

Remarks on the Minor Rock Edict of Aśoka at Ratanpurwa

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In January 2009, not long after my catalogue of Aśokan sites (Falk 2006) had appeared, yet one more Minor Rock Edict (MRE) was brought to public notice first by its discoverer Devi Dayal Maurya, teacher at Mughalsarai, Varanasi who had reported it to scholars at the Jñāna-Pravāha – Centre for Cultural Studies & Research, Varanasi, which is devoted to the maintenance and promotion of the traditional sciences and arts of India. Startled by a first photograph provided by the discoverer, two young scholars from Jñāna-Pravāha, Dr. Niraj Pandey and Samrat Chakravorty, visited the site, took better photographs and informed the academic world about it. Very soon the text was edited by K.K. Thaplyal and published in the Monograph series of the said Institute with the title *A New Aśokan Inscription from Ratanpurwa* in 2009.

Since the text of the edict is almost perfectly preserved, the reading as established by Thaplyal needs no further comment. In his booklet all major issues of the text are touched upon and elucidated. In line with the tenets followed in my *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts*, I can only supply notes on how to reach the site, about the literature that has accrued so far, on the palaeography and relative chronology as compared to the parallel found at Sahasrām, as well as on some minor points.

The Name

The name of the site as given in Thaplyal is Ratanpurvā, as the spot lies in the vicinity of this village in Bihar. Considerably larger, but also further away, is the village of Basahā (25°01'45"N, 83°21'36"E), and thus the MRE has also been linked to that site, which is seen 2 km north of the rock shelter, and from where an un-metalled road leads to a few houses close to the Kaimur range to the East of the edict rock.

The Ratanpurvā MRE's coordinates in Google map are 25°01'05"N, 83°20'30"E; the relevant US army map would be NG 44-12, which is singularly useless in this case, as it only shows Chakia in UP, but does not contain the important road leading from there eastwards to Saidupur (25°02'N, 83°17'E) and further to Bhabhua. Shortly after Saidupur a narrow road branches off to the South-East at 25°02'32"N, 83°17'32"E leading after about five winding km to the school at Ghurahupur (25°1'10.61"N, 83°19'25.24"E) in District Bhabhua, Bihar. Walking 2.5 km eastwards along the northern slope of the Kaimur range leads to the edict rock.

The MRE site is occasionally found connected with the houses of Ghurahupur. The discoverer lives at that place and leads visitors from there to the site. Geographically, Ghurahupur and the Ratanpurvā cave site have nothing to do with each other.

Presently, the names "Ratanpurvā MRE" and "Basahā MRE" are used in concurrence, and I use here only the first, and propose to follow this example, to honour the pivotal edition of Thaplyal and to simplify reference.

A Buddhist Site

Some of the confusions regarding the MRE site found in Thaplyal (2009) and Verma (2009) arose from the fact that a start at Ghurahupur most naturally first incites some other caves on a cliff directly south of the Kaimur Range locally called Pithiyā Pahāra (25°00'51.49"N; 83°19'19.64"E), 400 meters south of the Ghurahupur school and about 100 meters inside the UP territory. The cliff faces north and a series of caves and rock shelters are instantly seen after reaching the top of the first elevation, which are spacious and show multiple signs of occupation in ancient times. Faint figures of Buddha in Gupta style are preserved on the walls in several of these caves (Fig.1). We see the



Fig.1 : Paintings of the Buddha, Pithiyā Pahāra caves (Photo author)



Fig.2 : The largest of the Pithiyā Pahāra caves with three constructions in stone (Photo author)



Fig.3 : The highest construction serving as an altar (Photo author)

upper body or a sitting posture; in one case, sided by *stūpa* like contours. The cave at the highest point contains three constructions in stone, today serving as an altar and bedsteads. The central construction is one meter high and the surface of the large slab shows a glossy polish (Figs.2, 3). It is regarded as the resting place of Buddha, which is not impossible given his range of travels where the path along the Kaimur Range was certainly comfortable with its many places to stay in caves or rock-shelters.

An impression in the bedrock in front of the highest construction is explained as a foot-print of the Buddha and venerated accordingly. Two benches are to the right of the high altar, suitably used as bedsteads at night. The adjoining cave shelters a natural water reservoir. The old rock-cut steps below the main cave still provide an easy access.

It was just below this main cave that a journalist Susheel Tripathi slipped and fell down some 10 meters and died. Following this tragic incident in 2008, access has been provided with the iron railings.

Thaplyal (2009: 2) speaks about Buddhist “paintings and images” at the Aśokan Edict site, but he is mistaken, as the paintings and images all belong to the Pithiyā Pahāra caves.

The MRE Site

This mountain face is certainly impressive with all its vestiges, but it has nothing to do with the Aśokan site which is reached by following the range eastwards for about 2 km. The only path leads along shady mango and *mahuā* trees to a point, on the northern side of which exists a large and round artificial

elevation about 10 meters high with flat upper surface (Fig.4). People consider it as having been a *stūpa*; however, it consists of all sorts of sherds and would be regarded as a settlement if found at another place. Here, it may more suitably be taken as a site where pilgrims gathered for variety of refreshments, before – or better after – having climbed the hill side just south of it. Any other use can only be ascertained through an excavation.



Fig.4 : *Stūpa*-like mound at the beginning of the path ascending to the MRE (Photo author)

The MRE is found in the upper part of the rocky formation just south of this *stūpa*-like elevation. There are several ways to reach it. The hill face below the rock can be climbed in a straight vertical way through shrubs and over loose rock debris in 20 minutes and without much effort, troubled mainly by the scorching sun. The old and well-trodden path, however, leads first up the barren hillside just north of the *stūpa*-like elevation, and then enters into the

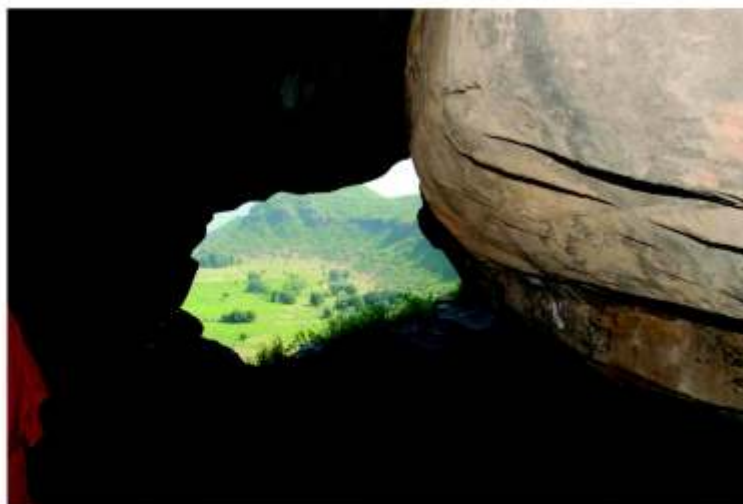


Fig.5 : View from inside the cave to the northern slope of the Kaimur Range (Photo author)

shrubs but is well-paved with large undressed rocks. It leads to the top of the range and then turns east along the hill face for some 20 meters. One gap of hardly 1 meter has to be overcome, with ample means to hold on to the rock face. After overcoming that gap, the next moment one is looking inside a large cave (Fig.5). The lower rocks between the gap and cave have been trimmed long ago.

There is a third way which I could not explore, although it is frequently used by goatherds today: at the top of the range, where the path goes along the hill face, there is also a hole in a rocky formation, which opens into a sort of pipe, about



Fig.6 : Rear end of the cave with beginning of the pipe behind the crouching man (Photo author)



Fig.7 : Terrace with overhanging rocks. The cave is just to the right of the terrace (Photo author)

10 meters long that ends in the rear end of the cave (Fig.6). This pipe is about 70 to 80 cm high and from 3 to 1 meter wide, with the narrow opening away from the cave. This path avoids the gap, but requires one to move under the low ceiling of the pipe.

The attraction of the cave seems to come from the third access: climbing a hill, squeezing oneself through the pipe and suddenly standing in a cave 10 meters deep, 3 to 5 meters wide and 4 meters high with an opening towards the north leading to a terrace-like flat rock to the right of the exit. This spacey terrace is sheltered by an overhanging rock (Fig.7).



Fig.8 : Back-wall of the terrace with MRE above the hand (Photo author)

Its perpendicular rocky backside is made of light beige sandstone. The MRE is inscribed here at a height where no hand can touch (Fig.8).

The common visitor will direct his view rather to the north across the plains, but while resting on the terrace rock, many visitors must have seen the edict (Fig.9) sooner or later.

The cave is allegedly called *muṭh maurya guph*, and it was so even at the time when the edict was not yet a celebrity. The term *muṭh* is explained as *maṭh* (meeting place), but may have different roots.

In my book on Aśokan sites, one chapter deals with the rationale behind the MRE sites (Falk 2006: 55-58), which are peculiar as they are



Fig.9 : Parts of the upper lines of the MRE (Photo author)

commonly found at places that are definitely not on everybody's way.

Summing up what is dealt with there in detail, we find MREs:

- (i) in caves or rock-shelters on top of hills (at Sahasrām, Jaṭiṅga-Rāmeśvaram, Palkiguṇḍu and Gavīmaṭh);
- (ii) in caves or rock-shelters halfway up a hill (at Maski and Siddapura);
- (iii) at the beginning of a path leading up to or along rocky formations to a sacred place (at Gujjarā, Niṭṭūr, Bairāṭ and Eṛraguḍi);
- (iv) on the flat surface of sacred sites, like at Ahaurā. The Delhi site is identical, but its historical value is unreported.
- (v) by the side of or in connection with sacred water places (at Rajula-Maṇḍagiri and Brahmagiri).

The sites of Sahasrām, Jaṭiṅga-Rāmeśvaram, Gujjarā, Niṭṭūr, Bairāṭ, Eṛraguḍi, Ahaurā, Rājula-Maṇḍagiri and Brahmagiri are still active, drawing large crowds at certain days of the year. None of these sites is connected with Buddhism in any way. Bairāṭ has an old monastery and there only the so-called Calcutta-Bairāṭ slab was found containing instructions for the monks regarding Buddhist texts to be rehearsed with preference. In former times, a road from here led south towards Jaipur, but the MRE is two km away to the north with nothing Buddhist around, but a rock-shelter with a *devī* stone halfway uphill.

A true exception is Pāṅgurāriā, where a monastery has left some *stūpas* just below and above the MRE site. Moreover, Pāṅgurāriā shelters the solitary edict referring to Aśoka's private life. It informs about his camping there at the time when he was living with an unwedded consort (Falk 1997; 2006: 110), whom we know as the famous Vidiśā-Devī. Aśoka's camping there was not for Buddhist purposes, but for *vihāra*, which in Aśoka's time did not yet mean 'monastery', but 'distraction', which included hunting (*migaviyā*, Skt. *mṛgavya*) according to Rock Edict 8. The mountains behind the Pāṅgurāriā cave are still rich in wild animals, including tigers and leopards. The relationship between the Pāṅgurāriā text and the installation of a Buddhist monastery of the frugal type is unclear, and thus, does not invalidate my general conclusions:

- MREs are placed at sites which are peculiar in nature, like often on the top of hills requiring an ascent of 20 to 40 minutes. The reason is that the folk

religions, still found in many parts of Central and Southern India, held festivals at sacred places during auspicious times of the year, usually away from the settlement in an extraordinary rocky formation. D.D. Kosambi from India and then his erstwhile student Günther-Dietz Sontheimer from Germany did extensive research on such cults mostly centering on some *mātā* or *devī*. The latter also established a school of research with Cornelia Mallebrein particularly active in Orissa.

- The text of the standard MRE does not speak to Buddhist monks or laymen, but tells non-Buddhists that Aśoka turned to the *saṅgha* for promoting the welfare of all. To place such a text at meditation sites of Buddhist monks, as Thaplyal (2009:2) assumes with the older literature, would reach very few men who did not need to be convinced at all. Aśoka's text is missionary in nature, which presupposes non-Buddhists listeners. In my view, Aśoka is not waiting for people to come to his edict in the wilderness, but he places this edict where people used to go on their own, motivated by festivals of a popular nature, an event which was not Buddhist at all.
- Aśoka is particularly concerned with 'gods mingling with men' or 'men mingling with gods', depending on the MRE version, and recommends to follow his example and attend the Buddhist *uposatha* ceremonies, which will promote such mingling on a higher scale. The lower scale which he wants to overcome can be explained by practices in folk religions as observed and described by Sontheimer and Mallebrein in books, papers and videos: on such festive days a man or a woman turns into a medium, falls in a trance and embodies a deity which can be approached and questioned.

For all details and further literature the relevant chapter in my book should be consulted.

If we compare Ratanpurvā with this general scheme as defined through other sites, we can only say that it falls into the most numerous and most spectacular section, namely a 'cave on top of a hill', unconnected to any Buddhist constructions, reached after considerable climbing. Unfortunately for our argumentation, it is not venerated any more.

The Text

Thaplyal (2009: 14) has noted that the text of Ratanpurvā is more or less identical to the one known from Sahasrām. Looking at the map, we see Ratanpurvā between the two MRE sites of Sahasrām and Ahaurā, all three along the Kaimur Range, and thus we can expect that there was an ancient travel way following it.

I present here the text of both sites in synoptic form which first demonstrates the degree of accordance. We can then continue to discuss one singular feature which is only found at one of these two sites, namely punctuation. The line beginnings are given in round brackets and show in both cases that the scribe did not shrink back from cutting through a word at the end of a line. Other scribes of Aśoka would have hated to do so. The sentences are numbered alphabetically according to the most comprehensive and critical edition of the MREs in Andersen 1990. A plus sign '+' indicates a missing or completely obliterated *akṣara*, a central dot '.' a missing part of an *akṣara*, either the consonant sign or the vowel stroke. Differences are given in bold letters. Note the vertical punctuation strokes '|':

- Sah (B) : (1) devānāmpīye hevaṃ + +
Rat : (1) devānāmpīye hevaṃ āha
Sah (C) : + + + + + .iyāni savachalāni aṃ upāsake sumi |
Rat (C) : sādḥikāni aḍhatiyāni savachalāni aṃ upāsake sumi
Sah (D) : na cu bādḥaṃ palakaṃ +
Rat (D) : (2) na cu bādḥaṃ palakaṃte
Sah (E) : (2) savachale sādḥike | aṃ + + + + + t.
Rat (E) : savachale sādḥike aṃ mama saṃghe upayīte
Sah (F) : etena ca aṃtalena | jāmbudīpasi | aṃmisaṃdevā |
Rat (F) : etena ca aṃtalena (3) jāmbudīpasi amisaṃdevā
Sah : saṃtā (3) munisā misaṃdeva kaṭā
Rat : saṃtā munisā misaṃdeva kaṭā
Sah (G) : pala + + + iyaṃ phale
Rat (G) : palakamasa iyaṃ phale
Sah (H) : .o + +yaṃ mahatatā va cakiye pāvatave |

- Rat (H) : (4) no ca iyaṁ mahatātā va cakiye pāvātave
 Sah (I) : khudakena pi pala-(4)-kamamīnenā vipule pi suage + kiye ālā + + +
 ve |
 Rat (I) : khudakena pi pala kamamīnenā vipule (5) pi suage cakiye
 ālādhayitave
 Sah (J) : se etāye aṭhāye iyaṁ sāvāne |
 Rat (J) : se etāye aṭhāye iyaṁ sāvāne
 Sah (K) : khudakā ca uḍālā ca pa-(5)-lakamaṁtu
 Rat (K) : khudakā ca uḍā-(6)-lā ca palakamaṁtu
 Sah (L) : aṁtā pi ca jānaṁtu |
 Rat (L) : aṁtā pi ca jānaṁtu
 Sah (M) : cilaṭhitike ca palākame hotu |
 Rat (M) : cilaṭhitike ca palakame hotu
 Sah (N) : iyaṁ ca aṭhe vaḍhisati | vipulaṁ pi ca vaḍhisati
 Rat (N) : iyaṁ ca a-(7)-ṭhe vaḍhisati vipulaṁ pi ca vaḍhisati
 (6) diyāḍhiyaṁ avaladhiyenā diyāḍhiyaṁ vaḍhisati |
 diyāḍhiyaṁ avaladhiyenā diyāḍhiyaṁ vaḍhi-(8)-[sa]ti
 Sah (O) : iyaṁ ca savane vivuthena
 Rat (O) : iyaṁ ca sāvane vivuthena
 Sah (P) : duve sapaṁnālāti-(7)-satā vivuthā ti 200 50 6
 Rat (P) : duve sapaṁnālāti satā vivuthā ti 200 50 6
 Sah (Q) : ima ca aṭhaṁ pavatesu likhāpayāthā ya+ vā a-(8)-thi
 Rat (Q) : imaṁ (9)[ca aṭhaṁ] pavatesu likhāpayāthā yadi vā athi
 hetā silāthambhā tata pi likhāpayatha ti
 hetā silāthambhā tata pi likhāpayathā ti

We see instantly that the two texts are not just related, but they are identical. The few differences are trivial and concern long-*ā* strokes in sentences O and Q, and an *anusvāra* dot in sentence Q. What reads ya+ in Sahasrām was amended to *yata* by Sircar (1979: 138), and to *yadi* by Andersen (1990: 95,129), who was proved right by Ratanpurvā.

The Script

There are several cases where more or less identical versions have been inscribed by one and the same person. For instance, all the three versions of Siddapura, Jatiᅅga-Rāmeśvaram and Brahmagiri end with the signature of the clerk Capaᅇa, who calls himself a scribe (*lipikara*) in Kharoᅇᅇhi letters. The same applies to the two versions of Eᅇraguᅇi and Rājula-Maᅇᅇagiri. The shapes of all the crucial letters at Sahasrām and Ratanpurvā are identical, different from most other scribes. The letters are:

- *ta* : instead of a vertical upper part on a triangular lower part, or a slanting long left line with a slanting short line right, our scribe first writes a long vertical to which he adds a short slanting line right. This form is also found at Sahasrām, but together with the other two forms, as if the two older forms were given up until the inscribing of the Ratanpurvā MRE for just one individual form.

- *kha* : with other scribes, this letter can end with a circle or with a dot at its lower end. Our scribe uses the rarer circle. At both places the *u-mātrā* leaves the circle towards the lower right.

- *ᅇha* and *tha* can fill the line or appear just in half size in the upper half of the line, as in most of the Pillar Edicts. At both our sites, however, the half-sized letters occupy the lower part of the line; cf. Thaplyal (2009: 6).

Arisings from the Textual Form

The most peculiar feature of this scribe is his idea of punctuation and the fact that he uses it at Sahasrām and dismisses it at Ratanpurvā. At Sahasrām he separates sentences by a short vertical bar, similar in appearance to what other scribes use for the *ra*. Sentences C, F, I, J, L, M and N finish in this manner. The sentences E and N show one stroke also in the middle. Sentence F contains three such strokes, after *amitalena*, after *jambudīpasi* and another one after *amimisamdevā*. These strokes must be compared to those speech units which are separated by short spaces in the Pillar Edicts, as was shown by Janert (1972). Such units are called *varga* by Kauᅇilya in a chapter of the *Arthasāstra* (2.10,21) dealing with royal declarations, as was seen by Scharfe (1967). The speech units ending in a short pause make it possible to comprehend those parts of a sentence that Aśoka wanted to emphasize.

The spaces after *vargas* in PEs and the strokes in the Sahasrām version

gives the listener the chance to really understand the importance that Aśoka attributes to certain sentence parts. In this case, Aśoka stated that he visits “his” *saṅgha*, and says: “and through this means”, emphasizing on the point that because I do just this, going to the *saṅgha*, a change comes about. The next word *jambudīpasi* again ends with a pause, expressing that it is India where all this happens, but not in other countries. Then follows *amisamdevā*, again followed by a stop, giving stress to the idea of a deep social split between the people and *devas*. Aśoka, who is a *deva*, mixes with the people at least within Buddhist monastic compounds. As I have shown in Falk 2006: 56, the MRE sites are situated where folk religions found expression in yearly rites, partly having successors to this very day. In those practices, a god takes possession of a medium and a “mixture” of god and people can be seen as well, at least as long the possession lasts. Aśoka does not say it here expressly, but the very fact that he places his MREs only at such places is evidence in itself that he sees two sorts of mixtures. One is good, that is him as *deva* inside the *saṅgha*, and the other is to be given up, that is folk rites in caves on hills. He expresses this idea in the first major Rock Edict, where he describes how to deal with meetings (*samāja*) of both sorts.

We can think of a reason why a text with stop signs may be younger than one without them. Obviously, the text becomes clearer on putting emphasis through stop signs. But the other way round could as well be defended: the stop-stroke looks like a *ra* and confuses the reader. Thus, I see no way to definitely decide if stops (Sahasrām) or no stops (Ratanpurvā) are indicative of any sort of chronological priority. But another point to be considered is that on the whole, the Ratanpurvā writing looks more perfect. The last sentence Q speaks of rock-faces and stone-pillars: *tata pi likhāpayathā ti*, i.e. “there too you should have it incised”. At Sahasrām, the *akṣara pi* was added later (above and between *ta* and *li*); while in Ratanpurvā, the *akṣara* stands on the ground-line in due succession.

Another sign shows improved handling of the script. The sign for 200 is rather rudimentary at Sahasrām with the usual small stroke at the right upper corner, which changes the 100 to 200. At Ratanpurvā, the sign cannot be taken for anything but 200; the small horizontal stroke has grown and comes down to the base line. This form is seen at no other place so far.

All in all it seems that the text was first inscribed at Sahasrām, and only later, after some development, at Ratanpurvā.

The Date Formula

The stops at Sahasrām allow at least one more conclusion. They are not used beyond sentence N; the final sentences O, P and Q come without any stop sign. The sentences O, P and Q are not part of the message, they contain a date. Aśoka tells us that the text to be heard (*sāvane*, Skt. *śrāvanaṃ*) came with the 256th *vivuṭṭha* night, that is a night that 'lit up' (Skt. *vyuṣṭa*) in the early morning. Because of a homophony in the participle of *vi-vas* 'to stay outside home' and *vi-vas/uch* 'to light up', the idea arose that Aśoka spoke of 256 nights 'spent on tour'.¹ As shown in Falk (1990) only 'light up' is possible when comparing all occurrences of *vivasati* and *vyuṣṭa* in Aśokan texts.

What are the 256 nights? In 1990, I opted for the nights of the *uposatha* meetings at the full and new moon days, because they are spent by the monks and the laity at night in the monastery and end when the morning rises. A misconception regarding the number of *uposatha* days led to a wrong result, duly pointed out by Hu-von Hinüber (1996), who nonetheless valued the new explanation making use of the lighting-up of the *uposatha* nights as axiomatic ('naheliegend', 1996: 88). In a lecture at Bamberg in 2001, the same authoress proposed convincingly that the two sorts of Aśoka's laymen, most likely, are first the *tivācika upāsaka*, who only expresses his affiliation to the three *ratnas*, and the other *uposathika upāsaka*, who takes part in all *uposatha* ceremonies. Aśoka knew the *uposatha* nights, but we cannot be sure if he had two or four per month in mind, the first for the monks reciting the *Prātimokṣa* text on the full and new moon days, the latter for the laity, including the two eighth days between the full and new moon.

If we calculate as simply as possible and take the full moon and new moon *uposatha* days as the most important Buddhist purifying days, which are also sacred to Vedic priests and laity and to other religious groups as well, we get just two in a synodic month (at 29.53 days). The 256 *uposatha* days 'lighting up' in the morning amount to 128 synodic months or roughly 10 solar years (at 365.25 days) and 127 days, or 10 years and 4 month. This is more or less what we expect to be the span of time from Aśoka's enthronement to the promulgation of the Minor Rock Edicts.

We can compare this span with other dates furnished by Aśoka. From the Kandahar bilingual we know that Aśoka said: "Ten years (of reign) having been completed,² King Piodasses (Ashoka) made known (the doctrine of) Piety to men" (Pugliese Carratelli & Garbini 1964: 30f.). In other words, if ten years were 'completed', Aśoka 'made known' his dharma in his eleventh current regnal year. According to the computation of the 'lit-up nights' above, the 256th lunar node also falls into the eleventh current year. If *sāvane vivouthena 256* means "This is my declaration at the 256th lunar node night having lit up", then it definitely expresses a date during the lifetime of Aśoka. Such a date also explains why he tells us at Pāṅgurariā and Rūpanātha that this edict was "made" (*kaṭe, kitā*) at that date, expressing that the formulation of the text is a matter of the past, while the inscribing at some places took place considerably later (Falk 1990: 109).

In his sixth Pillar Edict, Aśoka speaks of having sent out re-scripts of morality when he was "anointed for his twelfth regnal year". This is one year later than the MRE and should refer to the major Rock Edicts, as is expressly stated in RE 3 and 4.

We can further compare these 10 years and 4 months to the dates in the text of the MRE, but we have to take into account the fact that Indian counting starts with the year ahead; Aśoka being 'anointed for his tenth regnal year' means that nine years are completed and the tenth year begins and is current. On the contrary, the expression in Greek and Aramaic at Kandahar pointed at completed years, not current ones. Aśoka says in the MRE that for one year as a Buddhist layman he was not particularly zealous. "But indeed a year and somewhat more (has passed) since I have visited the *Saṅgha* and have been very zealous", as Hultzsch (1925: 177) translates the sentence at Brahmagiri. When Aśoka was anointed for his tenth regnal year (**daśavarṣābhiṣiktaḥ*), he went to Sambodhi as we know from RE 8. This means that he went to Bodhgayā after the ninth year was completed and the tenth current one started. One 'year and somewhat more' matches nicely the period from the visit to Bodhgayā at the beginning of his tenth current regnal year to the promulgation of the MRE on the 256th lunar node after four months in the eleventh current year of his reign.

This date part comes in wide diverging versions; it comes without punctuation at Sahasrām, all of which shows to my mind that Aśoka did not

insist on a verbal preservation, but thought that all people would understand its meaning immediately, which, however, was not the case.

A Textual Singularity

In sentence E, Aśoka says that he went to 'his' *saṅgha*: *mama saṅghe upayīte*,³ as visible at Ratanpurvā; Sahasrām is destroyed at this part. This sounds strange as all other versions say, *mayā saṅghe upayīte*, i.e., "by me the *saṅgha* was joined". What is correct? Did Aśoka regard the Buddhist order as his property? Strange as it may seem, but this idea is also expressed at Sāñchī in the so-called Schism Edict, the only text of Aśoka found there. According to all editions, Aśoka says that "the monk or nun who shall break up the *Saṅgha*", *ye saṅgham bhakhati bhikhu va bhikhuni vā*, "shall put on white cloth and live outside the monastery" (Hultzsch 1925: 161). In the crucial sentence, *ye saṅgham* ends line four, while *bhakhati* starts line five. A simple inspection of the pillar, the rubbing in Hultzsch (1925: 160) or (Fig.10) shows, however, that there is a *ma* to the left of *bhakhati*, slightly raised above the line with its circle perfectly



Fig.10 : Close-up of the beginning of line 5 at Sanchi (Photo author)

preserved, as is the right arm, while the left one is lost in the break of the stone. It is clear that a single *ma* in such a construction after the noun referred to,⁴ can only be a *me*, with the *e-matra* lost with the left arm. Under these circumstances, Aśoka says that "whichever monk or nun shall break up my *Saṅgha*", implying the same idea as at Ratanpurvā.⁵

Relative Position of Sahasrām/Ratanpurvā in the Expedition of the MREs

There is no doubt that as a textual composition the MRE is clearly the oldest type of edict. It was composed roughly two years earlier than the major

Rock Edicts. Two facts show that in the beginning at least some stone masons did not know how writing worked. One working at Eṛṛaguḍi was of the opinion that every line on his exemplar should be turned into one unbroken line on the rock. However, the rock was too narrow to allow an exact copy. So, wherever he ran out of space at the right border, he incised the rest running backwards to the left above or below the first part of the line. The resulting mixture of right and left running pieces would never have been deciphered, if the correctly written parallels at other places were not done. At nearby Rājula-Maṇḍagiri, the same mason copied the same lines from his exemplar on the flat and spacey floor rock thus allowing us to reconstruct his mistakes at Eṛṛaguḍi. A graphic outline in Falk 2006: 71 demonstrates the process arising from ignorance.

Another interesting item is the number 200, which appeared enigmatic to some clerks who turned it into something they knew. At Rūpanātha, we read a plain *akṣara su* instead, which has a certain likeness to 200 but provides no meaning. This would have been impossible if writing had been practiced for a long time before.

Aśoka was disappointed with some forms his edicts took through people who did not like what he said or who did not know how to write properly, as he tells us in his Rock Edict 14. Consequently, he introduced some changes. Instead of the random size of the letters, from 10 cm at Eṛṛaguḍi to 20 at Niṭṭūr, the REs and PEs come only in a standard height of about one inch per letter. He also used spaces high above the reach of people to have his texts incised. The pillars with their edicts were shipped already fully inscribed, which guaranteed the absolute uniformity of the text at all places.

Looking at the rock at Ratanpurvā, we see a number of 'late' features:

- The text is incised high above people's reach, although the rock beneath would have provided the same flat surface.
- The letters are of the 1 inch size, much different from the large letters e.g. at Niṭṭūr, Uḍegolam, Eṛṛaguḍi, Māskī, Gujjarā or Bairāṭ.
- The rock surface has been smoothed before incising, a feature found at only a few RE sites (Kalsi, Mansehra), at one cave inscription (Kaṛṇa Caupāra cave at Barabar hills), at the Calcutta-Bairāṭ separate edict and naturally at all Pillar sites, but on no other MRE so far.

- Only here and at Pāṅgurariā and Rūpanātha does Aśoka ask that the text also be incised at places “where there are pillars”. Since so far, we know about pillars only of Aśoka and none of any of his predecessors, this could mean that these two texts were incised after Aśoka had started to have monolithic pillars produced and shipped. The earliest one comes from the Nepal Tarai, dated to the 14th regnal year (Niglivā; Falk 2006: 189). With some pillars (Kauśāmbī, Rāmpurvā bull pillar, Pāṭaliputra) left un-inscribed, the production may have started even earlier than that.

All this leads to the impression that Aśoka may have had the standard MRE text made to be inscribed at the appropriate sites even many years after he had his Rock Edict series dispatched.

Genuine or Not?

After the Ratanpurvā site was discovered, there were attempts to deprive the discoverers of their merit first by claiming chronological priority in the discovery, then by denigrating the value of the text as a recent fabrication (Tripathi, Upadhyay & Kumar 2009). Following reasons were brought forward: (a) Nobody ever knew of this inscription, although shepherds go to the cave regularly. (b) The rock can be seen from the ground below the range and nobody ever saw the edict. (c) The letters are shallow and appear brand-new. (d) The recently researched Pithiyā Pahāra caves are claimed by Buddhists and the edict was found just short of a Buddhist meeting over there. Thus, the Aśokan edict was meant to add weight to Buddhist claims.

All these are without substance. Every visitor to the MRE cave will enjoy the scenic view down instead of searching the wall at his back. The rock is of a uniform pale colour much beyond the space covered by the letters, which cannot be seen from below. The letters are not brand-new but show some deposit from water having run over them for centuries; the lower left part has lost some of its surface due to this. The place is overhung by a large rock and looks north (Fig.7/or6), so that neither strong sun nor much rain can interfere. A similar pristine condition is found at Pāṅgurariā, where the letters look like they were incised yesterday, at a place which certainly draws many more casual visitors than Ratanpurvā, and still, nobody ever questioned the genuineness of that edict. To speak of Buddhists as fakers is meant to sow religious dissent, an unnecessary but truly dangerous behaviour given the severe clashes over caste issues in this remote area.

Conclusion

The MRE site at Ratanpurvā fulfils all the conditions of its type, being a part of a 'cave on top of a hill' with a peculiarity, its back entrance through a low pipe-like opening. This scenic feature made it a unique place, which was indicative of higher forces liking and visiting it, ideal for rites of the age-old Indian folk religions. The MRE was written by the same person who wrote the Sahasrām MRE inside a cave on top of a hill. There is, however, one major difference – he used punctuation at Sahasrām, while he did not do so at Ratanpurvā. The facts that the MRE is written on a smoothed portion of the rock high above reach, the size of the letters and a systematized script seem to indicate that this text was incised not with the first batch in Aśoka's tenth regnal year, but rather some years later reacting clerical flaws, which were apparent in that first batch.

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1. Cf. Hultzsch (1925: 259), where in the Corrigenda he confesses to have lost his "belief in the correctness of the meaning 'on tour', assigned to *vyushṭa*", preferring "spent the night (in prayer)", rather close to our interpretation. Still, his old translation is copied again and again.
2. ΔΕΚΑ ΕΤΩΝ ΠΛΗΡΗ + + + + ΩΝ, with the four erased letters emended to δέκα ἐτῶν πληρηθέντων or δέκα ἐτῶν πληρης ὄνων, according to Pugliese Carratelli 1964: 31.
3. Thaplyal prints *upayite* in the Roman rendering, but the correct *upayīte* in Nāgarī.
4. Cf. *amṭā ca me jānevu* in MRE1 sentence L, "and my neighbours shall be instructed".
5. The letter *ma* is perfectly chiselled while the other letters are rather carelessly done. Together with the fact that the *ma* is out of the left border and not on the baseline, this difference can be taken as indicating a later addition.

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