

Imperial Ideology and Religious Pluralism in Aśoka

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Aśoka (reigned c. 268–232 BCE) was the third emperor of the Maurya Dynasty, who consolidated power and expanded his territory—for the first and last time—to most of the Indian subcontinent, including northwestern regions such as Afghanistan. He left a large corpus of inscriptions, which are the earliest written records from India. These so-called edicts are unique in world history in that they contain letters written to his officials, subjects, and religious communities encouraging them to lead virtuous lives. In them he proclaims what may be called an imperial moral/religious ideology aimed at providing a religious foundation to his empire that was ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. I have called this Aśoka's "civil religion" centered on the concept of *dharma*, which he attempted to preach not just in his own territory but in countries far away, such as Greece and Sri Lanka, by sending religious ambassadors. Further, some of his letters he encourages diverse religious groups (*pāṣaṇḍa*) to live in harmony, to meet with each other, and to learn each other's doctrines and way of life. At the religious level, therefore, he fostered religious pluralism. This paper investigates the nature of Aśoka's civil religion and his efforts at religious pluralism, and how this may have impacted the formation of his empire.