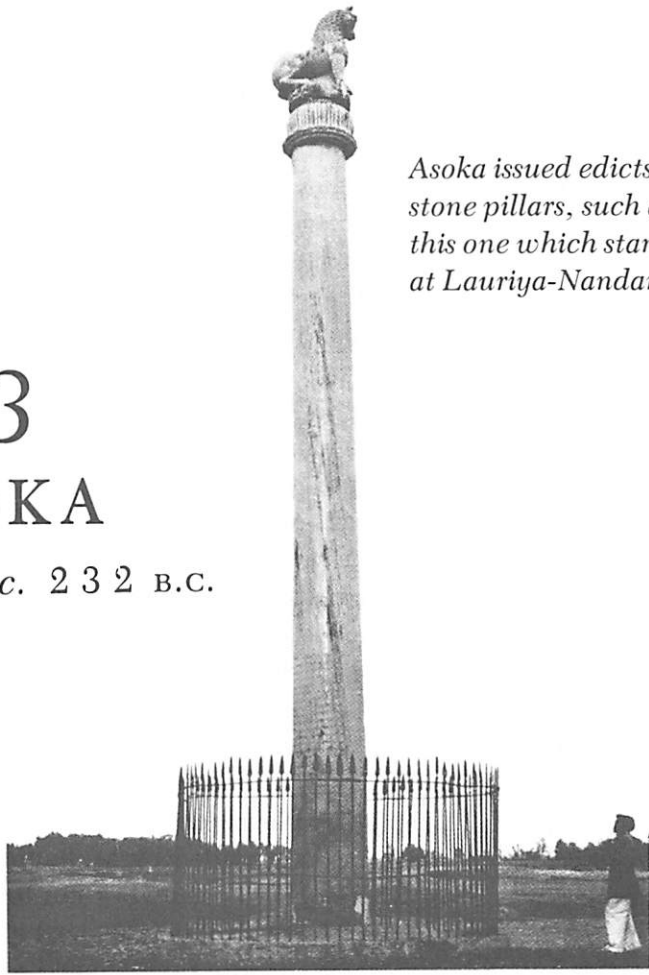


# 53

## ASOKA

c. 300 B.C.- c. 232 B.C.



*Asoka issued edicts on stone pillars, such as this one which stands at Lauriya-Nandangarh.*

Asoka, who was probably the most important monarch in the history of India, was the third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty and the grandson of its founder, Chandragupta Maurya. Chandragupta was an Indian military leader, who in the years subsequent to the campaign of Alexander the Great, conquered most of northern India, and thereby established the first major empire in Indian history.

The year of Asoka's birth is unknown; probably it was close to 300 B.C. Asoka ascended the throne about 273 B.C. At first he followed in his grandfather's footsteps and sought to extend his territory through military action. In the eighth year of his reign,

he concluded a successful war against Kalinga, a state on the east coast of India (about where the present state of Orissa is). But when he realized the horrible human cost of his triumph, Asoka was appalled. One hundred thousand persons had been killed, and an even larger number wounded. Shocked and remorseful, Asoka decided that he would not complete the military conquest of India, but would instead renounce all aggressive warfare. He adopted Buddhism as his religious philosophy, and attempted to practice the virtues of *dharma*, which include truthfulness, mercy, and nonviolence.

On a personal level, Asoka gave up hunting and became a vegetarian. Of more significance were the various humane and political policies that he adopted. He established hospitals and animal sanctuaries, mitigated many harsh laws, built roads, and promoted irrigation. He even appointed special government officials, *dharma* officers, to instruct people in piety and to encourage friendly human relationships. All religions were tolerated in his realm, but Asoka particularly promoted Buddhism, which naturally enjoyed a great increase in its popularity. Buddhist missions were sent to many foreign countries, and were especially successful in Ceylon.

Asoka ordered descriptions of his life and policies inscribed on rocks and pillars throughout his large realm. Many of these monuments survive to the present day. Their geographic distribution provides us with reliable information concerning the extent of Asoka's domain, and the inscriptions on them are our main source of knowledge of his career. Incidentally, these pillars are also considered to be superb works of art.

Within fifty years of Asoka's death, the Mauryan Empire fell apart, and it was never revived. However, through his support of Buddhism, Asoka's long-term influence upon the world has been very large. When he ascended the throne, Buddhism was a small, local religion, popular only in northwest India. By the time of his death, it had adherents throughout India and was spreading rapidly to neighboring countries. More than any one man, except Gautama himself, Asoka is responsible for the development of Buddhism into a major world religion.