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Gleaning Into the Transition from Early Brāhmī to Middle Brāhmī: A Case Study on the Bhārhut Inscriptions of the Indian Museum, Kolkata

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Abstract: The site of Bhārhut represents one of the earliest stages in the development of donative architecture in India. Dating roughly to the 2nd century BCE, the donative inscriptions of Bhārhut represent one of the most pivotal corpora for tracing the palaeographic continuum of the Brāhmī script, from the earliest variant to the later ones. These records occupy a transitional position between the Early Brāhmī, as seen in the Aśokan edicts, and the Middle Brāhmī script of later periods, marked by more regional variations. This article aims to undertake a detailed palaeographic analysis of the Bhārhut inscriptional corpus in the Indian Museum, Kolkata - with particular emphasis on the morphological and orthographic transitions as observable in the forms of the key consonants, vowel markers, conjunct formations, and ligatures. Through this approach, this article tries to trace both the features, of transition as well as of continuity, as reflected from these inscriptions, in comparison to their early predecessors. By situating the Bhārhut inscriptions within the wider trajectory of Brāhmī's evolution, this study highlights their significance as a bridge between Mauryan imperial epigraphs and the epigraphs of the subsequent centuries, with more pronounced regional alterations and modifications.

Keywords: Bhārhut, Continuity, Corpus, Donative Inscriptions, Early Brāhmī, Epigraphy, Middle Brāhmī, Palaeographic Transitions.

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Introduction

Bhārhut (23°30'44" N and 80°57'44" E), situated in the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh, is said to be the site of an old city, famed among the natives as Bhaironpur, as it was believed to be founded by the Bhoro people (Cunningham 1879:1). The site is famous for the remnants of a Buddhist stūpa, discovered first by Sir Alexander Cunningham in 1873-74 CE (Refer Fig.1). The stūpa is believed to have been constructed in phases, in the hilly terrain of the Laal Pahadi in Bhārhut village (Refer Fig.2) continuing from the Maurya to the Sunga periods, quite in tune with its counterpart at Sāñci. Cunningham's publications on his excavations at Bhārhut were a

milestone, since the reproduction of the sculptures was done in original photographs, along with some sketches. Assisted by the Ceylonese Buddhist priest, Subhūti, he also began a comprehensive interpretation of the sculptures, particularly those resembling any of the *Jātaka* stories. Later, extensive work on the sculptural milieu at Bhārhut has been done by scholars such as Benimadhab Barua and Kumar Gangananda Sinha, in three volumes, where they have attempted a thorough identification of the sculptures and associated scenes. Although later criticized by Luders, Barua and Sinha's work provided the basis for further studies related to Bhārhut, from both inscriptional and iconographic perspectives.

Unfortunately, nothing except the earthy base of the *stūpa* exists at the site of the erstwhile *stūpa* at present. The remains of the railings and a *torana* were recovered by Cunningham, and are housed, at present, in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, as well as in the Allahabad Museum. The Bhārhut Gallery in the Indian Museum is dedicated to these relocated railings and pillars. It displays one of the richest collections in the world from this Buddhist *stūpa* site, which might otherwise have gone into complete oblivion due to neglect and human vandalism.



Fig. 1: The location of Bhārhut (Courtesy: Google Earth)

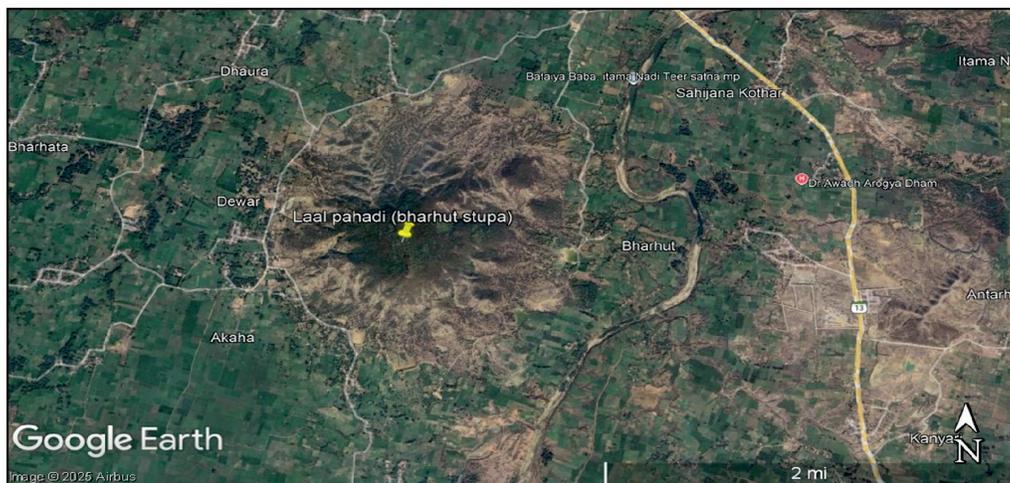


Fig. 2: The original site of the stūpa at Laal Pahadi (Courtesy: Google Earth)

The significance of Bhārhut lies not only in its sculptural and architectural realm, but also in its epigraphic panorama, with donors ranging from lay devotees to monks and nuns, and even women, with an aim to embed records of their pious acts into the very fabric of the sacred structure. Such inscriptions, however, go beyond mere records of patronage – they provide a critical palaeographic archive for tracing the diachronic development of the script. Situated chronologically between the Aśokan edicts of the third century BCE and the increasingly regional variations of the early centuries CE, the Bhārhut inscriptional corpus occupies a transitional position that highlights the elements of both change and continuity within the scriptural tradition. Equally noteworthy is the linguistic context of the Bhārhut inscriptions. Composed in early forms of *Prākṛt*, they reflect the spoken vernaculars of their patrons. The adaptation of the Brāhmī script to the *Prākṛt* phonology has played a key factor in its evolution, necessitating innovations in orthographic conventions (Salomon 1998: 64-5). The Bhārhut inscriptions bear witness to this transition, as their palaeographic shifts are closely tied to the need for more consistent representations of the vernacular speech sounds.



Fig. 3: The Eastern toraṇa of Bhārhut during excavation (Courtesy: Cunningham 1879: Plate XII)

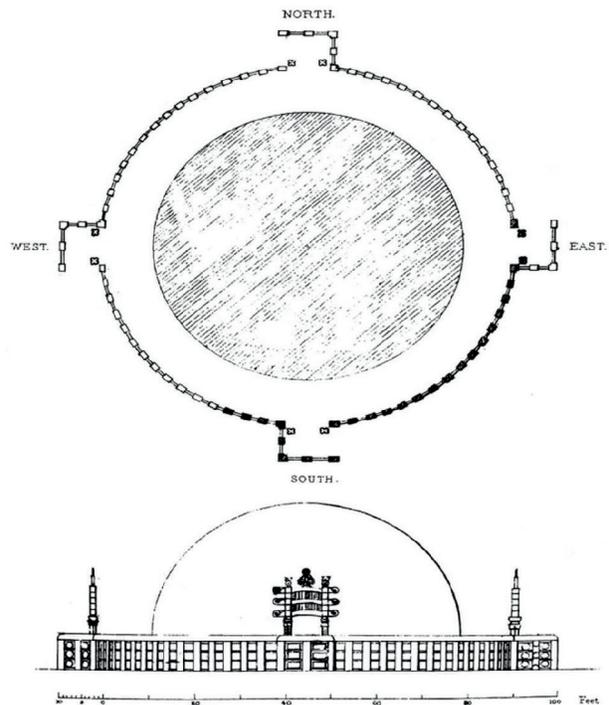


Fig. 4: Plan and elevation of the original stupa (Courtesy: Cunningham 1879: Plate III)

Based on their provenance, the inscriptional corpus at Bhārhut has been classified under the Central Group of Early Brāhmī inscriptions (Lüders 1963: xiii). The language of these inscriptions, in general, is essentially *Prākṛt*, which exhibits a predominance of Western dialectal characteristics (Lüders 1963: xiii). Another interpretation of the language of the Bhārhut corpus has been described as that of “a monumental Prakrit with a marked tendency to conform to the Pāli diction” (Barua and Sinha 1934: 48). In this context, based on their orthographic and palaeographic features, the inscriptions from Bhārhut have been categorized by Barua and Sinha under three heads –

1. Gateway inscriptions ascribed to the Śunga period
2. Coping stone inscriptions belonging, apparently, to the same time period
3. Rail-pillar, rail-bar, rail-panel, and rail-medallion inscriptions, assigned to the post-Aśokan period.

Based on a detailed study of the inscriptional corpus along with its palaeographic characteristics, the following paper tries to establish the Bhārhut corpus as the beginning of the tendency towards transition, which began from the end of Aśoka's reign, ultimately resulting in the rise of the Middle Brāhmī script in Central India, roughly around the first century CE. This paper presents a thorough comparative study of the classic Aśokan Early Brāhmī, used profusely in the edicts of his reign, and the later Central Indian variety of the Middle Brāhmī script, to which the Bhārhut group of inscriptions belongs. Focusing on the morphology of the key consonants, the development of vowel markers, and the orthographic treatment of the conjuncts and ligatures, the present research seeks to identify both the features – of change and of continuum – within the developing script. The primary objective, therefore, is to situate the transitional palaeographic features seen at Bhārhut on a firm and acceptable footing.

General Survey of the Inscriptions

The inscriptions in the Bhārhut pillars and railings have been categorised into a number of groups of inscriptions, based on their themes (Lüders 1963:1). The primary classification was made into two broad categories (Refer Fig. 5) —

1. Group A (Consisting of the donative inscriptions, and their further subdivisions into distinct categories on the basis of the information furnished by those),
2. Group B (Consisting of the inscriptions describing the sculptural representations of various scenes)

The donative inscriptions (Group A) of Bhārhut form one of the earliest surviving examples of the popular art, wherein there occurs ample evidence that donations were made not only by the members of the royal families, but also by the lay people at large, as has been specified below —

"The donors mentioned in the 136 Bhārhut inscriptions of our group A include both the men and women who lead the worldly life and those that have renounced it "

— CII Vol. II Part II: Bharhut Inscriptions (Lüders, 1963:1)

Donative Inscriptions

A thorough survey of the donative inscriptions reveals around fifty-eight donations by male lay devotees, while the females carried out around thirty-six donations. Donations were also made by monks and nuns (Refer Fig. 6), who, supposedly, had to keep away from such worldly possessions. The number of donations identified in each of the subcategories, as mentioned in the chart above, clearly hints towards a certain level of societal parity between the male and female donors. The vast array of donative inscriptions from the Bhārhut corpus provides us with a wide variation of data regarding the donors, like some provide only their names, while others provide us with a lot

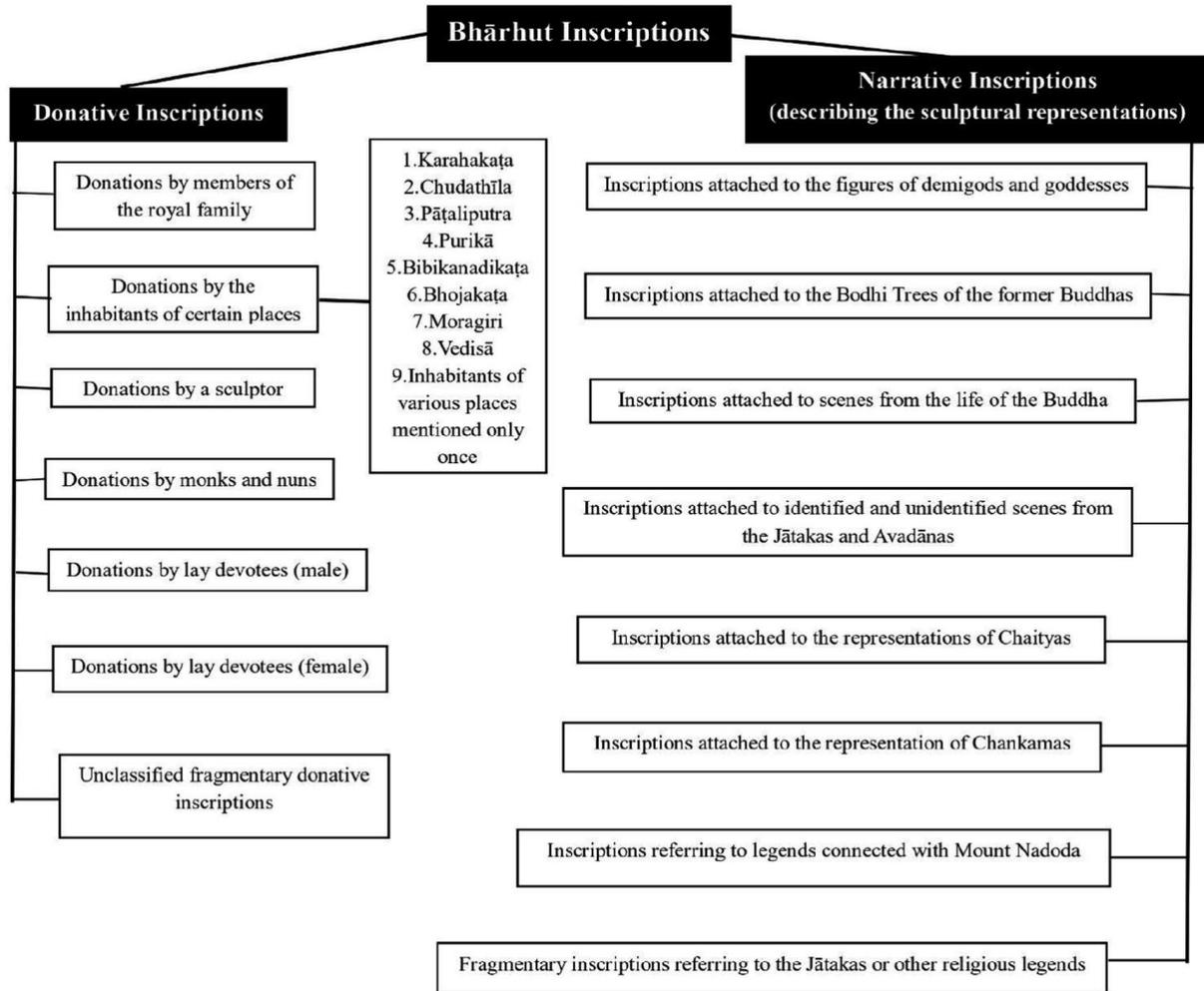


Fig. 5: Flowchart depicting the various categories and subcategories of the Bhārhut Inscriptions

of other details, like their places of origin, their profession, the communities they belonged to, the various religious titles they bear, as well as their personal relationships with other persons in certain rare cases, etc. (Lüders 1963: 2). A few inscriptions also record community donations, in place of a single donor, as is seen in the inscription A5, on a coping stone, now preserved in the Indian Museum, which records a gift of the town of *Karahakaṭa* (identified with modern Karad in the Satara district of Maharashtra), pointing towards a community donation made by the entire city (or, its inhabitants) itself. Several other places have also been identified by Lüders based on these inscriptions, thus contributing to the significance of the Bhārhut corpus in terms of its geographical aspect as well, such as *Bhojakaṭa* (Bhojpur, Madhya Pradesh), *Pāṭaliputra* (Patna, Bihar), *Vedisā* (Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh), and others, while certain other locations mentioned, such as *Cudathīla*, *Bibikānadikata*, etc., are yet to be identified. Another aspect of these donative inscriptions, as pointed out by Lüders, is that the donations were generally made for the spiritual and religious merit of oneself, although a solitary inscription, found on a displaced railing (Inscription A108), records the donation to have been made for the welfare of the donor's parents — *mātāpituna*

athāyā. In certain cases, the objects of donation were also mentioned, for instance, *thabho dānam*, which translates to *stambha dānam* (donation of pillar) in Saṅskṛt. Overall, the donative corpus of the Bhārhut inscriptions provides us with a multifarious set of information regarding the donors who contributed to its establishment.

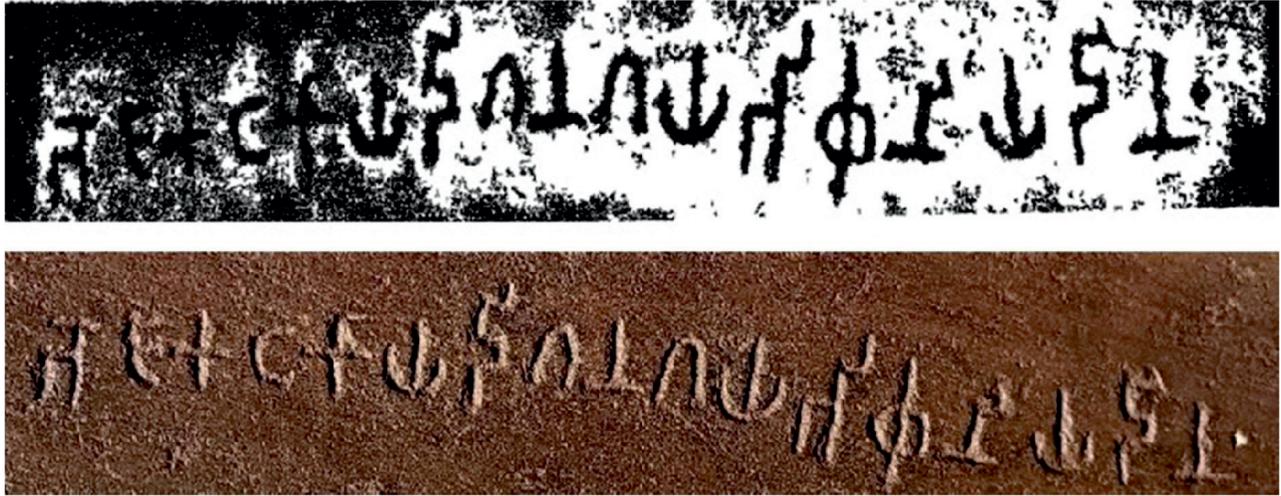


Fig. 6: Donative inscription (A24) by a nun, Diganagā, belonging to a place named Bhojakaṭa

Narrative Inscriptions

These constitute the other group of inscriptions (Group B), which describe the myriad sculptural depictions that adorn the pillars, railings, and gateways of the *stūpa*. There has remained a constant contention among scholars on whether the Bhārhut artists based their works on the original *Pāli Jātaka* tales, to which some scholars, like Bühler, exert support, while others, such as Ivan Minayeff and Hermann von Oldenburg, are in the negative. Others, such as the French Indologist Alfred Foucher, along with Lüders himself, however, take a midway stance — stating that a literary source much akin to the *Pāli* collection was followed by the artists, since many of the titles show a marked difference from the original *Pāli* canons, and also pertaining to a distinct dialect (Luders 1963: 66). These inscriptions describe the figures of various *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs*, the *Bodhi* trees of the former Buddhas, the various events in the life of Gautama Buddha (Refer Fig.7), the representation of *caityas* and *caṅkamas* (Refer Fig.8), as well as diverse scenes from the *Jātaka* and *Avadāna* literatures. Another significant aspect to note is that all the sculptures associated with the life of Buddha represent him in an aniconic form, by means of the empty throne (*vajrāsana*), the *bodhi* tree, *stūpa*, etc., quite in resonance with the artistic language of the second century BCE, where anthropomorphic depiction of the Buddha was yet to gain shape. An interesting category of the narrative group of inscriptions is numbered between B70 and B76, which contain the depictions of a legendary mountain, Mount Naḍoda, which has been, almost unanimously, equated by scholars with a chain of hills in the vicinity of Bhārhut, named Naro (Chanda 1927: 6). Some scholars have even attributed it to Nālada, Nārada, or Gandhamādana (of the Rāmāyaṇa), since *nala* or *nalada* refers to a scented plant or mineral (Barua and Sinha 1926: 98). This view, however, has been refuted later by Lüders. Overall, the Bhārhut corpus represents an extremely diverse group of inscriptions.

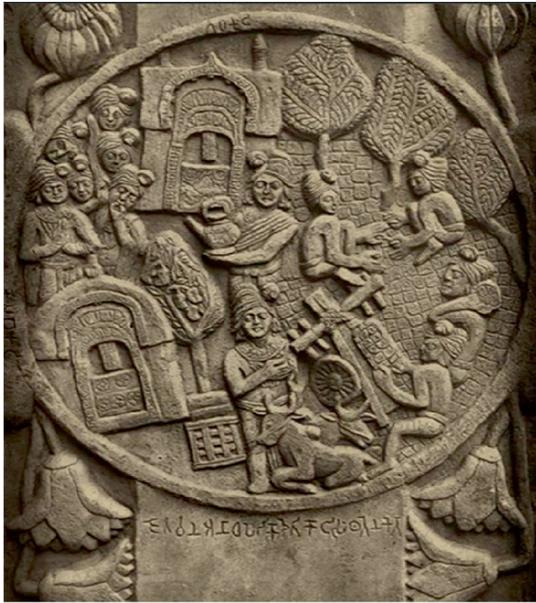


Fig. 7: Sculpture and inscription (B32) describing Anāthapindika's presentation of the Jetavana to the saṅgha (Courtesy – Cunningham 1879: Plate LVII) [ṭikuṭiko cakamo]



Fig. 8: Sculpture and inscription (B78) describing a triangular caṅkama (Courtesy – Cunningham 1879: Plate XXVIII)

Palaeographic Features

With the end of Aśoka's reign began the gradual decline of the pomp and glory of the Mauryan rule, leading to their ultimate downfall. The absence of a strong centralised administration led to the rise of localised regional powers, aimed at carving out an independent identity for themselves. The political scenario exerted its impression on various aspects of society, including the writing system as well, which saw a growth of regional identities and styles in the earlier established system. The Aśokan Brāhmī had a unity of purpose, which ultimately determined the style of writing — the imperial style (Dani 1963: 50-1). The post-Aśokan Brāhmī inscriptions differ both in terms of contents and style, leading to the rise of provincial Brāhmī scripts, which have been classified, based on their regional styles, one of which is the Central Indian variety, to which the entire Bhārhut corpus is ascribed. This style is generally characterised by the reduction in the length of the verticals, and a pre-eminence of the angular forms of the letters, which became a fully established feature only as late as the Śaka records, leading eventually to the equalisation of all the verticals. These were, however, later developments in the Central Indian style, and at Bhārhut, one can notice signs of these transitions in its inceptional stage.

The scholars have mostly agreed upon a general consensus that the *stūpa* at Bhārhut was constructed in different phases — with the Post-Aśokan Mauryan Era (c. late third to early second century BCE) seeing the erection of much of the pillars, railings, and sculptures, whereas the construction of the *toranas* is ascribed to the Śunga period (c. first century BCE) — which is quite evident in the major stylistic variations noticed in the Bhārhut corpus, in comparison with the standard Brāhmī of the Aśokan Edicts. From the palaeographic point of view, the Bhārhut Inscriptions display mixed features, preserving significant components from the Early Brāhmī of

the Aśokan era, while simultaneously juxtaposing several transitional features within the corpus, which later went on to develop into the more stylistically varied Middle Brāhmī script of the early centuries CE. Such transitions could be ascribed to the varying levels of creativity of the artisans, who were no longer bound by a set standard of writing prescribed by the royalty; they began to weave in their own unique styles in their writings. The Bhārhut inscriptions showcased a number of stylistic transitions in the letters, medial vowels, and ligatures, based on which two basic classifications can be made:

1. Letters exhibiting absolutely similar features to the Early Brāhmī of the Aśokan period.
2. Letters showing signs of transition from the set Aśokan standards.

The chart provided below (Fig.9) gives a graphical representation of the various forms of the letters that can be seen in the various inscriptions of Bhārhut, including the most widely recurring forms, jotted down after a thorough scrutiny of all the available inscriptional sources from the site.

VOWELS (Full or Initial Forms)							
A		I	U	Ū	E		
MEDIAL (Post-Consonantal) VOWELS							
KĀ	JĀ	DĀ	MĀ	KHI	CI	CHI	JI
JHI	DHI	BI	VI	SI	GĪ	THĪ	
KU	KHU	CHU	TU	TU	THU	DHU	NU
PU	BU	MU	SU	CŪ	BŪ	BHŪ	JE
DE	ME	KO	KHO	GO	GHO	DHO	NO
BO	MO	PAU	KAM	GAM	GHAM	THAM	NAM

Fig. 9

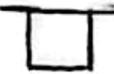
BO 	MO 	PAU 	KAM̄ 	GAM̄ 	GHAM̄ 	THAM̄ 	NAM̄ 
CONSONANTS (Normalised forms)							
	Unvoiced unspirated	Unvoiced aspirated	Voiced un-aspirated	Voiced aspirated	Nasal	Semi Vowels	Sibilants
Guttural	KA 	KHA 	GA 	GHA 	ŃA 	YA 	HA 
Palatal	CA 	CHA 	JA 	JHA 	ṆA 	RA 	ŚA 
Retroflex	ṬA 	ṬHA 	ḍA 	ḍHA 	ṅA 	LA 	ṢA 
Dental	TA 	THA 	DA 	DHA 	NA 	VA 	SA 
Labial	PA 	PHA 	BA 	BHA 	MA 		
CONSONANTAL CONJUNCTIONS AND LIGATURES (Normalised forms)							
DRA 	BRA 	MHĀ 		MDHI 	KRAM̄ 		

Fig. 9: Chart showing various forms of the letters as found in the Bhārhut corpus (Courtesy- Researcher)

1. Letters with similar features as in the Early Brāhmī of the Aśokan period

As can be deduced from the chart provided above, there appears a number of vowels, consonants, medials, as well as ligatures that have preserved their forms exactly in accordance with their Aśokan counterparts. These letters have retained their forms quite diligently, leading to the general impression that the Bhārhut inscriptions belonged mostly to the period when the Aśokan rule had recently come to an end, but the set standards of writing still continued to persist with very slight changes, if not in their exact forms (Refer Fig.10).

	ROMAN	AŚOKAN BRĀHMĪ	BHĀRHUT INSCRIPTIONS
Vowels	I	∴	∴
	U	𑀓 𑀔	𑀓 𑀔
Consonants	GA	𑀧	𑀧
	CHA	𑀛	𑀛
	JA	𑀺 𑀻	𑀺 𑀻
	ṬHA	𑀇	𑀇
	THA	𑀆	𑀆
	PA	𑀕	𑀕
	PHA	𑀞	𑀞
	MA	𑀢	𑀢
	YA	𑀤 𑀥	𑀤 𑀥
	RA	𑀲 𑀳	𑀲 𑀳
	LA	𑀭	𑀭
	HA	𑀘	𑀘
	Medial Vowels	CHI	𑀉𑀲
BI		𑀉𑀢	𑀉𑀢
CHU		𑀉𑀛	𑀉𑀛
THU		𑀉𑀆	𑀉𑀆
JE		𑀉𑀺	𑀉𑀺
MO		𑀉𑀻	𑀉𑀻
THAM̐		𑀉𑀆𑀭	𑀉𑀆𑀭
Ligatures	MHĀ	𑀭𑀘	𑀭𑀘
	NHI	𑀢𑀘	𑀢𑀘

Fig. 10: Chart showing the letters that underwent no or negligible stylistic variations
(Courtesy- Researcher)

2. Letters showing signs of transition

ROMAN	AŚOKAN BRĀHMĪ	BHĀRHUT INSCRIPTIONS
A		
Ā		
E		
Ū		

Fig. 11: Chart showing the vowels that underwent some stylistic transitions
(Courtesy- Researcher)

Vowels

The first full vowel of the Nāgari alphabet, ‘a’, has the largest variety of forms in the Aśokan inscriptions. The most frequently occurring, however, is the cursive one, in which a straight vertical line is touched in the middle, on the left, by two curved lines. The two arms thus meet at a central point on the vertical arm. In case of the Bhārhut corpus, there occur two distinct forms — one in which a gap occurs between the two left arms and they do not, essentially, merge at the same point, and the other where the two left arms, abruptly, take a sharp rightwards bend. Both of these forms are indicative of the post-Asokan writing system. In case of the long vowel ‘ā’ in the Bhārhut corpus, the vertical arm takes the shape of a Roman ‘L’, with another small horizontal projection running parallel to the lower projected arm. The left arms touch the vertical arm, leaving a slight gap in between. The vowel ‘e’ preserves almost the same triangular form as seen in the Aśokan inscriptions, while, at times, displaying another variant which looks somewhat like a slanted semicircle. A new long vowel, ‘ū’, of which there had been no evidence in the Asokan edicts as such, is found in the Bhārhut inscriptions. It is, again, in the form of a Roman ‘L’, having two parallel horizontal right arms, the upper arm being shorter in length than the one below. Besides these, not much noticeable changes in styles have been seen in the case of the vowels (Refer Fig.11).

Consonants

In Aśokan inscriptions, the consonant ‘ka’ is in the shape of a Catholic cross — a long vertical and a short horizontal arm bisecting each other at right angles. At Bhārhut, the horizontal arm got increased in length, giving the notion of an inverted sword. In a second form, the horizontal arm assumed a curved structure, meeting the vertical arm at a point near its upper half. Another letter showing a marked stylistic variation is ‘kha’. While the Aśokan variant appears as a simple hook with a dot or a small circle attached to its lower end, the Bhārhut type displays two distinct forms — one in which the dot below changes into a small, curved projection, and the other in which the vertical assumes a curved form, and the circle below becomes larger, attaching itself to the side of the curved vertical arm in the form of a loop.

	ROMAN	AŚOKAN BRĀHMĪ	BHĀRHUT INSCRIPTIONS
Guttural	KA	𑀓	𑀓 𑀔
	KHA	𑀕	𑀕 𑀖
	GHA	𑀗	𑀗 𑀘 𑀙
Palatal	CA	𑀚	𑀚 𑀛
	JHA	𑀜	𑀜
	ÑA	𑀞	𑀞
Retroflex	ṬA	𑀠	𑀠 𑀡
	ḌA	𑀢 𑀣	𑀢 𑀣
	DHA	𑀤	𑀤
	ṆA	𑀦	𑀦
Dental	TA	𑀧 𑀨	𑀧 𑀨
	DA	𑀩 𑀪	𑀩 𑀪 𑀫
	DHA	𑀬	𑀬
	NA	𑀭	𑀭
Labial	BA	𑀮	𑀮 𑀯
	BHA	𑀰 𑀱	𑀰 𑀱
Semi Vowel	VA	𑀲	𑀲 𑀳
Sibilant	SA	𑀴	𑀴 𑀵

Fig. 12: Chart showing the consonants that underwent some stylistic transitions

In the case of the consonant ‘gha’, one can notice three distinct forms preserved at Bhārhut, one of which exactly resembles the Aśokan variant, in the shape of a fish hook with a small vertical joining it at the midpoint of the curve of the hook. At Bhārhut, ‘gha’ is seen to have attained a completely angular form; and the third form is clearly a result of the cursive hand used by the scribe. A number of other consonants, such as ‘jha’, ‘ñā’, ‘ḍa’, ‘ṇa’, ‘na’, ‘ta’, ‘bha’, and ‘va’, display minor variations in forms, as compared to their early counterparts. The only exception is that in all these letters, the vertical or horizontal or both arms tend to become more elongated. Also, the letters ‘ca’, ‘ṭa’, ‘da’, and ‘ba’ are seen both in their angular as well as rounded forms.

One of the most frequently occurring consonants in the Bhārhut corpus, ‘ta’, is seen in two forms. The first form, corresponding to the Aśokan predecessor, is in the form of a vertical arm with an inverted ‘v’ shape attached to its base. In another form, the ‘v’ attains the form of an inverted ‘u’, attached to the foot of the vertical. This phenomenon might be the effect of engraving in a hurry (Upasak 1960: 78-9), which, however, seems more to be a result of the developing habit of writing in a cursive hand. The consonant ‘dha’ simply attains the mirror image of itself, in the form of an inverted ‘D’, with no more visible signs of transformation.

The last consonant to display a gradual transition is the sibilant ‘sa’. In this context, it is noteworthy to mention that the other two sibilants, ‘śa’ and ‘ṣa’, have not been reported in the Bhārhut corpus. The standard shape of the dental ‘sa’ in the Aśokan inscriptions is much akin to ‘pa’, with an additional hook pointing downwards, attached to the left (Upasak 1960: 101). This form has been preserved at Bhārhut, with the simultaneous occurrence of another style, where the left curved arm tends to grow longer, taking a bend, and running, for a short length, towards the right (Refer Fig.12).

Medial Vowels

ROMAN	AŚOKAN BRĀHMĪ	BHĀRHUT INSCRIPTIONS
JĀ		
MĀ		
KO		
PAU		

Fig. 13: Chart showing the medial vowels that underwent some stylistic transitions
(Courtesy - Researcher).

In its greater majority, the Bhārhut corpus preserves the medials in an almost unaltered form, of course with minor exceptions. For instance, the medial ‘ā’ in ‘jā’ is generally attached to the middle line in the Aśokan edicts, while sometimes it is attached vertically on top of the middle arm, as a small stroke. Similarly, for ‘mā’, the medial ‘ā’ is attached to the top, projecting

mostly horizontally rightwards. Bhārhut, however, preserves some instances where the rightward projection of the medial is added to the middle, just above the loop joint. Another significant transition can be noticed in the medial ‘o’, which was earlier written in the form of two separate horizontal lines extending rightwards and leftwards simultaneously. However, at Bhārhut, the medial ‘o’, mostly, is depicted as a single horizontal line on top of the individual letters. The introduction of a new medial vowel, ‘au’, is again a feature unique to the Bhārhut corpus, and does not exist in the earlier times (Refer Fig.13).

Ligatures

ROMAN	AŚOKAN BRĀHMĪ	BHĀRHUT INSCRIPTIONS
KRA		
DRA		
BRA		

Fig. 14: Chart showing the ligatures/conjuncts that underwent some stylistic transitions

One of the most striking characteristics of the post-Aśokan inscriptions in general, and Bhārhut in particular, is noticed in the formation of the ligatures. The fundamental rule, in this regard, is to place the syllables normally one upon another in their natural order, without any mutilations whatsoever (Upasak 1960: 119).

The most notable change took place in the use of the consonant ‘ra’ as a conjunct. In the Aśokan inscriptions, this conjunct appears invariably as the first element, irrespective of whether it is the initial or second letter in the compound. For instance, the conjunct ‘kra’ is written as ‘rka’, but is taken to mean ‘kra’, as is explained by Dani,

“In both cases, it was shown by giving a serpentine vertical to the straight verticals of the compounded letters.”

— *Indian Palaeography* (Dani 1963: 54)

This problem seems to be addressed effectively in the post-Aśokan inscriptions, and can be seen in the Bhārhut corpus as well, where the use of ‘ra’ in conjuncts as the second element has already been mastered. This, therefore, forms an essential distinguishing feature in all the inscriptions of the later periods, and has been successfully incorporated from the Bhārhut inscriptions themselves (Refer Fig.14).

Observations and Conclusion

The post-Aśokan inscriptions can be classified under the following heads, based on their regional configurations (Dani 1963: 53) —

- Eastern India (with its old centre at Magadha, and the new centres based around the regions of the south of the Ganges at Kauśāmbī, the influence of which spread across the regions

of Bhārhut and Bodh Gaya, to as far as Hāthīgumphā in Odisha, and at the north of the Ganges at Ayodhyā).

- North-West India, centered around places like Taxila, Mathura, and other places in the Malwa region, on the route leading to the Deccan.
- North-West Deccan, exhibiting a cultural continuation from the Malwa region.
- South India, further classified into Eastern and Western Deccan styles.

The Bhārhut inscriptional corpus can be characterised within the Central Indian group of inscriptions, an offshoot of the Eastern Indian palaeographic developments, and exhibits a number of features which assign it to the transitional phase between the Aśokan Early Brāhmī and the full-fledged advent of Middle Brāhmī. From the detailed study of the nature of the inscriptions along with their individual palaeographic peculiarities, numerous salient features can be deduced to support the above claim. Firstly, there is evidence of a gradual reduction in the length of the verticals, quite in line with the trend of squarisation of the letters, which establishes itself more vehemently in the later periods. At Bhārhut, the shortening of the verticals is clearly visible in the execution of certain letters, such as ‘ka’, ‘gha’, ‘jha’, ‘ḍha’, and ‘bha’, to mention a few. However, no reliance can be placed on the length of the verticals, as they do not exhibit any gradual pattern of reduction (Dani 1963: 51), as has been noticed at Bhārhut. The inscriptions on the eastern *torāṇa* exhibit this feature more prominently, since it is ascribed to a later period, in the early centuries CE. Another feature that quite certainly establishes the Bhārhut inscriptions in the transitional phase is the angularisation of the letters. From the post-Mauryan period onwards, some of the letters assume an angular form, as is the case with the consonants ‘ca’, ‘ṭa’, ‘da’, ‘gha’, ‘va’, and some others, which have retained both their rounded as well as angular forms. This becomes a fully established feature around the early centuries CE.

Initiation of long vowels is essentially another characteristic feature of post-Aśokan Brāhmī. In the Aśokan inscriptions, there was no use of long vowels, except ‘ā’. At Bhārhut, however, the incorporation of a new long vowel ‘ū’ can be seen, along with the introduction of ‘au’ as a medial vowel for the first time. Also, the proper use of ‘ra’ as a consonantal conjunct seems to have been mastered by the scribes of the Bhārhut inscriptions. A change in the pattern of the medial vowels can also be noticed. Nevertheless, disparities became evident within the Bhārhut corpus as well. The script style used in the pillars and railings mostly corresponds to the Aśokan pantheon of Early Brāhmī, while the *torāṇa* and some other inscriptions exhibit the newer features, thereby testifying to the differences in their chronologies. The following distinguishing features are, therefore, noteworthy in the Bhārhut inscriptions, such as the tendency towards shortening of the verticals, the introduction of new long vowels, the angularisation of a few letters, distinct forms of the medial vowels, and the proper use of ligatures. Placing all of these characteristic features together, it can, therefore, safely be concluded that Bhārhut is one of the type-sites where the early signs of transition from Early Brāhmī to Middle Brāhmī can be seen.

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