

Ashoka Pillar, Features, Major & Minor Edicts, Lion Capital of Ashoka

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The Ashoka Pillar represents one of the earliest and most refined stone monuments of ancient India, erected during the reign of Emperor Ashoka the Great. These monolithic columns, raised across the Mauryan Empire, symbolized royal authority and moral governance based on Dhamma. The pillars were carved from single blocks of sandstone and placed at key administrative, trade and pilgrimage centres. They remain among the finest surviving examples of Mauryan architecture and sculpture.

Ashoka Pillar

The **Ashoka** Pillars were monumental stone columns erected throughout northern India and adjoining regions as part of the emperor's early artistic and political programme. Originally about 20-30 pillars were installed out of which only about 19 have survived till today and many are fragmented. They were transported from quarries at Mathura and Chunar and erected along trade routes, border towns and major Buddhist pilgrimage sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Sanchi. The inscriptions engraved upon them were deciphered in the 1830s. They form part of nearly 150 Ashokan edicts discovered across India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

Ashoka Pillar Features

The pillars display uniform design, polished finish and symbolic capitals reflecting Mauryan craftsmanship and imperial vision.

- **Monolithic Shaft:** Each pillar shaft was carved from a single sandstone block, circular in cross section, slightly tapering upward and reaching 12 to 15 metres in height with mirror-like Mauryan polish.
- **Stone Types Used:** Two principal stones were employed, spotted red and white sandstone from Mathura and fine buff sandstone from Chunar near Varanasi, both transported over long distances.
- **Weight and Dimensions:** Average height ranged between 40 and 50 feet and each pillar weighed approximately 50 tons, demonstrating advanced engineering and coordinated labour organization.
- **Capital Structure:** The capital consisted of three sections carved from one piece, joined to the shaft by a metal dowel, forming a stable and durable architectural unit.
- **Bell Shaped Base:** The lower capital resembled an inverted lotus bell, symbolizing purity and spiritual awakening, reflecting both Indian symbolism and possible Achaemenid stylistic parallels.
- **Abacus Decoration:** The abacus platform was either plain square or circular with carvings such as lotuses, bead and reel patterns, palmettes and rosettes inspired by Greek and Near Eastern motifs.
- **Animal Sculptures:** Surviving capitals include seven animals, mainly lions, one bull and one elephant, sculpted fully in the round and representing strength, vigilance and moral sovereignty.
- **Mauryan Polish:** Surfaces were polished to extraordinary smoothness, comparable to fine metalwork, reflecting technical mastery unmatched in early Indian stone architecture.
- **Script and Language:** Inscriptions were engraved in Prakrit using Brahmi script, the ancestor of later Indic scripts, while some western edicts used Aramaic and Greek.
- **Geographic Spread:** Major surviving pillars are located in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Nepal and Afghanistan, marking the vast territorial extent of the Mauryan Empire.
- **Relocation:** In 1356 CE, Firuz Shah Tughlaq transported two pillars from Topra and Meerut to Delhi, preserving them within medieval monuments.

Read about: [Mauryan Empire](#)

Pillars of Ashoka

The list of few of the preserved Pillars of Ashoka has been given below:

- **Sarnath Pillar:** Famous for the Lion Capital, now the National Emblem of India. The polished sandstone pillar carried the Schism Edict and displays the finest Mauryan craftsmanship.
- **Sanchi Pillar:** Located at the Buddhist site of Sanchi. It once had a lion capital similar to Sarnath. The pillar bears the Schism Edict and reflects early inscription techniques.
- **Allahabad Pillar (Kosambi Pillar):** Originally erected at Kosambi and later moved to Allahabad Fort. It contains both Major and Minor Pillar Edicts, including the Queen's Edict. Later rulers like Samudragupta also added inscriptions.
- **Lauriya-Araraj Pillar:** Located in East Champaran district of Bihar. It contains Major Pillar Edicts and is known for its well preserved polished shaft.

- Lauriya Nandangarh Pillar: Also situated in Champaran, Bihar. The pillar carries Major Pillar Edicts and stands near ancient burial mounds.
- Rampurva Pillars: Two pillars were found here, one with a lion capital and another with a bull capital. One pillar bears Major Pillar Edicts, while the other is without inscription.
- Vaishali Pillar: Features a single lion capital facing north. Unlike many others, this pillar has no inscription and marks an important Buddhist site.
- Topra Kalan Pillar (Delhi-Topra Pillar): Originally installed at Topra in Haryana and later moved to Delhi. It contains Major Pillar Edicts including the unique Major Pillar Edict VII.
- Lumbini Pillar (Rummindei Pillar): Marks the birthplace of the Buddha. Ashoka reduced taxes in the village and commemorated his visit with this pillar.
- Nigali Sagar Pillar: Erected after Ashoka enlarged the stupa of Kanakamuni Buddha. The pillar commemorates his personal visit and devotion.
- Sankisa Pillar: Located at Sankisa, an ancient Buddhist site. The pillar is now broken, but an elephant capital was discovered here, symbolizing the Buddha's descent from heaven.
- Delhi-Meerut Pillar (Firoz Shah Kotla): Originally from Meerut and relocated to Delhi by Firoz Shah Tughlaq in the 14th century. It carries Major Pillar Edicts and stands inside Firoz Shah Kotla.
- Kandahar Fragment: Though mainly known for rock edicts, fragments associated with pillar inscriptions in Aramaic have been reported, showing Ashoka's influence extended into Afghanistan.

Lion Capital of Ashoka

The Lion Capital of Ashoka, commonly called as "Ashoka Stambh", is the National Emblem of India. It was built by Emperor Ashoka around 250 BCE at Sarnath. The sculpture shows four Asiatic lions standing back to back, symbolizing power, courage, pride and confidence. It is made of polished sandstone and represents truth and righteousness under the Mauryan Empire. It was adopted in 1950 as the State Emblem of India, with the Ashoka Chakra placed at the centre of the national flag.

Ashoka Pillar Edicts

Ashoka Pillar Edicts are official inscriptions engraved on stone pillars erected by Ashoka during the 3rd century BCE. They communicate his Dhamma policy, moral teachings, administrative principles and messages of non violence, justice and religious tolerance across the Mauryan Empire.

The Ashoka Pillar Edicts have been classified into two categories:

1. Major Pillar Edicts

Major Pillar Edicts are important inscriptions of Ashoka explaining Dhamma, governance, welfare and moral duties. The seven Major Pillar Edicts were inscribed on selected pillars across the Gangetic plain.

1. Major Pillar Edict I: Explains Ashoka's principle of protecting his people through moral governance. It stresses welfare measures, justice and the king's duty to ensure public safety and ethical administration.
2. Major Pillar Edict II: Defines Dhamma as avoiding sins and practicing virtues like compassion, charity, truthfulness and purity. It presents a simple moral code for peaceful and harmonious living.

3. Major Pillar Edict III: Advises people to avoid cruelty, anger, pride and harsh behavior. It encourages self control, kindness and moral discipline among subjects throughout the empire.
4. Major Pillar Edict IV: Describes duties of Rajukas, officers appointed to spread Dhamma. They toured provinces every five years to guide people and ensure fair governance.
5. Major Pillar Edict V: Lists animals and birds protected from killing on certain days and occasions. It also mentions Ashoka's humanitarian act of releasing twenty five prisoners.
6. Major Pillar Edict VI: Explains Ashoka's Dhamma policy in administration. It emphasizes quick justice, public communication and the king's concern for moral and material welfare.
7. Major Pillar Edict VII: Summarizes works done for promoting Dhamma. It highlights religious tolerance and states that all sects value self control and purity of mind.

2. Minor Pillar Edicts

Minor Pillar Edicts are shorter inscriptions of Ashoka focusing on Sangha unity, donations and commemorative visits.

1. Schism Edicts: Found at Sarnath, Sanchi and Allahabad, these edicts warn against division in the Buddhist Sangha. They order strict action against monks or nuns causing disunity.
2. Queen's Edict: Inscribed on the Allahabad pillar, it credits Ashoka's second queen, Karuvaki, for her charitable donations like mango groves and religious institutions.
3. Lumbini Pillar Inscription (Rummindei Edict): Records Ashoka's visit to Lumbini, birthplace of the Buddha. He reduced taxes there and marked the sacred site with a pillar.
4. Nigali Sagar Pillar Inscription: Mentions Ashoka enlarging the stupa of Kanakamuni Buddha and personally visiting the site to pay respect, marking it with a commemorative pillar.

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