

Study Questions: Rock and Pillar Edicts of A'soka

The Rock and Pillar edicts of the Mauryan ruler A'soka (who reigned from 273 to 232 BCE) constitute inscriptions engraved on pillars, gigantic boulders, and caves in scattered locations across the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan. One of the most notable rulers in world history, A'soka —whose name with royal titles was Devanampiya (“Beloved of the Gods”) Piyadasi (“Benignant, Beloved of Us”) Raja (“King”) A'soka —used the form of the edicts to leave blueprints of his ideas and ideals throughout the Maurya Empire. Reflecting his benevolent attitude and activities, A'soka issued the royal proclamations in the edicts after the fateful Kalinga War of around 261 BCE. The large-scale devastation resulting from that war greatly moved A'soka, and he thenceforth relinquished war in favor of victory by *dhamma*, meaning “righteous path” or “piety.” The concept of dharma (“religion” in Sanskrit), or *dhamma* (the Prakrit version of dharma), as used by the emperor denoted that he was advocating not religion per se but a path of self-righteousness based on moral and ethical principles. The A'sokan edicts dispersed throughout his empire thus served as heralds of *dhamma*.

1. A'soka is considered a major figure in Indian history and, in fact, in the history of the world. Why is he regarded in this light? What was his impact on history?
2. In the modern world, many Westerners have become interested in Eastern religions such as Buddhism (and Hinduism). Why do you believe this is so, and what can Westerners learn about such religious beliefs from A'soka and his Rock and Pillar edicts?
3. What impact did the Kalinga War have on A'soka? How did the war give rise to the beliefs he expressed in the edicts?
4. Many of the precepts expressed in the edicts would be taken for granted today. Why would A'soka's beliefs have been considered almost revolutionary at the time? Why, for example, would his call for “uniformity in law and uniformity in sentencing” have been something innovative?
5. Some historians have argued that the Rock and Pillar edicts are the world's first document in the history of religious freedom. Why would they hold such a belief?