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Buddhism and the Rule of Law: An Analytical Study of Priyadasi Aśoka's Contribution to Ancient Indian Legal Thought and Jurisprudence

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Abstract

Histories of Indian jurisprudence have conventionally located its origin in Brahmanical and Vedic legal sources, treating Buddhist statecraft as a moral supplement rather than a juridical tradition in its own right. This article challenges that periodisation through a close reading of the Major Rock and Pillar Edicts attributed to the Mauryan emperor Priyadasi Aśoka (c. 268–232 BCE), read as primary legal-historical evidence rather than as devotional or biographical material. Using a historical-philological and comparative textual method anchored in the inscriptional corpus and supported by comparative analysis against the *Manusmṛti*, the *Arthaśāstra*, the canonical Pāli sources of the dhammarāja ideal, and A. V. Dicey's formulation of the rule of law, the article argues that Aśoka's promotion of dhamma after the Kalinga war produced a recognisable, if historically bounded, body of legal thought: a doctrine of undifferentiated liability before judicial officers, an administrative apparatus of grievance-redress through the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras*, and a normative limitation on the discretion of the sovereign's own punitive power.

The article's contribution is interpretive rather than evidentiary: it does not introduce new inscriptional material but offers a reading of the existing corpus, informed by recent work in Buddhist Studies and legal history, that treats the edicts as constitutive of an operative category of governance rather than as ornament to it. The article also identifies the limits of this analogy; Aśokan authority remained personal and charismatic rather than institutionalised as Dicey's "ordinary law," and the edicts are aspirational texts whose enforcement cannot be assumed from their survival. The study contributes to Buddhist studies and legal history alike by demonstrating that dhamma functioned, in Aśoka's reign, as an operative category of governance and law, not merely of personal piety, and by clarifying where that category converges with, and diverges from, later and Western conceptions of the rule of law.

Keywords

Dhamma; Aśokan Edicts; Buddhist Jurisprudence; Rule of Law; *Dhamma-Mahāmātra*; Legal Pluralism

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Introduction

Esa hi vidhī iyaṃ ; dhammena pālanaṃ, dhammena vidhānaṃ, dhammena sukhiyanā, dhammena gotīti. "For this is the rule: governance by *Dhamma*, administration by *Dhamma*, the happiness of the people through *Dhamma*, and their protection through *Dhamma*." [1]

This formulation, carried on Aśoka's inscriptions across the Indian subcontinent, states in compressed form a claim that this article takes seriously as a claim about law: that the legitimacy of rule (*pālana*), the apparatus of administration (*vidhāna*), and the substantive end of governance (*sukha*, well-being) are all to be derived from and constrained by dhamma. Recognised in his own inscriptions as *Devānaṃpriya Priyadasi*, the emperor conventionally identified with Aśoka Maurya (r. c. 268–232 BCE) occupies a pivotal place in the history of South Asian legal thought, not because he replaced existing law with Buddhist doctrine, but because his edicts constitute the earliest surviving body of Indian political writing that grounds the ruler's judicial and administrative conduct explicitly in a non-Brahmanical ethical source. The claim of originality that follows should be stated precisely: this article does not introduce new epigraphic evidence, and the Rock and Pillar Edicts discussed below have been studied for over a century. What is offered instead is a reading of that familiar corpus through the lens of legal-historical categories ; liability, procedure, delegated authority, precedent ; that has not been applied to it in a sustained way, together with an argument that this reading belongs as much to Buddhist Studies as to political history.

The historiography of ancient Indian law has tended to treat the *Brahmanical dharmaśāstra* tradition ; most prominently the *Manusmṛti* ; as the default starting point for any account of Indian jurisprudence, with Buddhist and Jain material relegated to the history of religion or ethics (Smith 1901; Thapar 1961; and, in the classical reference works of the field, Jolly 1928 and Kane 1930–1962). This is not a uniform consensus ; Olivelle (2024) and French and Nathan (2014) have argued from within Buddhist Studies that the inscriptional and Vinaya material, respectively, carries independent juridical content, and Olivelle (2024) has distinguished Aśoka's *dhamma* from the Buddha's own teaching, specifically to contest a purely devotional reading ; but it remains, on the evidence of the standard textbook and reference literature on Indian legal history, the dominant periodisation against which this article positions itself. This article asks a narrower and more answerable question than "was Aśoka a Buddhist king": how did Aśoka's promotion of dhamma, as recorded in his own inscriptions, reshape the operative content of law and administration in the Mauryan state, and what, precisely, does this contribute to a comparative account of the rule of law? Three sub-questions follow from this: first, what do the edicts themselves say about judicial procedure, punishment, and the limits of sovereign discretion; second, how does this body of normative claims relate to the contemporaneous *Brahmanical* and *Arthaśāstric* models against which it implicitly or explicitly positions itself, and to the canonical Pāli material on righteous kingship with which it shares a religious idiom; and third, where does the analogy to a later, Western articulation of the rule of law ; taken here in A. V. Dicey's classical formulation ; hold, and where does it break down. The article's central claim, argued across sections 2 through 4, is that the edicts supply genuine but partial and historically bounded analogues to a rule-of-law standard: partial, because they furnish procedural and administrative constraints on the sovereign without an independent judiciary; bounded,

because the programme did not outlive Aśoka's own reign as a functioning bureaucratic fact, even where its underlying ideal of self-binding kingship arguably did.

The question is not only a legal-historical one. It bears directly on how Buddhist Studies itself frames the relationship between doctrine and polity. A recurring assumption in the field is that Buddhism supplies ethics and soteriology while the state supplies law, and that the two touch only at the point where a ruler happens to be pious ; a division of labour visible, for instance, in older survey accounts that treat Aśoka's inscriptions chiefly as evidence of royal patronage rather than as governing texts in their own right. Aśoka's inscriptions resist that division of labour. The edicts do not present dhamma as a private devotional practice that a king may or may not observe alongside his public duties; they present it as the stated basis on which reporting officers are instructed, judicial delay is prohibited, capital sentences are stayed, and provincial tours are mandated. If that reading is correct, then the proper disciplinary home for this material is not only political history but also Buddhist Studies' own long-standing concern with how the dhamma proclaimed by texts becomes a lived, administered order ; the concern that motivates the discipline's attention to monastic *vinaya*, to royal patronage, and to the reception of Buddhist kingship ideals across Asia, each of which this article touches on in turn. Read this way, Aśoka's edicts are not merely an early data point for comparative legal history; they are a test case for what it means, in a Buddhist idiom, for a normative teaching to become a governing order ; the very question that separates a devotional account of a pious king from an analytical account of a religiously grounded juridical reform.

Method and sources. This study proceeds by the historical-philological and comparative textual method, anchored in the primary epigraphic corpus rather than in later hagiography. The Major Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts are read in Hultzsch's (1925) and Cunningham's (1877/2021) editions and checked against Sircar's renderings, where the translation of key terms (*dhamma, daṇḍa, vyavahāra, vyāpāda*) materially affects the legal argument being drawn from a passage. This textual analysis is read comparatively against three further bodies of normative material: the penal and status provisions of the *Manusmṛti*; the statecraft realism of Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (Olivelle 2013); and, within the Buddhist tradition itself, the canonical Pāli sources of the dhammarāja and *cakkavatti* ideal and the disciplinary procedure of the Vinaya, read for institutional and conceptual analogy rather than for direct textual filiation. This comparative material is read, in turn, against Dicey's (1885) three-part account of the rule of law, used here strictly as an analytic foil for identifying convergence and divergence, not as a transhistorical standard Aśoka either passes or fails; section 4.3 also situates Dicey's formulation against more recent rule-of-law scholarship to avoid treating a nineteenth-century account as the field's final word. Dicey is retained as the primary comparator, rather than a more contemporary theory, because his tripartite formulation ; supremacy of ordinary law, equal subjection to it, and its derivation from precedent rather than written grant ; isolates exactly the three axes (arbitrariness, address, and institutional source) along which the edicts make identifiable claims, whereas later and more expansive accounts of the rule of law (for instance, those built around judicial independence in a modern constitutional sense) presuppose institutional forms that have no Mauryan analogue and would obscure rather than sharpen the comparison. Where the argument in section 2.6 draws on the Pali Vinaya, the comparison is made at the level of institutional logic; a rule-governed order constituted by promulgated text and a designated body of officers responsible for its maintenance; rather than as a claim of direct textual influence, since there is no

philological evidence that Aśoka's chancery drew on a codified Vinaya in the form later preserved by the Theravāda tradition. The article does not claim ethnographic or fieldwork evidence; its findings are textual and historical, and its limits are stated as such in section 5.

1. Historical Context: From Conquest to Dhamma

Aśoka inherited an expansive empire originally established by his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya, who had overthrown the Nanda dynasty in Magadha following Alexander's withdrawal from India in 325 BCE and had then negotiated with Seleucus Nicator to secure the territories Alexander had conquered in the northwest. The Mauryan state, as described by Megasthenes from the Magadhan court and known to later generations only through fragments preserved by Greek writers, was a highly centralised, bureaucratically governed monarchy, capitalled at Pāṭaliputra; Bindusāra largely maintained this structure, and Aśoka, who succeeded him around 273 BCE and was formally crowned some years later, inherited both a well-organised army and a complex administrative apparatus (Kulke and Rothermund 2004; Thapar 1961). This general narrative is well established and is compressed here so that the discussion can move directly to its legal significance, which lies less in the institutions Aśoka inherited than in what he did to their normative basis after Kalinga.

The Thirteenth Major Rock Edict is the pivotal text for the argument that follows. In it, Aśoka records the conquest of Kalinga; by his own account, a campaign that led to the deportation of 150,000 individuals, the deaths of 100,000, and many more perishing from related causes; and states that the suffering inflicted upon the conquered population is a source of deep grief (*anusocana*) and regret (*klesa*) to him (Hultzsch 1925). This reading of the edict as remorse converted into policy is not the only one available in the scholarship. Strong (1983) has shown that the later Aśokāvadāna tradition builds an elaborate conversion narrative on comparatively slight epigraphic ground, and Thapar (1961) has cautioned that the edict's rhetoric of grief may itself be a calculated instrument of legitimation rather than a transparent report of the king's interior state; the present article does not resolve this debate but adopts the narrower and more defensible reading ; that whatever its psychological sincerity, the edict functions publicly and politically as the stated rationale for a change in policy, since that functional claim is what the subsequent administrative record (sections 2 and 3, below) can actually corroborate. Unlike the Aśokāvadāna, the edict itself makes a comparatively narrow, yet verifiable, assertion: that the deaths and displacement caused by even a victorious war constitute a profound loss; one that includes *brāhmaṇas*, *śramaṇas*, and householders of all kinds who find themselves within the zone of conflict. This article treats the edict's declaration of remorse as a strategically significant political act, presented as the primary rationale for abandoning further military conquest (*vijaya*) in favour of conquest through dhamma (*dhamma-vijaya*). It sets aside, without dismissing its historiographical significance, the separate and largely legendary narrative of Aśoka's personal spiritual transformation that later Buddhist literature supplies; that narrative belongs to a distinct genre; hagiographical and homiletic rather than administrative; and is treated separately below.
That distinction between the epigraphic Aśoka and the Aśoka of later Buddhist memory is not merely a matter of source hierarchy; it is itself a historiographical claim that this article makes

explicitly, following a body of Buddhist Studies scholarship devoted to exactly this problem. The Sri Lankan chronicle tradition ; principally the *Dīpavaṃsa* (c. 4th century CE) and the *Mahāvaṃsa* (c. 5th–6th century CE) ; presents Aśoka as *Dhammāsoka*, an already-converted patron whose reign is organised around the Third Buddhist Council, the mission of Mahinda to Sri Lanka, and a sequence of pious donations; this is a theological and dynastic history written centuries after the events it narrates, for the purpose of legitimating the Theravāda saṅgha's own institutional lineage, and its chronology and causal sequence cannot be read back into the inscriptions without independent corroboration (Dhammika 1993; Seneviratna 1994; Lahiri 2015). Lahiri's biography is instructive here precisely because it takes the opposite methodological path from the present article's: where this study reads the edicts for their legal-administrative content, Lahiri reconstructs a plausible human narrative from the same fragments, explicitly flagging where the chronicle tradition supplies colour that the inscriptions themselves do not support. The two projects are compatible rather than competing, and the caution both share; that the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa* are evidence of how the Theravāda tradition remembered and used Aśoka, not a transparent window onto Mauryan administrative practice; is the caution this article observes throughout by anchoring its claims in the epigraphic corpus and treating the chronicle material, like the Aśokāvadāna, as a distinct and later interpretive layer.

What follows Kalinga, based on the evidence of the edicts, is not a retreat from coercive state power. Aśoka's administration continued to maintain its army, its revenue system, and its penal authority. What it added was a comprehensive programme of public self-binding: the ruler commits himself, in written form, across the empire in multiple scripts and at least two languages; Prakrit in *Brāhmī* and *Kharoṣṭhī*, as well as Greek and Aramaic at the empire's western frontier; to standards of judicial and administrative conduct that his subjects could, in principle, hold him accountable to. The choice of Prakrit rather than Sanskrit for this imperial, documentary purpose is itself significant: Pollock's (2006) account of the later "Sanskrit cosmopolis" observes that Sanskrit does not become a language of public political inscription until several centuries after Aśoka, so that his reliance on regional Prakrit vernaculars ; rendered locally in Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī, and, at the empire's western edge, translated into Greek and Aramaic rather than left in a prestige idiom ; reflects a deliberate choice to be legible to, and binding upon, an administered population rather than to a learned elite; this is the linguistic register in which Pollock's argument bears on an inscriptional corpus otherwise remote from the Sanskrit literary culture he studies. It is this act of publicly binding oneself through textual means, rather than any specific doctrinal belief, that endows the edicts with their unique significance as a legal and historical record.

2. Textual Analysis of the Edicts: Dhamma as a Category of Governance

2.1 Equal Liability and the Limits of Status (Major Rock Edicts I–III, IX, XII)

Major Rock Edict I, in its Girnar and Kālsī versions (Hultzsch 1925), restricts animal slaughter for sacrifice and limits festival killing across the empire; its address is to the population at large, with no varna qualification attached to the prohibition. Edict II goes further in scope: it records the establishment of two kinds of medical treatment ; for persons and for cattle ; "everywhere within the dominions of King *Devānaṃpriya Priyadarśin*," extending also into the territories of neighbouring rulers, including the *Chōḻas, Pāṇḍyas*, and the Greek king Antiyoga

(*Antiochus*) at the empire's northwestern frontier (Hultzsch 1925; cf. the Greek-language Kandahar edict, which renders dhamma as *eusebeia*). Edict III, promulgated in Aśoka's twelfth regnal year, directs the *yutas, rajjukas*, and *prādeśikas* to tour the provinces quinquennially to instruct the population in dhamma, again without status qualification in the text's address.

The comparison with the *Manusmṛti* that this pattern invites needs an explicit chronological caveat before it can do interpretive work. The received text of the *Manusmṛti* is now generally dated, following Olivelle's (2005) critical edition and translation, to roughly the second century BCE to the second century CE ; that is, after Aśoka rather than contemporary with him ; so the comparison drawn here is not between two contemporaneous legal regimes but between the edicts and the fullest surviving articulation of an idiom, *varnāśramadharma*-based status differentiation, whose broad outlines Thapar (1961) and other historians of the period take to have older roots in Brahmanical social theory predating its Mauryan-era codification. Used this way, the *Manusmṛti* functions as a comparator for a tradition of legal thought rather than as evidence of a rival contemporary code Aśoka was answering directly, and the argument below is calibrated accordingly: it claims a contrast of idiom and orientation, not a documented historical confrontation between two dated texts. Where the *dharmaśāstra* tradition graduates both entitlement and penalty by *varna* ; the same act committed by a *brāhmaṇa* and by a *śūdra* incurring categorically different consequences under Manu's scheme (Olivelle 2005, chs. 8–9) ; the edicts' mode of address is to an undifferentiated population bound by a single standard of conduct and entitled to a single standard of provision. This is not a claim that Aśoka abolished caste as a social fact, which the edicts do not purport to legislate, nor is it a claim that undifferentiated moral address by itself secured equal legal liability in practice; the distinction the article draws throughout is the narrower one between the *normative instrument* the state issues and the social realities it may or may not have altered. The edicts' primary normative instrument does not itself encode status differentiation in the way the contemporaneous Brahmanical legal idiom does; what the inhabitants of the empire actually experienced when a dispute reached a *rajjuka* is a separate question the epigraphic record does not answer, and section 5 returns to why that gap cannot be closed from the edicts alone.

A further edict strengthens this reading of the address as an intentional feature rather than an incidental omission, though the strength of that inference should not be overstated. Major Rock Edict IX distinguishes the “ceremony of dhamma” (*dhamma-maṅgala*) from conventional domestic ceremonies performed at births, illnesses, marriages, and departures on journeys, which Aśoka describes as being “of doubtful efficacy,” particularly those performed by women. The ceremony of dhamma, by contrast ; proper treatment of slaves and servants, reverence to elders, restraint towards living beings, and liberality to ascetics and *brāhmaṇas* ; is described as bearing fruit both in this world and the next, regardless of who performs it (Hultzsch 1925). The edict is significant for the present argument not primarily for its content on ritual, which is properly a matter of religious reform, but for its structure, which repeats at the level of ordinary social practice the same move the edicts make at the level of judicial address: it substitutes a universally performable, ethically defined standard for a set of status- and household-specific rites. That structural parallel is offered as evidence of a consistent normative programme, not as proof that Edict IX is itself a piece of legislation; the edict remains, on its face, moral exhortation, and its

relevance to the article's legal argument lies in what it shares in form with the judicial provisions discussed below, not in any independent legal force of its own. Major Rock Edict XII adds a further, and for a study of legal pluralism directly relevant, dimension: it instructs that members of all sects should be honoured, that self-praise and disparagement of others' sects should be restrained, and that "concord" (*samavāya*) among sects is itself a good to be pursued, again through officers ; the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras* discussed in section 3 ; charged with promoting this restraint in practice, not merely proclaiming it. An alternative reading of Edict XII, favoured by scholars emphasising imperial integration over legal universalism, takes its concern with sectarian concord as primarily a strategy for governing a religiously heterogeneous empire rather than as an assertion of anything resembling equal legal status; that reading is not incompatible with the one offered here, since a policy of managed pluralism and a policy of undifferentiated address can be, and on this article's reading are, the same policy described from two angles. Read together, Edicts I–III, IX, and XII indicate that the edicts' undifferentiated address is a considered normative programme, not an artefact of the genre's brevity.

2.2 Judicial Procedure and Access to the Sovereign (Major Rock Edict VI)

Major Rock Edict VI is, for this article's argument, the single most important text in the corpus. In its Girnar and Kālsī recensions (Hultzsch 1925), Aśoka records that he has directed his reporting officers (*pativedaka*) to bring matters concerning the people before him at any time and in any place ; whatever he is occupied with, including meals, the inner apartments, and travel ; so that business affecting his subjects is never deferred for want of access to the sovereign. He further states that he has ordered this because the welfare of the people is to him the chief duty, and that diligence and the dispatch of business (*vyavahāra*) are the means by which that welfare is secured. This should be stated with some precision: the edict guarantees accessibility to the sovereign's attention, and in that sense removes an informal administrative barrier, but it does not on its face create a legal right to adjudication that a subject could invoke against an officer who ignored it, and nothing in the text specifies a remedy for non-compliance. The claim advanced here is accordingly the more modest one ; that read as a procedural rather than merely hortatory commitment, the edict constrains the temporal and spatial discretion of the sovereign's own attention, converting access to adjudication from a privilege contingent on courtly proximity into something approaching a standing entitlement in practice, short of a formally enforceable legal right.

Against Dicey's second pillar ; equality before the law and the jurisdiction of the same courts ; the edict supplies, on this more cautious reading, a partial, administrative analogue: not equality of forum, since there remains a single apex forum mediated by officers, but a removal of the informal barriers of time and place that would otherwise foreclose access to it. The comparison is drawn for a specific and limited methodological purpose ; to identify which of the concerns animating Dicey's later, and considerably more developed, doctrine already have a textual analogue in the Mauryan material ; and it is not intended to imply historical equivalence between third-century-BCE administrative practice and nineteenth-century constitutional doctrine, still less a claim that one influenced the other. The comparator's value lies precisely in its distance from the source material: it lets the analysis state clearly where the edicts anticipate a recognisable rule-of-law concern and where, as the following subsections and section 4.3 show, they plainly do not.

2.3 Limiting the Sovereign's Own Punitive Power (Pillar Edict IV)

Pillar Edict IV, inscribed on the Delhi-Topra column among others (Hultzsch 1925), assigns the *rajjukas* ; district officers who combine revenue collection and judicial responsibilities ; the authority to determine appropriate rewards and punishments directly, and to exercise it without partiality. The edict further stipulates that individuals sentenced to death must be granted a three-day respite before execution, during which their relatives may petition for a review of the sentence or for clemency; if remission is not granted, the condemned person may undertake acts of almsgiving and religious observance in preparation for death. This provision should be read carefully for what kind of constraint it establishes. It is textually a rule directed at the *rajjukas* ; a structural feature of the penal process that the sovereign imposes on his delegated officers ; rather than a discretionary act of royal clemency exercised case by case; in that sense it is a procedural safeguard rather than an ad hoc exercise of royal grace. Whether that procedural safeguard amounts to a systemic limitation on sovereign power in a stronger sense, or remains itself a standing exercise of the sovereign's own discretion (since it is Aśoka who grants it and nothing in the corpus indicates it could not be revoked by a successor), is a question the edict alone cannot settle; the article's claim is limited to the former, more defensible point ; that the three-day stay functions as a mandatory interval built into ordinary procedure, imposed on the machinery of the state by its own sovereign, and that this is doctrinally significant regardless of how the vaster question of its enforceability across the empire is ultimately resolved. This explicit measure is perhaps the clearest example among the edicts of how dhamma functions not merely as moral exhortation directed outward toward the subjects, but as a set of constraints the ruler enforces upon the machinery of his own state.

2.4 The Kalinga Edict and the Limits of Judicial Severity (Major Rock Edict XIII; the Dhauli and Jaugaḍa Separate Edicts)

Major Rock Edict XIII, preserved in its complete form at Kālsī (Hultzsch 1925, 43–49) and notably absent from the inscriptions found within Kalinga itself, details the casualties of the conquest ; 150,000 people deported, 100,000 killed, and additional unspecified deaths ; and records that this loss causes deep grief and regret (*anusocana*) to the king, extending this sense of sorrow to the *brāhmaṇas, śramaṇas*, householders, and individuals of all conditions caught within the affected territory. In place of Edicts XI–XIII, the versions found at Dhauli and Jaugaḍa present two Separate Edicts addressed specifically to the judicial officers (*mahāmātras*) stationed in Kalinga. The First Separate Edict instructs these officials that “all men are my children” and directs them to administer justice fairly, without resorting to arbitrary imprisonment or harsh physical punishment, so that their conduct fosters the perception of the king as a paternal figure rather than merely a ruler wielding the power of life and death. The Second Separate Edict adopts a more conciliatory approach towards the unconquered border peoples, assuring them of the king's forbearance and inviting their trust and cooperation.

Taken together, Edict XIII and the Kalinga Separate Edicts form the clearest documentary link within the corpus between a specific historical episode of judicial and military severity and subsequent administrative directives aimed at restraining such severity. This article reads that sequence as one plausible instance of a self-correcting institutional response; it is not the only

available reading, and alternative accounts ; that the directives reflect ordinary administrative consolidation of a newly conquered and volatile province, or a pragmatic policy of post-conquest reconciliation aimed at securing Kalinga's loyalty rather than at limiting sovereign power as such ; are equally consistent with the same textual evidence and are not excluded by the argument offered here. What can be said with more confidence is that the sequence stands in contrast to devotional interpretations of Aśoka's "conversion," which tend to overlook this pragmatic and institutional dimension of the post-Kalinga reforms regardless of which explanation for that dimension is ultimately preferred.

2.5 The Analogy to Vinaya: A Buddhist Institutional Precedent for Rule-Governed Order

The preceding four subsections read the edicts as legal texts on their own terms. It is worth asking, in addition, whether the edicts' juridical structure has a precedent within the Buddhist tradition itself, rather than only in contrast to Brahmanical and Arthaśāstric models. The most plausible candidate is the monastic Vinaya: the body of rules, promulgated by the Buddha and elaborated by the early *saṅgha*, that regulates admission, discipline, procedure for adjudicating disputes among monastics (*adhikaraṇa-śamatha*), and graduated sanction according to the gravity of the offence, from formal expulsion (*pārājika*) to minor confession (*pācittiya*). Two features of this precedent bear on the present argument, offered here as a structural analogy rather than a claim of institutional causation. First, the Vinaya already supplies, within Buddhist textual tradition, a working model in which a normative teaching (*dhamma* in its doctrinal sense) is inseparable from a promulgated rule (*vinaya* in its narrower, disciplinary sense) enforced by a designated procedure rather than left to individual conscience. Second, the Vinaya's procedural apparatus ; communal assembly (*saṅghakamma*), formal motion and resolution (*ñatti-kamma*), and confession before a quorum ; supplies exactly the kind of institutionalised, rule-bound adjudication that Aśoka's edicts gesture toward for the lay population but do not fully replicate: RE VI removes barriers to access but does not establish a forum independent of the sovereign, and PE IV imposes a procedural stay but does not create anything resembling the *saṅgha*'s capacity to adjudicate by its own communal procedure.

This relationship should not be overstated into a claim of direct doctrinal transmission from the Vinaya to the chancery that drafted the edicts. No edict cites Vinaya provisions, and the redaction history of the Pali Vinaya as it survives postdates Aśoka's reign, so an equally plausible account of the resemblance is that it reflects independent, convergent solutions to the shared problem any promulgating authority faces ; how to move from a stated norm to a working procedure ; rather than borrowing in either direction; administrative consolidation of a large, newly pacified empire could produce broadly similar bureaucratic instruments (designated officers, standing procedure, a public promulgated text) without any debt to Buddhist monastic organisation at all, and the argument here does not claim to rule that possibility out. The narrower and more defensible claim advanced is that Aśoka's promotion of dhamma as a governing category draws on, and makes public and lay-facing, an institutional logic ; normative teaching realised through promulgated rule and designated procedure ; that Buddhist monastic practice had already developed for the regulation of its own community, whatever its ultimate causal relationship to the edicts. On this reading, the edicts are not simply a ruler's ad hoc borrowing of an ethical vocabulary; they extend a pattern of rule-governed community formation that the

Buddhist tradition had already modelled at the scale of the *saṅgha* to the much larger and more heterogeneous scale of the empire. This is, admittedly, a structural rather than a philological argument, and it is offered as such: it explains why a ruler drawing on Buddhist ethical vocabulary might also reach for the vocabulary and apparatus of rule, rather than confining himself to exhortation, without requiring that he ; or his chancery ; had direct textual knowledge of a codified Vinaya.

2.6 The Schism Edicts and Vinaya Cullavagga VII: State Power and Monastic Self-Governance

A more concrete point of contact between the edicts and the Vinaya, rather than the structural analogy of section 2.5, is supplied by the so-called Schism Edict, preserved in three versions ; at Sarnath, Sanchi, and on the Allahabad-Kosambi pillar (Hultzsch 1925; Norman 1992). The edict is addressed to the *mahāmātras* and states plainly that the *saṅgha* is not to be divided (*saṃghe bhetavye*), and that any monk or nun who causes division in the *saṅgha* is to be made to wear white lay robes and to be made to reside outside the monastic residences (*anāvāsa*) ; that is, to be expelled from the monastic community by state action. Instructions are given that copies of this order be posted at assembly places and communicated to the lay community as well, with district officers (*mahāmātras*) responsible for ensuring it is read out and enforced at each observance (*uposatha*) day.

The relevant comparator within the Vinaya is Cullavagga VII, the section of the monastic disciplinary code that defines *saṅghabheda* (schism) and prescribes the *saṅgha*'s own internal procedure for identifying, censuring, and where necessary separating from a schismatic faction, up to and including the grave offence attributed there to Devadatta. Reading the Schism Edict against Cullavagga VII sharpens, rather than collapses, the distinction the edict itself draws: the state's sanction is disrobing and physical removal from monastic residence, imposed by royal officers and enforced through the ordinary machinery of provincial administration, whereas the Vinaya's own procedure for determining what counts as a schism-causing offence, and for the internal disciplinary steps (censure, suspension, formal act of the community) that precede any question of expulsion, remains entirely internal to the *saṅgha*'s communal procedure and is nowhere displaced by the edict's text. On the reading offered here, Aśoka's intervention reinforces the outcome of monastic unity that Vinaya categories already define, by attaching state enforcement power to a determination the edict presupposes rather than makes; it does not purport to supersede, and supplies no alternative to, the *saṅgha*'s own internal authority to determine, by its own procedure, who is in fact schismatic. This reading is consistent with the scholarly consensus, associated particularly with Bechert's (1961, 1982) re-examination of the edict, that it addresses discord within individual local communities rather than a doctrinal schism in the Buddhist Church as a whole, a point that further narrows the edict's ambition: it is best understood as an instrument of administrative reinforcement for monastic discipline that the *saṅgha* itself continued to define and adjudicate, not as evidence of a state-directed Buddhist orthodoxy imposed on the monastic order from outside.

2.7 Dhamma-Vijaya and the Canonical Ideal of the Dhammarāja

The edicts' language of dhamma as the basis of governance also has a canonical Pāli hinterland that deserves more than passing mention, since it supplies the doctrinal vocabulary the edicts draw on even where, as with the Vinaya in section 2.5, no direct textual borrowing can be demonstrated. The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 26) sets out the ideal of the *cakkavatti*, the wheel-turning righteous monarch whose legitimacy and prosperity depend on ruling "by dhamma" (*dhammena*) rather than by force, and whose failure to do so is narrated as the direct cause of social and moral decline; the sutta's insistence that the wheel-turning monarch "does not himself do what is not dhamma" and provides protection, shelter, and guardianship (*dhammikaṃ rakkhāvaraṇaguttiṃ*) to all classes of subjects supplies close conceptual ground for the edicts' own vocabulary of *pālana* and *goti* in the epigraph with which this article opens. The *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 5) offers a second and more specifically administrative resource: in it the Buddha, asked how a king should conduct a great sacrifice, redirects the question toward what has been read since at least Rhys Davids's translation as an early statement of welfare economics ; supplying seed and fodder to farmers, capital to traders, and adequate wages to officials as the means of suppressing crime and securing prosperity, in place of ritual slaughter. The structural resemblance between this redirection and Aśoka's own substitution, in Major Rock Edict I, of restraint on animal sacrifice for royal welfare measures such as those recorded in Edict II is suggestive rather than demonstrable as direct influence, but it situates the edicts within a recognisable canonical pattern of converting sacrificial obligation into administrative welfare provision.

Two further canonical sources round out this picture without, on the present evidence, licensing a stronger claim of direct transmission. The *Aggañña Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 27) supplies an origin narrative for kingship itself, in which the first "Great Elect" (*Mahāsammata*) is chosen by common agreement to maintain order in exchange for a share of the community's produce ; a account of royal authority as delegated and accountable rather than divinely underived, which resonates with, without directly explaining, the edicts' insistence that the king's authority is exercised for the welfare (*sukha*) of the governed. The *Sigālovāda Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 31), concerned with the reciprocal duties owed among householders, parents and children, teachers and pupils, and employers and employees, has sometimes been read as a lay counterpart to the Vinaya ; a "vinaya of the householder"; and its structure of reciprocal, universally stated obligation (rather than status-graded duty) again parallels the edicts' mode of address discussed in section 2.1. Finally, the tenfold royal virtue (*dasa-rāja-dhamma* ; *dāna, sīla, pariccāga, ajjava, maddava, tapa, akkodha, avihiṃsā, khanti*, and *avirodhana*), articulated in Jātaka commentarial literature (see the verse preserved in the Jātaka commentary on the Mahāhaṃsa/Chulla-haṃsa Jātaka; cf. Rahula 1959), gives later Buddhist kingship theory a compact ethical checklist against which a ruler's conduct could be measured; while this formulation cannot be shown to have existed in its later, fixed form in Aśoka's own lifetime, its individual constituent virtues ; non-violence, forbearance, restraint from wrath, liberality ; are each independently attested in the edicts' own vocabulary, which suggests either that the edicts draw on an already-circulating stock of royal-virtue language later crystallised into the *dasa-rāja-dhamma* formula, or that the formula's compilers drew, among other sources, on the same normative tradition Aśoka's inscriptions exemplify. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 16) supplies a final, structurally distinct precedent worth noting briefly: its account of the seven conditions of non-

decline (*aparihāniya dhammā*) that the Buddha commends to the Vajjian confederacy ; frequent assembly, acting in concord, upholding established institutions, honouring elders, and protecting women and shrines ; models collective, rule-bound governance rather than monarchy as such, and is invoked here not as a source for Aśoka's kingship but as evidence that the broader canonical tradition already treated governance, of whatever constitutional form, as properly constituted by publicly agreed and durable rule rather than by unconstrained discretion ; the same underlying commitment that section 2.5 locates in the Vinaya and that this article argues the edicts extend to the register of empire.

3. The Institutional Architecture of Dhamma

3.1 The Dhamma-Mahāmātras as an Office of Grievance-Redress

Dhamma, as evidenced by the edicts, was not solely left to moral persuasion; it was actively administered. The Fifth Major Rock Edict reveals that, in the thirteenth year of Aśoka's reign, a dedicated group known as the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras* was established. Their stated responsibilities included ensuring the well-being of ascetics and householders of diverse sects, providing relief to prisoners and their dependents, and promoting dhamma broadly among all sectarian groups. It is important, given how easily this office invites anachronistic description, to state plainly what the edicts do and do not establish about it. The office was an administrative innovation intended to promote a universal public ethic across a religiously and socially plural empire; nothing in the corpus indicates that the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras* were religious officers charged with enforcing monastic discipline or with propagating a state Buddhist doctrine as such ; their remit, as Edict V and Edict XII together describe it, runs across sects rather than being confined to the Buddhist *saṅgha*, and their disciplinary reach over monastics, where it exists at all (as in the Schism Edict discussed in section 2.6), is exercised in support of the *saṅgha*'s own determinations rather than in place of them. This office was distinct from the existing administrative structures such as *rajjukas*, who served as district judicial authorities; *yutas*, the junior executives; and *prādeśikas*, provincial governors, all of which are mentioned elsewhere in the edict corpus, and the edicts describe its remit as complementary to, rather than duplicating, the regular revenue and judicial administrative systems.

The characterisation of this office as exercising oversight over existing authorities, and not merely a welfare remit of its own, deserves a more cautious statement than the edicts alone can fully support. The textual basis for it is narrower than a general supervisory mandate: it rests on the edicts' description of the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras*' concern with prisoners and their dependents (implying some check on the exercise of penal authority by others) and with promoting dhamma “among all sectarian groups” (implying some standing, cross-cutting responsibility not confined to a single administrative silo), rather than on any explicit grant of authority to review or overturn the decisions of *rajjukas* or other officers. With that qualification stated, it remains true that a norm inscribed on a monument embodies a moral proposition, whereas a norm assigned to an officer bearing a specific title, operating within a defined jurisdiction, and reporting directly to the throne constitutes an administrative reality with potential juridical implications, even where enforcement cannot be assumed and even where, as

here, the office's authority relative to other officials is not fully specified. Understood in this more limited sense, the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras* function, by cautious analogy rather than functional equivalence, as something resembling a modern office of grievance redress: not a formal court of record, and not demonstrably possessed of judicial power to adjudicate or reverse the decisions of other officers, but a continuous administrative channel through which, in principle, the distance between the sovereign's proclaimed standards and the actual behaviour of his officials might be reduced over time. The analogy to a modern ombudsman is offered here only as an interpretive aid for a contemporary reader, not as a claim that the Mauryan office possessed a comparable formal mandate or independence.

3.2 From Mauryan Office to Buddhist Kingship Ideal: A Note on Reception

The institutional logic of the *Dhamma-Mahāmātra* office did not survive as a functioning Mauryan bureaucratic post; the epigraphic record after Aśoka is effectively silent on it. What is argued to have survived, in transmuted form, is the broader ideal it embodied ; that a righteous ruler institutes standing mechanisms for the welfare and correction of his subjects, rather than merely refraining from cruelty. This claim of continuity needs to be stated as what it is: a claim about the persistence of a conceptual ideal in later Buddhist kingship literature and in the historical memory of later Buddhist polities, not a claim of demonstrable institutional transmission or of unbroken doctrinal filiation from the Mauryan office itself. The ideal in question resurfaces, in different institutional clothing, in the *dasa-rāja-dhamma* and *cakkavatti* material discussed in section 2.7, and Sri Lankan and, later, Southeast Asian Buddhist polities that explicitly invoked Aśoka as a model of righteous kingship (Tambiah 1976; Seneviratna 1994) drew on precisely this feature ; the ruler as self-binding promulgator of a public standard ; even where they did not, and in most cases could not, reconstruct the specific administrative office of the *Dhamma-Mahāmātra* itself.

That later invocation of Aśoka, as section 1 has already argued, comes substantially through the Theravāda chronicle tradition of the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa* rather than through any independent transmission of Mauryan administrative practice, which means the continuity being traced here is best described as retrospective Buddhist interpretation building on canonical ideals (the *cakkavatti* and *dasa-rāja-dhamma* material of section 2.7) that predate Aśoka, rather than as a chain of institutional or even conceptual transmission running forward from the historical Mauryan office. Dhammika's (1993) and Seneviratna's (1994) collections of scholarship on Aśoka's reception in Theravāda memory, and Lahiri's (2015) biography, together document how thoroughly later Buddhist polities' "Aśoka" is a composite of the epigraphic king and the chronicle-tradition *Dhammāsoka*, and this article does not attempt to disentangle the two beyond noting, as section 1 does, that the epigraphic material alone is what grounds its own legal-historical claims. The point of noting the reception history here, briefly and without claiming to resolve it, is narrower: it identifies the specific element of Aśoka's institutional programme most likely to have had durable influence ; not the office as a bureaucratic fact, which lapsed, but the office as a later-invoked template, transmitted through Buddhist kingship literature and chronicle tradition, for what a Buddhist ruler's self-binding administrative commitment should look like. Section 5 and the conclusion return to why this distinction ; between doctrinal ideal and institutional survival ; matters for how much weight the argument of this article can bear.

4. Comparative Jurisprudence: Dhamma against Daṇḍanīti and Dicey

4.1 Against the Manusmṛti

Where the *dharmaśāstra* tradition derives legal obligation from *varnāśramadharma* ; a duty assigned according to one's birth-station and stage of life ; the edicts draw obligation from a single, universally addressed dhamma encompassing non-injury, truthfulness, respect for elders and ascetics of every sect, and restraint in expenditure and possessions, applied consistently across the householder, the official, and the king. As section 2.1 has already flagged, this comparison must be read with the chronological caveat that the received *Manusmṛti* postdates Aśoka by, on Olivelle's (2005) dating, at least a century and possibly several; it is used here, following Olivelle's own framing of the text as a systematised articulation of an older Brahmanical normative tradition rather than a legal code contemporaneous with the edicts, and following Thapar's (1961; 2002) related caution that Mauryan-period Brahmanical legal thought should not be read as identical to its later, more schematic codification. Used this way, the comparison is with an idiom and its eventual textual crystallisation, not with a rival statute Aśoka's officers might have consulted.

The most notable difference within that comparison appears in the realm of penology. The *dharmaśāstra*'s scheme, particularly as Manu articulates it, makes punishment explicitly status-graded: Olivelle's translation and commentary (2005, chs. 8–9) show penalties for identical offences varying categorically by the offender's and the victim's *varna*, most starkly in provisions concerning insult, assault, and sexual offence across status lines. The edicts, by contrast, contain no textual hierarchy of punishment of this kind. The claim that they therefore establish "universal liability" needs to be stated carefully, since it is an inference from an absence rather than a positive textual assertion: the edicts do not say that all subjects face identical penalties for identical offences, only that their address does not itself encode the status differentiation Manu's scheme makes explicit, and that the one procedural safeguard the corpus does specify in detail ; the three-day stay of PE IV ; is offered without any indication of status qualification. The article's claim is accordingly the moderated one: that the edicts substitute procedural safeguards, applied without stated status qualification, for the substantive, status-differentiated standards that structure the *dharmaśāstra*'s penal scheme, and that this is a real and traceable contrast of legal idiom even though it cannot, on the edicts' own terms, be read as a documented guarantee of identical outcomes in practice.

4.2 Against the Arthaśāstra

Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* treats *daṇḍa* ; the rod symbolising coercive sanction ; as the foundation of social order, and advises the *vijigīṣu*, the king oriented toward conquest and territorial expansion, to pursue a pragmatic and often amoral statecraft focused on the increase of power and territory (Olivelle 2013). Rock Edict XIII, in explicitly rejecting further military conquest in favour of *dhamma-vijaya*, stands in evident tension with this logic, even where it entails sacrificing the independence of neighbouring peoples, particularly those on the empire's western frontier. It is important, however, to be precise about how strong a claim this tension supports. The historical relationship between the *Arthaśāstra* as it survives and the Mauryan state

that Kauṭilya is traditionally associated with is itself unsettled: Trautmann's (1971) stylometric analysis first opened the question of composite authorship and later dating, and subsequent scholarship, including work associated with McClish's (2019) redating of major strata of the text, has pushed parts of the received *Arthaśāstra*'s compilation well after the Mauryan period, so there is no secure textual or historical basis for treating Aśoka, or his administration, as having read or consciously responded to the *Arthaśāstra* in the form in which it survives. What can be said with more confidence is the more modest, comparative claim: that Rock Edict XIII and the *Arthaśāstra*'s statecraft realism represent two contrasting normative orientations toward the same underlying problem ; how to balance coercive state authority with ethical constraint ; available within, or in close proximity to, the same broader Mauryan-era political culture, whether or not either text was a direct response to the other. Read this way, the two texts are best treated as two contrasting voices addressing a shared political and ethical challenge from radically different premises, rather than as a documented exchange of rebuke and response.

4.3 Against Dicey's Rule of Law

Dicey's (1885) tripartite account ; the supremacy of ordinary law over arbitrary executive power, the equal subjection of all persons to that law and to the ordinary courts, and the derivation of constitutional principle from judicial precedent rather than from written grant ; supplies a useful and explicitly bounded comparator, chosen, as the Method and sources section explains, because its three pillars map cleanly onto axes (arbitrariness, address, institutional source) on which the edicts make identifiable claims. Since Dicey's account is itself a nineteenth-century constitutional theory rather than a transhistorical standard, it is worth noting briefly where later rule-of-law scholarship has revised or extended it, so that the comparison here is not read as treating Dicey's formulation as the field's last word. Tamanaha's (2004) survey of rule-of-law theory, for instance, separates “formal” conceptions close to Dicey's own from “substantive” conceptions that build in individual rights, and Bingham's (2010) influential restatement adds accessibility, the protection of fundamental rights, and compliance with international law to Dicey's original three pillars; measured against either of these broader accounts, the edicts' analogues would look thinner still, since they supply no analogue at all to substantive rights-protection or to a plural, rights-bearing conception of legal subjecthood. The comparison in this article is deliberately confined to Dicey's narrower, formal three-part test precisely because it is the version most tractable to a pre-modern, non-constitutional polity; broader modern formulations are noted here to make clear that the modest analogues identified below should not be mistaken for a claim that Mauryan India anticipated the fuller apparatus of a modern rule-of-law state.

The edicts furnish partial analogues to Dicey's first two pillars: a public, written standard the sovereign holds himself to (RE VI, PE IV), and an address to subjects that does not encode status differentiation (section 2.1, above). They furnish no analogue to the third: there is no Mauryan court system generating binding precedent independent of the throne, and the entire apparatus of dhamma remains, in the final instance, an exercise of personal and charismatic authority rather than an institutionalised “ordinary law.” A further, narrower point of comparison sharpens this: Dicey's framework presupposes a plurality of courts whose decisions bind future decisions, including the Crown's own; the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras*, however extensive their remit, generate no comparable body of precedent, and their authority runs downward from Aśoka rather

than sideways from case to case. Aśoka binds himself; nothing in the corpus indicates that his successors were bound by anything other than their own choice to continue the policy, which, on the epigraphic record, they largely did not. The analogy to the rule of law is real but should not be overstated into a claim of proto-constitutionalism; it is better described as an early and historically specific instance of voluntary sovereign self-limitation grounded in religious ethics, which shares structural features with, but is not a precursor in any direct doctrinal line to, the later Western rule-of-law tradition.

5. Methodological Boundaries and the Limits of the Evidence

The argument advanced above rests on textual, epigraphic evidence, and it is worth restating clearly what that evidence can and cannot establish, so that the boundaries described here read as a specification of the argument's proper scope rather than as a retraction of it. First, the edicts are official normative texts issued directly by the sovereign himself; their survival and their content inform us about what Aśoka claimed and intended ; a jurisprudentially significant fact in its own right, since a theory of morally constrained kingship is itself a contribution to legal thought whether or not it was fully implemented ; but they do not by themselves establish how consistently *rajjukas, yutas*, and *Dhamma-Mahāmātras* applied these standards across a vast, subcontinental empire with limited communications infrastructure. The discrepancy between an inscribed standard and actual administrative practice cannot presently be reconstructed with sufficient precision from the evidence available. The article's central claims accordingly concern normative transformation ; the emergence of dhamma as a stated category of governance and law in the sovereign's own textual record ; and not a demonstration of complete or even substantial administrative compliance, which the edicts were never positioned to prove.

Second, the preservation of inscriptions is inherently non-random: inscribed on durable rock surfaces and stone pillars, they privilege certain locations and messages over others that may have been conveyed through oral tradition or through perishable components of governance that have not survived. Third, the subsequent history of dhamma as a component of state policy was relatively brief: the available evidence suggests that Aśoka's immediate successors did not maintain the programme with the same intensity, which counsels caution against reading the edicts as evidence of a long-lasting institutional transformation of ancient Indian political thought, as distinct from a feature of a single, historically contingent reign. This is precisely why the distinction drawn in section 3.2, between the *Dhamma-Mahāmātra* office, which did not survive institutionally, and the ideal of self-binding righteous kingship, which the reception evidence discussed there suggests arguably did persist in later Buddhist kingship literature, matters for the weight the article's institutional claim can bear; conflating the two would overstate the durability of what the epigraphic record alone can support. These limitations do not diminish the validity of the textual claims made in sections 2 through 4, which concern the content of the edicts themselves; they do restrict any inference from that content to the lived experience of Mauryan subjects, and the article has tried, throughout, to keep that distinction between normative claim and administrative fact in view rather than allowing the former to stand in silently for the latter.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Aśoka's edicts represent a significant body of legal-historical evidence in their own right, separate from both the Brahmanical *dharmaśāstra* tradition and the hagiographic and chronicle literature that later developed around Aśoka's biography. To state precisely what is meant by "legal-historical evidence" here: the edicts are read as evidence of normative claims the sovereign made about the basis and limits of his own authority, given administrative form through named offices and stated procedures, rather than as evidence of a codified body of enforceable law in the modern positivist sense, or as a systematic political theory in the manner of the *Arthaśāstra*. Within that more precise sense, and read as primary sources for governance rather than as devotional texts, the edicts reveal dhamma functioning as an administrative category with three identifiable effects, each of which is better described as a normative and administrative mechanism than as a directly enforceable legal consequence in the modern sense: first, an address to subjects that does not incorporate a hierarchy of liability based on social or religious status, in contrast to the *Manusmṛti*; second, a procedural commitment to accessible adjudication (RE VI) and to a mandatory waiting period before capital punishment (PE IV), which the corpus presents as general instructions to officers rather than as exceptional royal grants to particular individuals, even though their consistent application across the empire cannot be independently verified; and third, the existence of a dedicated administrative office ; the *Dhamma-Mahāmātras* ; responsible, on the more cautious reading offered in section 3.1, for promoting and monitoring the gap between proclaimed standards and actual official conduct, without clear evidence of a formal power to overturn other officers' decisions. Sections 2.5 through 2.7 further situate this programme within Buddhist textual tradition itself, arguing that its underlying logic ; normative teaching realised through promulgated rule and designated procedure ; has structural precedent in the monastic Vinaya and conceptual precedent in the canonical dhammarāja and *cakkavatti* material, even without evidence of direct textual borrowing in either direction.

When evaluated against Dicey's rule of law, and against the more recent scholarship noted in section 4.3 that has extended his formal account toward substantive and rights-based conceptions, these features provide genuine, though limited, analogues to the principle that a public standard should prevail over arbitrary discretion and that individuals should be addressed equally before that standard. They do not resemble an institutionalised "ordinary law" operating independently of the sovereign's authority, and their durability beyond Aśoka's own reign, as section 3.2 and section 5 both note, is properly a claim about the persistence of an ideal in later Buddhist kingship literature rather than about the survival of Mauryan institutions as such. Stated positively, rather than primarily in terms of what it withholds, the article's contribution is this: the edicts document a historically specific but genuine transformation in the normative conception of kingship and royal obligation ; from a sovereign whose legitimacy rests on martial success and ritual sanction to one whose legitimacy is staked, in his own public and multilingual text, on standards of judicial access, procedural restraint, and administered welfare that he invites his subjects to hold him to. That transformation, whatever its ultimate administrative reach, is itself a datum for legal history, not merely for the history of piety.

The broader implication for the historiography of Indian law is not that the standard periodisation ; which locates the origins of Indian jurisprudence in Vedic and Brahmanical sources, with Buddhist material read primarily as ethical commentary ; is simply mistaken, but that it understates the independent juridical content present in the Aśokan corpus by treating law and piety as more sharply opposed categories than ancient political traditions, which regularly combine moral, religious, and administrative norms, actually sustain. The historiographical strands this article means to challenge are, specifically, the older reference tradition represented by works such as Jolly's (1928) and Kane's (1930–1962) surveys of Hindu law, which take the *dharmaśāstra* corpus as the effective totality of ancient Indian legal thought and treat Buddhist material as falling outside it by definition, and the related tendency, visible in general political and constitutional histories of India, to locate the beginnings of a recognisably "legal" Indian polity in later, more state-like formations; the article's aim, against both, is to expand the category of legal history to admit the edicts on their own terms, not to displace religious or devotional readings of Aśoka, which remain valid on their own ground and which this article has drawn on, rather than dismissed, in distinguishing the epigraphic Aśoka from his later chronicle memory.

Considering the edicts as genuine, if historically bounded, evidence of legal thought ; rather than merely as acts of piety ; opens at least two avenues for further investigation that this article has not explored in full. First, a systematic comparison of enforcement evidence across different regions of the empire, to the extent that independent epigraphic or administrative evidence outside the edicts themselves remains available, would help close the gap between normative claim and administrative practice that section 5 identifies as the study's principal limitation. Second, and building on the brief note in section 3.2, a comparative analysis of how the dhamma-as-governance model was received, modified, or abandoned in the Buddhist polities of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, where Aśoka was explicitly invoked as a model of righteous kingship, and where the *cakkavatti* and *dasa-rāja-dhamma* traditions arguably preserved the ideal of self-binding rule even after the specific Mauryan institutions that first embodied it had disappeared, would clarify whether that continuity is best described as conceptual ; a canonical ideal, independently available, being repeatedly reapplied ; or as a more specific retrospective Buddhist interpretation organised around the figure of Aśoka himself, as the chronicle tradition discussed in sections 1 and 3.2 suggests. Either finding would be of interest to Buddhist Studies specifically: the first would document an institutional legacy internal to Buddhist polities; the second would document how a religious tradition preserves a governing ideal even after the office that first realised it has vanished from the administrative record ; itself a recurring pattern in the history of Buddhist kingship that this article's method, extended comparatively, is well placed to examine.

Notes

1. Translation of the epigraph after Sircar; transliteration follows standard Pali/Prakrit convention rather than the original Brāhmī orthography.
2. The historical method followed here draws on the source-critical approach associated with Leopold von Ranke, and on the epigraphic interpretive conventions established by James Prinsep and developed by D. C. Sircar for Aśokan material specifically.

3. The Author declares the moderate and supportive use of AI tools for formatting, citation-consistency checking, and language editing in the preparation of this manuscript, in accordance with the journal's AI policy; the analysis and argument are the Author's own. Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit terms are rendered in standard Unicode IAST characters.

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