Networks of intention in a peripheral landscape

Namita Sugandhi

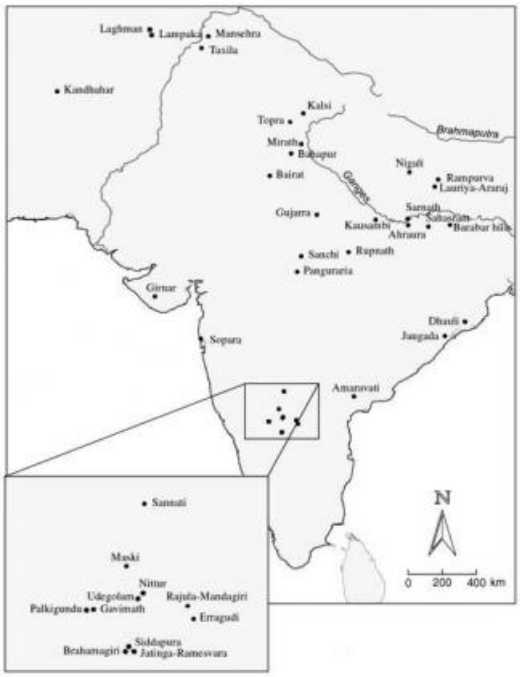


Figure 1*. Distribution of Asokan inscriptions.*

Introduction

The sixth to fourth centuries BC saw the emergence of a number of expansive, complex states or *mahajanapadas* in the north-east and central parts of the Indian subcontinent. Constant competition between these *mahajanapadas* led to the emergence of one dominant polity –*Magadha* – which quickly expanded to incorporate much of North India under the rule of the Mauryan Dynasty (*c.* 320-180 BC). The extent of the Mauryan empire has largely been mapped onto the distribution of a series of inscriptions established by the third Mauryan emperor, Asoka. These inscriptions are found throughout the Indian subcontinent, from the north-west regions of Pakistan, to the South Indian states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (Figure 1). Little is known, however, about the political economy and nature of society in the peripheral regions that lie far beyond the Mauryan imperial core in north-east India, leading to questions about the extent of Mauryan hegemony across the Indian subcontinent.

The question of Mauryan imperial interaction with peripheral regions was explored through a survey and surface collection project near two known Asokan inscriptions at Nittur and Udegolam in Bellary District, Karnataka (Figure 2). Also included in the survey was the village of Tekkalakota, well known for its hilltop Neolithic settlements, as studied by Dr Nagaraja Rao in the 1960s (Figure 3). In 2005, systematic survey of the area around the edict sites documented evidence of ancient cultural activity, such as megalithic alignments, rock bruisings and a Neolithic period ash mound. A low density of surface artefacts (mostly ceramic sherds) was observed around the region of the Nittur edicts, but hardly any surface remains were noted around the Udegolam edicts. Instead, surface remains suggest that the major centre of occupation in the region had been at Tekkalakota (Figure 4). In addition to Neolithic period settlements on the hilltops, the survey also documented extensive evidence for occupation during the subsequent Iron Age, Early Historic period, and Middle Period.

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Figure 2. *Nittur minor rock edict.*



Figure 3. *Neolithic site at Tekkalakota.*

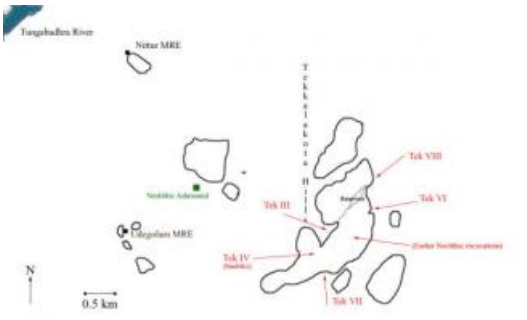


Figure 4. *Survey area.*

Four discrete sites, whose dates may correspond to the period of Mauryan rule, were documented around the base of the Tekkalakota hills, and systematic surface collections were carried out at all four. Tek III and Tek VIII are the two largest sites and are found on opposite sides of the hill. Both have a high density of Iron Age and Early Historic ceramics, lithic tools and iron slag on the surface. Between them lies a long reservoir, which has a retaining wall on the north-east end with construction episodes dating to both the Early Historic and Vijayanagara (Late Middle) periods (Figure 5).

Smaller reservoirs were documented at several other locations around the Tekkalakota hills, including at Tek III, and Tek VI - which is one of the two smaller sites recorded around the base of the hills. These smaller sites have a much lower density of surface artefacts than Tek III or VIII, however, a notable find was discovered at Tek VII, a silver punch mark coin (Figure 6). Punch marked coins are a characteristic economic feature of several Early Historic polities in South Asia. A specialist at the Indian Institute of

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Research in Numismatic Studies in Nasik identified this coin as potentially from the Mauryan period.

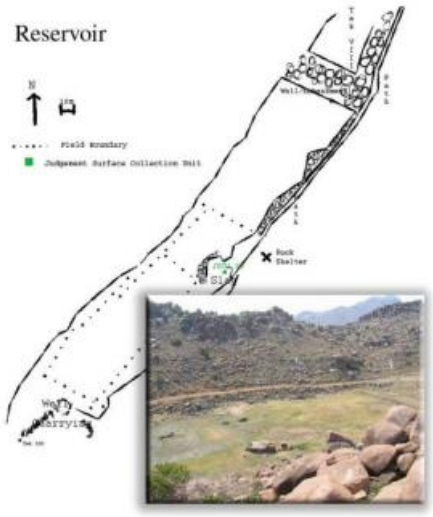


Figure 5. *Reservoir between Tek III and Tek VIII.*

While evidence such as the Asokan edicts and the punch marked coin indicate that some form of interaction took place between the Mauryan empire and the Southern Deccan, an examination of the Nittur-Udegolam-Tekkalakota region found little evidence of large scale imperial investment or direct control. Instead, the patterns of occupation seen in the area correspond quite closely with patterns at other sites in the Southern Deccan both with and without Asokan inscriptions.

Comparison with other sites in the Southern Deccan

These are sites characterised by very long term occupation sequences from the Neolithic period onwards, with similar artefacts and features that include red and black slipped wares, russet coated painted wares and microlithic tool assemblages. Survey evidence from Tekkalakota is most readily compared with data being generated from excavation at the site of Kadebakele as part of the Early Historic landscapes of the Tungabhadra Corridor project, directed by Kathleen Morrison and Carla Sinopoli. This comparison of sites suggests that inhabitants of the south followed previously established regional and local traditions of political and economic life, remaining largely independent of Mauryan influence or control.

Looking beyond the Mauryan empire: applying a networks approach

The centuries following Mauryan rule see the introduction of many shared developments including the spread of Sanskrit literary and political traditions, as well as evidence for increased long distance trade and the spread of heterodox religions such as Buddhism and Jainism. A consideration of the period subsequent to the decline of the Mauryan empire suggests that though Mauryan hegemony may have been geographically limited, they were successful in initiating a network of interregional relationships that played a key role in later social and economic developments across the Indian subcontinent.

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Figure 6*. Silver punch-marked coin.*

To account for the distribution of the Asokan inscriptions in the context of these later interregional developments, a network model of early states is a useful construct which focuses on the relationships and processes that go into the making of a polity, rather than presumed territorial boundaries. Networks may be broadly defined as *'widely spread, diffuse patterns of relationships'*(Cohn & Marriott 1958), and from an archaeological perspective, *'a network model of ancient states enables us to examine more accurately the mechanisms developed to manage the inherent economic, social, and political challenges to the imposition of state authority.'*(Smith 2005: 838). This position views states as potentially non-contiguous zones formed of 'nodes', such as cities, town and resource rich areas, linked through 'corridors' of constantly shifting sets of political interactions connecting not only to a central area, but also to one another (Smith 2002; 2005; see also Biersteker &Weber 1996; Wilkinson 2003).

This model may be extended to include parallel networks of interaction, which exist independent of political authority and endure beyond the decline of various dynastic powers. This type of network is comprised of both formal and informal loci of interaction, including networks of exchange, religious pilgrimage, and marriage alliances, in addition to more overtly political missions of military conquest or diplomatic venture. The inherent flexibility of this model seems particularly appropriate to the study of early polities, not only radically reconfiguring our historic understanding of imperial polities such as the Mauryas, but also providing a broader view of early complex polities that is able to look beyond individual dynastic sequences.

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