

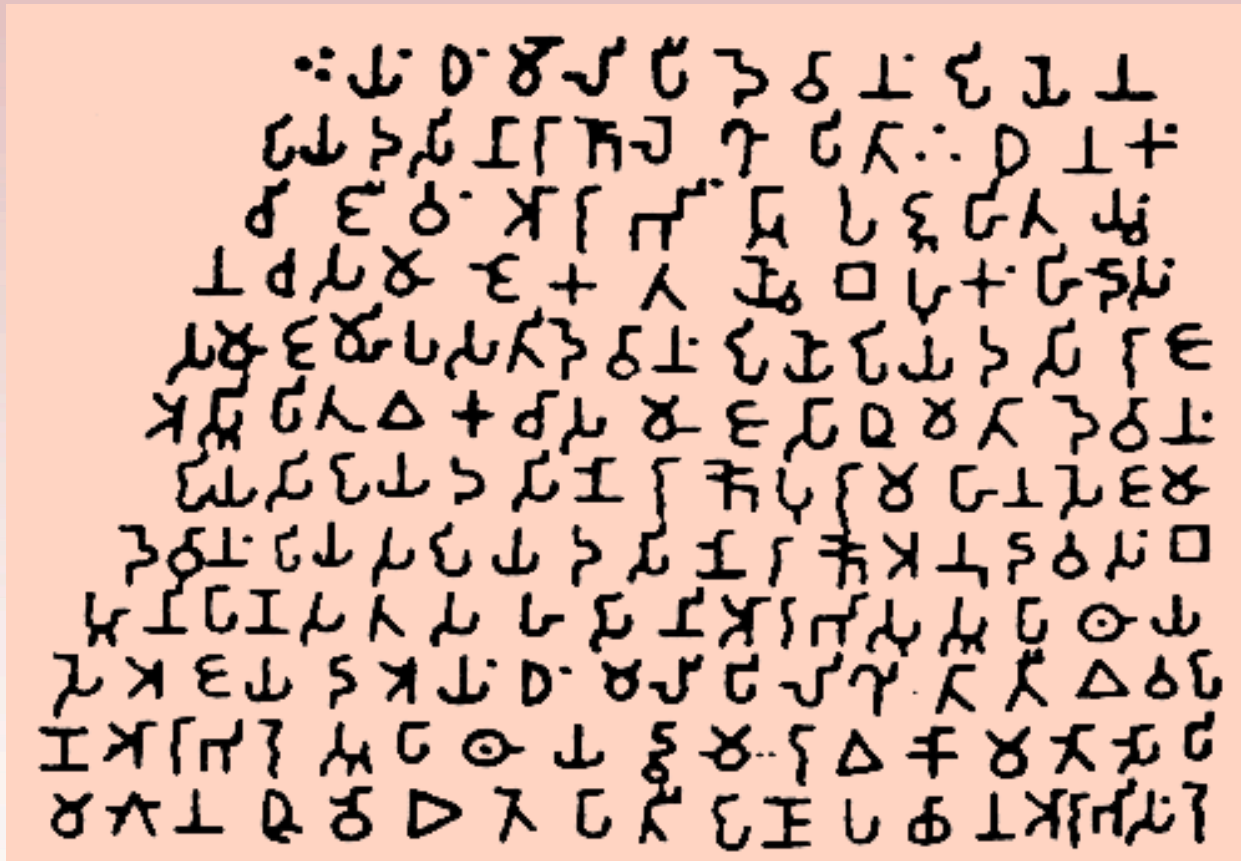


Asia Education Foundation

Ashoka and the Mauryan Empire

Investigation 1. Mysterious messages from the past

[1.1] Ashokan edict at Girnar



Have you seen writing like this before? What language could it be? Who wrote it and when? What does it mean?

We're going to find out.

[1.2] Girnar hill



To do that, we have to imagine going to India. This is Girnar, and at the bottom of the hill you can still see the same writing.

Because it is cut into the surface of a rock, it is called an 'inscription'.

[1.3] Girnar rock in 1869



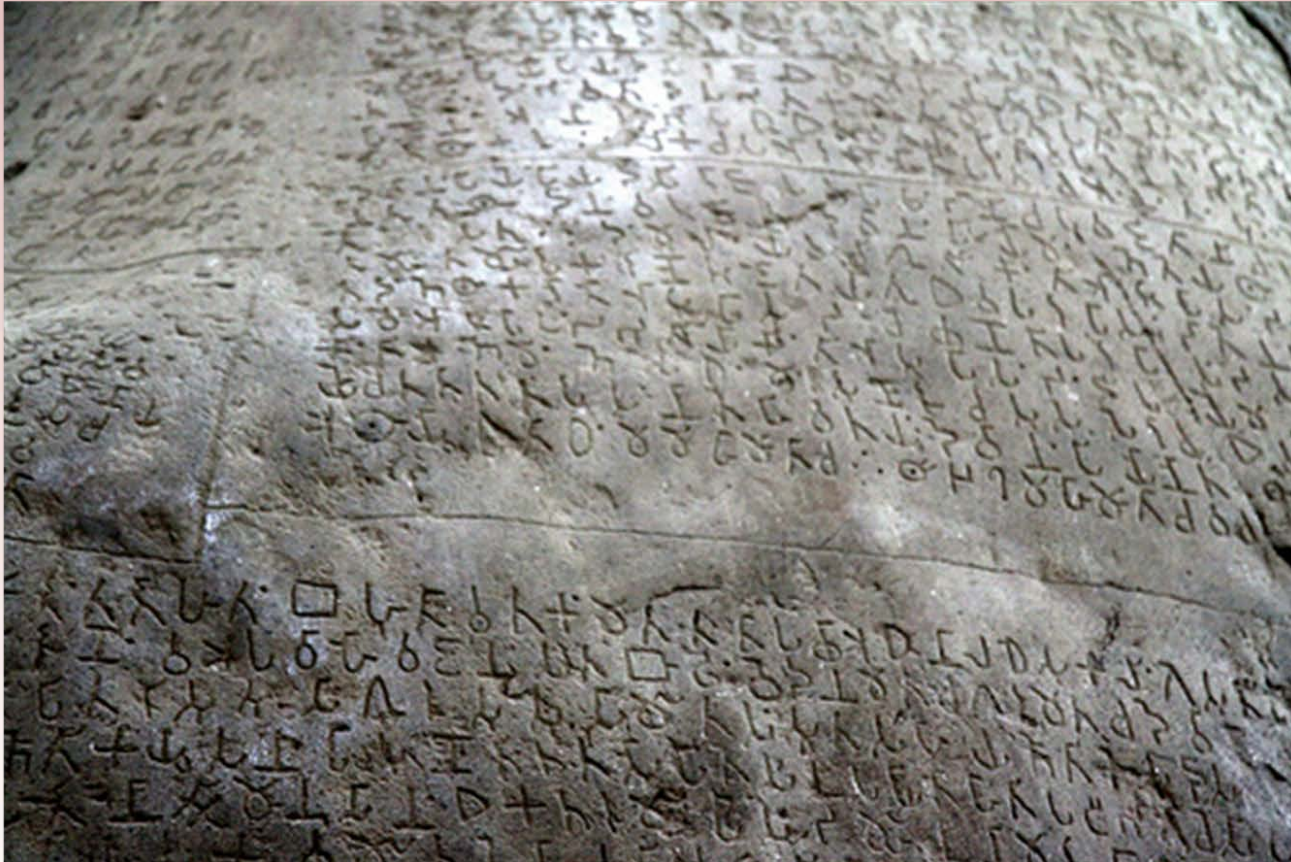
Here's the rock itself, in an old photo, taken in 1869. You can only just see the inscription, and part of the rock has been blasted away to be used to build a road. Whoever did that obviously didn't think it was important to look after the inscription.

[1.4] Girnar rock in 1900



You can see the inscription itself more clearly in this photo, taken in 1900.
Can you see any changes?

[1.5] Girnar edict in 2007



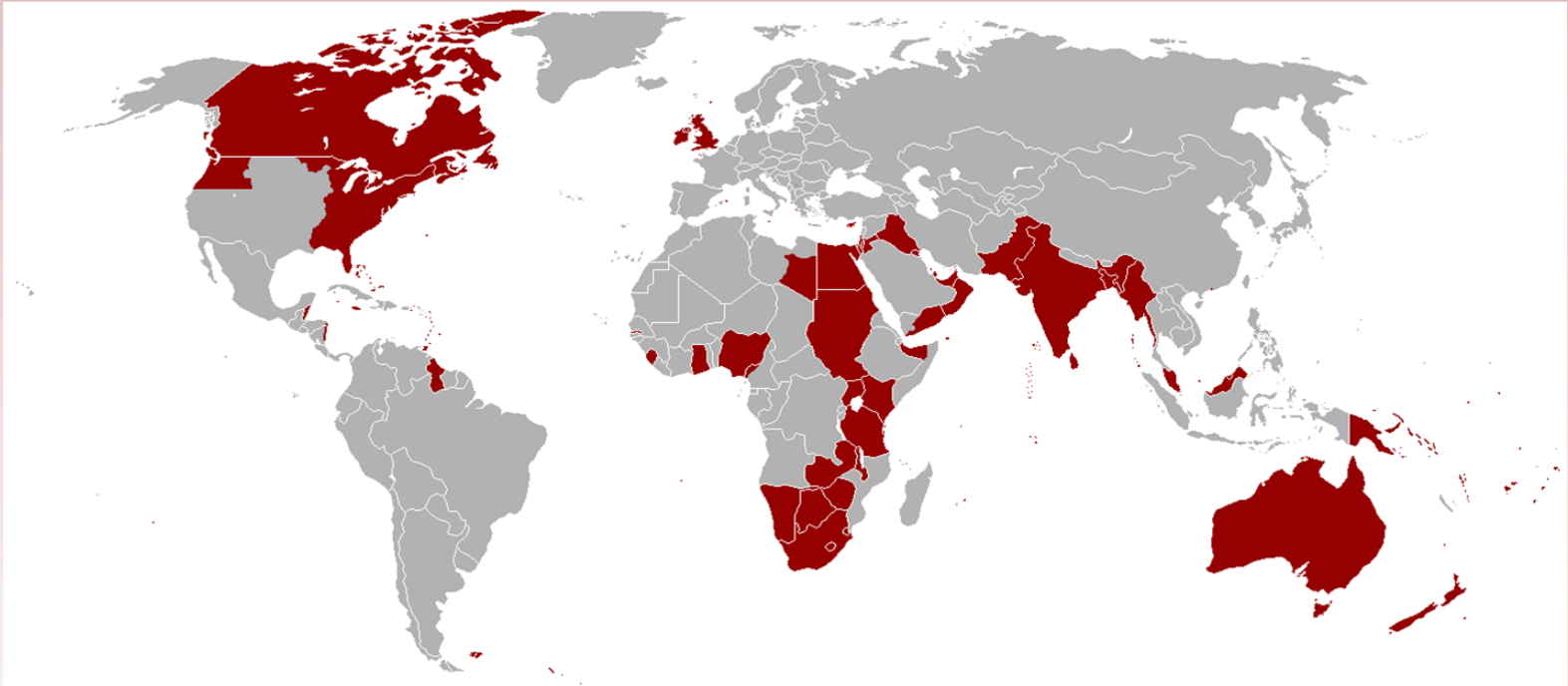
And you can see the inscription much more clearly here.
The photograph was taken in 2007.

[1.6] Building at Girnar



These days the rock is protected inside this building. If you can't read the words on the front of the building, you might be able to find out what they mean by asking someone who can read the Hindi language.

[1.7] Map of British Empire



Through the 1800s, Britain was the most powerful country in the world. This map gives a rough idea of the size of their empire. Australia was a group of British colonies, and most of India was part of the British Empire as well.

The British started ‘finding’ the inscriptions in India in the late 1700s. (Of course, local people didn’t have to ‘find’ them; they knew about them all along. And they knew they were very old.)

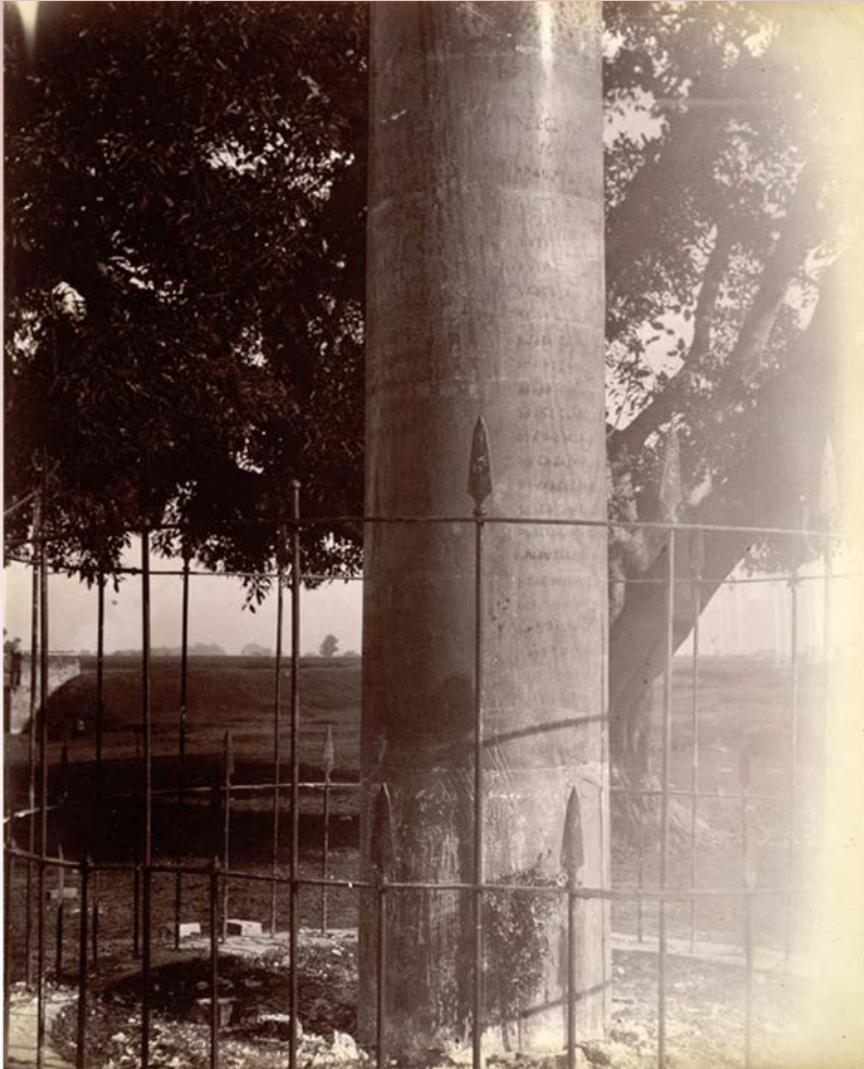
[1.8] Pillar at Lauriya Nandangarh in the 1860s



There were similar inscriptions on pillars, like this one at Lauriya Nandangarh, across the other side of India, photographed in the 1860s.

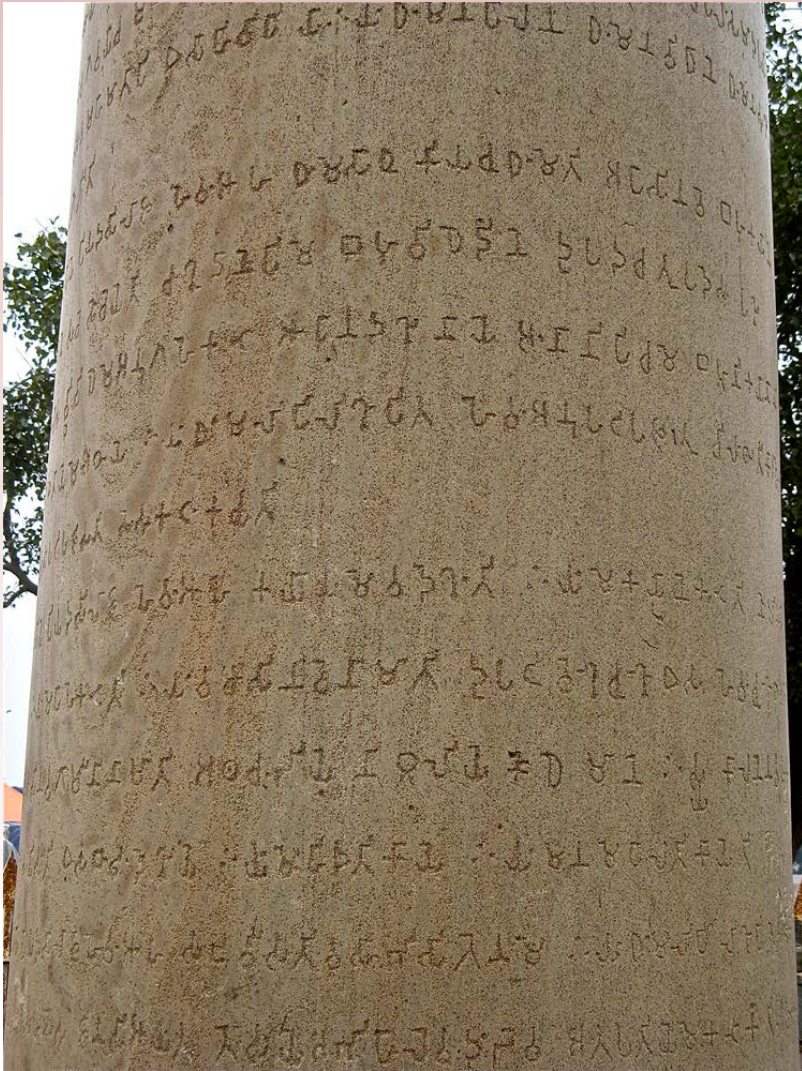
We'll find out more later about the lion on top of the column.

[1.9] Pillar at Lauriya Nandangarh in 1895



You can just make out the inscription in this 1895 photo. By that time, a fence had been put up around the column.

[1.10] Detail of pillar at Lauriya Nandangarh



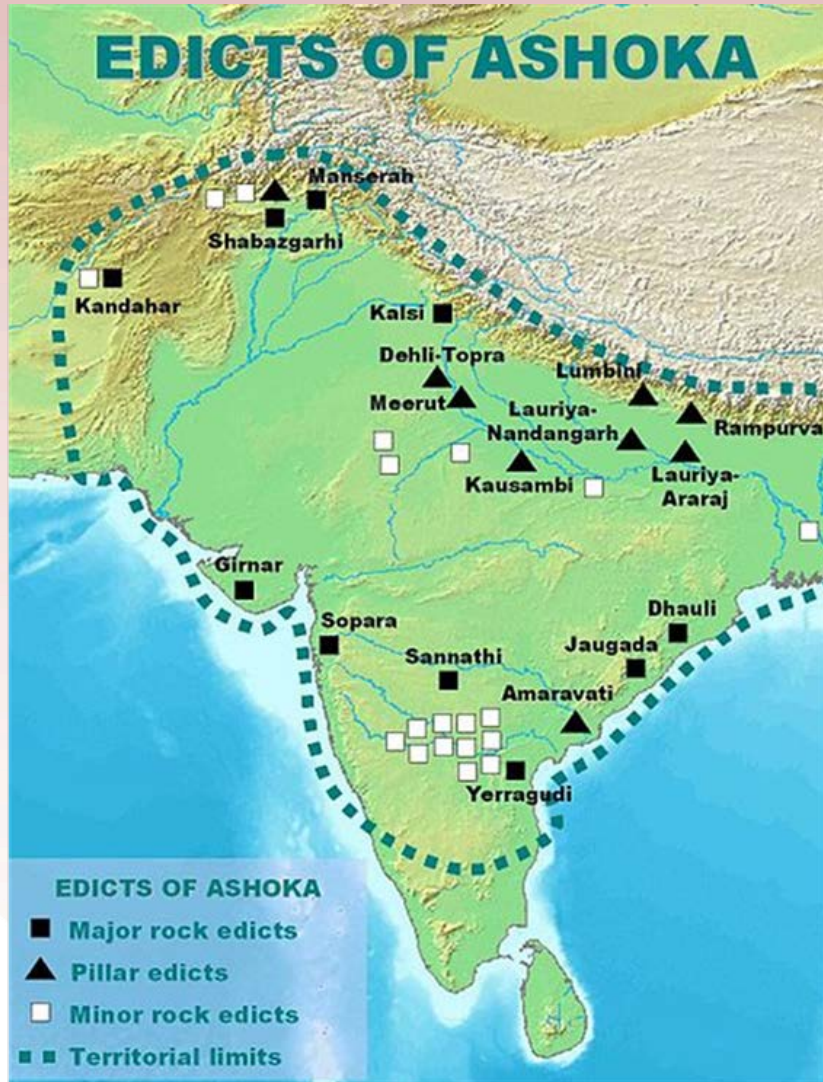
You can see the inscription clearly in this 2012 photo.

[1.11] Graffiti at Lauriya Nandangarh



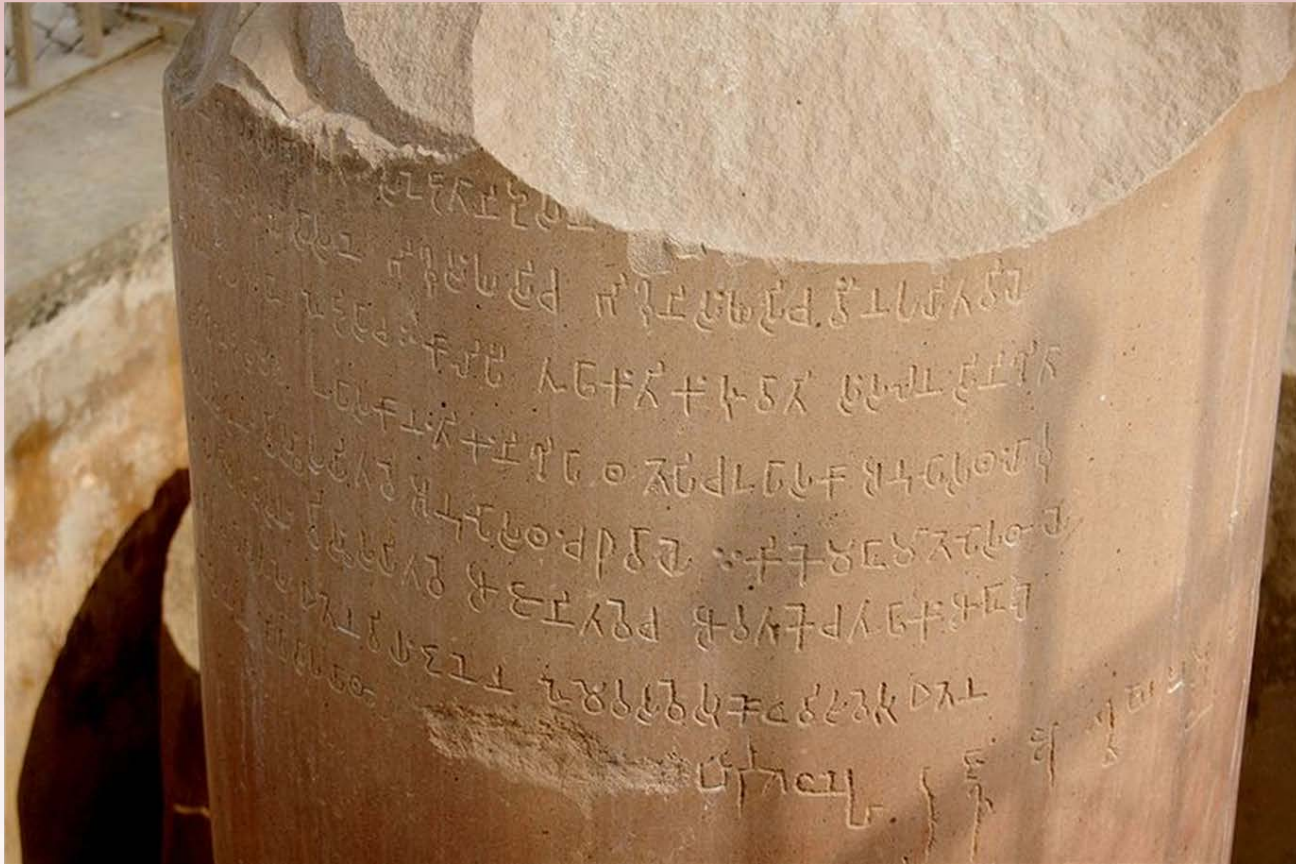
British people and others were writing graffiti on the pillar before 1800 and people continue to write graffiti today. If you look closely at this photo you can see some of it, in various languages. The original inscription is just the part at the top of the picture.

[1.12] Map showing sites of Ashokan edicts



Inscriptions were found all over north and central India, and in the north-west in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan.

[1.13] Broken pillar at Sarnath



Some of them were broken, or damaged, like this fragment of a column at Sarnath.

[1.14] Pillar at Lauriya Araraj in 1895



If this pillar at Lauriya Araraj ever had a lion (or anything else) on top, it had disappeared by the time this photo was taken in 1895.

[1.15] Fragment of Ashokan edict



Here's a close-up look at a fragment of an inscription.

Nobody knew what the writing meant. Local people couldn't read it and neither could anyone else. Some people thought it might be some kind of Greek, some thought it must be Egyptian and others thought it must be related to Sanskrit, the classical language of India.

[1.16] Portrait of James Prinsep



Many British people went to India in those days just to make money, but some were interested in the Indian people and Indian history. One of these was James Prinsep, who was only 20 years old when he arrived in Calcutta in 1819, to take a job at the Royal Mint. Calcutta was the British capital of India at that time.

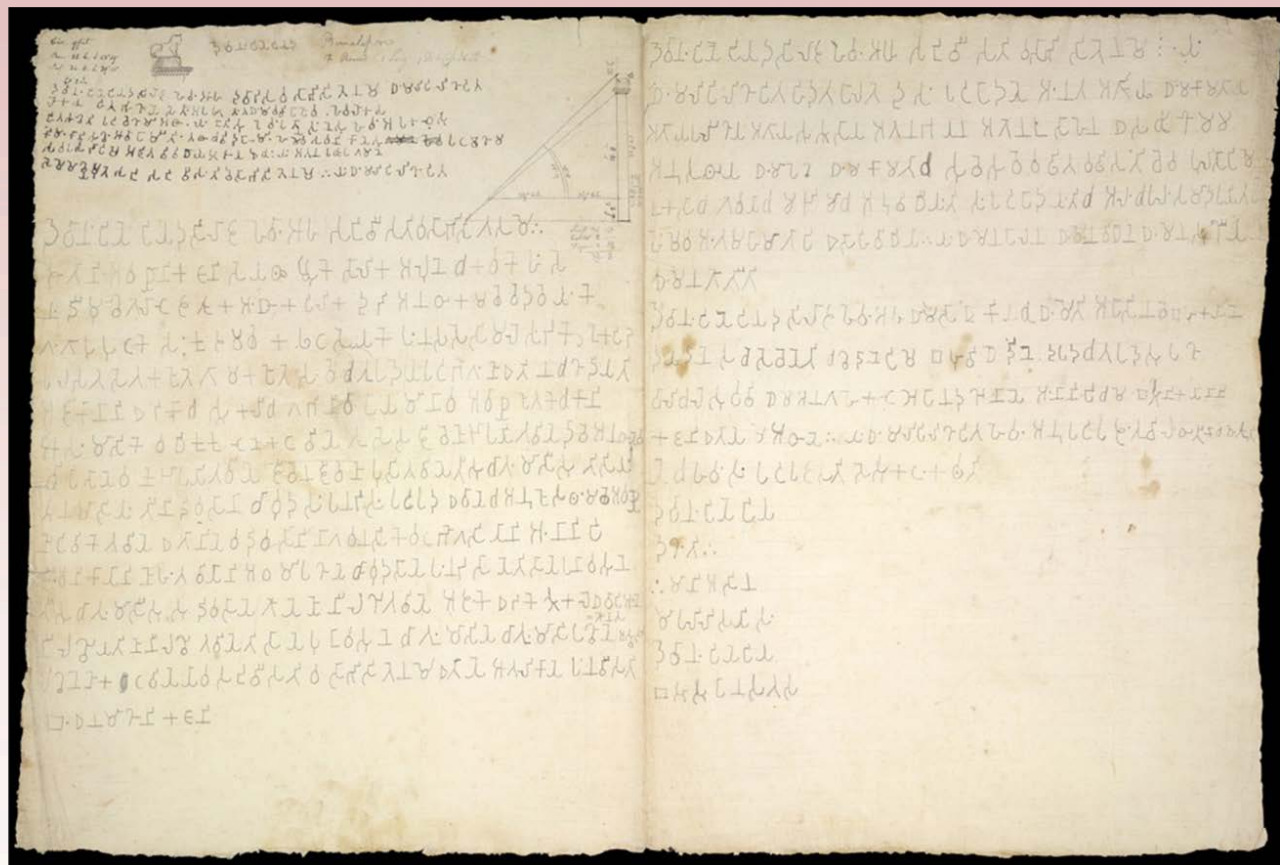
Here he is in a drawing, twenty years later, after his work on the inscriptions was finished.

[1.17] Asiatic Society building



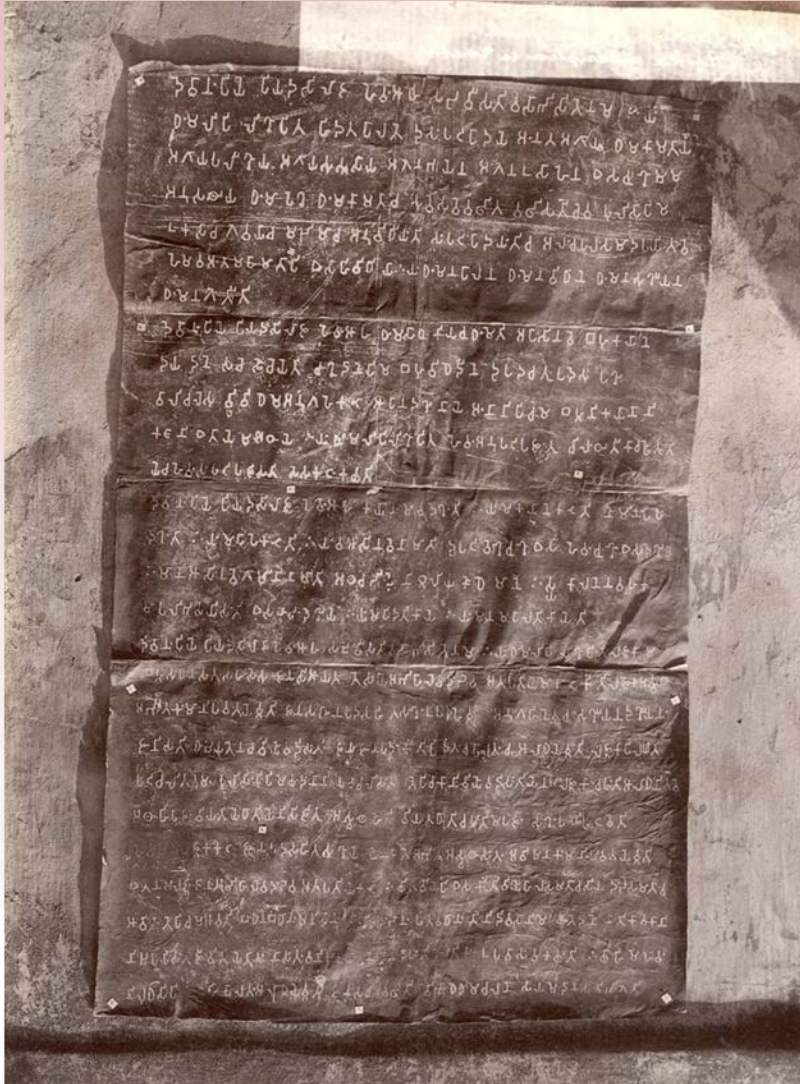
James Prinsep got involved with the Asiatic Society, a group of mainly British people who were interested in India's ancient history and culture. This is their old building in Kolkata, which was built about 1805. Members of the Asiatic Society were all over India, and they collected information about ancient history and sent it back to Calcutta.

[1.18] Copy of edicts at Lauriya Nandangarh, 1797



That's the way Prinsep received information about the inscriptions, and he spent years trying to work out what they said. Here's a hand-written copy (made in 1797) of the inscription on the Lauriya Nadangarh pillar.

[1.19] Copy of edicts at Lauriya Nandangarh, 1881



And here are some copies (made in 1881) of inscriptions on the same pillar. Most of the copies Prinsep saw would not have been even as clear as this.

In the next Investigation, we'll see how he cracked the code, and find out what the inscriptions were actually saying.

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