of the empire—hardly half a century after Aśhoka, as we mentioned in the last chapter. Many new kingdoms emerged across the subcontinent, which, often, were earlier tributary kingdoms under the overlordship of the Maurya empire. The northwest region became weak, exposing it to invasions from outside the subcontinent.

This period is also known as the 'age of reorganisation' by some scholars as the existing regions were being reorganised into new kingdoms that were constantly competing to become powerful. The map of India changed significantly in that age, as did people's lives.

LET'S EXPLORE

Create a timeline on a sheet of paper marking the period from the first year of the 2nd century BCE and ending in the last year of the 3rd century CE. How many years does this period cover? As we progress through the chapter, mark the key individuals, kingdoms and events on the timeline.

Fig. 6.2. Prominent dynasties of India during the age of reorganisation

LET'S REMEMBER

While working on the timeline, did you notice the transition from BCE to CE? Remember what you learned in the Grade 6 chapter 'Timeline and Sources of History' about how time is measured in history.

Matrimonial alliance : An alliance arranged through a marriage, generally between two members of royal families. In practice, this would often mean a king offering his daughter for marriage into the royal family of a neighbouring kingdom, with the intention of cementing an alliance between the two kingdoms.

LET'S EXPLORE

In the previous chapter, you studied the map of the Maurya empire (see page 100). Above is a map of the post-Maurya period. How many kingdoms can you count in the area that were previously under the control of the Maurya empire?

The 'new' kingdoms now competed for territorial control. Peaceful methods like **matrimonial alliances** between neighbouring kingdoms, or the use of force in warfare, were means of gaining control. Remember that there was constant wrestling for control over areas along the borders, as gaining control over them was important to keep the kingdom safe from attacks.

Together with those political events, there was a burst in the development of art, architecture and literature, and enriching cultural exchanges. We will get a peek into this in the following sections.

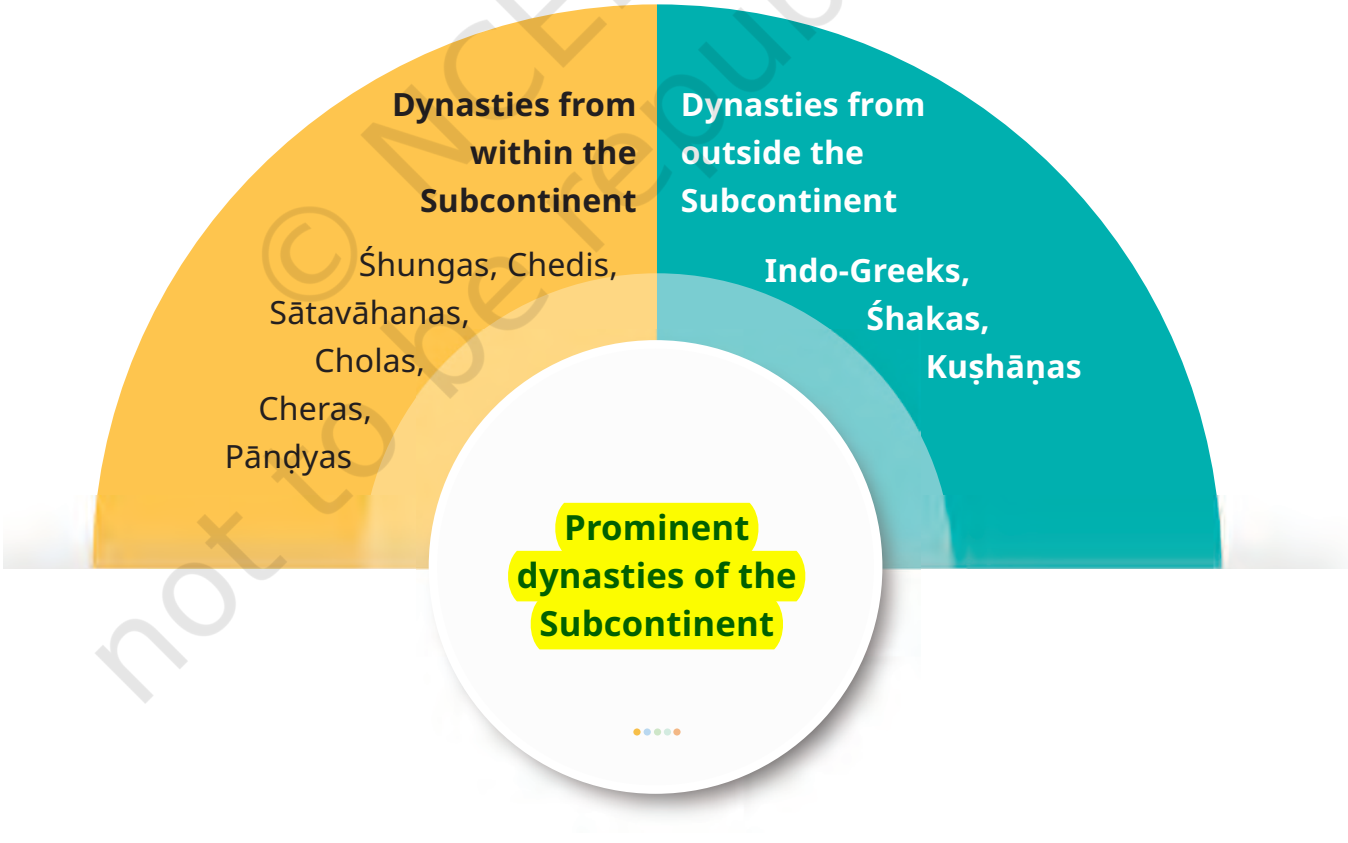


Fig. 6.3

Surge of the Śhungas

Puṣhyamitra Śhunga founded the Śhunga dynasty, which ruled over parts of north and central India. He performed the *aśhvamedha yajña*, a Vedic ritual, to establish himself as a most powerful ruler. Although his empire was smaller than the previous Maurya Empire (compare their two maps), he kept it safe from potential invaders and maintained friendly relations with the Greeks, after some initial military campaign against them. But, again, the empire did not last long after him—a century later, it was gone.

The period witnessed the revival of Vedic rituals and practices, but other schools of thought nevertheless continued to flourish.

DON'T MISS OUT

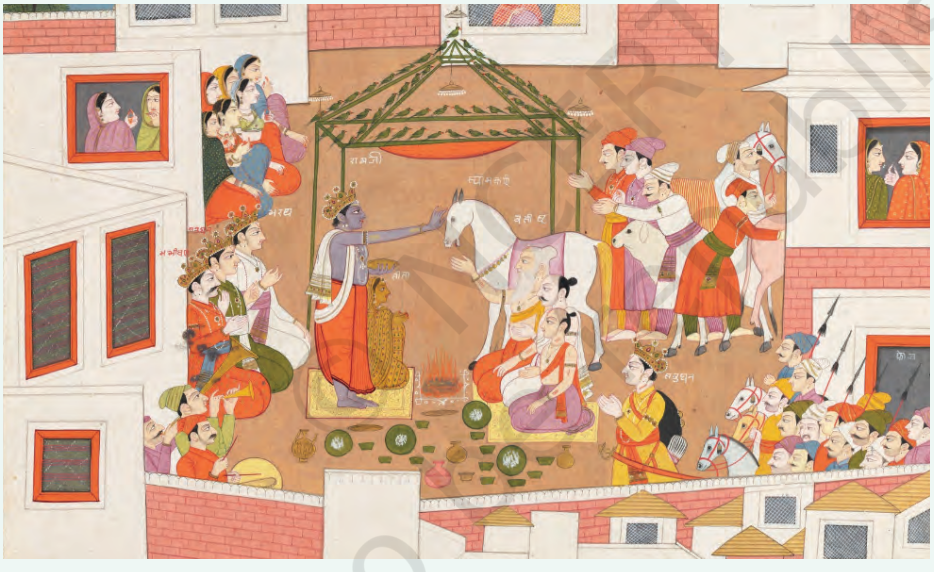


Fig. 6.4. Scene from the Rāmāyaṇa in which King Rāma is seen performing the aśhvamedha yajña (19th century painting, National Museum)

The *aśhvamedha yajña* was a Vedic ritual conducted by many rulers to declare their position as the king. In this ritual, a horse accompanied by soldiers was left to wander freely. Any territory that the horse crossed unchallenged was considered to become a part of the king's empire. If any ruler stopped the horse, it led to a battle to determine supremacy.

Sanskrit emerged as one of the preferred languages for philosophical and literary works. Do you recall some aspects of the *Yoga Sūtras* in your Physical Education and Well-being classes in Grade 6? These *Yoga Sūtras* were compiled by Patañjali during this period.

The Śhungas patronised literature, art and architecture. The Bharhut Stūpa (in present-day Madhya Pradesh) presents us with beautiful examples of Śhunga art. It was probably built during the time of Ashoka, but the Śhungas added beautifully carved railings and reliefs depicting stories from the Buddha's life. These are considered some of the earliest examples of Buddhist art.

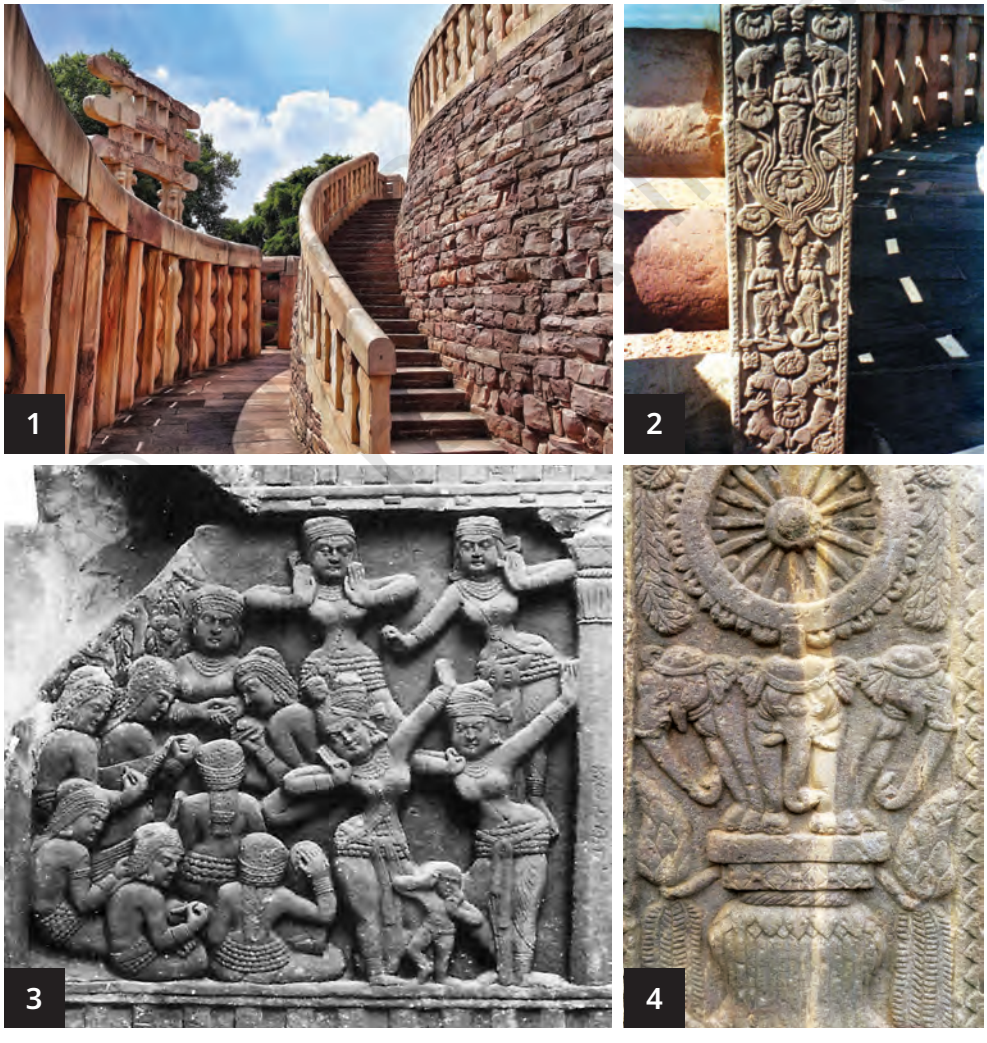


Fig.6.5.1. Railings at the Bharhut Stūpa. Fig. 6.5.2. Carving of Lakshmi on a railing. Fig. 6.5.3. A group of singers and dancers. 6.5.4. Elephants holding up the wheel of dharma

Some Śhunga Contribution to Art

Fig. 6.6.1. Pillar with a Greek warrior. Fig. 6.6.2. Male figure. Fig. 6.6.3. Woman with a child. Fig. 6.6.4. Woman with a fan. Fig. 6.6.5. A vase. Fig. 6.6.6. Female figure with hair ornaments, terracotta. Fig. 6.6.7. Royal family. Fig. 6.6.8. Bronze bangles covered with a thin layer of gold. Fig. 6.6.9. Comb of ivory. Fig. 6.6.10. Beads of a necklace.

LET'S EXPLORE

Below is a panel from the Bharhut Stūpa. Look at the two figures on the right. What are they doing? Can you guess their profession? Notice their attire. What does this tell us about them? List other details that you notice in the panel and discuss your findings in class.

Fig. 6.7. A panel from the Bharhut Stūpa

LET'S EXPLORE

Look closely at the pictures in the collage in Fig 6.6 (on the previous page). In a note, write down your observations on the clothes, the jewellery, and other objects of daily use.

The Sātavāhanas

From the limited evidence available, the Śhungas seem to have waged wars with many of their neighbouring regions. This may have included the Sātavāhanas, who ruled large parts of the Deccan from the 2nd century BCE onward, to the south of the Śhunga Empire. Sometimes referred to as 'Andhras', the Sātavāhanas were a powerful dynasty and their empire largely comprised of present-day Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Maharashtra, with different capital cities at different times — the most famous were Amrāvatī and Pratiṣhṭhāna (Paithan). Trade and commerce appear to have flourished in the Sātavāhana kingdom.

Coins issued by the Sātavāhana rulers have been found in various regions of India, from Gujarat to Andhra Pradesh — India's western and eastern coasts. Indeed, many coins depicted ships, suggesting that maritime trade was an important part of economic life. The type of ship depicted on the coin above suggests advanced shipbuilding and navigation technologies.

Fig. 6.8. A Sātavāhana coin bearing the image of a seafaring ship with two masts. Notice how the masts of the ship are prominently depicted with intersecting lines, possibly representing sails; the wavy lines below represent oceanic waters.

Agriculture flourished in the Krishna-Godavari river system, which provided economic stability to the kingdom. The Sātavāhanas had active trade networks that reached as far as the Roman Empire and included an exchange of goods like spices, textiles, sandalwood, and luxury items like gold-plated pearls, ivory, etc. Imports included glass and perfumed ointments. Tolls and taxes on trade added revenue to the kingdom.

Economic prosperity and a relatively peaceful political period facilitated the development of literature, art and culture, to which the Sātavāhanas made significant contributions.

Fig. 6.9. The Naneghat Caves near Pune, located close to a major trade route, were used for collection of tolls and taxes, and as resting places for traders.

Fig. 6.10. Coin of the Sātavāhanas with an inscription in Brahmi script, 'King Lord Sātakarṇi, son of Gautamī'.

Life under the Sātavāhanas

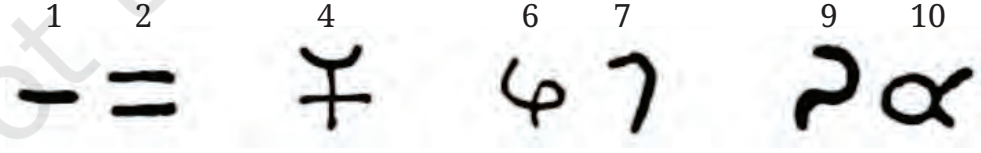
In the Sātavāhana tradition, princes were often named after their mothers. Thus Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi was named after his mother, Gautamī Balaśhrī. She was a powerful queen who donated land to Buddhist monks and had an important inscription carved in Nāśhik, showing her influence in the kingdom.

THINK ABOUT IT

What, according to you, could the tradition of using the mother's name at the beginning of a king's name signify?

Another set of inscriptions found in the Naneghat caves near Pune (Fig. 6.9) focuses on a Sātavāhana widow queen who, remarkably, performed several Vedic rituals, including the *aśhvamedha yajña*. The inscriptions mention Vedic gods like Indra, Chandra, and Sūrya. We also get a glimpse of the queen's donations (*dāna*): land, cows, horses, elephants, silver coins, and other items to priests, guests, workers, scholars, and monks.

These inscriptions are in the Brahmi script and include a few numerals (that is, symbols for numbers) which, at times, resemble today's shapes, as shown below. This is one of the many evidences showing that modern numerals ultimately originated in India.



THINK ABOUT IT

In the above series of numerals, which ones look somewhat like our modern numerals? Which ones don't?

The Sātavāhanas were devout followers of Vāsudeva (another name for Kṛiṣhṇa), although they also patronised other schools of thought, which flourished during their rule. For instance, Sātavāhana kings often granted tax-free agricultural land to Vedic scholars, Jaina and Buddhist monks, helping them to pursue their studies and practices.

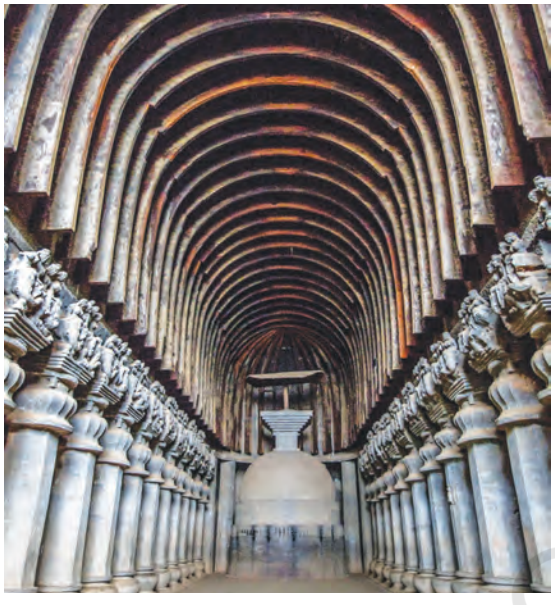


Fig. 6.11. The Karla caves (near Lonavala in present-day Maharashtra) to which the Sātavāhanas contributed during their reign. These caves were made for Buddhist monks. Notice the magnificent pillars and the stone replica of a stūpa in the centre — all of it carved out of a rocky hillside!

Fig. 6.12. A yakṣha (a minor deity associated with nature) from the Pitalkhora caves, Maharashtra, carved in the Sātavāhana period.

THINK ABOUT IT

This sculpture of a *yakṣha* from Pitalkhora carries an inscription on its hand, *kanhadāsena hiramakarena kāṭa* meaning 'made by Kanahadasa, a goldsmith'. Is it not interesting to see that a goldsmith could also craft a sculpture made of stone? What do you think this tells us about people's professions at the time?

In the 3rd century CE, the Sātavāhana Empire fragmented into smaller independent kingdoms. Several factors contributed to its disintegration, the most significant one being weak central

control and a gradual economic decline. Once again, this will pave the way for regional powers to assert or reassert their dominance and establish new kingdoms.

Coming of the Chedis

Let us go back a little. Do you remember the Kalinga war mentioned in the previous chapter? After the decline of the Maurya Empire, Kalinga rose as a prominent power under the kings of the Chedi dynasty.

Khāravela, one of their main rulers, was a devoted follower of Jain teachings; he was sometimes called *bhikṣhu-rāja* or monk-king, although he respected all schools of thoughts. Near Bhubaneswar, the famous Udayagiri-Khandagiri caves, likely developed for Jain monks, feature intricate panels and statues, and spacious rooms carved into the rock, showcasing the skill of the craftsmen. The design and craftsmanship of these caves make them notable examples of 'rock-cut architecture', a style of architecture that we will turn to in higher classes.

Fig. 6.13.1. Udayagiri caves near Bhubaneswar. Fig. 6.13.2. The Hāthīgumphā inscription. Fig. 6.13.3. Carved panel showing a scene from the Rāmāyaṇa

One of the caves prominently displays the Hāthīgumphā inscription, written in Brahmi script, which records King Khāravela's accomplishments year after year, including his victorious military campaigns and his benevolent works for the welfare of his people. Khāravela also proudly declares that he created a 'council of ascetics and sages' from a hundred regions and is 'accomplished in extraordinary virtues, respector of every sect and repairer of every temple'. Once again, a ruler takes pride in extending his protection to all schools of thought. This is a fundamental part of what we may call the 'Indian ethos'.

THINK ABOUT IT

Notice the regularity of the rock-cut chambers sculpted nearly two millennia ago. How did artisans achieve such precision with just a chisel and a hammer? Picture yourself as a sculptor in that era, shaping stone into art with your own hands. What tools would you use?

Kingdoms and Life in the South

In India's southern region, this period, between the 2nd or 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, saw the rise to prominence of three powerful kingdoms — the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pāṇḍyas — which often competed with each other for control over the South, while also contributing to the region's growth in trade and culture. Let's remember how Aśhoka's empire stopped at those south Indian kingdoms (which he mentions in his edicts), which suggests that they remained independent even at the height of Mauryan power. And although Khāravela claims that he defeated an alliance of south Indian kings that threatened his own territory, the location of that battle is unknown and he does not seem to have invaded the southern region.

THINK ABOUT IT

In the map given on next page, you may notice different symbols alongside the names of the kingdoms. What do these symbols represent? Think about how they highlight the unique identities of the kingdoms.

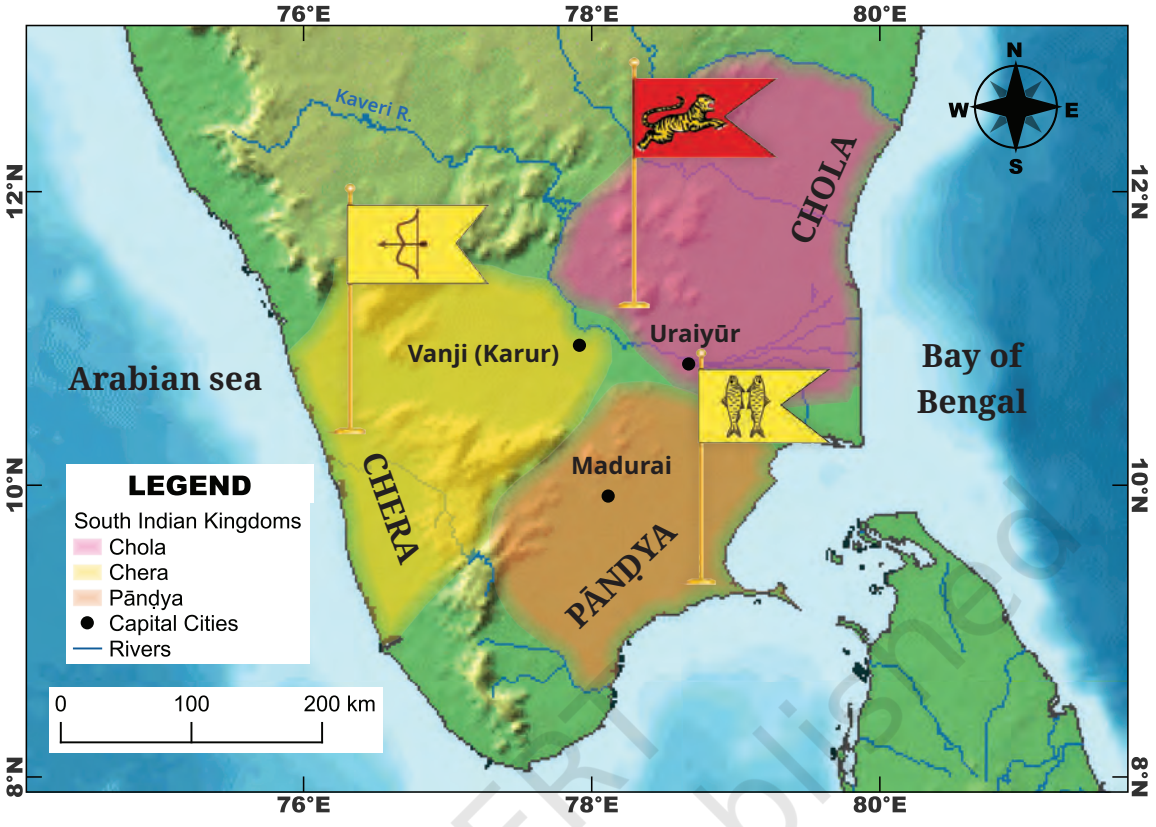


Fig. 6.14. Kingdoms in the South (note that borders are approximate and fluctuated in time).

That period saw the advent of many poets whose works, collectively known as 'Sangam literature', defined the entire era: it came to be known as the 'Sangam Age'. The word *sangam* is derived from the Sanskrit *sangha*, which translates to 'association' and 'coming together'—in this context, referring to an assembly of the poets. The Sangam literature, the oldest in south India, consists of several collections or anthologies of poems and is much consulted by historians who investigate the society and culture of the times. Primarily, Sangam poetry expresses with great skill and delicacy personal emotions such as love or societal values like heroism and generosity.

The Cholas

The Sangams refer to three 'crowned kings'—the Cholas, Cheras and Pāṇḍyas. The Cholas were a powerful dynasty that ruled parts of south India from the 3rd century BCE to the 13th century CE. The Chola king Karikāla is said to have defeated a combined force of the Cheras and Pāṇḍyas and established his supremacy.

Silappadikāram: The Tale of the Anklet

This famous epic, composed soon after the Sangam collections, tells the story of Kaṇṇagi, who lived happily with her husband Kovalan in the prosperous Chola capital city of Puhār (identified with Kāveripattinam seen earlier). However, Kovalan fell in love with a dancer and eventually lost all his wealth over her. Realising his mistake, he returned to Kaṇṇagi, who forgave him. They then travelled to Madurai, the capital of the Pāṇḍya kingdom, hoping to rebuild their lives.

Fig. 6.15. Statue of Kaṇṇagi, Chennai

To start anew, Kaṇṇagi gave Kovalan one of her anklets to sell; however, he was falsely accused of theft and executed by the Pāṇḍya king. Devastated, Kaṇṇagi proved his innocence by revealing her second anklet. The king, realising his mistake, died of shock. Kaṇṇagi then cursed Madurai, invoking the god of fire who destroyed the city. She then walked further west to the Chera kingdom, where she was honoured as a goddess. Even today, Kaṇṇagi is worshipped in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Silappadikāram's exquisite poetry thus centres on the principles of justice and the ruler's dharma to protect it. It also takes us through cities rich in traded goods, through three kingdoms, and also through several schools of thought.

THINK ABOUT IT

Observe the statue of the king. How is he depicted? What do his posture, clothing, and expression say about his power and status?

Fig. 6.16. Statue of King Karikāla at the Grand Anicut Memorial Park in Tamil Nadu

Karikāla undertook many projects for the benefit of the people. Among them is the Kallaṇai or Grand Anicut, a complex water diversion system located at a geographically strategic point just downstream of the Srirangam island. It helped to divert waters from the Kāveri to the central and southern parts of the Kāveri delta. This enabled more land to be brought under cultivation, earning this area the name 'rice bowl of the South'. Restored several times in the course of time, it is still in use and helps millions of people in Tamil Nadu by providing water for irrigation and thus supporting agriculture in the region.

Fig. 6.17. A view of the Kallaṇai or Grand Anicut

The Cheras

Also known as the Keralaputra (sons of Kerala), the Cheras ruled over the western parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, with their capital at Vanji, present-day Karur in Tamil Nadu. They played an essential role in shaping the region's cultural and economic history, encouraging the growth of Tamil literature and patronising Sangam poets.

The Cheras were known for their extensive trade connections with the Roman Empire and West Asia, exporting many goods from India to the outside world. The kingdom became a hub for the export of spices, timber, ivory and pearls.

THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever wondered how historians uncover the trade relations between two distant kingdoms many centuries ago? Let's take a moment to brainstorm and discuss how this information comes to light.

The Chera kings issued a number of coins under their reign. Do you notice the royal emblem of Cheras on one such coin given below?

Fig. 6.18. Coins under Chera Kings

The Pāṇḍyas

The Pāṇḍyas' rule over parts of Tamil Nadu and the surrounding regions, with their capital at present-day Madurai, goes back several centuries BCE. Successive kings expanded the Pāndyan kingdom. In his work *Indika*, Megasthenes mentions this kingdom as a prosperous one, with a strong administration and involved in active trade with distant powers like the Greeks and Romans, apart from much internal trade (Khāravela, for instance, states that he gets hundreds of pearls brought from the Pāṇḍya kingdom). The Pāṇḍyas were also an important naval power of the subcontinent. The later Pāṇḍyas also contributed greatly to the art, architecture, and overall prosperity of the region.

THINK ABOUT IT

The Pāṇḍyas were known for their pearls. Why do you think pearls were an important article of trade during these times?

The Pāṇḍyas left many inscriptions in which their kings asserted their great concern for their subjects' welfare and their encouragements to all schools of thought and belief.

Invasions of the Indo-Greeks

Fig. 6.19. The Heliodorus pillar near Vidisha

Having completed our brief journey into south India, it is time to return to the north, where a very different kind of development is about to occur. So far, we have only visited a few native dynasties; yet the same period also witnessed the arrival of invaders who entered through the northwest frontier and took control of the northwestern, northern, and central regions of the Subcontinent.

Let us first examine the legacy of Alexander's brief campaign in the Indus plains. While retreating from the areas he had conquered, he left satraps behind. Over time, these regional rulers established their independent domains and came to be known as 'Indo-Greeks'.

After the decline of the Mauryas, the areas in the northwestern regions (roughly present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) were an easy target for the Indo-Greeks. However, while they arrived as conquerors, they were much influenced by the rich local culture. This cultural interaction led to a blend of Greek and Indian elements in governance, art, language, and daily life, shaping the cultural landscape of the region.

The Heliodorus pillar, near Vidisha (Madhya Pradesh), is a notable example of such connections. It is named after an Indo-

Greek ambassador, who in his inscription praises Vāsudeva as the 'god of gods'. The inscription also states, "Three immortal precepts (footsteps) [...] when practised lead to heaven: self-restraint, charity, consciousness."

During excavations in north India, archaeologists have found many Indo-Greeks coins, which have provided most of the information we have about these rulers. Those coins were made of gold, silver, copper and nickel often portraying a king on one side and Greek deities on the other. However, some coins, instead, depicted Indian deities like Vāsudeva-Kṛiṣhṇa and Lakṣhmī.

The rule of the Indo-Greeks ended with the invasions of the Indo-Scythians or Śhakas (see a little below).

LET'S EXPLORE

What do you think might have been the meaning of having deities like Vāsudeva-Kṛiṣhṇa or Lakṣhmī on some Indo-Greek coins?

Fig. 6.20. An Indo-Greek silver coin with Vāsudeva-Kṛiṣhṇa on one side

DON'T MISS OUT

The Śhakas (sometimes called Indo-Scythians) also invaded the northwest of the Subcontinent and ruled from the latter part of the 2nd century BCE to the 5th century CE. Their kingdoms rose to power after the Indo-Greeks, and they were in power until the arrival of the Kuṣhāṇas (see below). It was during this period that the Śhaka Samvat calendar was developed. It is 78 years behind the Gregorian calendar (except from January–March, when it is behind by 79 years). It was adopted as the Indian National Calendar in 1957.

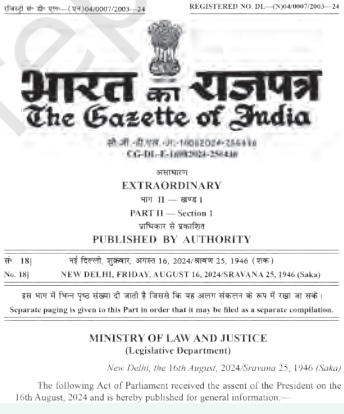

भारत का राजपत्र
The Gazette of India
EXTRAORDINARY
PART II — Section 1
PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY
NEW DELHI, FRIDAY, AUGUST 16, 2024/SRAVANA 25, 1946 (Saka)
MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE
(Legislative Department)

Fig. 6.21. Notice how dates are provided in both the Gregorian and Śhaka Samvat eras on this official publication of the Government of India.

The Emergence of the Kuṣhāṇas

The Kuṣhāṇas, originally from central Asia, entered India probably in the 2nd century CE. At its peak, their empire extended from central Asia to large parts of northern India. Their rule marked a period of extensive cultural intermixing and had a profound impact on the history of the Indian subcontinent.

When he was not busy with his military campaigns, Kaṇiṣhka encouraged art and culture, leading to the development of new artistic styles.

Fig. 6.22. Headless statue of King Kaṇiṣhka

LET'S EXPLORE

Carefully observe this massive statue (1.85 m high) and notice the clothing, weapon, and footwear. What does it tell us about this figure?

This famous 'headless' statue is of King Kaṇiṣhka, probably the most powerful ruler of the Kuṣhāṇa dynasty. The Brahmi inscription on the statue reads, '*mahārāja rājadhirāja devaputra kaṇiṣhka*', that is, 'The great king, king of kings, son of God, Kaṇiṣhka'.

LET'S EXPLORE

Observe the coins carefully. Who, besides the emperor, appears on the coin?

Fig. 6.23. Coins of Kaṇiṣhka

On the first coin, Kāṇiṣhka is shown holding a spear, titled 'King of Kings', while the other side features Buddha with the inscription BOΔΔO (Buddha) in Greek script. On the second coin, an emperor appears on one side, and Śhiva with the bull Nandi on the other. Let's reflect on the following:

- Why would a powerful ruler feature Buddha and Śhiva on his coins? What does it say about his values and priorities?
- Can you find modern examples of such symbolic currency?

The Kuṣhāṇas held control over significant sections of the Silk Route (on the next page), and during their reign, trade grew, connecting India with other parts of Asia and the West.

Continuing the trend set under the Indo-Greek rulers, Kuṣhāṇa art and architecture, exemplified by the Gāndhāra and Mathurā schools of art, are celebrated for their fusion of Indian and Greek styles. The sculptures feature a variety of deities reflecting the peaceful co-existence of various schools of thought. This era saw the rise of representations of deities—like Sūrya or the sun god—which looked more similar to humans and the increase in the development of religious art, laying the groundwork for later temple architecture in the subcontinent.

The Gāndhāra style, which emerged in the western regions of Punjab, blended Greco-Roman elements with Indian features. Most sculptures and artefacts from this tradition were crafted in intricate detail from grey-black schist stone. In particular, sculptors produced many fine Buddha images with realistic anatomy and flowing robes.

Fig. 6.24. Head of a bodhisattva (or future Buddha) from the Gāndhāra School of Art. Note the fusion of Indian and Greek features.

THINK ABOUT IT

Do you know where Gāndhāra is? Does it remind you of a character from the epic Mahābhārata?

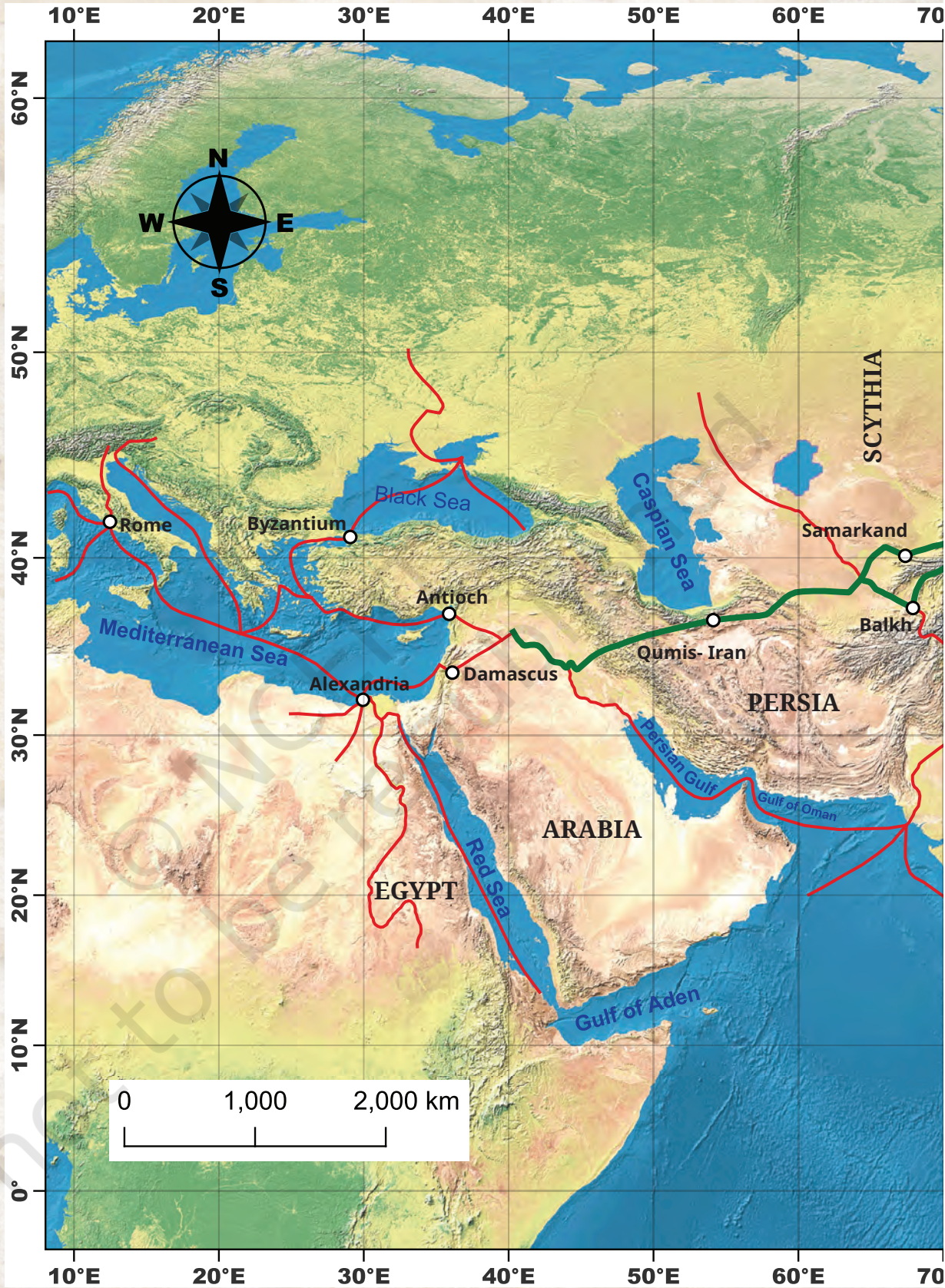
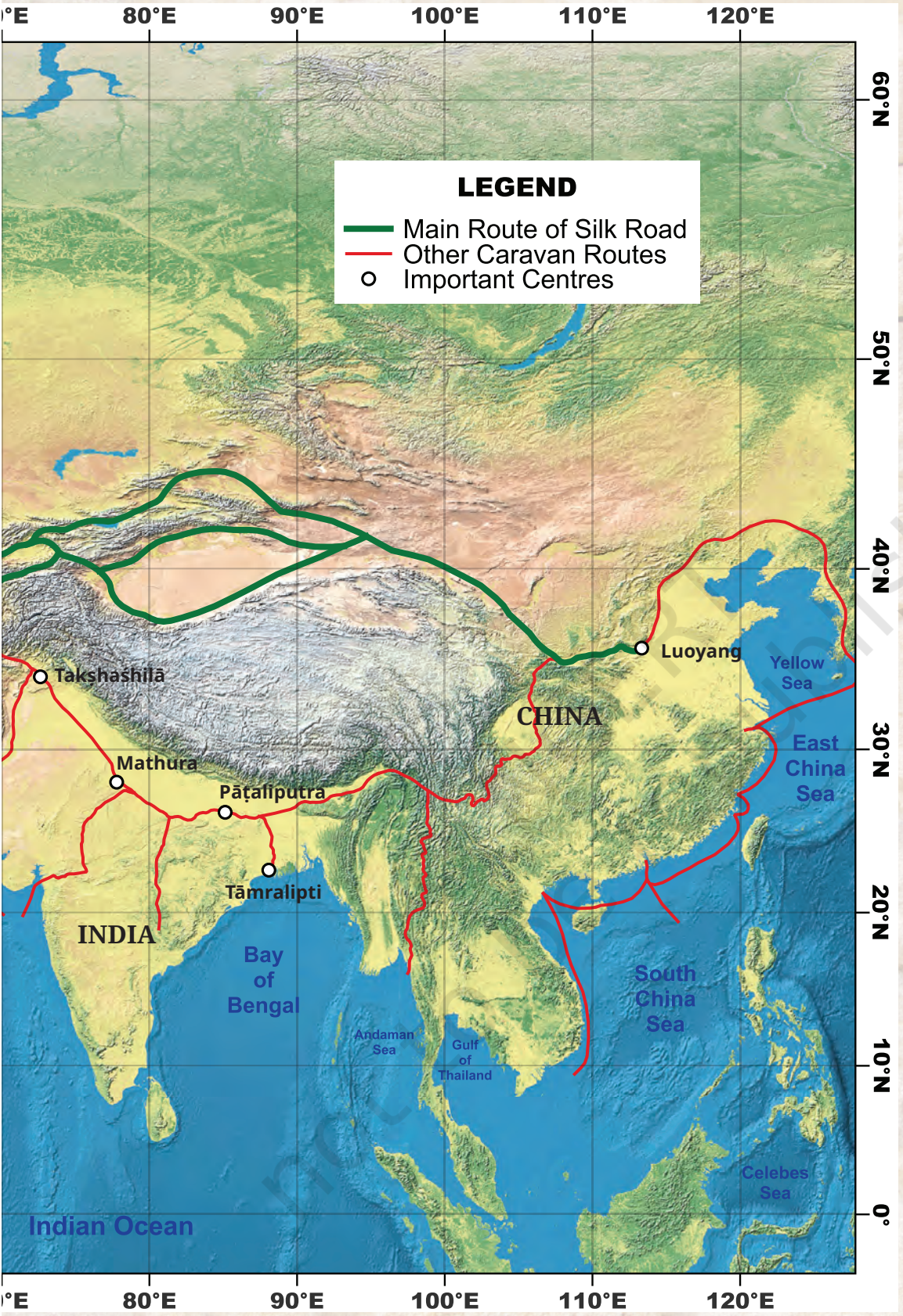


Fig. 6.25. Some of the trade routes of the ancient world. The network marked in green shows the Silk Route connecting China with the Mediterranean world and passing through central Asia, Persia, etc.



The Mathurā style developed in the Mathura region of present-day Uttar Pradesh and is known for its distinct Indian style. Unlike the Gāndhāra style, it primarily used red sandstone for its sculptures and reflects less influence from Greco-Roman aesthetics. This art form is known for its depictions of Indian deities, including Kubera, Lakṣhmī, Śhiva, Buddha, *yakṣhas* and *yakṣhiṇīs* and generally produced fuller figures with smooth modelling.

Fig. 6.26. Kubera, God of 'wealth' from the Mathura School of Art. Did you miss the prominent moustache? The moustache is a distinguishing feature of some Indian sculptures.

LET'S EXPLORE

Now that you are familiar with the basic characteristics of the Mathurā and Gāndhāra styles of art, study the pictures of artefacts given in Fig. 6.27 on the right page and try to identify which school of art each artefact belongs to. Write your observations with justifications and discuss your answers with your classmates.

Despite the political conflicts and power struggles, the period saw remarkable cultural exchange and assimilation. This shared heritage is evident in art and architecture, where styles interacted, but with a dominance of Indian themes (especially Hindu and Buddhist ones). It was also the age when Sanskrit literature flourished, with, in particular, the composition of major Indian texts such as the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana (refer to the chapter "Unity in Diversity, or 'Many in the One' " in your Grade 6 textbook).

Recognising these connections encourages us to view this 'Tapestry of the Past' not as confined to any one kingdom or ruler, but as a dynamic process that works through interaction and assimilation over time.

Fig. 6.27.1. A scene of the death of Buddha. Fig. 6.27.2. Bodhisattva Maitreya. Fig. 6.27.3. Śhiva linga being worshipped by Kuṣhāna devotees. Fig. 6.27.4. A Nāga between two Nāgīs, with an inscription referring to the eighth year of Kaṇiṣhka's reign. Fig. 6.27.5. Kartikeya, the god of war, and Agni, the god of fire. Fig. 6.27.6. Standing Buddha.

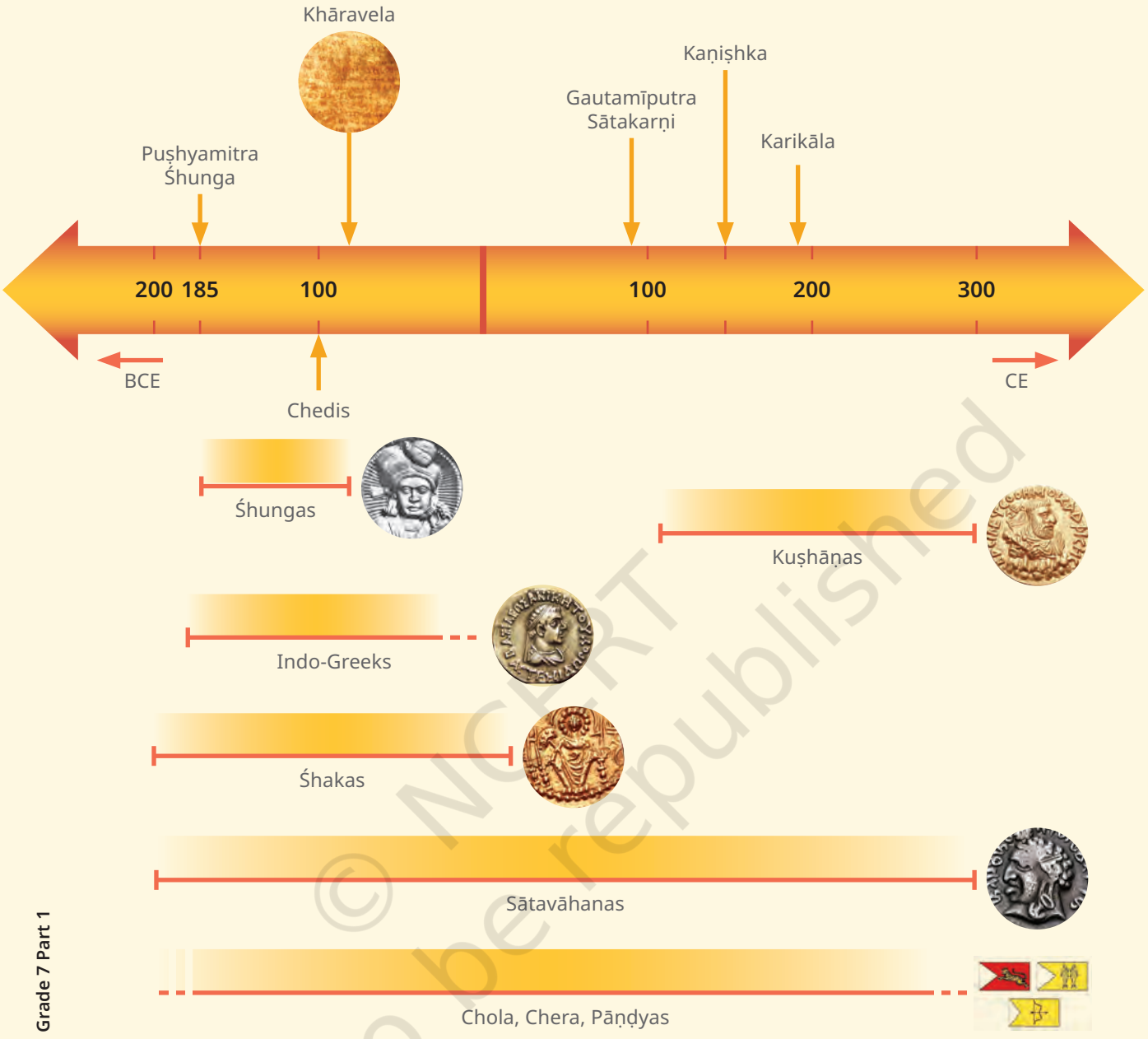


Fig. 6.28

Before we move on ...

- The period after the disintegration of the Maurya empire was characterised by the emergence of many big and small kingdoms across the Subcontinent.
- The internal conflicts were coupled with foreign invasions, which together led to a period of reorganisation of political powers.

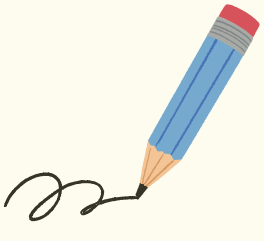
- This period witnessed a dialogue of various cultures that absorbed each other's influence to create new styles of art, architecture, coinage, etc., with ultimately a dominance of Indian themes and flourishing Sanskrit literature.
- This time was also marked by remarkable developments in trade activities, both internal and external.

Questions and activities

1. Why was the post-Maurya era also known as the era of reorganisation?
2. Write a note on the Sangam literature in 150 words.
3. Which rulers mentioned in this chapter included their mother's name in their title, and why did they do so?
4. Write a note of 250 words about one kingdom from this chapter that you find interesting. Explain why you chose it. After presenting your note in class, find out what kingdoms have been the most selected by your classmates.
5. Imagine you have the chance to create your own kingdom. What royal emblem would you choose, and why? What title would you take as the ruler? Write a note about your kingdom, including its values, rules and regulations, and some unique features.
6. You have read about the architectural developments of the post-Maurya era. Take an outline of the Indian subcontinent and mark the approximate locations of some of the ancient structures mentioned in this chapter.

Noodles

*‘Noodles’ is our abbreviation for ‘Notes and Doodles’!

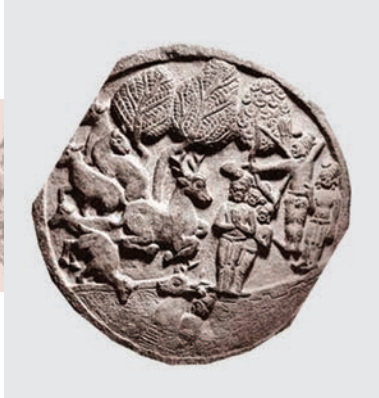


ChronicleIAS

Post-Mauryan India

Class 11th NCERT

Chapter 4



11144CH04

4

POST-MAURYAN TRENDS IN INDIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

FROM the second century BCE onwards, various rulers established their control over the vast Mauryan Empire: the Shungas, Kanvas, Kushanas and Guptas in the north and parts of central India; the Satvahanas, Ikshavakus, Abhiras, Vakataks in southern and western India. Incidentally, the period of the second century BCE also marked the rise of the main Brahmanical sects such as the Vaishnavas and the Shaivas. There are numerous sites dating back to the second century BCE in India. Some of the prominent examples of the finest sculpture are found at Vidisha, Bharhut (Madhya Pradesh), Bodhgaya (Bihar), Jaggayyapeta (Andhra Pradesh), Mathura (Uttar Pradesh), Khandagiri-Udaigiri (Odisha), Bhaja near Pune and Pavani near Nagpur (Maharashtra).

Bharhut

Bharhut sculptures are tall like the images of *Yaksha* and *Yakhshini* in the Mauryan period, modelling of the sculptural volume is in low relief maintaining linearity. Images stick to the picture plane. In the relief panels depicting narratives, illusion of three-dimensionality is shown with tilted perspective. Clarity in the narrative is enhanced by selecting main events. At Bharhut, narrative panels are shown with fewer characters but as the time progresses, apart from the main character in the story, others also start appearing in the picture space. At times more than one event at one geographical place is clubbed in the picture space or only a single main event is depicted in the pictorial space.

Availability of the space is utilised to the maximum by the sculptors. Folded hands in the narratives as well as single figures of the *Yakhshas* and *Yakshinis* are shown flat clinging to the chest. But in some cases, especially in later times, the hands are shown with the natural projection against the chest. Such examples show how artisans who were working at a collective level had to

Yakshini, *Bharhut*

understand the method of carving. Initially, dressing the surface of stone slabs appears as the main concern. Later the human body and other forms were sculpted. Due to shallow carving of the picture surface, projection of hands and feet was not possible, hence, the folded hands and awkward position of the feet. There is a general stiffness in the body and arms. But gradually, such visual appearance was modified by making images with deep carvings, pronounced volume and a very naturalistic representation of human and animal bodies. Sculptures at Bharhut, Bodhgaya, Sanchi Stupa-2, and Jagayyapetta are good examples.

Narrative reliefs at Bharhut show how artisans used the pictorial language very effectively to communicate stories. In one such narrative, showing Queen Mayadevi's (mother of Siddhartha Gautam) dream, a descending elephant is shown. The queen is shown reclining on the bed whereas an elephant is shown on the top heading towards the womb of Queen Mayadevi. On the other hand, the depiction of a *Jataka* story is very simple—narrated by clubbing the events according to the geographical location of the story like the depiction of Ruru *Jataka* where the Boddhisattva deer is rescuing a man on his back. The other event in the same picture frame depicts the King standing with his army and about to shoot an arrow at the deer, and the man who was

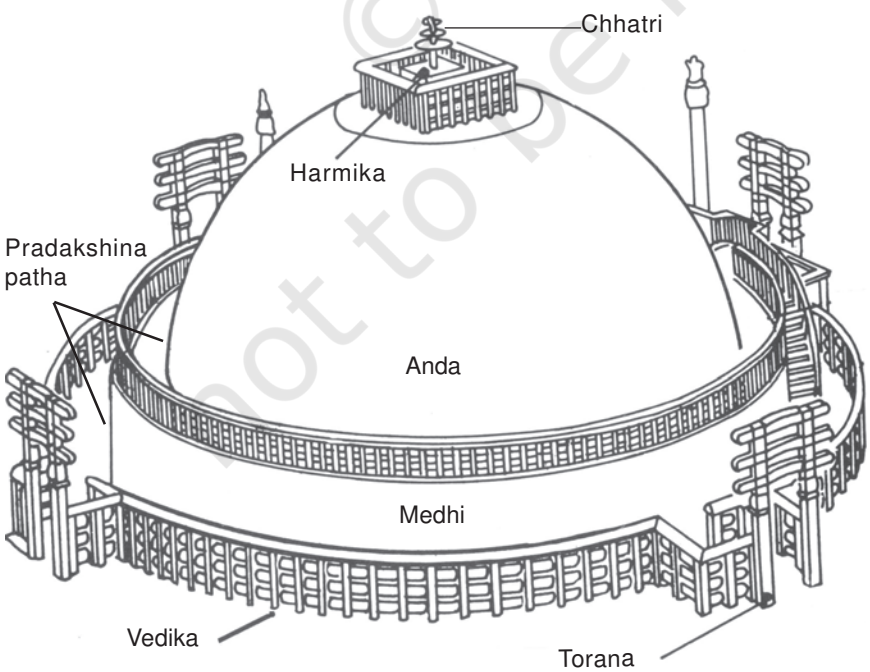
Jataka *panel , Bharhut*

Queen Maya's dream, Bharhut

rescued by the deer is also shown along with the king pointing a finger at the deer. According to the story, the man promised the deer after his rescue that he would not disclose his identity to anybody. But when the king makes a proclamation of reward for disclosing the identity of the deer, he turns hostile and takes the king to the same jungle where he had seen the deer. Such *Jataka* stories became part of *stupa* decoration. Interestingly, with the rise in the construction of *stupas* in various parts of the country, regional stylistic variations also began to emerge. One main characteristic in all the male images of first–second centuries BCE is the knotted headgear. In many sculptures it is very consistent. Some of the sculptures found at Bharhut are displayed in Indian Museum, Kolkata.

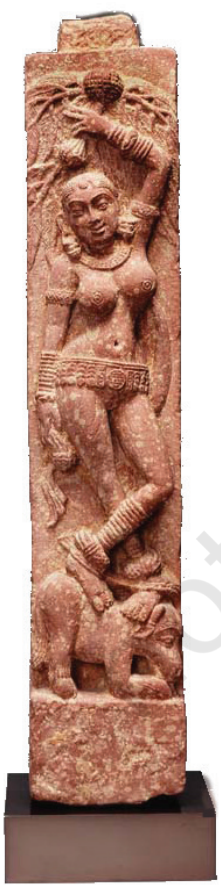
Sanchi

The next phase of sculptural development at Sanchi Stupa-1, Mathura, and Vengi in Andhra Pradesh (Guntur District) is noteworthy in the stylistic progression. Stupa-1 at Sanchi has upper as well as lower *pradakshinapatha* or circumambulatory path. It has four beautifully decorated *toranas* depicting various events from the life of the Buddha and the *Jatakas*. Figure compositions are in high relief, filling up the entire space. Depiction of posture gets naturalistic and there is no stiffness in the body. Heads have considerable projection in the picture space. Rigidity



Plan of Stupa-1, Sanchi

Stone carving, Stupa-1, Sanchi



Part of railing, Sangol

in the contours gets reduced and images are given movement. Narration gets elaborated. Carving techniques appear more advanced than Bharhut. Symbols continue to be used representing the Buddha. At Sanchi Stupa-1, narratives get more elaborated; however, the depiction of the dream episode remains very simple showing the reclining image of the queen and the elephant at the top. The historical narratives such as the siege of Kushinara, Buddha's visit to Kapilavastu, visit of Ashoka to the Ramgrama Stupa are carved with considerable details. In Mathura, images of this period bear the same quality but are different in the depiction of physiognomic details.

Mathura, Sarnath and Gandhara Schools

The first century CE onwards, Gandhara (now in Pakistan), Mathura in northern India and Vengi in Andhra Pradesh emerged as important centres of art production. Buddha in the symbolic form got a human form in Mathura and Gandhara. The sculptural tradition in Gandhara had the confluence of Bactria, Parthia and the local Gandhara tradition. The local sculptural tradition at Mathura became so strong that the tradition spread to other parts of northern India. The best example in this regard is the *stupa* sculptures found at Sanghol in the Punjab. The Buddha image at Mathura is modelled on the lines of earlier *Yaksha* images whereas in Gandhara it has Hellenistic features. Early Jain Teerthankar images and portraits of kings, specially the headless Kanishka are also found from Mathura.

Images of Vaishnava (mainly Vishnu and his various forms) and Shaiva (mainly the *lingas* and *mukhalingas*) faiths are also found at Mathura but Buddhist images are found in large numbers. It may be noted that the images of Vishnu and Shiva are represented by their *ayudhas* (weapons). There is boldness in carving the large images, the volume of the images is projected out of the picture plane, the faces are round and smiling, heaviness in the sculptural volume is reduced to relaxed flesh. The garments of the body are clearly visible and they cover the left shoulder. Images of the Buddha, *Yakshas*, *Yakshinis*, Shaivite and Vaishnavite deities and portrait statues are profusely sculpted. In the second century CE, images in Mathura get sensual, rotundity increases, they become fleshier. The trend continues in the fourth century CE but in the late fourth century CE, the massiveness and fleshiness is reduced further and the flesh becomes more tightened, the volume of the drapery also gets reduced and in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, the drapery is

integrated into the sculptural mass. Transparent quality in the robes of the Buddha images is evident. In this period, two important schools of sculptures in northern India are worth noting. The traditional centre, Mathura, remained the main art production site whereas Sarnath and Kosambi also emerged as important centres of art production. Many Buddha images in Sarnath have plain transparent drapery covering both shoulders, and the halo around the head has very little ornamentation whereas the Mathura Buddha images continue to depict folds of the drapery in the Buddha images and the halo around the head is profusely decorated. One can visit museums at Mathura, Sarnath, Varanasi, New Delhi, Chennai, Amaravati, etc. to study the features of early sculptures.

Among the important *stupa* sites outside the Gangetic valley is Devnimori in Gujarat. In the subsequent centuries sculptures had little variations while slender images with transparent drapery remained a dominant aesthetic sensibility.

Meditating Buddha, Gandhar, third–fourth century CE

Bodhisattva, Gandhar, fifth–sixth century CE

Buddhist Monuments of South India

Vengi in Andhra Pradesh has many *stupa* sites like Jagayyapetta, Amaravati, Bhattiprolu, Nagarjunkonda, Goli, etc. Amaravati has a *mahachaitya* and had many sculptures which are now preserved in Chennai Museum, Amaravati Site Museum, National Museum, New Delhi and the British Museum, London. Like the Sanchi Stupa, the Amaravati Stupa also has *pradakshinapatha* enclosed within a *vedika* on which many narrative sculptures are depicted. The domical *stupa* structure is covered with relief *stupa* sculptural slabs which is a unique feature. The *torana* of the Amaravati Stupa has disappeared over a period of time. Events from the life of the Buddha and the *Jataka* stories are depicted. Though in the Amaravati Stupa there is evidence of construction activity in the third century BCE, it was best developed in the first and second centuries CE. Like Sanchi, the early phase is devoid of Buddha images but during the later phase, in the second and third centuries CE, the Buddha images are carved on the drum slabs and at many other places. Interior space in the composition is created by different postures of the figures such as semi-back, back, profile, frontal, semi-frontal, side, etc.

Sculptural form in this area is characterised by intense emotions. Figures are slender, have a lot of movement, bodies are shown with three bents (i.e. *tribhanga*), and the sculptural composition is more complex than at Sanchi. Linearity becomes flexible, dynamic movement breaks the

Carving on outer wall of Stupa, Amaravati

Stupa drum slab, Amravati, second century CE

staticness of form. The idea of creating three-dimensional space in the relief sculpture is devised by using pronounced volume, angular bodies and complex overlapping. However, absolute attention has been paid to the clarity of form despite its size and role in the narrative. Narratives are profusely depicted which include events from the life of the Buddha and the *Jataka* stories. There are a number of *Jataka* scenes that have not been completely identified. In the depiction of the birth event, the queen is shown reclining on a bed surrounded by female attendants and a small-sized elephant is carved on the upper frame of the composition showing the dream of Queen Mayadevi. In another relief, four events related to the birth of the Buddha are shown. These represent varied ways of depicting the narratives.

The animated movement in the figures gets reduced in the sculptures of Nagarjunkonda and Goli in the third century CE. Even within the relatively low relief volume than in the Amaravati sculptures, artists at Nagarjunkonda and Goli managed to create the effect of protruding surfaces of the body which is suggestive in nature and look very integral. Independent Buddha images are also found at Amaravati, Nagarjunkonda and Guntapalle in Andhra Pradesh. Guntapalle is a rock-cut cave site near Eluru. Small apsidal and circular *chaitya* halls have been excavated belonging to the second century BCE. The other important site where rock-cut *stupas* have been excavated is Anakapalle near Vishakhapatanam. In Karnataka, Sannati in Gulbarga district is the largest *stupa* site excavated so far. It also has a *stupa* like the one in Amaravati decorated with sculptural relief.

Panel, Nagarjunkonda

Construction of a large number of stupas does not mean that there were no structured temples or *viharas* or *chaityas*. We do get evidences but no structured *chaitya* or *vihara* survived. Among the important structured *viharas*, mention may be made of the Sanchi apsidal *chaitya* structure, i.e., temple 18, which is a simple shrine temple having front pillars and a hall at the back. Similar structured temples at Guntapalle are also worth mentioning. Along with the images of the Buddha, other Buddhist images of Boddhisattvas like Avalokiteshvara, Padmapani, Vajrapani, Amitabha, and Maitreya Buddha started getting sculpted. However, with the rise of *Vajrayana* Buddhism many Boddhisattva images were added as a part of the personified representations of certain virtues or qualities as propagated by the Buddhist religious principles for the welfare of the masses.

Cave Tradition in Western India

In western India, many Buddhist caves dating back to the second century BCE onwards have been excavated. Mainly three architectural types were executed—(i) apsidal vault-roof *chaitya* halls (found at Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Bhaja); (ii) apsidal vault-roof pillarless hall (found at Thana-Nadsur in Maharashtra); and (iii) flat-roofed quadrangular hall with a circular chamber at the back (found at Kondivite in Maharashtra). The front of the *chaitya* hall is dominated by the motif of a semi-circular *chaitya* arch with an open front which has a wooden facade and, in some cases, there is no dominating *chaitya* arch window such as found at Kondivite. In all the *chaitya* caves a stupa at the back is common.

In the first century BCE some modifications were made to the standard plan of the apsidal vault-roof variety where the hall becomes rectangular like at Ajanta Cave No. 9

Unfinished chaitya cave, Kanheri

Chaitya hall, Karla

with a stone-screen wall as a facade. It is also found at Bedsa, Nashik, Karla and Kanheri. Many cave sites have the standard first type of *chaitya* halls in the subsequent period. In Karla, the biggest rock-cut *chaitya* hall was excavated. The cave consists of an open courtyard with two pillars, a stone screen wall to protect from rain, a veranda, a stone-screen wall as facade, an apsidal vault-roof *chaitya* hall with pillars, and a *stupa* at the back. Karla *chaitya* hall is decorated with human and animal figures. They are heavy in their execution, and move in the picture space. Further elaboration over the Karla *chaitya* hall plan is observed at Kanheri Cave No.3. Though the cave's interior was not fully finished, it shows how the carving progressed from time to time. Subsequently, the quadrangular flat-roofed variety became the most preferred design and is extensively found at many places.

Nashik Cave No. 3

The *viharas* are excavated in all the cave sites. The plan of the *viharas* consists of a veranda, a hall and cells around the walls of the hall. Some of the important *vihara* caves are Ajanta Cave No. 12, Bedsa Cave No. 11, Nashik Cave Nos. 3, 10 and 17. Many of the early *vihara* caves are carved with interior decorative motifs like *chaitya* arches and the *vedica* designs over the cell doors of the cave. Facade design in Nashik Cave Nos. 3, 10, and 17 became a distinct achievement. The *vihara* caves at Nashik were excavated with front pillars carved with *ghata*-base and *ghata*-capital with human figures. One such *vihara* cave was also excavated at Junnar in Maharashtra, which is popularly known as Ganeshleni because an image of Ganesha belonging to a later period was installed in it. Later, a stupa was added at the back of the hall of the *vihara* and it became a *chaitya-vihara*. The stupas in the fourth and fifth centuries CE have Buddha images attached. Junnar has the largest cave excavations— more than two hundred caves around the hills of the town— whereas Kanheri in Mumbai has a hundred and eight excavated caves. The

Chaitya, Cave No. 12, Bhaja

most important sites are Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Ellora, Nashik, Bhaja, Junnar, Karla, Kanheri. Ajanta, Ellora, and Kanheri continue to flourish.

Ajanta

The most famous cave site is Ajanta. It is located in Aurangabad District of Maharashtra State. Ajanta has twenty-nine caves. It has four *chaitya* caves datable to the earlier phase, i.e., the second and the first century BCE (Cave Nos. 10 and 9) and the later phase, i.e., the fifth century CE (Cave Nos. 19 and 26). It has large *chaitya-viharas* and is decorated with sculptures and paintings. Ajanta is the only surviving example of painting of the first century BCE and the fifth century CE. The caves at Ajanta as well as in western Deccan in general have no precise chronology because of the lack of known dated inscriptions.

Cave Nos. 10, 9, 12 and 13 belong to the early phase, Cave Nos. 11, 15 and 6 upper and lower, and Cave No. 7 belong to the phase earlier than late fifth century CE. The rest of the caves belong to late fifth century CE to early sixth century CE. The *chaitya* Cave Nos. 19 and 26 are elaborately carved. Their facade is decorated with Buddha and, Boddhisattva images. They are of the apsidal-vault-roof variety. Cave No. 26 is very big and the entire interior hall is carved with a variety of Buddha images, the biggest one being the *Mahaparinibbana* image. The rest of the caves are *vihara-chaitya* caves. They consist of a pillared veranda, a pillared hall and cells along the walls. The back wall has the main Buddha shrine. Shrine images at Ajanta are grand in size. Some of the *vihara* caves are unfinished such as Cave Nos. 5, 14, 23 24, 28 and 29. Among the important patrons at Ajanta were Varahadeva (patron of Cave No. 16), the prime minister of the Vakataka king, Harishena; Upendragupta (patron of Cave Nos. 17–20) the local king of the region and feudatory of the Vakataka king, Harishena; Buddhabhadra (patron of Cave No. 26); and Mathuradasa (patron of Cave No. 4). Many paintings have survived in Cave Nos. 1, 2, 16 and 17.

View, Ajanta Caves

Sculptural panel in the veranda of Cave No. 2, Ajanta

Paintings have a lot of typological variations. Outward projections are used in the Ajanta paintings of the fifth century CE. Lines are clearly defined and are very rhythmic. Body colour gets merged with the outer line creating the effect of volume. The figures are heavy like the sculptures of western India.

The caves of the early phase also have paintings especially Cave Nos. 9 and 10. They belong to the first century BCE. The figures are broad with heavy proportion and arranged in the picture space in a linear way in Cave No. 9. Lines are sharp. Colours are limited. Figures in these caves are painted with considerable naturalism and there is no over-stylisation. Events are grouped together according to geographical location. Tiered, horizontally-arranged figures appear as a convenient choice of the artisans. Separation of geographic location has been indicated by using outward architectural bands. Figures appear like the Sanchi sculptures which indicate how the lithic and painting traditions were progressing simultaneously. The frontal knot of the headgear of the figures follows the same pattern as that of the sculptures. However, there are a few different patterns of headgear.

Painting of the Buddha, Yashodhra and Rahul, Cave No. 17, Ajanta

Apsara, Cave No. 17, Ajanta

The second phase of paintings can be studied from the images of the Buddhas painted on the walls and pillars of Cave Nos. 10 and 9. These Buddha figures are different from the figures painted in the fifth century CE. Such developments in paintings need to be understood in the context of the religious requirement. Cave excavation and painting were simultaneous processes and dating of the paintings follows the date of the cave excavations. The next stage of development is observed mainly in the paintings of Cave Nos. 16, 17, 1, and 2. However, it does not mean that pictures had not been painted in other caves. Infact almost in all the finished excavations, pictures have been painted but very few have survived. Paintings have typological variations in these caves. It may also be observed that various skin colours

Painted ceiling, Cave No. 10, Ajanta

Paintings, Cave No. 9, Ajanta

are used in the paintings such as brown, yellowish brown, greenish, yellow ochre, etc., which represent a multicoloured population. Paintings of Cave Nos. 16 and 17 have precise and elegant painterly quality. They do not bear the ponderous volume of the sculptures in the caves. Movements in the figures are very rhythmic. Brown thick dark lines are used as contours. Lines are forceful and full of energy. Attempts are also made to give highlights in the figural compositions.

The paintings of Cave Nos. 1 and 2 are very orderly and naturalistic, well integrated with the sculptures in the caves. Architectural setting is simple and the arrangement of figures is delineated in the circular form to create three-dimensionality and the special effects. Half-closed, elongated eyes are employed. Different guilds of artisans seem to have worked on the paintings of these caves which can be inferred from their typological and stylistic variations. Naturalistic postures and unexaggerated facial features are used as exceptional types.

The themes of the paintings are the events from the life of the Buddha, the *Jatakas* and the *Avadanas*. Some paintings such as *Simhala Avadana*, *Mahajanaka Jataka* and *Vidhurpundita Jataka* cover the entire wall of the cave. It is worth noting that *Chaddanta Jataka* has been painted in the early Cave No. 10 with many details and events grouped according to their geographical locations. Events that happened in the jungle and events that happened in the palace are separated by their locations. In Cave No. 10

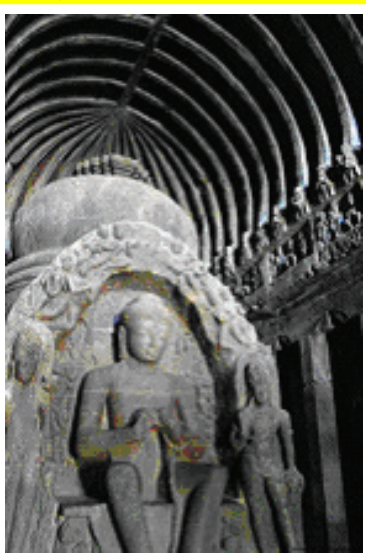
Part of Mahajanaka Jataka panel, Cave No. 1, Ajanta

Chaddanta faithfully follows the Pali text whereas the one painted in Cave No. 17 is very different. In one of the events, the Boddhisattva, *Chaddanta*, is shown removing his own tusk and giving it to the hunter, Sonuttar. The other important paintings are the famous Padmapani and Vajrapani in Cave No. 1. However, it may be observed that the images of Padmapani and Vajrapani are very common in Ajanta but the best preserved paintings are in Cave No. 1. Some figures in Cave No. 2 have affiliation with the Vengi sculptures and at the same time, the influence of the Vidarbha sculptural tradition is also observed in the delineation of some sculptures. The subsequent development of the painting tradition has been discussed in the next chapter.

Ellora

Another important cave site located in Aurangabad District is Ellora. It is located a hundred kilometres from Ajanta and has thirty-four Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain caves. It is a unique art-historical site in the country as it has monastries associated with the three religions dating from the fifth century CE onwards to the eleventh century CE. It is also unique in terms of stylistic eclecticism, i.e., confluence of many styles at one place. The caves of Ellora and Aurangabad show the ongoing differences between the two religions—Buddhism and Brahmanical. There are twelve Buddhist caves having many images belonging to Vajrayana Buddhism like Tara, Mahamayuri, Akshobhya, Avalokiteshwara, Maitrya, Amitabha, etc. Buddhist caves

Courtyard, Kailash Temple, Cave No.16, Ellora



Seated Buddha, Chaitya Hall, Cave No. 10, Ellora

are big in size and are of single, double and triple storeys. Their pillars are massive. Ajanta also has excavated double-storeyed caves but at Ellora, the triple storey is a unique achievement. All the caves were plastered and painted but nothing visible is left. The shrine Buddha images are big in size; they are generally guarded by the images of Padmapani and Vajrapani. Cave No. 12, which is a triple-storey excavation, has images of Tara, Avalokiteshwara, Manushi Buddhas and the images of Vairochana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghsiddhi, Vajrasatva and Vajraraja. On the other hand, the only double-storey cave of the Brahmanical faith is Cave No. 14. Pillar designs grow from the Buddhist caves and when they reach the Jain caves belonging to the ninth century CE, they become very ornate and the decorative forms gain heavy protrusion.

The Brahmanical Cave Nos. 13–28 have many sculptures. Many caves are dedicated to Shaivism, but the images of both Shiva and Vishnu and their various forms according to Puranic narrative are depicted. Among the Shaivite themes, Ravana shaking Mount Kailash, Andhakasurvadha, Kalyanasundara are profusely depicted whereas among the Vaishnavite themes, the different *avatars* of Vishnu are depicted. The sculptures at Ellora

Gajasur Shiva, Cave No.15, Ellora

are monumental, and have protruding volume that create deep recession in the picture space. The images are heavy and show considerable sophistication in the handling of sculptural volume. Various guilds at Ellora came from different places like Vidarbha, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and carved the sculptures. Thereby it is the most diverse site in India in terms of the sculptural styles. Cave No. 16 is known as Kailash leni. A rock-cut temple has been carved out of a single rock, a unique achievement of the artisans, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Among the important Shaivite caves are Cave No. 29 and Cave No. 21. The plan of Cave No. 29 is almost like that of the main cave at Elephanta. The sculptural quality of Cave Nos. 29, 21, 17, 14 and 16 is amazing for its monumentality and vigorous movements in the picture space.

The Bagh Caves, consisting of Buddhist mural paintings, are located 97 km from Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. These rock-cut cave monuments are not natural but carved over a period of time during the ancient India mostly during the Satvahana period. The Bagh caves, like those at Ajanta, were excavated by master craftsmen on perpendicular sandstone rock face of a hill across the seasonal stream of Baghani. Out of the original nine caves, only five have survived, all of which are *viharas* or resting places for monks, having a quadrangular plan. A small chamber, usually at the back, forms the *Chatiya* — the prayer hall. Most significant of the five caves is Cave No. 4, commonly known as the *Rang Mahal,* meaning the Palace of Colours, where paintings on the wall and ceilings are still visible. Other caves where remanants of tempra mural paintings on the walls and ceiling can be seen are Cave Nos. 2, 3, 5 and 7. The ground prepared was a reddish-brown gritty and thick mud plaster, laid out on the walls and ceilings. Over the plaster, lime-priming was done, on which these paintings were made. Some of the most beautiful paintings were on the walls of the portico of Cave 4. To prevent further loss of the values of the Indian art, most paintings were carefully removed in 1982 and today can be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Gwalior.

Elephanta Caves and Other Sites

The Elephanta Caves located near Mumbai are dominated by the Shaivite faith. It is contemporary with Ellora, and its sculptures show slenderness in the body, with stark light and dark effects.

Entrance to Elephanta Caves

The tradition of rock-cut caves continued in the Deccan and they are found not only in Maharashtra but also in Karnataka, mainly at Badami and Aiholi, executed under the patronage of the Chalukyas; in Andhra Pradesh in the area of Vijayawada; and in Tamil Nadu, mainly at Mahabalipuram, under the patronage of the Pallavas. The post-sixth-century development of art history in the country depended more on political patronage than the collective public patronage of the early historic periods.

Mention may also be made of the terracotta figurines that are found at many places all over the country. They show a parallel tradition with the religious lithic sculptures as well as the independent local tradition. Many terracotta figures of various sizes are found which show their popularity. They are toys, religious figurines as well as figurines made for healing purposes as part of the belief systems.

Cave Tradition in Eastern India

Like in western India, Buddhist caves have also been excavated in eastern India, mainly in the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh, and in Odisha. One of the main sites in Andhra Pradesh is Guntapalle in Eluru district. The caves have been excavated in the hills along with the structured monasteries. Perhaps it is among the very unique sites where the structured *stupas*, *viharas* and the caves are

Udaigiri-Khandagiri caves near Bhubaneswar

Details of the veranda, Udaigiri-Khandagiri

excavated at one place. The Guntapalle *chaitya* cave is circular with a *stupa* in the circular hall and a *chaitya* arch carved at the entrance. The cave is relatively small when compared to the caves in western India. A number of *vihara* caves have been excavated. The main *vihara* caves, despite the small dimensions, have been decorated with *chaitya* arches on the exterior. They are rectangular with vaulted roof and are carved single-storeyed or double-storeyed without a large central hall. These excavations date back to the second century BCE. There are some excavations which were added in the subsequent centuries but all are of the *vihara* type. Apart from Guntapalle, the other important cave site is Rampaerrampallam which has very moderate small excavations but there are rock-cut stupas on the hillock. At Anakapalli near Vishakhapatnam, caves were excavated and a huge rock-cut stupa was carved out of the hillock during the fourth–fifth centuries CE. It is a unique site as it has the biggest rock-cut stupas in the country. Many votive rock-cut stupas all around the hillock have also been excavated.

The rock-cut cave tradition also existed in Odisha. The earliest examples are the Udaigiri-Khandagiri caves in the vicinity of Bhubaneswar. These caves are scattered and have inscriptions of Kharavela Jain kings. According to the inscriptions, the caves were meant for Jain monks. There are numerous single-cell excavations. Some have been carved in huge independent boulders and given the shape of animals. The big caves include a cave with a pillared veranda with cells at the back. The upper part of the cells is decorated with a series of *chaitya* arches and

narratives that still continue in the folklores of the region. The figures in this cave are voluminous, move freely in the picture space, and are an excellent example of qualitative carving. Some caves in this complex were excavated later, some time in the eighth–ninth centuries CE.

EXERCISE

1. Describe the physical and aesthetic features of Sanchi Stupa-I.
2. Analyse the stylistic trends of the sculptures in North India during the fifth and sixth centuries.
3. How did cave architecture develop in different parts of India, from cave shelters to the monolitic temple at Ellora?
4. Why are the mural paintings of Ajanta renowned?

STUPA-1, SANCHI

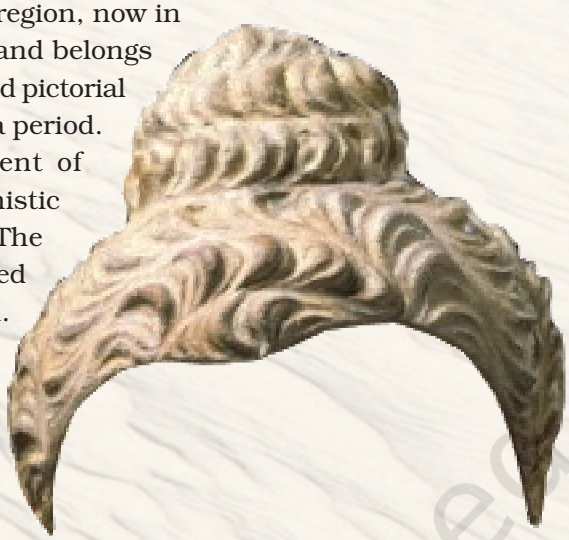
Sanchi, about 50 km from Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, is a world heritage site. Along with other relatively small *stupas*, there are three main *stupas* at Sanchi. Stupa-1 is presumed to have the relics of the Buddha, Stupa-2, the relics of ten less famous *arhats* belonging to three different generations. Their names are found on the relic casket. Stupa-3 has the relics of Sariputta and Mahamougalayana.

Stupa-1, known for the carvings on its gateways is one of the finest examples of *stupa* architecture. Originally the *stupa* was a small brick structure which expanded over a period and was covered with stone, *vedika* and the *torana* (gateways). The Ashokan lion-capital pillar with an inscription is found on the southern side of the *stupa*, indicating how Sanchi became a centre of monastic and artistic activities. The south gateway was made first followed by the others. The *pradakshinapath* around the *stupa* is covered with the *vedika*. There is also the upper *pradakshinapath* which is unique to this site. The four gateways are decorated profusely with sculptures. Buddha is shown symbolically as an empty throne, feet, *chhatra*, *stupas*, etc. *Toranas* are constructed in all four directions. Their stylistic differences indicate their possible chronology from the first century BCE onwards. Though Stupa-1 is the oldest *stupa*, the carving of images on the *vedica* of Stupa-2 are earlier than those on Stupa-1. *Jatakas* also become an important part of the narratives in *stupas*. The figures at Sanchi, despite being small in dimension, show considerable mastery of sculpting. Their physiognomic treatment of the body shows both depth and dimension which are very naturalistic. There are guardian images on pillars and the *shalbhanjika* (i.e., lady holding the branch of a tree) sculptures are remarkable in their treatment of volume. The rigidity of the earlier sculptures of Stupa-2 is no more there. Each *torana* consists of two vertical pillars and three horizontal bars on the top. Each horizontal bar is decorated with different sculptural themes on the front as well as at the back. Supporting the extensions of the lowermost horizontal bar from below are the images of *shalbhanjikas*.

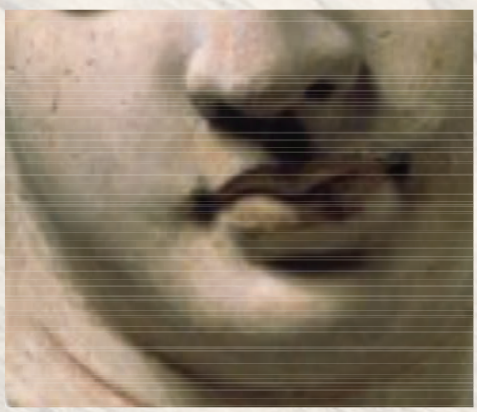
SEATED BUDDHA, KATRA MOUND, MATHURA

Mathura was a great centre for making sculptures during the early historic period and many images have been found here. A large number of images dating back to the Kushana Period is from Mathura. A distinct way of sculpting practised at Mathura makes the images found here different from those at other centres in the country. The image of the Buddha from the Katra mound belongs to the second century CE. It represents the Buddha with two Boddhisattva attendants. The Buddha is seated in *padmasana* (cross-folded legs) and the right hand is in the *abhayamudra,* raised a little above the shoulder level whereas the left hand is placed on the left thigh. The *ushanisha,* i.e., hair knot, is shown with a vertically raised projection. Mathura sculptures from this period are made with light volume having fleshy body. The shoulders are broad. The *sanghati* (garment) covers only one shoulder and has been made prominently visible covering the left hand whereas while covering the torso, the independent volume of the garment is reduced to the body torso. The Buddha is seated on a lion throne. The attendant figures are identified as the images of the Padmapani and Vajrapani Boddhisattvas as one holds a lotus and the other a *vajra* (thunderbolt). They wear crowns and are on either side of the Buddha. The halo around the head of the Buddha is very large and is decorated with simple geometric motifs. There are two flying figures placed diagonally above the halo. They bear a lot of movement in the picture space. Flexibility replaces the earlier rigidity in the images giving them a more earthy look. Curves of the body are as delicately carved. The upright posture of the Buddha image creates movement in space. The face is round with fleshy cheeks. The bulge of the belly is sculpted with controlled musculature. It may be noted that there are numerous examples of sculptures from the Kushana Period at Mathura, but this image is representative and is important for the understanding of the development of the Buddha image in the subsequent periods.

BUDDHA HEAD, TAXILA



The Buddha head from Taxila in the Gandhara region, now in Pakistan, dates back to the second century CE and belongs to the Kushana period. The image shows hybridised pictorial conventions that developed during the Gandhara period. It has Greco-Roman elements in the treatment of sculpture. The Buddha head has typical Hellenistic elements that have grown over a period of time. The curly hair of the Buddha is thick having a covered layer of sharp and linear strokes over the head. The forehead plane is large having protruding eyeballs, the eyes are half-closed and the face and cheeks are not round like the images found in other parts of India. There is a certain amount of heaviness in the figures of the Gandhara region. The ears are elongated, especially the earlobes. The treatment of the form bears linearity and the outlines are sharp. The surface is smooth. The image is very expressive. The interplay of light and dark is given considerable attention by using the curving and protruding planes of the eye-socket and the planes of the nose. The expression of calmness is the central point of attraction. Modelling of the face enhances the naturalism of three-dimensionality. Assimilating various traits of Acamenian, Parthian and Bactrian traditions into the local tradition is the hallmark of the Gandhara style. The Gandhara images have physiognomic features of the Greco-Roman tradition but they display a very distinct way of treating physiognomic details that are not completely Greco-Roman. The source of development of Buddha images, as well as, others has its genesis in its peculiar conditions in western and eastern style. It may also be observed that the north-western part of India, which is now Pakistan, always had continuous habitation from proto-historic times. It continued in the historical period as well. A large number of images have been found in the Gandhara region. They consist of narratives of the life of the Buddha, narrations from the *Jataka* stories, and Buddha and Boddhisattva images.



SEATED BUDDHA, SARNATH

This image of the Buddha from Sarnath belonging to the late fifth century CE is housed in the site museum at Sarnath. It has been made in Chunar sandstone. The Buddha is shown seated on a throne in the *padmasana*. It represents *dhammachackrapravartana* as can be seen from the figures on the throne. The panel below the throne depicts a *chakra* (wheel) in the centre and a deer on either side with his disciples. Thus, it is the representation of the historical event of *dhammachakrapravartana* or the preaching of the *dhamma*.

This Buddha image is a fine example of the Sarnath school of sculpture. The body is slender and well-proportioned but slightly elongated. The outlines are delicate, very rhythmic. Folded legs are expanded in order to create a visual balance in the picture space. Drapery clings to the body and is transparent to create the effect of integrated volume. The face is round, the eyes are half-closed, the lower lip is protruding, and the roundness of the cheeks has reduced as compared to the earlier images from the Kushana Period at Mathura. The hands are shown in *dhammachakrapravartana mudra* placed just below the chest. the neck is slightly elongated with two incised lines indicating folds. The *ushanisha* has circular curled hairs. The aim of the sculptors in ancient India had always been to represent the Buddha as a great human being who achieved *nibbana* (i.e., cessation of anger and hate). The back of the throne is profusely decorated with different motifs of flowers and creepers placed in a concentric circle. The central part of the halo is plain without any decoration. It makes the halo visually impressive. Decoration in halo and the back of the throne indicates the artisan's sensitivity. Sarnath Buddha images of this period show considerable softness in the treatment of the surface and volume. Transparent drapery becomes part of the physical body. Such refinement comes over a period of time and these features continued in subsequent periods.

There are many other Buddha images in the standing position from Sarnath having features like transparent drapery, subtle movement, carved separately and placed about the memorial *stupas* around the Dharmarajika Stupa. These images are now preserved in the Sarnath Museum. They are either single or with the attendant figures of Boddhisattvas, Padmapani and Vajrapani.

PADMAPANI BODDHISATTVA
AJANTA CAVE NO. 1

Ajanta Cave No. 2

This painting on the back wall of the interior hall before the shrine-antechamber in Cave No. 1 at Ajanta dates back to the late fifth century CE. The Boddhisattva is holding a *padma* (lotus), has large shoulders, and has three bents in the body creating a movement in the picture space. The modelling is soft. Outlines are merged with the body volume creating the effect of three-dimensionality. The figure of the Boddhisattva is wearing a big crown in which detailed rendering is visible. The head is slightly bent to the left. The eyes are half-closed and are slightly elongated. The nose is sharp and straight. Light colour all over the projected planes of the face is aimed at creating an effect of three-dimensionality. The beaded necklace too has similar features. Broad and expanded shoulders create heaviness in the body. The torso is relatively round. Lines are delicate, rhythmic, and define the contours of the body. The right hand is holding a lotus and the left hand is extended in the space. The Boddhisattva is surrounded by small figures. The foreshortened right hand of the Boddhisattva makes the image more solid, and effectively dense. The thread over the torso is shown with fine spiral lines indicating its dimensions. Each and every part of the body is given equal attention. Light red, brown, green and blue colours are used. Nose projections, incised end of lips with lower lip projection and small chin contribute to the overall effect of solidity in the figure composition. The paintings in Cave No.1 are of good quality and are better preserved. One can observe certain typological and stylistic variations in the paintings of Ajanta indicating different guilds of artisans working on the cave paintings at Ajanta over the centuries.

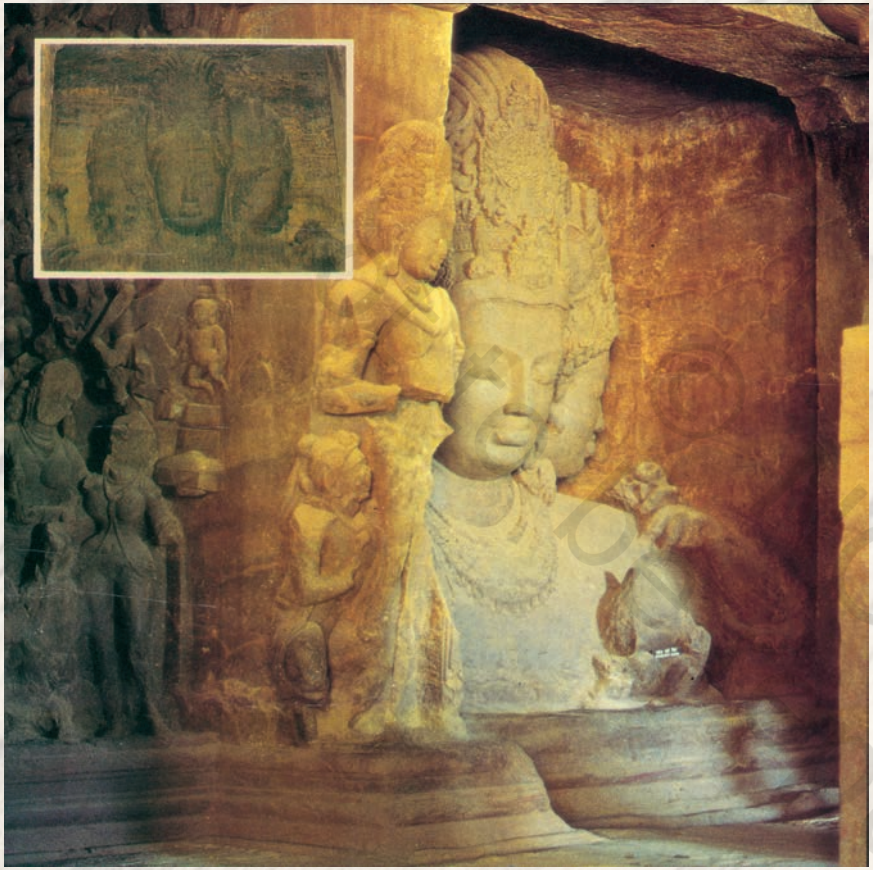
On the other side of the image Vajrapani Bodhisattva has been painted. He holds *a vajra* in his right hand and wears a crown. This image also bears the same pictorial qualities as the Padmapani. Cave No. 1 has many interesting paintings of Buddhist themes such as *Mahajanak Jataka*, *Umag Jataka*, etc. The *Mahajanak Jataka* is painted on the entire wall side and is the biggest narrative painting. It may be observed that the paintings of Padmapani and Vajrapani and the Bodhisattvas are painted as shrine guardians. Similar such iconographic arrangement is also observed in other caves of Ajanta. However Padmapani and Vajrapani in Cave No. 1 are among the best survived paintings of Ajanta.

Painting of Mahajanak Jataka, Ajanta Cave No. 1

MARA VIJAYA, AJANTA CAVE NO. 26

The theme of Mara Vijaya has been painted in the caves of Ajanta. This is the only sculptural representation sculpted on the right wall of Cave No. 26. It is sculpted near the colossal Buddha image of *Mahaparinibbana*. The panel shows the image of the Buddha in the centre surrounded by Mara's army along with his daughter. The event is part of the enlightenment. It is a personification of the commotion of mind which the Buddha went through at the time of enlightenment. Mara represents desire. According to the narrative, there is a dialogue between the Buddha and Mara, and the Buddha is shown with his right hand indicating towards earth as a witness to his generosity. This relief sculptural panel is highly animated and shows a very matured sculptural style at Ajanta. The composition is very complex with highly voluminous images. Their complex arrangement in the picture space is highly dynamic and generates considerable movement. The figure on the right shows Mara coming with his army consisting of various kinds of people including some with grotesque animal faces. The dancing figures at the lower base with the musicians have forward bulging waist, and one of the dancing figures has expanded her hands in the dancing posture with an angular frontal look. On the left lower end, the image of Mara is shown contemplating how to disturb Siddhartha, the name of the Buddha before enlightenment. The army of Mara is shown marching towards the Buddha in the first half of the panel whereas the lower half of the panel shows the departing army of Mara giving him adorations. The centrally placed Buddha is in *padmasana* and a tree at the back is shown by dense leaves. Some of the facial features of the Mara army has tacit characters of the sculptures from Vidarbha. The artisans at Ajanta worked in guilds and their stylistic affiliations can be traced by identifying such stylistic features. This is the largest sculptural panel at Ajanta. Though there are several big images in the caves of Ajanta and especially located in the shrine-antechamber as well as facade walls, such a complex arrangement of figures is unique. On the other hand, painted panels exhibit such complexities in their arrangement. A similar kind of arrangement of dancing figures in a panel is also observed at the Aurangabad caves.

MAHESHMURTI, ELEPHANTA



The image of Maheshmurti at Elephanta dates back to the early sixth century CE. It is located in the main cave shrine. In the tradition of western Deccan sculpting it is one of the best examples of qualitative achievement in sculpting images in rock-cut caves. The image is large in size. The central head is the main Shiva figure whereas the other two visible heads are of Bhairava and Uma. The central face is in high relief having a round face, thick lips and heavy eyelids. The lower lip is prominently protruded showing a very different characteristic. The all-inclusive aspect of Shiva is exhibited in this sculpture by soft-modelling, smooth surface and large face. The face of Shiva-Bhairava is clearly shown in profile in anger with bulging eye and mustache. The other face showing feminine characters is of Uma who is the consort of Shiva. One of the *shilpa* texts mentions five integrated faces of Shiva and this image, despite being shown with only three faces, is considered as of the same variety and the top and back faces are deemed as invisible. Each face has a different crown as per its iconographic prescription. This sculpture has been sculpted on the south wall of the cave along with the sculpture of Ardhanarishwara and the Gangadhara panel. Elephanta sculptures are known for their remarkable qualities of surface smoothness, elongation and rhythmic movement. Their composition is very complex. The iconographic arrangement of this cave is replicated in Cave No. 29 at Ellora.

A

B

C

D

E

A. Anantha from Ananthapadmanabh Temple, Kasarghod

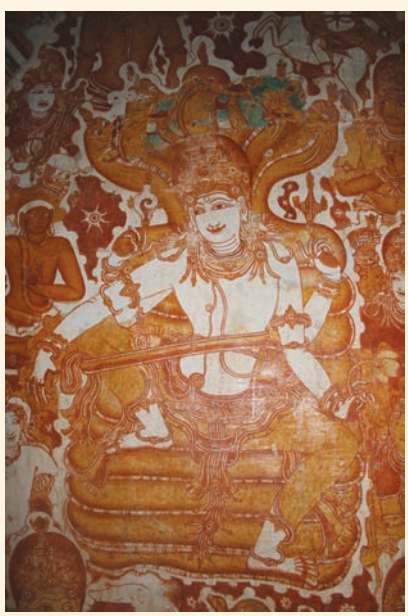
B. Shiva chasing the boar—a scene from Kiratarjuniya, *Lepaksh temple*

C. Chola king Rajaraja and court poet Karuwar Dever, Thanjavoor, eleventh century

D. Shiva killing Tripuraasura, Thanjavoor

E. Rama kills Ravana, a scene from Ramayana panel, Mattancheri Palace

F. Shasta, Padmanabhapuram Palace, Thakkala



F

ChronicleIAS

The Mauryan Empire

Class 12th NCERT
Chapter-2

12093CH02

THEME TWO

Kings, Farmers and Towns
Early States and Economies
(c. 600 BCE-600 CE)

There were several developments in different parts of the subcontinent during the long span of 1,500 years following the end of the Harappan civilisation. This was also the period during which the *Rigveda* was composed by people living along the Indus and its tributaries. Agricultural settlements emerged in many parts of the subcontinent, including north India, the Deccan Plateau, and parts of Karnataka. Besides, there is evidence of pastoral populations in the Deccan and further south. New modes of disposal of the dead, including the making of elaborate stone structures known as megaliths, emerged in central and south India from the first millennium BCE. In many cases, the dead were buried with a rich range of iron tools and weapons.

Fig. 2.1
An inscription, Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh), c. second century BCE

From *c.* sixth century BCE, there is evidence that there were other trends as well. Perhaps the most visible was the emergence of early states, empires and kingdoms. Underlying these political processes were other changes, evident in the ways in which agricultural production was organised. Simultaneously, new towns appeared almost throughout the subcontinent.

Historians attempt to understand these developments by drawing on a range of sources – inscriptions, texts, coins and visual material. As we will see, this is a complex process. You will also notice that these sources do not tell the entire story.

1. Prinsep and Piyadassi

Some of the most momentous developments in Indian epigraphy took place in the 1830s. This was when James Prinsep, an officer in the mint of the East India Company, deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi, two scripts used in the earliest inscriptions and coins. He found that most of these mentioned a king referred to as Piyadassi – meaning "pleasant to behold"; there were a few inscriptions which also

Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions.

referred to the king as Asoka, one of the most famous rulers known from Buddhist texts.

This gave a new direction to investigations into early Indian political history as European and Indian scholars used inscriptions and texts composed in a variety of languages to reconstruct the lineages of major dynasties that had ruled the subcontinent. As a result, the broad contours of political history were in place by the early decades of the twentieth century.

Subsequently, scholars began to shift their focus to the *context* of political history, investigating whether there were connections between political changes and economic and social developments. It was soon realised that while there were links, these were not always simple or direct.

2. THE EARLIEST STATES

2.1 The sixteen *mahajanapadas*

The sixth century BCE is often regarded as a major turning point in early Indian history. It is an era associated with early states, cities, the growing use of iron, the development of coinage, etc. It also witnessed the growth of diverse systems of thought, including Buddhism and Jainism. Early Buddhist and Jaina texts (see also Chapter 4) mention, amongst other things, sixteen states known as *mahajanapadas*. Although the lists vary, some names such as Vajji, Magadha, Koshala, Kuru, Panchala, Gandhara and Avanti occur frequently. Clearly, these were amongst the most important *mahajanapadas*.

While most *mahajanapadas* were ruled by kings, some, known as *ganas* or *sanghas*, were oligarchies (p. 30), where power was shared by a number of men, often collectively called *rajas*. Both Mahavira and the Buddha (Chapter 4) belonged to such *ganas*. In some instances, as in the case of the Vajji *sangha*, the *rajas* probably controlled resources such as land collectively. Although their histories are often difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of sources, some of these states lasted for nearly a thousand years.

Each *mahajanapada* had a capital city, which was often fortified. Maintaining these fortified cities as well as providing for incipient armies and bureaucracies required resources. From *c.* sixth

Inscriptions

Inscriptions are writings engraved on hard surfaces such as stone, metal or pottery. They usually record the achievements, activities or ideas of those who commissioned them and include the exploits of kings, or donations made by women and men to religious institutions. Inscriptions are virtually permanent records, some of which carry dates. Others are dated on the basis of *palaeography* or styles of writing, with a fair amount of precision. For instance, in *c.* 250 BCE the letter "a" was written like this:  . By *c.* 500 CE, it was written like this:  .

The earliest inscriptions were in Prakrit, a name for languages used by ordinary people. Names of rulers such as Ajatasattu and Asoka, known from Prakrit texts and inscriptions, have been spelt in their Prakrit forms in this chapter. You will also find terms in languages such as Pali, Tamil and Sanskrit, which too were used to write inscriptions and texts. It is possible that people spoke in other languages as well, even though these were not used for writing.

Janapada means the land where a *jana* (a people, clan or tribe) sets its foot or settles. It is a word used in both Prakrit and Sanskrit.

Map 1
Early states and their capitals

➲ Which were the areas where states and cities were most densely clustered?

century BCE onwards, Brahmanas began composing Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasutras. These laid down norms for rulers (as well as for other social categories), who were ideally expected to be Kshatriyas (see also Chapter 3). Rulers were advised to collect taxes and tribute from cultivators, traders and artisans. Were resources also procured from pastoralists and forest peoples? We do not really know. What we do know is that raids on neighbouring states were recognised as a legitimate means of acquiring wealth. Gradually, some states acquired standing armies and maintained regular bureaucracies. Others continued to depend on militia, recruited, more often than not, from the peasantry.

Oligarchy refers to a form of government where power is exercised by a group of men. The Roman Republic, about which you read last year, was an oligarchy in spite of its name.

2.2 First amongst the sixteen: Magadha

Between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, Magadha (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful *mahajanapada*. Modern historians explain this development in a variety of ways: Magadha was a region where agriculture was especially productive. Besides, iron mines (in present-day Jharkhand) were accessible and provided resources for tools and weapons. Elephants, an important component of the army, were found in forests in the region. Also, the Ganga and its tributaries provided a means of cheap and convenient communication. However, early Buddhist and Jaina writers who wrote about Magadha attributed its power to the policies of individuals: ruthlessly ambitious kings of whom Bimbisara, Ajatasattu and Mahapadma Nanda are the best known, and their ministers, who helped implement their policies.

Initially, Rajagaha (the Prakrit name for present-day Rajgir in Bihar) was the capital of Magadha. Interestingly, the old name means "house of the king". Rajagaha was a fortified settlement, located amongst hills. Later, in the fourth century BCE, the capital was shifted to Pataliputra, present-day Patna, commanding routes of communication along the Ganga.

➲ Discuss...

What are the different explanations offered by early writers and present-day historians for the growth of Magadhan power?

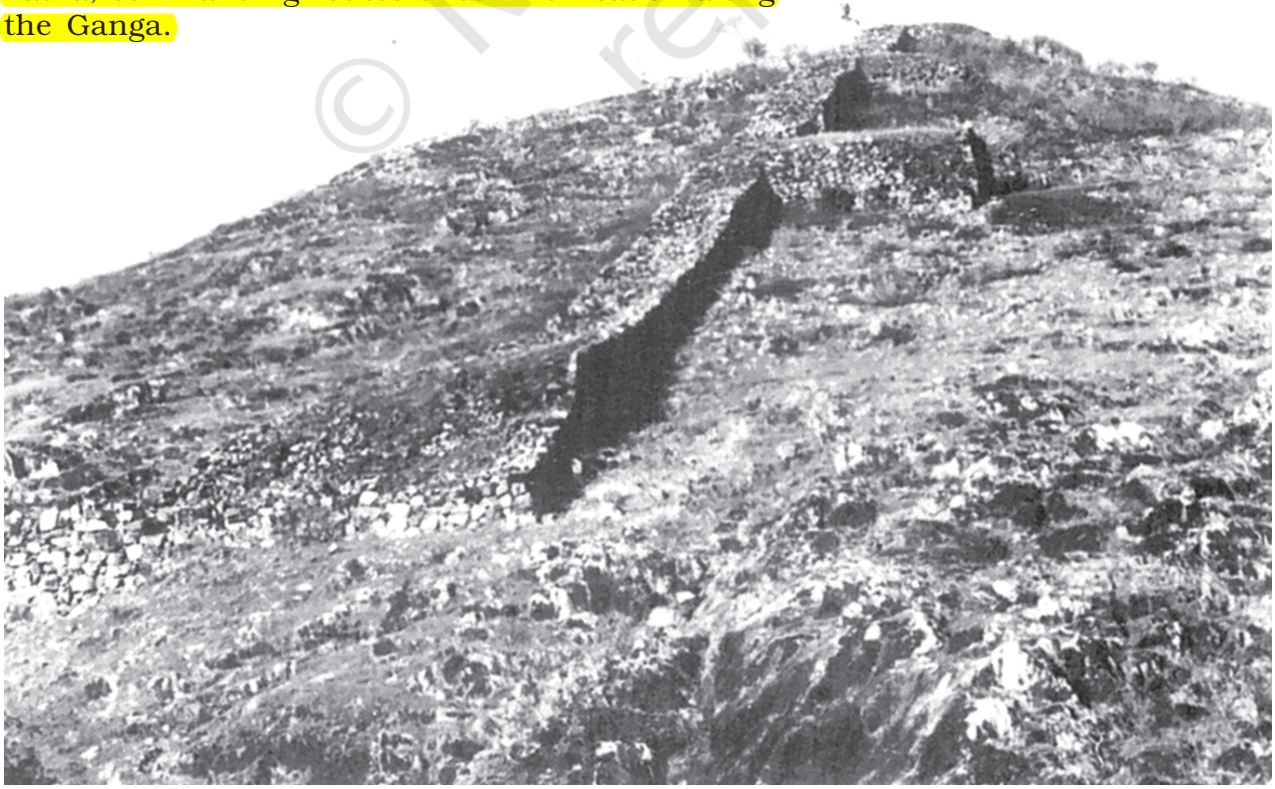


Fig. 2.2
Fortification walls at Rajgir

➲ Why were these walls built?

Languages and scripts

Most Asokan inscriptions were in the Prakrit language while those in the northwest of the subcontinet were in Aramaic and Greek. Most Prakrit inscriptions were written in the Brahmi script; however, some, in the northwest, were written in Kharosthi. The Aramaic and Greek scripts were used for inscriptions in Afghanistan.

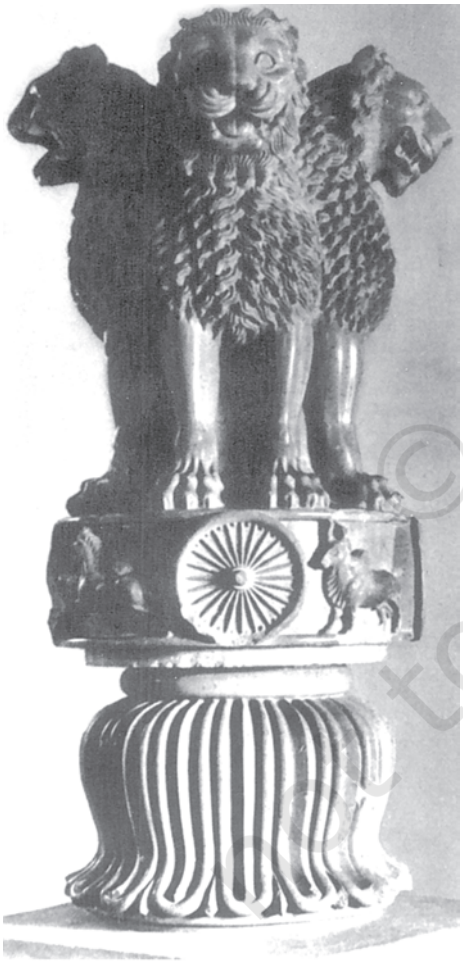


Fig. 2.3
The lion capital

➲ Why is the lion capital considered important today?

3. AN EARLY EMPIRE

The growth of Magadha culminated in the emergence of the Mauryan Empire. Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the empire (*c.* 321 BCE), extended control as far northwest as Afghanistan and Baluchistan, and his grandson Asoka, arguably the most famous ruler of early India, conquered Kalinga (present-day coastal Orissa).

3.1 Finding out about the Mauryas

Historians have used a variety of sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire. These include archaeological finds, especially sculpture. Also valuable are contemporary works, such as the account of Megasthenes (a Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya), which survives in fragments. Another source that is often used is the *Arthashastra,* parts of which were probably composed by Kautilya or Chanakya, traditionally believed to be the minister of Chandragupta. Besides, the Mauryas are mentioned in later Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature, as well as in Sanskrit literary works. While these are useful, the inscriptions of Asoka (*c.* 272/268-231 BCE) on rocks and pillars are often regarded as amongst the most valuable sources.

Asoka was the first ruler who inscribed his messages to his subjects and officials on stone surfaces – natural rocks as well as polished pillars. He used the inscriptions to proclaim what he understood to be *dhamma*. This included respect towards elders, generosity towards Brahmanas and those who renounced worldly life, treating slaves and servants kindly, and respect for religions and traditions other than one's own.

3.2 Administering the empire

There were five major political centres in the empire – the capital Pataliputra and the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri, all mentioned in Asokan inscriptions. If we examine the content of these inscriptions, we find virtually the same message engraved everywhere – from the present-day North West Frontier Provinces of Pakistan, to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Uttarakhand in India. Could this vast empire have had a uniform administrative system? Historians have increasingly come to realise that

➲ Could rulers have engraved inscriptions in areas that were not included within their empire?

this is unlikely. The regions included within the empire were just too diverse. Imagine the contrast between the hilly terrain of Afghanistan and the coast of Orissa.

It is likely that administrative control was strongest in areas around the capital and the provincial centres. These centres were carefully chosen, both Taxila and Ujjayini being situated on important long-distance trade routes, while Suvarnagiri (literally, the golden mountain) was possibly important for tapping the gold mines of Karnataka.

Source 1

What the king's officials did

Here is an excerpt from the account of Megasthenes:

> Of the great officers of state, some ... superintend the rivers, measure the land, as is done in Egypt, and inspect the sluices by which water is let out from the main canals into their branches, so that every one may have an equal supply of it. The same persons have charge also of the huntsmen, and are entrusted with the power of rewarding or punishing them according to their deserts. They collect the taxes, and superintend the occupations connected with land; as those of the woodcutters, the carpenters, the blacksmiths, and the miners.

➲ Why were officials appointed to supervise these occupational groups?

➲ Discuss...

Read the excerpts from Megasthenes and the *Arthashastra* (Sources 1 and 2). To what extent do you think these texts are useful in reconstructing a history of Mauryan administration?

Communication along both land and riverine routes was vital for the existence of the empire. Journeys from the centre to the provinces could have taken weeks if not months. This meant arranging for provisions as well as protection for those who were on the move. It is obvious that the army was an important means for ensuring the latter. Megasthenes mentions a committee with six subcommittees for coordinating military activity. Of these, one looked after the navy, the second managed transport and provisions, the third was responsible for foot-soldiers, the fourth for horses, the fifth for chariots and the sixth for elephants. The activities of the second subcommittee were rather varied: arranging for bullock carts to carry equipment, procuring food for soldiers and fodder for animals, and recruiting servants and artisans to look after the soldiers.

Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating *dhamma*, the principles of which, as we have seen, were simple and virtually universally applicable. This, according to him, would ensure the well-being of people in this world and the next. Special officers, known as the *dhamma mahamatta*, were appointed to spread the message of *dhamma*.

3.3 How important was the empire?

When historians began reconstructing early Indian history in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the Mauryan Empire was regarded as a major landmark. India was then under colonial rule, and was part of the British empire. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian historians found the possibility that there was an empire in early India both challenging and exciting. Also, some of the archaeological finds associated with the Mauryas, including stone sculpture, were considered to be examples of the spectacular art typical of empires. Many of these historians found the message on Asokan inscriptions very different from that of most other rulers, suggesting that Asoka was more powerful and industrious, as also more humble than later rulers who adopted grandiose titles. So it is not surprising that nationalist leaders in the twentieth century regarded him as an inspiring figure.

Yet, how important was the Mauryan Empire? It lasted for about 150 years, which is not a very long time in the vast span of the history of the subcontinent. Besides, if you look at Map 2, you will notice that the empire did not encompass the entire subcontinent. And even within the frontiers of the empire, control was not uniform. By the second century BCE, new chiefdoms and kingdoms emerged in several parts of the subcontinent.

4. NEW NOTIONS OF KINGSHIP

4.1 Chiefs and kings in the south

The new kingdoms that emerged in the Deccan and further south, including the chiefdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in Tamilakam (the name of the ancient Tamil country, which included parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, in addition to Tamil Nadu), proved to be stable and prosperous.

Chiefs and chiefdoms

A *chief* is a powerful man whose position may or may not be hereditary. He derives support from his kinfolk. His functions may include performing special rituals, leadership in warfare, and arbitrating disputes. He receives gifts from his subordinates (unlike kings who usually collect taxes) and often distributes these amongst his supporters. Generally, there are no regular armies and officials in chiefdoms.

We know about these states from a variety of sources. For instance, the early Tamil Sangam texts (see also Chapter 3) contain poems describing chiefs and the ways in which they acquired and distributed resources.

Many chiefs and kings, including the Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western and central India (*c.* second century BCE-second century CE) and the Shakas, a people of Central Asian origin who established kingdoms in the north-western and western parts of the subcontinent, derived revenues from long-distance trade. Their social origins were often obscure, but, as we will see in the case of the Satavahanas (Chapter 3), once they acquired power they attempted to claim social status in a variety of ways.

Source 2

Capturing elephants for the army

The *Arthashastra* lays down minute details of administrative and military organisation. This is what it says about how to capture elephants:

> Guards of elephant forests, assisted by those who rear elephants, those who enchain the legs of elephants, those who guard the boundaries, those who live in forests, as well as by those who nurse elephants, shall, with the help of five or seven female elephants to help in tethering wild ones, trace the whereabouts of herds of elephants by following the course of urine and dung left by elephants.

According to Greek sources, the Mauryan ruler had a standing army of 600,000 foot-soldiers, 30,000 cavalry and 9,000 elephants. Some historians consider these accounts to be exaggerated.

➲ If the Greek accounts were true, what kinds of resources do you think the Mauryan ruler would have required to maintain such a large army?

Source 3

The Pandya chief Senguttuvan visits the forest

This is an excerpt from the *Silappadikaram,* an epic written in Tamil:

(When he visited the forest) people came down the mountain, singing and dancing … just as the defeated show respect to the victorious king, so did they bring gifts – ivory, fragrant wood, fans made of the hair of deer, honey, sandalwood, red ochre, antimony, turmeric, cardamom, pepper, etc. … they brought coconuts, mangoes, medicinal plants, fruits, onions, sugarcane, flowers, areca nut, bananas, baby tigers, lions, elephants, monkeys, bear, deer, musk deer, fox, peacocks, musk cat, wild cocks, speaking parrots, etc. …

➲ Why did people bring these gifts? What would the chief have used these for?

4.2 Divine kings

One means of claiming high status was to identify with a variety of deities. This strategy is best exemplified by the Kushanas (*c.* first century BCE-first century CE), who ruled over a vast kingdom extending from Central Asia to northwest India. Their history has been reconstructed from inscriptions and textual traditions. The notions of kingship they wished to project are perhaps best evidenced in their coins and sculpture.

Colossal statues of Kushana rulers have been found installed in a shrine at Mat near Mathura (Uttar Pradesh). Similar statues have been found in a shrine in Afghanistan as well. Some historians feel this indicates that the Kushanas considered themselves godlike. Many Kushana rulers also adopted the title *devaputra*, or "son of god", possibly inspired by Chinese rulers who called themselves sons of heaven.

By the fourth century there is evidence of larger states, including the Gupta Empire. Many of these depended on *samantas*, men who maintained themselves through local resources including control over land. They offered homage and provided military support to rulers. Powerful *samantas* could become kings: conversely, weak rulers might find themselves being reduced to positions of subordination.

Histories of the Gupta rulers have been reconstructed from literature, coins and inscriptions, including *prashastis*, composed in praise of kings in particular, and patrons in general, by poets. While historians often attempt to draw factual information from such compositions, those who composed and read them often treasured them as works of poetry

Fig. 2.4
A Kushana coin
Obverse: King Kanishka
Reverse: A deity

➲ How has the king been portrayed?

rather than as accounts that were literally true. The *Prayaga Prashasti* (also known as the Allahabad Pillar Inscription) composed in Sanskrit by Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta, arguably the most powerful of the Gupta rulers (*c.* fourth century CE), is a case in point.

Source 4

In praise of Samudragupta

This is an excerpt from the *Prayaga Prashasti:*

> He was without an antagonist on earth; he, by the overflowing of the multitude of (his) many good qualities adorned by hundreds of good actions, has wiped off the fame of other kings with the soles of (his) feet; (he is) *Purusha* (the Supreme Being), being the cause of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad (he is) incomprehensible; (he is) one whose tender heart can be captured only by devotion and humility; (he is) possessed of compassion; (he is) the giver of many hundred-thousands of cows; (his) mind has received ceremonial initiation for the uplift of the miserable, the poor, the forlorn and the suffering; (he is) resplendent and embodied kindness to mankind; (he is) equal to (the gods) Kubera (the god of wealth), Varuna (the god of the ocean), Indra (the god of rains) and Yama (the god of death)…

Fig. 2.5
Sandstone sculpture of a Kushana king

➲ What are the elements in the sculpture that suggest that this is an image of a king?

➲ Discuss…

Why do you think kings claimed divine status?

Source 5

The Sudarshana (beautiful) lake in Gujarat

Find Girnar on Map 2. The Sudarshana lake was an artificial reservoir. We know about it from a rock inscription (*c.* second century CE) in Sanskrit, composed to record the achievements of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman.

The inscription mentions that the lake, with embankments and water channels, was built by a local governor during the rule of the Mauryas. However, a terrible storm broke the embankments and water gushed out of the lake. Rudradaman, who was then ruling in the area, claimed to have got the lake repaired using his own resources, without imposing any tax on his subjects.

Another inscription on the same rock (*c.* fifth century) mentions how one of the rulers of the Gupta dynasty got the lake repaired once again.

➲ Why did rulers make arrangements for irrigation?

Transplantation is used for paddy cultivation in areas where water is plentiful. Here, seeds are first broadcast; when the saplings have grown they are transplanted in waterlogged fields. This ensures a higher ratio of survival of saplings and higher yields.

5. A CHANGING COUNTRYSIDE

5.1 Popular perceptions of kings

What did subjects think about their rulers? Obviously, inscriptions do not provide all the answers. In fact, ordinary people rarely left accounts of their thoughts and experiences. Nevertheless, historians have tried to solve this problem by examining stories contained in anthologies such as the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*. Many of these stories probably originated as popular oral tales that were later committed to writing. The *Jatakas* were written in Pali around the middle of the first millennium CE.

One story known as the *Gandatindu Jataka* describes the plight of the subjects of a wicked king; these included elderly women and men, cultivators, herders, village boys and even animals. When the king went in disguise to find out what his subjects thought about him, each one of them cursed him for their miseries, complaining that they were attacked by robbers at night and by tax collectors during the day. To escape from this situation, people abandoned their village and went to live in the forest.

As this story indicates, the relationship between a king and his subjects, especially the rural population, could often be strained – kings frequently tried to fill their coffers by demanding high taxes, and peasants particularly found such demands oppressive. Escaping into the forest remained an option, as reflected in the *Jataka* story. Meanwhile, other strategies aimed at increasing production to meet growing demand for taxes also came to be adopted.

5.2 Strategies for increasing production

One such strategy was the shift to plough agriculture, which spread in fertile alluvial river valleys such as those of the Ganga and the Kaveri from *c.* sixth century BCE. The iron-tipped ploughshare was used to turn the alluvial soil in areas which had high rainfall. Moreover, in some parts of the Ganga valley, production of paddy was dramatically increased by the introduction of transplantation, although this meant back-breaking work for the producer.

While the iron ploughshare led to a growth in agricultural productivity, its use was restricted to certain parts of the subcontinent – cultivators in

areas which were semi-arid, such as parts of Punjab and Rajasthan did not adopt it till the twentieth century, and those living in hilly tracts in the north-eastern and central parts of the subcontinent practised hoe agriculture, which was much better suited to the terrain.

Another strategy adopted to increase agricultural production was the use of irrigation, through wells and tanks, and less commonly, canals. Communities as well as individuals organised the construction of irrigation works. The latter, usually powerful men including kings, often recorded such activities in inscriptions.

5.3 Differences in rural society

While these technologies often led to an increase in production, the benefits were very uneven. What is evident is that there was a growing differentiation amongst people engaged in agriculture – stories, especially within the Buddhist tradition, refer to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants, as well as large landholders. The term *gahapati* was often used in Pali texts to designate the second and third categories. The large landholders, as well as the village headman (whose position was often hereditary), emerged as powerful figures, and often exercised control over other cultivators. Early Tamil literature (the Sangam texts) also mentions different categories of people living in the villages – large landowners or *vellalar*, ploughmen or *uzhavar* and slaves or *adimai*. It is likely that these differences were based on differential access to land, labour and some of the new technologies. In such a situation, questions of control over land must have become crucial, as these were often discussed in legal texts.

Gahapati

A *gahapati* was the owner, master or head of a household, who exercised control over the women, children, slaves and workers who shared a common residence. He was also the owner of the resources – land, animals and other things – that belonged to the household. Sometimes the term was used as a marker of status for men belonging to the urban elite, including wealthy merchants.

Source 6

The importance of boundaries

The *Manusmrti* is one of the best-known legal texts of early India, written in Sanskrit and compiled between *c.* second century BCE and *c.* second century CE. This is what the text advises the king to do:

> Seeing that in the world controversies constantly arise due to the ignorance of boundaries, he should … have … concealed boundary markers buried – stones, bones, cow's hair, chaff, ashes, potsherds, dried cow dung, bricks, coal, pebbles and sand. He should also have other similar substances that would not decay in the soil buried as hidden markers at the intersection of boundaries.

➲ Would these boundary markers have been adequate to resolve disputes?

Source 7

Life in a small village

The *Harshacharita* is a biography of Harshavardhana, the ruler of Kanauj (see Map 3), composed in Sanskrit by his court poet, Banabhatta (*c.* seventh century CE). This is an excerpt from the text, an extremely rare representation of life in a settlement on the outskirts of a forest in the Vindhyas:

> The outskirts being for the most part forest, many parcels of rice-land, threshing ground and arable land were being apportioned by small farmers ... it was mainly spade culture ... owing to the difficulty of ploughing the sparsely scattered fields covered with grass, with their few clear spaces, their black soil stiff as black iron ...
>
> There were people moving along with bundles of bark ... countless sacks of plucked flowers, ... loads of flax and hemp bundles, quantities of honey, peacocks' tail feathers, wreaths of wax, logs, and grass. Village wives hastened en route for neighbouring villages, all intent on thoughts of sale and bearing on their heads baskets filled with various gathered forest fruits.

➲ How would you classify the people described in the text in terms of their occupations?

5.4 Land grants and new rural elites

From the early centuries of the Common Era, we find grants of land being made, many of which were recorded in inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions were on stone, but most were on copper plates (Fig. 2.13) which were probably given as a record of the transaction to those who received the land. The records that have survived are generally about grants to religious institutions or to Brahmanas. Most inscriptions were in Sanskrit. In some cases, and especially from the seventh century onwards, part of the inscription was in Sanskrit, while the rest was in a local language such as Tamil or Telugu. Let us look at one such inscription more closely.

Prabhavati Gupta was the daughter of one of the most important rulers in early Indian history, Chandragupta II (*c.* 375-415 CE). She was married into another important ruling family, that of the Vakatakas, who were powerful in the Deccan (see Map 3). According to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have independent access to resources such as land. However, the inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land, which she then granted. This may have been because she was a queen (one of the few known from early Indian history), and her situation was therefore exceptional. It is also possible that the provisions of legal texts were not uniformly implemented.

The inscription also gives us an idea about rural populations – these included Brahmanas and peasants, as well as others who were expected to provide a range of produce to the king or his representatives. And according to the inscription, they would have to obey the new lord of the village, and perhaps pay him all these dues.

Land grants such as this one have been found in several parts of the country. There were regional variations in the sizes of land donated – ranging from small plots to vast stretches of uncultivated land – and the rights given to donees (the recipients of the grant). The impact of land grants is a subject of heated debate among historians. Some feel that land grants were part of a strategy adopted by ruling lineages to extend agriculture to new areas. Others suggest that land grants were indicative of weakening political power: as kings were losing control over their *samantas*, they tried to win allies

by making grants of land. They also feel that kings tried to project themselves as supermen (as we saw in the previous section) *because* they were losing control: they wanted to present at least a façade of power.

Source 8

Prabhavati Gupta and the village of Danguna

This is what Prabhavati Gupta states in her inscription:

Prabhavati Gupta … commands the *gramakutumbinas* (householders/peasants living in the village), Brahmanas and others living in the village of Danguna …

"Be it known to you that on the twelfth (lunar day) of the bright (fortnight) of Karttika, we have, in order to increase our religious merit donated this village with the pouring out of water, to the Acharya (teacher) Chanalasvamin … You should obey all (his) commands …

We confer on (him) the following exemptions typical of an *agrahara* …(this village is) not to be entered by soldiers and policemen; (it is) exempt from (the obligation to provide) grass, (animal) hides as seats, and charcoal (to touring royal officers); exempt from (the royal prerogative of) purchasing fermenting liquors and digging (salt); exempt from (the right to) mines and *khadira* trees; exempt from (the obligation to supply) flowers and milk; (it is donated) together with (the right to) hidden treasures and deposits (and) together with major and minor taxes …"

This charter has been written in the thirteenth (regnal) year. (It has been) engraved by Chakradasa.

➲ What were the things produced in the village?

An *agrahara* was land granted to a Brahmana, who was usually exempted from paying land revenue and other dues to the king, and was often given the right to collect these dues from the local people.

Land grants provide some insight into the relationship between cultivators and the state. However, there were people who were often beyond the reach of officials or *samantas:* pastoralists, fisherfolk and hunter-gatherers, mobile or semi-sedentary artisans and shifting cultivators. Generally, such groups did not keep detailed records of their lives and transactions.

➲ Discuss…

Find out whether plough agriculture, irrigation and transplantation are prevalent in your state. If not, are there any alternative systems in use?

The history of Pataliputra

Each city had a history of its own. Pataliputra, for instance, began as a village known as Pataligrama. Then, in the fifth century BCE, the Magadhan rulers decided to shift their capital from Rajagaha to this settlement and renamed it. By the fourth century BCE, it was the capital of the Mauryan Empire and one of the largest cities in Asia. Subsequently, its importance apparently declined. When the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang visited the city in the seventh century CE, he found it in ruins, and with a very small population.

6. TOWNS AND TRADE

6.1 New cities

Let us retrace our steps back to the urban centres that emerged in several parts of the subcontinent from *c.* sixth century BCE. As we have seen, many of these were capitals of *mahajanapadas.* Virtually all major towns were located along routes of communication. Some such as Pataliputra were on riverine routes. Others, such as Ujjayini, were along land routes, and yet others, such as Puhar, were near the coast, from where sea routes began. Many cities like Mathura were bustling centres of commercial, cultural and political activity.

6.2 Urban populations: Elites and craftspersons

We have seen that kings and ruling elites lived in fortified cities. Although it is difficult to conduct extensive excavations at most sites because people live in these areas even today (unlike the Harappan cities), a wide range of artefacts have been recovered from them. These include fine pottery bowls and dishes, with a glossy finish, known as Northern Black Polished Ware, probably used by rich people, and ornaments, tools, weapons, vessels, figurines, made of a wide range of materials – gold, silver, copper, bronze, ivory, glass, shell and terracotta.

Fig. 2.6
The gift of an image
This is part of an image from Mathura. On the pedestal is a Prakrit inscription, mentioning that a woman named Nagapiya, the wife of a goldsmith (*sovanika*) named Dharmaka, installed this image in a shrine.

Map 3
Some important kingdoms and towns

➲ Were there any cities in the region where the Harappan civilisation flourished in the third millennium BCE?

By the second century BCE, we find short votive inscriptions in a number of cities. These mention the name of the donor, and sometimes specify his/her occupation as well. They tell us about people who lived in towns: washing folk, weavers, scribes, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, officials, religious teachers, merchants and kings.

Sometimes, guilds or *shrenis*, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well. These guilds probably procured raw materials, regulated production, and marketed the finished product. It is likely that craftspersons used a range of iron tools to meet the growing demands of urban elites.

Votive inscriptions record gifts made to religious institutions.

Source 9

The Malabar coast (present-day Kerala)

Here is an excerpt from *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, composed by an anonymous Greek sailor (*c.* first century CE):

> They (i.e. traders from abroad) send large ships to these market-towns on account of the great quantity and bulk of pepper and malabathrum (possibly cinnamon, produced in these regions). There are imported here, in the first place, a great quantity of coin; topaz ... antimony (a mineral used as a colouring substance), coral, crude glass, copper, tin, lead ... There is exported pepper, which is produced in quantity in only one region near these markets ... Besides this there are exported great quantities of fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, ... transparent stones of all kinds, diamonds and sapphires, and tortoise shell.

Archaeological evidence of a bead-making industry, using precious and semi-precious stones, has been found in Kodumanal (Tamil Nadu). It is likely that local traders brought the stones mentioned in the *Periplus* from sites such as these to the coastal ports.

➲ Why did the author compile this list?

"Periplus" is a Greek word meaning sailing around and *"Erythraean"* was the Greek name for the Red Sea.

6.3 Trade in the subcontinent and beyond

From the sixth century BCE, land and river routes criss-crossed the subcontinent and extended in various directions – overland into Central Asia and beyond, and overseas, from ports that dotted the coastline – extending across the Arabian Sea to East and North Africa and West Asia, and through the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia and China. Rulers often attempted to control these routes, possibly by offering protection for a price.

Those who traversed these routes included peddlers who probably travelled on foot and merchants who travelled with caravans of bullock carts and pack-animals. Also, there were seafarers, whose ventures were risky but highly profitable. Successful merchants, designated as *masattuvan* in Tamil and *setthis* and *satthavahas* in Prakrit, could become enormously rich. A wide range of goods were carried from one place to another – salt, grain, cloth, metal ores and finished products, stone, timber, medicinal plants, to name a few. Spices, especially pepper, were in high demand in the Roman Empire, as were textiles and medicinal plants, and these were all transported across the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean.

6.4 Coins and kings

To some extent, exchanges were facilitated by the introduction of coinage. Punch-marked coins made of silver and copper (*c.* sixth century BCE onwards) were amongst the earliest to be minted and used. These have been recovered from excavations at a number of sites throughout the subcontinent. Numismatists have studied these and other coins to reconstruct possible commercial networks.

Attempts made to identify the symbols on punch-marked coins with specific ruling dynasties, including the Mauryas, suggest that these were issued by kings. It is also likely that merchants, bankers and townspeople issued some of these coins. The first coins to bear the names and images of rulers were issued by the Indo-Greeks, who established control over the north-western part of the subcontinent *c.* second century BCE.

The kushanas, however, issued the largest hoards of gold coins first gold coins *c.* first century CE. These were virtually identical in weight with those issued

by contemporary Roman emperors and the Parthian rulers of Iran, and have been found from several sites in north India and Central Asia. The widespread use of gold coins indicates the enormous value of the transactions that were taking place. Besides, hoards of Roman coins have been found from archaeological sites in south India. It is obvious that networks of trade were not confined within political boundaries: south India was not part of the Roman Empire, but there were close connections through trade.

Coins were also issued by tribal republics such as that of the Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (*c.* first century CE). Archaeologists have unearthed several thousand copper coins issued by the Yaudheyas, pointing to the latter's interest and participation in economic exchanges.

Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. The earliest issues are remarkable for their purity. These coins facilitated long-distance transactions from which kings also benefited.

From *c.* sixth century CE onwards, finds of gold coins taper off. Does this indicate that there was some kind of an economic crisis? Historians are divided on this issue. Some suggest that with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire long-distance trade declined, and this affected the prosperity of the states, communities and regions that had benefited from it. Others argue that new towns and networks of trade started emerging around this time. They also point out that though finds of coins of that time are fewer, coins continue to be mentioned in inscriptions and texts. Could it be that there are fewer finds because coins were in circulation rather than being hoarded?

Numismatics is the study of coins, including visual elements such as scripts and images, metallurgical analysis and the contexts in which they have been found.

Fig. 2.7
A punch-marked coin, so named because symbols were punched or stamped onto the metal surface

Fig. 2.8
A Yaudheya coin

Fig. 2.9
A Gupta coin

➲ **Discuss...**

What are the transactions involved in trade? Which of these transactions are apparent from the sources mentioned? Are there any that are not evident from the sources?

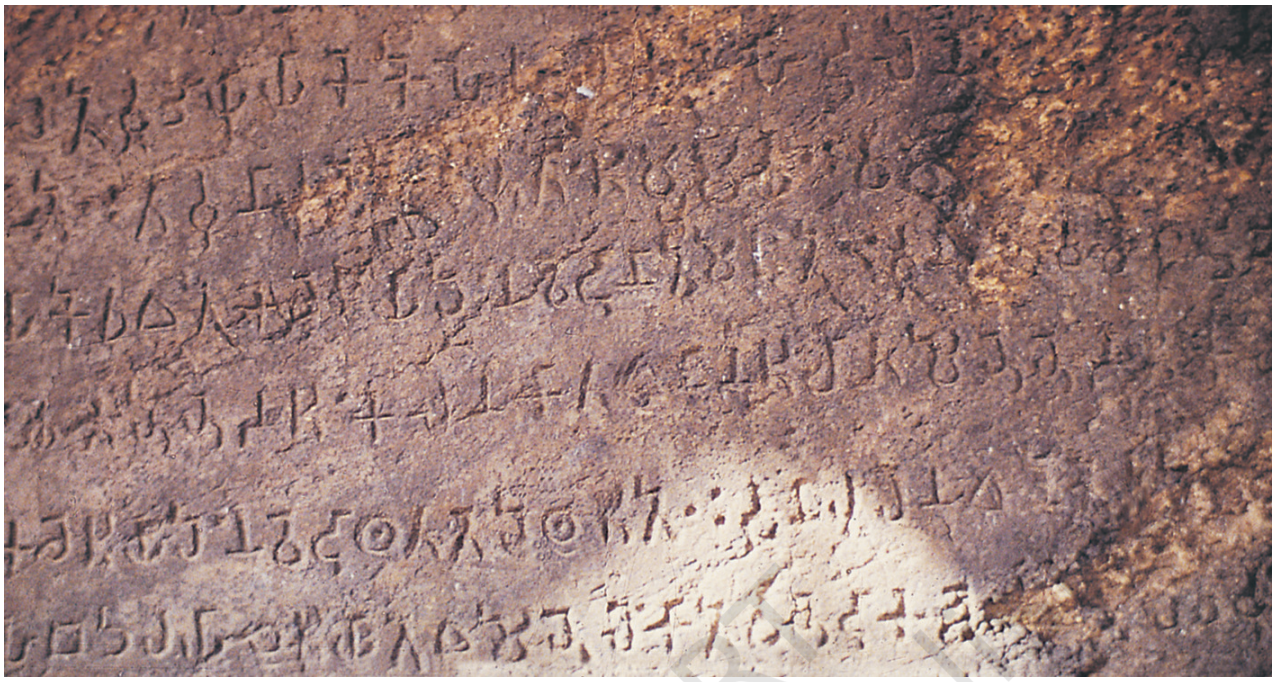


Fig. 2.10
An Asokan inscription

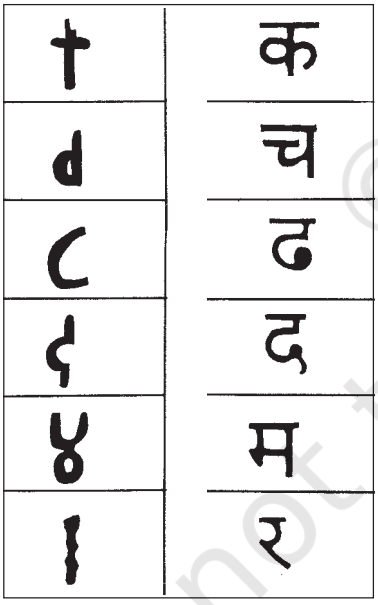


Fig. 2.11
Asokan Brahmi with Devanagari equivalents

➲ Do some Devanagari letters appear similar to Brahmi? Are there any that seem different?

7. BACK TO BASICS

HOW ARE INSCRIPTIONS DECIPHERED?

So far, we have been studying excerpts from inscriptions amongst other things. But how do historians find out what is written on them?

7.1 Deciphering Brahmi

Most scripts used to write modern Indian languages are derived from Brahmi, the script used in most Asokan inscriptions. From the late eighteenth century, European scholars aided by Indian pandits worked backwards from contemporary Bengali and Devanagari (the script used to write Hindi) manuscripts, comparing their letters with older specimens.

Scholars who studied early inscriptions sometimes assumed these were in Sanskrit, although the earliest inscriptions were, in fact, in Prakrit. It was only after decades of painstaking investigations by several epigraphists that James Prinsep was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.

7.2 How Kharosthi was read

The story of the decipherment of Kharosthi, the script used in inscriptions in the northwest, is different. Here, finds of coins of Indo-Greek kings who ruled over the area (*c.* second-first centuries BCE) have

facilitated matters. These coins contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharosthi scripts. European scholars who could read the former compared the letters. For instance, the symbol for "a" could be found in both scripts for writing names such as Apollodotus. With Prinsep identifying the language of the Kharosthi inscriptions as Prakrit, it became possible to read longer inscriptions as well.

7.3 Historical evidence from inscriptions

To find out how epigraphists and historians work, let us look at two Asokan inscriptions more closely.

Note that the name of the ruler, Asoka, is not mentioned in the inscription (Source 10). What is used instead are titles adopted by the ruler – *devanampiya*, often translated as "beloved of the gods" and *piyadassi*, or "pleasant to behold". The name Asoka is mentioned in some other inscriptions, which also contain these titles. After examining all these inscriptions, and finding that they match in terms of content, style, language and palaeography, epigraphists have concluded that they were issued by the same ruler.

You may also have noticed that Asoka claims that earlier rulers had no arrangements to receive reports. If you consider the political history of the subcontinent prior to Asoka, do you think this statement is true? Historians have to constantly assess statements made in inscriptions to judge whether they are true, plausible or exaggerations.

Did you notice that there are words within brackets? Epigraphists sometimes add these to make the meaning of sentences clear. This has to be done carefully, to ensure that the intended meaning of the author is not changed.

Source 10

The orders of the king

Thus speaks king Devanampiya Piyadassi:

In the past, there were no arrangements for disposing affairs, nor for receiving regular reports. But I have made the following (arrangement). *Pativedakas* should report to me about the affairs of the people at all times, anywhere, whether I am eating, in the inner apartment, in the bedroom, in the cow pen, being carried (possibly in a palanquin), or in the garden. And I will dispose of the affairs of the people everywhere.

➲ Epigraphists have translated the term *pativedaka* as reporter. In what ways would the functions of the *pativedaka* have been different from those we generally associate with reporters today?

Fig. 2.12
A coin of the Indo-Greek king Menander

Source 11

The anguish of the king

When the king Devanampiya Piyadassi had been ruling for eight years, the (country of the) Kalingas (present-day coastal Orissa) was conquered by (him).

One hundred and fifty thousand men were deported, a hundred thousand were killed, and many more died.

After that, now that (the country of) the Kalingas has been taken, Devanampiya (is devoted) to an intense study of Dhamma, to the love of Dhamma, and to instructing (the people) in Dhamma.

This is the repentance of Devanampiya on account of his conquest of the (country of the) Kalingas.

For this is considered very painful and deplorable by Devanampiya that, while one is conquering an unconquered (country) slaughter, death and deportation of people (take place) there ...

➲ Discuss...

Look at Map 2 and discuss the location of Asokan inscriptions. Do you notice any patterns?

Historians have to make other assessments as well. If a king's orders were inscribed on natural rocks near cities or important routes of communication, would passers-by have stopped to read these? Most people were probably not literate. Did everybody throughout the subcontinent understand the Prakrit used in Pataliputra? Would the orders of the king have been followed? Answers to such questions are not always easy to find.

Some of these problems are evident if we look at an Asokan inscription (Source 11), which has often been interpreted as reflecting the anguish of the ruler, as well as marking a change in his attitude towards warfare. As we shall see, the situation becomes more complex once we move beyond reading the inscription at face value.

While Asokan inscriptions have been found in present-day Orissa, the one depicting his anguish is missing. In other words, the inscription has not been found in the region that was conquered. What are we to make of that? Is it that the anguish of the recent conquest was too painful in the region, and therefore the ruler was unable to address the issue?

8. THE LIMITATIONS OF INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE

By now it is probably evident that there are limits to what epigraphy can reveal. Sometimes, there are technical limitations: letters are very faintly engraved, and thus reconstructions are uncertain. Also, inscriptions may be damaged or letters missing. Besides, it is not always easy to be sure about the exact meaning of the words used in inscriptions, some of which may be specific to a particular place or time. If you go through an epigraphical journal (some are listed in Timeline 2), you will realise that scholars are constantly debating and discussing alternative ways of reading inscriptions.

Although several thousand inscriptions have been discovered, not all have been deciphered, published and translated. Besides, many more inscriptions must have existed, which have not survived the ravages of time. So what is available at present is probably only a fraction of what was inscribed.

There is another, perhaps more fundamental, problem: not everything that we may consider

politically or economically significant was necessarily recorded in inscriptions. For instance, routine agricultural practices and the joys and sorrows of daily existence find no mention in inscriptions, which focus, more often than not, on grand, unique events. Besides, the content of inscriptions almost invariably projects the perspective of the person(s) who commissioned them. As such, they need to be juxtaposed with other perspectives so as to arrive at a better understanding of the past.

Thus epigraphy alone does not provide a full understanding of political and economic history. Also, historians often question both old and new evidence. Scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily interested in the histories of kings. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, issues such as economic change, and the ways in which different social groups emerged have assumed far more importance. Recent decades have seen a much greater preoccupation with histories of marginalised groups. This will probably lead to fresh investigations of old sources, and the development of new strategies of analysis.

Fig. 2.13
A copperplate inscription from Karnataka, c. sixth century CE

TIMELINE 1
MAJOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

*c.*600-500 BCE	Paddy transplantation; urbanisation in the Ganga valley; *mahajanapadas*; punch-marked coins
c. 500-400 BCE	Rulers of Magadha consolidate power
c. 327-325 BCE	Invasion of Alexander of Macedon
c. 321 BCE	Accession of Chandragupta Maurya
c. 272/268-231 BCE	Reign of Asoka
c. 185 BCE	End of the Mauryan empire
c. 200-100 BCE	Indo-Greek rule in the northwest; Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in south India; Satavahanas in the Deccan
c. 100 BCE-200 CE	Shaka (peoples from Central Asia) rulers in the northwest; Roman trade; gold coinage
c. 78 CE?	Accession of Kanishka
*c.*100-200 CE	Earliest inscriptional evidence of land grants by Satavahana and Shaka rulers
c. 320 CE	Beginning of Gupta rule
c. 335-375 CE	Samudragupta
c. 375-415 CE	Chandragupta II; Vakatakas in the Deccan
c. 500-600 CE	Rise of the Chalukyas in Karnataka and of the Pallavas in Tamil Nadu
c. 606-647 CE	Harshavardhana king of Kanauj; Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang comes in search of Buddhist texts
c. 712	Arabs conquer Sind

(Note: It is difficult to date economic developments precisely. Also, there are enormous subcontinental variations which have not been indicated in the timeline.
Only the earliest dates for specific developments have been given. The date of Kanishka's accession is not certain and this has been marked with a '?')

TIMELINE 2
MAJOR ADVANCES IN EPIGRAPHY

Eighteenth century	
1784	Founding of the Asiatic Society (Bengal)
Nineteenth century	
1810s	Colin Mackenzie collects over 8,000 inscriptions in Sanskrit and Dravidian languages
1838	Decipherment of Asokan Brahmi by James Prinsep
1877	Alexander Cunningham publishes a set of Asokan inscriptions
1886	First issue of *Epigraphia Carnatica*, a journal of south Indian inscriptions
1888	First issue of *Epigraphia Indica*
Twentieth century	
1965-66	D.C. Sircar publishes *Indian Epigraphy* and *Indian Epigraphical Glossary*

ANSWER IN 100-150 WORDS

1. Discuss the evidence of craft production in Early Historic cities. In what ways is this different from the evidence from Harappan cities?
2. Describe the salient features of *mahajanapadas*.
3. How do historians reconstruct the lives of ordinary people?
4. Compare and contrast the list of things given to the Pandyan chief (Source 3) with those produced in the village of Danguna (Source 8). Do you notice any similarities or differences?
5. List some of the problems faced by epigraphists.

WRITE A SHORT ESSAY (ABOUT 500 WORDS) ON THE FOLLOWING:

6. Discuss the main features of Mauryan administration. Which of these elements are evident in the Asokan inscriptions that you have studied?

7. This is a statement made by one of the best-known epigraphists of the twentieth century, D.C. Sircar: "There is no aspect of life, culture and activities of the Indians that is not reflected in inscriptions." Discuss.

8. Discuss the notions of kingship that developed in the post-Mauryan period.

9. To what extent were agricultural practices transformed in the period under consideration?

MAP WORK

10. Compare Maps 1 and 2, and list the *mahajanapadas* that might have been included in the Mauryan Empire. Are any Asokan inscriptions found in these areas?

PROJECT (ANY ONE)

11. Collect newspapers for one month. Cut and paste all the statements made by government officials about public works. Note what the reports say about the resources required for such projects, how the resources are mobilised and the objective of the project. Who issues these statements, and how and why are they communicated? Compare and contrast these with the evidence from inscriptions discussed in this chapter. What are the similarities and differences that you notice?

12. Collect five different kinds of currency notes and coins in circulation today. For each one of these, describe what you see on the obverse and the reverse (the front and the back). Prepare a report on the common features as well as the differences in terms of pictures, scripts and languages, size, shape and any other element that you find significant. Compare these with the coins shown in this chapter, discussing the materials used, the techniques of minting, the visual symbols and their significance and the possible functions that coins may have had.

If you would like to know more, read:

D.N. Jha. 2004. *Early India: A Concise History.* Manohar, New Delhi.

R. Salomon. 1998. *Indian Epigraphy.* Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi.

R.S. Sharma. 1983. *Material Culture and Social Formation in Early India.* Macmillan, New Delhi.

D.C. Sircar. 1975. *Inscriptions of Asoka.* Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi.

Romila Thapar. 1997. *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

For more information, you could visit:
http:/projectsouthasia.sdstate.edu/Docs/index.html