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Abstract. The Mauryan Empire and its neighbouring countries still remain as a desideratum research topic because of the scarcity of authentic data. The only available sources are the edicts of King Ashoka the Great and a few other inscriptions. The paper offers a review of the recent monograph by Professor Susmita Basu Majumdar (Calcutta) on the Mahasthan inscription, which is believed to be a part of the Mauryan epigraphy. Content analysis of the Mahasthan record and comparative study of various Mauryan inscriptions and coins help to find shortcomings in Majumdar's reconstructions. First, there is no reason to believe that the Mahasthan inscription does mention unhusked rice because the term [*dhā*] *niyam* means 'grain' in general. Second, there is no reason to treat the Mahasthan record as an order issued by the imperial Magadha authorities and, moreover, as a kind of 'Mauryan clay tablet'. The Mahasthan inscription mentions no Magadha authorities. One may even suggest that this record was issued by a separate polity which imitated both epigraphical documents and punch-marked coinage of the Mauryan Empire.

Keywords: Mahasthan inscription, Indian epigraphy, Mauryan Empire, Sohgaoura inscription, Aśoka, Prakrits, Brahmi, historiography

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Аннотация. Империя Маурьев и соседние с ней страны по-прежнему остаются предметом исследования из-за нехватки достоверных данных. Единственными доступными источниками выступают эдикты царя Ашоки Великого и несколько других надписей. В статье представлен обзор недавней монографии профессора Сусмиты Басу Маджумдар (Калькутта) о надписи из Махастхана, которая считается частью корпуса надписей Маурьев. Контент-анализ надписи из Махастхана и сравнительное изучение различных надписей и монет Маурьев помогают выявить неточности в реконструкциях Маджумдар. Во-первых, нет оснований полагать, что в надписи из Махастхана упомянут неочищенный рис, поскольку термин [*dhā*]niyam означает «зерно» в целом. Во-вторых, нет оснований рассматривать надпись из Махастхана как приказ, изданный имперскими властями Магадхи, и, более того, как своего рода «глиняную табличку Маурьев». В надписи из Махастхана не упоминаются никакие властные структуры Магадхи. Можно даже предположить, что эта надпись выпущена отдельным политическим образованием, которое имитировало как эпиграфические документы, так и чеканку монет империи Маурьев.

Ключевые слова: надпись из Махастхана, индийская эпиграфика, империя Маурьев, надпись из Сохгаура, Ашока, пракриты, брахми, историография

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The Mauryan Empire is still an enigma despite its long-term investigation and almost cultic perception in modern India. Emperor Ashoka (Aśoka) the Great (c. 268 to 232 BCE) is mentioned in many inscriptions, which portray him as a morally oriented Buddhist ruler. These records, however, provide little information about the state government and social structure. There is a strong tradition among modern Indian scholars to reconstruct the Mauryan polity using the Sanskrit politico-economical treatise *Arthaśāstra*. It is believed to be a work of Chanakya, or Kauṭilya— an advisor to the first Mauryan king Chandragupta who lived in the fourth century BCE (see an overview by [Goyal, 1995]). But *Arthaśāstra* dates back to the beginning of the Common Era and has no specific reference to the Mauryan Empire. It makes its usage as a source of information about the Mauryan state problematic and even biased.

Fortunately, there are some inscriptions, which date back to the Mauryan times issued by other people. These records are short and very specific with regard to their context. However, they enable a modern scholar to look at the Mauryan Empire from a different point of view. A recent monograph by epigraphist Susmita Basu Majumdar, an Indian historian and professor in the Department of Ancient Indian History at the University of Calcutta is a new evaluation of these sources. It provides a fresh look on the Mauryan polity from a regional perspective of the city of Puṇḍranagara (located in an area of modern-day Bogra City of Bangladesh).

The Mahasthan inscription written in a Prakrit language and engraved in a Brahmi script was discovered on November 30, 1931, by a certain Baru Faqir of Mahasthangarh village. The record was bought by G. C. Chandra (the superintendent of the Eastern Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India) and dispatched to the Indian Museum (Calcutta). There were produced three estampages (p. 23–24, figs. 1.1–3; see also *ill. 1*), which are nowadays preserved at the Chennai office of the Archaeological Survey of India. There are the two archaeological sites connected with the inscription: Mahasthan and Bangarch founded in the fourth/third century BCE as eastern trading, administrative and military posts of the Mauryan Empire (p. 25). 'In a well-fortified Puṇḍranagara'—sulakhite Puṇḍranagale in the Prakrit Mahasthan inscription — fits well to the Mahasthan fort (p. 26).



Ill. 1. The Mahasthan Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica* XXI, 1931. Wikipedia, licensed under the Government Open Data License — India



Professor Majumdar provides a publication of the photos of the Mahasthan inscription (p. 29-30, figs. 2.1-5). She notes that they could have been carved on the sandstone rather than limestone (p. 28). She also stresses that 'the reverse or the flip side is finely polished (see Fig. 2.2.), thus it was a well-prepared dressed piece of stone' (p. 28). The researcher examines previous editions of the Mahasthan record since its first publication by D. R. Bhandarkar in 1931 [Bhandarkar, 1931, p. 83-91]. She shows drawbacks and misinterpretations of readings and translations of the inscription. For example, Bhandarkar erroneously reads the proper name Galadana in the first line instead of the correct term *taladana*. He also thought the record was a loan but there is no such word in the inscription (p. 32). Majumdar points out that B. M. Barua's treatment of '*Savagiyānaṃ* as a reference to *śaḍvargikas*, a Buddhist community' is unconvincing, and his interpretations of donations of trees and oil to the Buddhist community, as well as localization of the treasure chamber *koṣa* inside a granary [Barua, 1934a, p. 57-66], are untenable (p. 33-34). However, Barua correctly interpreted the emergency mentioned in the record as a flood. D. C. Sircar provides a Sanskrit translation based primarily on Barua's version and interprets the word *tila* as sesame [Sircar, 1942, p. 82-83]. Majumdar asks a reasonable question about why sesame oil and mustard 'were given to combat an emergency' (p. 36). Bongard-Levin interprets the Mahasthan records in a way that it reflects some sort of a cataclysm, such as flood, famine, etc. [Bongard-Levin, 1958a, p. 113; 1958b, p. 79-84; 1973, p. 16]. Majumdar stresses that Bongard-Levin provides no justification for why he counted the Mahasthan record as a Mauryan document (p. 37). At the same time, she unreasonably ascribes to Bongard-Levin a reading *Sumātra* in the Mahasthan inscription. This, however, does not reflect the reading by Bongard-Levin, (p. 36) where one reads '(mahā=)|māte. The reading *su|māte* can be found in Barua and Sircar, whereas the latter gives *Sumātraḥ* in his Sanskrit translation (p. 33, 35). Bongard-Levin interprets the term *gaṃḍa[kehi]* as *gaṃḍaka* coins, which had to be distributed among the people in the event of an emergency. Remarkably, the attention of the Indian scholar escaped two interesting observations by Bongard-Levin. In the first instance, he treats *savagiyas* as a future passive participle of the Sanskrit verb *saṃvrj* 'those destined to suffer, victims' [Bongard-Levin, 1958, p. 111]. In the second instance, Bongard-Levin believes *suatīyāyika* reflects *svīd-ātīyāyika* (*su>svīd*), i. e. 'in the event of all emergencies' or *su* is equivalent to Skr. *sva* [Bongard-Levin, 1958, p. 112-113]. Two Indian scholars, Mukherji and Maity discover in the Mahasthan record a mention of *Sumātra*, and change Bhandarkar's erroneous Galadana to another fallacious Gobardhana [Mukherji & Maity, 1967, p. 39-40]. Mukherji and Maity believe sesame seeds and mustard seeds were distributed among to Saṃvāṅgiyas. Still, there is no reference to such seeds in the Mahasthan inscription (p. 38). Mukherji and Maity interpret a Prakrit word *suatīyāyika* as *suka-tyāyika*, "emergency because of parrots", however, other scholars interpret it as 'due to the insects', which simply lacks any sense if applied to the flood (p. 38).

Majumdar offers her own reading of the Mahasthan record (p. 39) and gives a detailed commentary. She changes a traditional line numbering by adding line 1, which is lost, and she notes that 'the record may also have two lines prior to the present incised portion extant on the fragmentary stone' (p. 39). Using the *daṇḍa*



signs of the inscription as oration marks (p. 45), Majumdar translates the Mahasthan inscription as follows (p. 42):

‘Vide this token mahāmātra Dumadina stationed at safe (sulakite, i. e. surakṣita) Puṇḍranagara (is notified that) Taladina of the Saṁvaṅgiya locality (has to make arrangements) for paddy or unhusked rice (which is granted vide this order) to be carried or taken (at their own cost which means not to be sent by the authorities at their cost from Puṇḍranagara). Take (from specified store). (As there is an) emergency situation due to water, i. e. flood. Unhusked rice (for sowing) and in addition to this those who are facing severe or extreme emergency (from them financial aid, i. e.) copper coins from the treasure (are given or bestowed upon).’

Professor Majumdar considers the Mahasthan record as an instruction for the officials and ‘a notification recording an official order’, which mentions a measure to surpass a flood disaster (p. 42, 43, 55). The aid may have been given as a loan but this is not explicitly said in the Mahasthan inscription. Be that as it may, Majumdar’s translation in some aspects looks overloaded with her interpretations. She arbitrarily cuts the terms, which are obvious — *esa koṭhāgāle kosam* — in line 7, or line 6 of previous editions. Even if she is right in her reconstruction [*dhānī*]yikehi at the beginning of this line, the translation should be simpler mentioning ‘this granary’ *esa koṭhāgāle*: ‘Because of a flood, [grain should be given] to this granary and the treasury [should give coins *gaṇḍaka*]’. But this interpretation may be disproven because there is no sign after the word *kosam*.

Professor Majumdar considers Saṁvaṅgiyas is a reference to the confederacy of Vaṅgas, which flourished in the areas of what is nowadays Dhaka, Faridpur, Vikrampur and neighbouring areas (p. 44). She goes even further and suggests the aid from Puṇḍranagara to another region of Vaṅgas; she believes that unhusked rice would be offered for sowing. But it seems an exaggeration to speak about a type or sort of rice when the text is reconstructed as [*dhā*]niyam only. The common term ‘grain’ fits better here. Majumdar takes her interpretation of *dhāniyam* as unhusked rice for granted and speculates that it was given for future harvest (p. 56). She also states that ‘financial aid was only sanctioned for those facing excessive emergency (*su-atiyāyika*)’ (p. 56). However, this interpretation depends on the meaning of *su* in this word. It may equally mean *svid* ‘all’ or *sva* ‘one’s own’, as has already been shown by Bongard-Levin. Nevertheless, Majumdar rightly points out that the Mahasthan record does mention two officials — Taladina and Dumadina — by name. This is contrary to another third-century BCE inscription from Sohgaoura, which contains an order to share grain in case of future calamities, which was allegedly put on a gate to the two granaries (p. 57, 50–51) [Ghosh, 2016, p. 128–138; 2018, p. 145–152].

Professor Majumdar offers an interesting, albeit speculative reconstruction of the initial shape of the Mahasthan inscription (fig. 4.1). She adds the symbols and images from the top of the Sohgaoura inscription, which comprises two granaries, trees, a banner-*dhvaja*, and three-top hill with a crescent (p. 50, fig. 3.2; p. 53, fig. 3.3; p. 60, fig. 4.2, see also *ill. 2* below). However, the sign of the banner may be interpreted as a spear. Majumdar believes the treasury of the Mahasthan record, i. e. *koṣa*, ‘was located in Vaṅga as the territory of Varendra, which was a separate locality’ (p. 61).



There is another speculation which has no support in the text of the inscription where both the granary and the treasure are mentioned in a row. It is hard to imagine that an official charged with the provision of aid in a case of flooding had to go to two different (and also unspecified!) localities, which were separated by a great distance.

Majumdar compares the Mahasthan inscription with the Achaemenid clay treasure tablets and goes too far in her statement: 'the Mahasthan record is so far the only known specimen of a Mauryan clay tablet' (p. 63). First, Majumdar is definitively aware that the record was carved in stone and cannot therefore be written on clay. Second, there is a huge difference between Achaemenid clay tablets and the Mahasthan inscription: the former have a strict structure and mention names of a treasurer, actors and scribes as well as works and payments, whereas the latter is a sole record of its kind in its region. Its form is rather vague, the location of both granary and treasury is unspecified, there is no mention of repayments or other specific activities. An Achaemenid influence on the Mauryan epigraphy seems plausible, however, not in this particular case.

Chapter 4 deals with a question of currency functioned in the Mauryan Age Bengal. Majumdar once again stresses that the Mahasthan record mentions copper coinage, and examines the Mahasthan, Baigacha and Mahasthan II silver coin hoards. The first two hoards were excavated and include coins of lesser weight than the Mauryan imperial silver punch-marked coins were. The provenance of the Mahasthan II hoard is problematic as it originates from a coin dealer. Majumdar finds it problematic because the coins all have regular weight of imperial standard. More important, however, are her reflections on the reasons why and how local Bengal currency could have been of lesser weight than the imperial issues were. She suggests that the local authorities sent their coining or minting charges to Magadha and then minted coins of lesser weight (p. 66–68).

Chapter 5 focuses on the emergencies mentioned in the Mahasthan and Sohgaura inscriptions as *atīyāyika*. They are compared with various classifications as well as disaster mentions in the *Arthaśāstra*, *dharmasāstras* and *avadānas*. Majumdar writes: 'For such organized administrative structure and disaster management, a state-controlled economic system and an all-pervasive administrative machinery is required and the presence of both is attested in these two records' (p. 75). This statement undermines recent trends to treat the Mauryan Empire as a loose political system where the administrative apparatus was relatively weak [Vigasin, 2007]. However, Majumdar's references to the *Arthaśāstra* and *Kāmandakīya Nītisāra* seem outdated. The *Arthaśāstra* dates from the first century CE [Scharfe, 1968; Trautmann, 1971] and cannot be a description of the Mauryan Empire at any rate; it offers an ideal kingdom without specific reference to any ancient Indian polity. The *Kāmandakīya Nītisāra* is a much later text too, which may date back from the third to sixth or seventh centuries CE [Mitra & Mitra, 1982, p. II, IX; Gaṇapati Sāstrī, 1912, p. V–VI].

Chapter 6 comprises a favourable attitude to 'a structured administrative set-up, a proper defensive mechanism, surplus or adequate resources to divert sufficient resource for labour and materials to create, maintain and sustain public structures' (p. 82). Professor Majumdar even assumes that an officer at Mahasthan 'was also a Magadhan recruit' (p. 82) and that the Maurya possessed 'political control over



these subregions of Bengal' (p. 84). The Mauryan control over Puṇḍranagara was 'more vibrant and connected with the metropolitan Magadha' whereas 'the control over Vaṅga was less intense' (p. 84). Majumdar attributes the flood disaster mentioned in the Mahasthan record, to 'the months of June or July, i. e. the monsoon season', and the local population obtained seeds for their rabi crops, that is, rice (p. 86). Be that as it may, Majumdar's reconstruction remains a hypothesis. It seems risky to suggest the exact levels of political control and moreover, the appointment of the officials in Magadha from the fragmentary Mahasthan inscription. Majumdar criticizes Bongard-Levin for his straightforward identification of the record with the Mauryas however her own ideas are even more ungrounded. As it has been shown above, the Mahasthan record does not specify the kind of grain. Therefore, it's hard to believe that the grain given to the victims of the flood was definitely unhusked rice for sowing in December.

Chapter 7 comprises Majumdar's statement about the autonomous spaces of Bengal (undivided) in the Mauryan Empire. 'In the case of Bengal, issuance of a local currency clearly reflects the continued manifestation of the autonomous spaces within the ambit of the state through regions' (p. 95). Here Professor Majumdar follows Romila Thapar's fundamental view on the Mauryan Empire as 'a complex form of state which accommodated culturally different people and different political and economic systems (Thapar 2015: 141-71)' (p. 98) (see also [Thapar, 1987, p. 1-30; Habib & Habib, 1989, p. 57-79]).



III. 2. The Sohgaoura Inscription, Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1894, p. 84-85. Public domain. Wikipedia



In conclusion, I would like to add a few comments regarding Majumdar's interpretation of both the Mahasthan inscription and the local currency of early Bengal, which differs by weight from the Mauryan imperial punch-marked coins. The Mahasthan inscription is the only inscription found in Bengal. It dates back from the third century BCE or even before the Common Era in general. The Mahasthan record mentions no Mauryan ruler or locality. While it presumably does mention the title of *mahāmātra*, its text in no way implies an order sent from Magadha. The Mahasthan record is unique because it mentions two names of officials while Aśoka's own edicts usually give no names except his own. Therefore, one may suggest that the Mahasthan record was issued by a local polity not incorporated into the Mauryan Empire. This polity probably would imitate imperial titles, scripts and symbols on coins but it issued its own currency whose weight was lesser than that of imperial issues. The hypothesis of a separate polity imitating the imperial standards would account for the unusual weight of early Bengal coins as well as the names of officials found in the Mahasthan inscription. This suggestion would explain the absence of Aśoka's own edicts issued in Bengal. But, of course, there is a copper plate inscription from Sohgaure in Uttar Pradesh which mentions the building of two granaries *koṭṭhāgālāni* and no Mauryan ruler but instead, its text lists three cities Tiayvani, Mathura and Chanchu [Barua, 1930, p. 32–48; Barua, 1934b, p. 55]. Mathura apparently was a part of the Mauryan Empire. It makes it difficult to disentangle the Sohgaure inscription and the Mauryan epigraphy, and in effect, one faces a problem about why to disentangle the Mahasthan record from the Mauryan Empire. In any case, the Sohgaure inscription is more in line with Aśoka's edicts because of its finely engraved letters and lacking of any names of officials. However, one needs more data to place the Mahasthan record in a proper context. At least, its content gives little to make Majumdar's far-fetching conclusions.

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