

INTRODUCTION

Encountering Ashoka

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken . . .

– Keats, “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer”

THERE IS NO avoiding the figure of Ashoka (c. 304–232 BCE) in the Thai city of Nakhon Si Thammarat. He swam into my ken there, an unexpected planet. I had gone in chase of him, expecting little, but then seen enough to become a Keatsian watcher of the skies.

At first glance Ashoka’s presence in southern Thailand may seem to the normal reader more than somewhat surprising. The third emperor of the Maurya dynasty of ancient India is, after all, separated from Thailand by his Indianness, several centuries, and the Indian Ocean. The first thing to do, it seemed to me, was to try working out why this very ancient Indian king was being remembered in this particular location so distant from modern Bihar, from where he had once ruled.

One aspect of the answer seemed to lie in geography: Nakhon Si Thammarat is a city in an isthmian region that partook of much that had happened in Asia between the South China Sea towards the east and the Bay of Bengal on the west. Its artefacts and antiquities, its oral legends and textual narratives, all reveal

remarkable connections between Thailand and India. To discover them, though, one has to look beyond the city's modern façade.

Nakhon Si Thammarat is an urban centre with a provincial ambience. Nothing in its contemporary form – moderately sized clusters of restaurants and residences, hotels and movie theatres – specially stands out, and almost certainly no avatars of ancient Ashoka can be spotted within the uniform modernity that suffuses everything.

But only a short distance away, untroubled by new Nakhon, lies a charming historic hub where it is easier to see residual shadows and ghosts of things that once made up its history. It was these elements of a fascinating past, in fact, that had drawn me across the Malay peninsula to sojourn in Nakhon in the winter of 2017. The ambience of the old city owes much to its Buddhist *wats* (places of worship) and *wihaans* (image sanctuaries), representations of Hindu deities in temples and gardens, and those of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas (future Buddhas). There is, above all, the presence of kings with names that would ring a bell in the mind of more or less any Indian historian – appellations such as “Si Thammsok” or “Sri Dharmasokaraja”, kings who ruled over territories here in the first half of the second millennium CE. The resonance of the earlier Indian Ashoka in these is almost a lesson in Thai political history, where the titles of rulers function emblematically. Thai dynasties sometimes sought to construct their history by invoking an ideal, even if that ideal was best conveyed by the name of a long dead Indian king.

Among all that is extraordinary about the presence of Ashoka in Nakhon Si Thammarat, the most remarkable and original is his representation in medieval chronicles composed around the city. These narratives centre on rulers who were described as having made Nakhon their capital – men who ruled there more than 1400 years after Ashoka. The texts speak of a letter carried to Thailand by a messenger from Sri Dharmasokaraja, who is described as a ruler of “Madhyadesha” – meaning “Middle

Country” – a term used in antiquity for a large part of North India.¹ This Indian king – a ruler of immense merit who could translate from the Pali language with the expertise of monks – is said in these texts to have built some 84,000 holy reliquaries in which to house relics of the Buddha. However, while he had all these reliquaries ready for the relics, he lacked the relics! Empty vessels make most noise, and so the reliquaries were, in a manner of speaking, crying out to be filled: the letter to the Thai ruler of the Nakhon region was one such cry. The Indian Ashoka needed the help of his Thai counterpart to send him relics of the Buddha to enshrine.

To the embarrassment of the Nakhon Ashoka, the location within his city where these relics were meant to have been buried was a mystery – or at least a mystery to him. A treasure hunt was called for. Eventually, the Thai king succeeded in getting the correct burial spot identified by a couple of people who were in the know about such antique matters. The story ends happily: the Thai Ashoka recovered the Buddhist relics within his territories and dispatched them to the Indian Ashoka, where they presumably alleviated the emptiness of 84,000 reliquaries awaiting fulfilment.

For nearly a millennium and a half, it would seem from stories such as these, old legends had grown and new ones been invented around Ashoka. And they had crept, filtered through, and made their way to distant lands – not just north to Tibet and China, but also east across an ocean. In their wake, six hundred or so years later, here I was on their tail, chasing tales.

By the time he came to be imagined in this part of Thailand, Ashoka’s persona had undergone a transformation more or less absolute. As we know – and this is something I had narrated a couple of years earlier in my book titled *Ashoka in Ancient India*

¹ References will be cited and discussed at length later in the book, in the chapter on Thailand.

(2015) – during his rule the Indian emperor had issued many public communications, all inscribed on rocks that had been discovered scattered over Indian terrain from Afghanistan in the north-west to Karnataka in the far south. These edicts, as they are commonly called, are crowded around a few years in Ashoka's life – from around 261 to 243 BCE. In them Ashoka mentions several rulers and states to the west of his empire, from the Seleucid kingdom to Ptolemaic Egypt, from Antigonus II Gonatas of Macedon to Magas of Cyrene. But not a single ruler or region to the east of the Indian subcontinent – and not even in a generic sense – appears on these most antique intimations of lithography. It was clear to me that neither Thailand nor any other part of South East Asia ever swam into Ashoka's ken. Some of the texts about him that were put together centuries after his death – as for instance the Sanskrit legendary biography in Sanskrit called the *Ashokavadana* (c. second century CE) – did however associate Ashoka with the construction of stupas in which relics within earlier stupas were first exhumed and then reburied. In this part of Thailand, that ancient story had taken new shape: the Indian king was transformed into a supplicant seeking relics in a South East Asian region he very probably had no notion of. Ashoka, as he appears in medieval Nakhon Si Thammarat, is different in all but name from the kingly figure recorded in ancient South Asia.

This phenomenon, of making a historical figure visible while simultaneously reinventing him, and of adapting faint memories and echoes of him to new political or other purposes, has never ceased to amaze me across the many years that I have spent in the company of Emperor Ashoka. In this process of being transformed, of course, he is not exceptional. Poetry may emanate from emotion recollected in tranquillity, but history is more often political memory recollected in tumult; in both cases, the idea seems to be to transform what is being recalled. There is for instance Alexander, the fourth-century BCE Macedonian whose

honorific “Great” rendered invisible the killings and pogroms in the trail of his conquests from Persia to India. And yet this ancient conqueror of Persia reappears as a Persian king in medieval texts.² Something similar happens to Sultan Saladin, founder of the Ayubbid dynasty, who recaptured Jerusalem from European Crusaders in 1187 CE. This Muslim sovereign was once turned into a Christian knight – supposedly through a genealogical link on his mother’s side – and at another time into a convert to Christianity secretly baptising himself without his entourage being in the know.³ In the world of art a most remarkable metamorphosis involves the black-haired Egyptian Queen Cleopatra being depicted by medieval and Renaissance artists as a “pale blonde because the pale blonde was their ideal of beauty”.⁴

Human memory is notoriously selective. Psychologists have pointed out that what is played back is never an exact replica of events as they played out. Frederic Bartlett, famous for pioneering work on the character of remembrance, pointed out in *Remembering* (1932) that memory retains a “little outstanding detail” while the remainder is reconstructive. Changed contexts and alterations in outlook determine the nature of new images and perspectives on past figures and events. Historians have highlighted this phenomenon in relation to the hoary as well as the relatively recent past. Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, was selectively remembered even within his lifetime: people saw him as they wanted or needed to see him, and ideas of him were very quickly reworked in the popular imagination.⁵ Within months of his visiting a particular area, what he said to his audience there – which is a matter of record – was a far cry from

² Romm, ed. (2012): Appendix L. For Alexander as a part of Persianite culture in India, see Cornwall (2020).

³ A fascinating range of Saladin’s avatars can be seen in Edde (2011), in the sixth segment of the book entitled “The Legend”.

⁴ Tyldesley (2008): 215.

⁵ Amin (1988).

what many who heard him recalled him saying – which is also a matter of record. In such matters, obviously, time is *not* of the essence. Recollections manipulate and transform the image of a near contemporary, Gandhi, in much the way they do an ancient figure such as Ashoka.

Thinking about all these willed reincarnations and deliberate transformations made the Thai version of Ashoka seem to me part of a historical remembrance pattern. People remember what they please and as they please, and then a historian comes along to show what she sees as the original shape of a ruler, which is not exactly his original shape either, and she then follows up his distinctly differing manifestations in subsequent centuries and distant locations. An Indian Ashoka making an appearance as a new man altogether within a Thai relic redistribution saga was, you could say, almost *de rigueur*.

When I first plunged into the history of this emperor – whose knowable past I had, as I said, examined in my *Ashoka in Ancient India* – what had emerged from his epigraphs were eccentric political interventions and an exceptional ideology of governance. From all that he set down in stone he was, it seemed to me, the most powerful, prominent, and impressive king ever to rule ancient India, and quite possibly the most uniquely compassionate ruler anywhere.⁶ His lifespan, as also that of the Maurya dynasty, was unfortunately finite. Some fifty years after he passed away, so did the dynasty of which he was the exemplar. In the ensuing centuries the core of what was known about the historical emperor became a casualty within many new conceptions of him. It is not that he was not remembered – on the contrary. But,

⁶ I was naturally very far from being the first to show this: the history of his recognition as utterly extraordinary is a subject in itself and dates back to the time of the discovery of his existence in the mid-nineteenth century. Among the many who memorably extol Ashoka are H.G. Wells in his *Outline of History* (1919–20) and *A Short History of the World* (1922), and Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* (1946).

in the panorama of the past within which he was recalled, the jumble of images of him that came to circulate were largely those evident in religious iconography and texts rooted in Buddhism. The many avatars of this reified persona may not have been quite as dramatic as in Nakhon, but they did involve thoroughgoing reimaginings and redefinitions.

Searching for Ashoka follows these many reconceptualisations of the emperor. I encountered them in places to which I travelled in search of his traces. Several of the chapters that follow are about Ashoka in spots across India, from Jahanabad in Bihar to Kanaganahalli in Karnataka. Others emerge from sites and cities in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. Beyond a sense of curiosity about how Ashoka is remembered from South Asia to South East Asia, setting out on this trail helped me understand the nature and workings of historical memory.⁷ And, I should add, also what might be termed historical forgetting. This subject – the memory and memorialisation of Ashoka – is vast and not limited to the collection of examples that I will offer. I have not engaged here with the Ashoka stupas in China, nor with the fate of Ashokan pillars in various parts of India and Nepal.⁸ Nor does the range of representations from antiquity to modernity of any particular Ashokan artefact feature in this book except in an incidental way. The Sarnath pillar of Ashoka happens to be one of them: its memorialisation ranges from Sanchi in Central India during the late centuries BCE to Chiang Mai in Thailand in the

⁷ Sumit Guha's *tour de force* (2019) looks at history and collective memory in admirable detail. He points to various modes of structuring and controlling memory, ranging from hagiographies to practices of commemoration. My book is limited to exploring the commemoration and memorialisation of one historical figure, Ashoka.

⁸ Soper (1959) has extensive references to the Ashokan stupas and even Ashokan images. It is based on excerpts of the Japanese text of Omura Seigai. The afterlife of Ashoka's pillars in Nepal – from later epigraphs on them to the designation of a broken pillar at Gotihawa as Phuteshwar Mahadeva – is known to me from my own research there.

1960s (Figs A.1 and A.2). I am selective. I stop at historic sites and locales that I find fascinating and take some care to explain the historical traces of the emperor I see in them.



Before I move on to recall what I saw over my journeys, I want to pause to pick out some threads that will make the tapestry of remembrance around Ashoka intelligible. Within his lifetime the emperor created images of himself through his own words, and I will often recall them here to evaluate what got filtered out and what remained. An issue I confronted each time I came upon memorialisations of Ashoka was: Has his image been added to or changed in relation to what I know to be true of his historical persona? This being a valid question, I reckon that for readers of this book it is first necessary to outline what I know about the man in his own lifetime.

The first thing to note about the historical Ashoka is that only a partial recall of his life is possible because, it turns out, this emperor, who is so communicatively expansive through his proclamatory edicts, said nothing at all about his birth, years as a prince, and early period as a ruler.⁹ Nor do other contemporary records. So, for instance, if we do have a likely year for Ashoka's birth at the cusp of the fourth and third century BCE, this is a surmise arrived at by working back from the date when he was anointed emperor. His consecration figures persistently in the record and we do have a reasonably accurate date for it – 269/268 BCE. As with several other kings in ancient India whose lives were described in regnal years, Ashoka anchored various happenings during his reign in relation to this year. Dates start appearing once he starts feeling intensely enough about his ideas and innovations to want them inscribed on stone. And Ashoka's most intense feelings, as is well known, date from the aftermath of the

⁹ This has been discussed in Lahiri (2015), esp. Chapters 1 and 12.



Fig. A.1: Ancient representation of the Sarnath pillar
at Sarnath

bloody Kalinga war. “Oh, from this time forth,” says Hamlet in a moment of decisive reckoning, “My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth”: change “bloody” to “unbloody” and it exactly describes Ashoka after the Kalinga war. His monumentally famous remorse results in writings that make him as memorable as Marcus Aurelius, and in the Orient far more famous.



Fig. A.2: Modern copy of the Sarnath pillar
at Chiang Mai

Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism is quite logically presumed to be on account of his change of heart following the Kalinga carnage. Rock surfaces and, later, pillars come to be inscribed with his words urging peace, goodwill, fellow feeling, compassion, and a great deal else. These have been found in some fifty-odd places across India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan; there are likely to have been many more such that have either succumbed to time or remain undiscovered. The sheer geographical spread

of these Ashokan edicts underlines an emperor who was not someone his subjects imagined ruling in a faraway capital, but rather someone real they encountered on a rock near paths where they lived, in the vicinity of where they worshipped, along routes they travelled. While I doubt that Ashoka himself visited all the places where his messages have been found, he is extraordinary in ensuring his presence across such a massive territorial expanse. In this he alone comes across as an emperor in the ancient world who desired communication with people in spaces that lay outside his comfort zone, far beyond the privileged royal surroundings where he himself was located.

Because he chose to speak in this way, we have an understanding of Ashoka's idea of kingship, aspects of his rule, his personality, the extent of his empire, and a few neighbouring rulers. From his reaching out we can at least assume it was of special importance to him that his subjects hear the singularity and sameness of his voice across the land he ruled: each message that he sent out to his administrators was in a form more or less identical with every other. Ashoka is singular as the communicator-king par excellence; copies of his communications were prepared and dispatched to his various provinces to ensure that his message of morality and related ideas of governance had a massive reach.

While he revealed very little by way of detail about his personal life, what little he did put down on stone shows a keenness to appear to posterity not as imperious but as a flesh-and-blood emperor. His first message gives a good sense of what he considered worthy of recounting to his subjects: not matters of state, but the state of his mind. He says he has become a Buddhist. His metamorphosis, he says, needs to be understood and emulated. The message is partly confessional, presenting his self-realisation as persuasion, and underlining the possibility that the new morality is open and available to all.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Rupnath Edict in Hultzsch (1925): 166–9 is an example of this message.

A little later he records the big war he won at Kalinga as a disaster because of the slaughter, mostly collateral, that the victory involved.¹¹ He paints himself as the perpetrator of the carnage. This is, to put it mildly, mind-blowing. No other victorious ruler in history comes to mind who, after winning a huge war, sees himself as a defeated king. Images of the Oriental despot, the Mongol hordes, the Vandals and the Huns and the Goths, Genghis Khan and Timur have collectively coloured our notion of eastern monarchs as semi-savage warrior-kings. Humility and self-abnegation are the last virtues we associate in a colossally successful male monarch in Asia. In this respect, Ashoka is utterly singular.

Some years later he appears again, and again in an all-too-human way, publicly acceding to the desires of his queen, Karuvaki. She has gifted mango groves, gardens, and almshouses and wants them registered in her name.¹² The king informs his officers; the registration is done as she desires. All of this, for the average subject in Ashoka's time, may have been bewilderingly unlike anything that history had shown them as the day-to-day reality of royal rule. While kingship had a distinguished antiquity in large parts of Ashoka's empire, going back many centuries prior to the dynasty of the Mauryas, a king was not prone to confiding in his people about either the life-changing episodes of his career or the desires of his queen.

Ashoka went on to elaborate and disseminate information on what appear to be very novel modes of governance, as well as norms of public and personal conduct. Among his public messages the one which still resonates among liberals, secularists, and democrats – and no doubt sorely grates on majoritarians and religious fundamentalists – is addressed to all the sects of his day: it asks for a public culture in which every denomination honours

¹¹ Lines 36 and 37, Thirteenth Rock Edict, Kalsi version, *ibid.*: 44.

¹² This is known as the Queen's Edict. *Ibid.*: 159.

every other. This is the essence of the Ashokan ideal of political space drawn from dhamma/dharma – the new morality is extensively described in the commandment.¹³ The king also vests enhanced spiritual responsibility in his officers, who are ordered, even while carrying out their routine duties, to do an inspection every five years and preach the dhamma.¹⁴

Enjoined on all are proper conduct towards the various classes of people and animal life, respect for parents and elders, and liberality with friends as well as those with differing religious inclinations. Ashoka himself undertook what were described as “dharma yatras” which involved “visiting Shramanas and Brahmanas and making gifts (to them), visiting the aged and supporting (them) with gold, visiting the people of the country, instructing (them) in morality, and questioning (them) about morality, as suitable for this (occasion).”¹⁵ Alongside, the king made himself accessible at all times to ensure swiftness in the transaction of state business. His officials, he proclaimed, could come to him at any time, including in his harem or when he was dining. While the reality may well have been different, the message signalling his interest in the prompt dispatch of business indicates a new priority given to the common weal.¹⁶

In later messages engraved on pillars, Ashoka grappled with the question of how harsh punishments handed out by the state might be mitigated. He ordered an interlude of three days from the time punishment was pronounced by “rajukkas” – officials who were responsible for justice in the countryside – to when condemned prisoners were led to the gallows.¹⁷ The respite was to allow relatives of prisoners on death row to appeal. Simultaneously,

¹³ Twelfth Rock Edict, lines 3 and 4 of the Girnar version. *Ibid.*: 20.

¹⁴ Third Rock Edict, lines 2 and 3, Erragudi version, Sircar (1979): 16.

¹⁵ Eighth Rock Edict, line 23, Kalsi version, Hultzsch (1925): 36.

¹⁶ Sixth Rock Edict, lines 1 and 2, Erragudi version, Sircar (1979): 17.

¹⁷ Fourth Pillar Edict, lines 15 and 16, Delhi-Topra pillar, Hultzsch (1925): 123.

the hiatus might ensure a more dignified death by allowing the condemned man to prepare himself with fasting or bestowing gifts. On as many as twenty-five occasions from the time of his anointment, Ashoka released prisoners, and some of these were conceivably commutations.¹⁸

A slew of substantive injunctions against the killing of animals, birds, and fish constitute another exceptional dimension of the emperor's humane provisions. From the modern ecological perspective his Fifth Pillar Edict is without doubt the most copious royal message anywhere in the ancient world for the protection of living beings in general. The persona of Ashoka as a guardian of animals permeates his major rock edicts; they outline personal and public measures for a kind of proto-conservation. Sacrifices are proscribed, the slaughter of animals for consumption in the royal kitchen drastically reduced, veterinary hospices established, and provisions made for pack animals along roads. He elaborates at length on measures for protecting the habitat of such living creatures and preventing cruelty towards them. "Cocks must not be caponed," he says, and "husks containing living animals must not be burnt," nor forests uselessly razed as they destroy living beings. An emperor ordering his people not to kill pregnant and lactating she-goats and sows, and regulating animal castration, needs to say nothing else to appear extraordinary.¹⁹ The success of this range of interventions on the ground is difficult to judge, but from this distance in time it seems enough that the effort was made and that its compassion is so staggering. Through his words Ashoka advances the notion of a fundamentally new kind of political and social community.

While still a young ruler, in words he first recorded in (what came to be known as) the Minor Rock Edicts – which were carved a little after 260 BCE – Ashoka offers a glimpse of himself, his move to Buddhism, and what that meant for him as a ruler

¹⁸ Fifth Pillar Edict, lines 19 and 20, Delhi-Topra pillar, *ibid.*: 126.

¹⁹ This, the Fifth Pillar Edict, is worth reading in its entirety. See Delhi-Topra pillar, *ibid.*: 125–8.

and his empire at large.²⁰ Very precise instructions were given on how he wanted his mission to be disseminated, and in many different places. Where these are found, as also in their hinterlands, there can have been no ambiguity in the minds of his readers and listeners that the king was publicly communicating as a Buddhist. His Buddhist persona was dramatically visible later as well. He travelled to Buddhist sacred places in the Nepal terai, such as Lumbini and Nigali Sagar; in the latter he had a stupa rebuilt, expanded, and dedicated to the Buddha Konakamana (or Konakamuni). Konakamuni was said to be an ancient Buddha (antedating the sixth-century BCE historical original), about whom we know very little. An emperor's pilgrimage to pay his respects would denote a revered deity. At Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace, Ashoka inscribed a record of his pilgrimage on a pillar that he set up there. He also used the occasion to announce a reduction in taxes. At Sarnath and Kausambi in the Gangetic plains, and at Sanchi in Central India, he presented himself as a spiritual regulator and protector of Buddhist unity, opposing divisions ("samghabheda") among monks and nuns.²¹

All this takes Ashoka beyond the mere practice of supporting Buddhist Shramanas (monks) and erecting or enlarging holy places associated with the faith. Dampening dissension within the Sangha makes him sound like a Buddhist pontiff. He opposed factional breakaways and proposed punishing dissidents by forcing them to give up monastic robes and wear the white clothes of householders. At Bairat in Rajasthan he offered advice on the particular religious expositions he believed the monastic community needed to absorb. The confidence with which he suggested that they focus on listening and reflect on specific doctrinal messages would suggest he saw himself as the Buddha's preacher-successor.²²

²⁰ Rupnath Edict, *ibid.*: 166–9.

²¹ The Sarnath Edict exemplifies this well. *Ibid.*: 161–4.

²² Bairat Edict, *ibid.*: 172–4.

Ashoka was obsessed with his ideas and interventions and dreaded their disappearance. He manifests an unusual degree of anxiety at the spectre of impermanence; it explains why he constantly urges his successors – his sons and his grandsons, and “the generations coming after them till the destruction of the world” – to continue his acts of merit, for “whosoever among them will abandon even a part of it will do an act of demerit.” Hammering home the new moral message of dhamma, literally as well as metaphorically, by casting it in stone seems to have been the consequence of some nervousness over whether “his descendants may conform to it.”



Did the Ashokan edicts also serve to relieve the emperor’s angst about the future and the survival of his legacy with concrete remembrances of things past? If so, what did he find worth recall, and in what contexts? The form in which Ashoka invokes the past seems to me fairly similar to how others would later remember him. Dredging up an earlier event or persona, even his own self, and reshaping it in order to convey the creation of something new is the form he followed. It is writ large in his meditations on matters of the mind and the state.

The past features in Ashoka’s words most often when he sets out the consequences of the new morality or dhamma that he is promoting, and sometimes in the slipstream of major episodes in his own life. So, for instance, in the first communiqué he sent off to his administrators his message presents the success of his mission and life with the assertion that whereas in preceding times humans and gods had not mingled, now in his empire – and he takes credit for this – such intermingling has been made possible.²³ Pointing to his own graduated progression as a Buddhist he says that though he became a lay worshipper two and a half

²³ Rupnath Edict, line 2, *ibid.*: 166.

years earlier, it was only a year or so ago that he became zealous on account of his interaction with the Buddhist Sangha (order). The past state of his kingdom, as also the past state of his own mind, are invoked to emphasise his transformation and mission to promote the same zeal in his subjects.

This juxtaposition of the features of a progressive present with memories of a less than edifying past is more dramatically clear in Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts, so called because they are more expansive than the Minor Rock Edicts – an earlier set of shorter messages. The practice of dhamma has altered the emperor and he is determined about its dissemination to make it universal. Whereas “many hundred thousands of living beings were formerly slaughtered” in the royal kitchen, now only three living creatures – two birds and one animal – are slaughtered.²⁴ Earlier, “for many hundreds of years, slaughter of lives, cruelty to living creatures, disrespect to Shramanas and Brahmins increased.”²⁵ Now, what had increased “to a degree as was not possible to achieve for many hundreds of years in the past” was “abstention from the slaughter of life, absence of cruelty to living creatures, seemly behaviour to Shramanas and Brahmanas, obedience to mother and father [and] obedience to the aged.”²⁶ Where war drums had once sounded, there was now the sound of morality (“bherighoso aho dhammaghoso”).²⁷ While in the past martial music had accompanied armed battles – the beating of the “bheri” was a call to arms – there was now only the sound of dhamma being proclaimed.

Governance is described via similar contrasts between past shortcoming and present improvement. There was a time when no reports were submitted to the ruler, nor was the disposal of affairs speedy; now informers report the affairs of the people at

²⁴ First Rock Edict, lines 4 and 6, Erragudi version, Sircar (1979): 14.

²⁵ Fourth Rock Edict, lines 1 to 3, Erragudi version, *ibid*: 25.

²⁶ Fourth Rock Edict, lines 5 to 9, Erragudi version, *ibid*: 25–6.

²⁷ Fourth Rock Edict, lines 3 and 4, Erragudi version, *ibid*: 25.

any time and solutions are swift. In the past “kings set out on vihara yatras or pleasure tours”, now the king’s tours are morality missions (“dharma yatras”). In the Thirteenth Edict the emperor is at his most poignant, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory by remembering the life-changing war at Kalinga. In the eighth year following his consecration, the destructive consequences of his military victory there made him human. In part this painful past is invoked to appeal to a group of adversaries, the Atavikas (forest dwellers), to follow his example. He hopes they will do penitence, as he has done, so that they may spare themselves injury. A threat is being sent out, but in the language of cajolery.²⁸

Memories of the past do not figure quite so often in the Pillar Edicts, but even in them he recalls past kings who, desiring men to make progress, promoted morality but failed. Their failure has made him consider the paths of success, and it has struck him that by issuing public proclamations and instructions, and giving muscle and teeth to his administration, he might succeed.²⁹

Ashoka did not publicly remember his own background or events from his own past – neither his parents, nor his grandfather, nor even the circumstances which brought him to the throne. His reticence in personal matters is stark. When recounting the times and actions of past kings he does not mention them by name, nor says anything about their reigns that would help identify them. His references to them are abstract, they contrast generically in their morals and governance with him; the specifics of their states are not relevant to his purpose.

The more I looked at the words Ashoka chose to highlight the past so purposively, the more it became clear to me that he saw his calling as that of a missionary whose epiphanic Damascene moment happened on the road back from Kalinga. From this time forth the traces of the past that figure in his messages are

²⁸ Thirteenth Rock Edict, lines 18 and 20, Erragudi version, *ibid.*: 31.

²⁹ Seventh Pillar Edict, lines 17 to 22, Delhi-Topra pillar, Hultzsch (1925): 130.

those through which he seeks to highlight his willed departure towards what he had divined as superior. His dhammic zeal and agenda are burnished by these backward glances at a past comparably less glorious than the present being given shape by him. Even before I began to understand and uncover how Ashoka came to be reconfigured among a diversity of cultures in Asia, I had discovered how clearly his own memory is both constructive and reconstructive. By constructing a particular kind of past within the fabric of moral messages, the emperor was setting himself up as a watershed.

In this book I try to show how skilfully and selectively Ashoka was portrayed in later centuries. He may well have been annoyed by the Thai story in which he appears as a supplicant of a medieval ruler in South East Asia. But, given his own ability to recast the past, and given his powers of self-reflection, I doubt that he would have been surprised by the Thai attempt – and now my attempt – to tell a new story about him.