

Selling tolerance by the pound: On ideal types' fragility, Aśoka's edicts and the political theology of toleration in and beyond South Asia

Federico Squarcini

Università Ca' Foscari, Italy

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Abstract

In recent times, scholars of precolonial South Asia have been solicited to take part in public debates regarding 'ancient traditions of tolerance'. The general idea is to request them to collect and exhibit 'evidence' and *exempla* from classics and historical sources about political and practical form of tolerance, so to permit non-specialists to learn from the past and to derive behavioural patterns from 'historical samples'. Nevertheless, although the patriarchal *motto* 'historia magistra vitae' is still widely believed, looking at the past is not that smooth and easy, as can be seen from the problematic history of the reception of the paradigmatic figure of Aśoka.

Keywords

Aśoka, *dharma*, political theology, semiotic of law, tolerance

Fertile words on ideals, tolerance, politics and Aśoka

Words, like seeds, are ambiguous 'objects', since they can be, at the same time, both fertile and fragile. Like seeds, words, when implanted into the common soil of a collective of

Corresponding author:

Federico Squarcini, Department of Asian and African Studies, Università Ca' Foscari, Venice 30123, Italy.

Email: federico.squarcini@unive.it

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speakers–hearers, are reputed fragile – and therefore futile – by someone, or taken *too* seriously by those who consider them fertile and fruitful. Such inevitable ambiguity shows how every single word could be fertile and fragile at the same time, without ever lacking in its property to affect and provoke actant cognitions and semantic constraints.

The *vulgata* about king Aśoka (c. 304–232 BCE) as an ideal righteous and tolerant ruler is also made out of fragile words. Nevertheless, it succeeded in becoming a long-lasting *doxa*, been rarely asked about the function it played within its centuries-long and worldwide reception circle.

Aśoka's idealized reputation became known outside Asian regions at the beginning of the 20th century, when monographs and volumes in English started to be devoted to him.¹ From those days on, the figure of Aśoka is towering on the scene, from scholarly works on political sciences to volumes on comparative law, from juvenile literature² to journalistic pamphlets.³

Apart from specialized and poorly circulating early Orientalist publications in European languages, the word 'Aśoka' entered the lexical repertoire of the educated English-speaking middle classes just 100 years ago, when Herbert George Wells (1866–1946),⁴ a widely known British journalist, scientific popularizer and writer of science fiction romances, published in 1920 the two volumes of his ambitious *The Outline of History. Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind*. The more than 1100 pages of Wells' somewhat pioneering and visionary editorial project were introduced by strong proposals and bold statements,⁵ strategically supported by the authority derived from the list of more than 50 names of scholars and experts quoted at the end of the *Introduction*.⁶

Throughout the several pages of his *Outline* devoted to ancient India, Wells presented a formidable portrait of Aśoka, a fertile literary depiction that has been highly influential in the spreading of the *vulgata* about 'Indian tolerance'. Paraphrasing and relying exclusively on the words of the Aśoka's edicts available in those days – edicts assumed and treated by Wells as if their writer should be blindly trusted in his self-portraying narrative – Wells devoted various paragraphs to Aśoka, inscribing on the malleable clay of collective memory the contours of a portrait destined for a formidable literary career. Endowed with a clear vocation for sagacity and literary elegance, Wells disposed his reasoning on Aśoka following a twofold scheme of logical implications: since the ruler Aśoka *was* a paradigmatic example of 'tolerance' ('[. . .] the only military monarch on record who abandoned warfare after victory' [*sic!*]), Aśoka *is* a 'Great Monarch'.⁷ A way of reasoning that resulted in a convincing depiction of the Maurya king, which was aptly coined by Wells in order to match and blend with a more broadly felt need for concrete historical examples of political leaders that are driven by tolerance and that '[. . .] worked sanely for the real needs of men'.⁸ The fertility and efficacy of such depiction are exemplified by the logical constraints it exercised on its readers, that repeated and replicated for decades Wells' twofold logical scheme.

Right after his presentation of the king Chandragupta of the Maurya clan, Wells dealt with Aśoka and wrote a highly evocative masterpiece of 'public history', a *pièce* that, the *Outline* being so largely spread and read, deserves close attention:

[p. 369] He [Chandragupta] was succeeded by his son [Bindusāra], who conquered Madras and was in turn succeeded by Asoka (264 to 227 B.C.), one of the great monarchs of history, whose dominions extended from Afghanistan to Madras. He is the only military monarch on record who abandoned warfare after victory. He had invaded Kalinga (255 B.C.), a country

along the east coast of Madras, perhaps with some intention of completing the conquest of the tip of the Indian peninsula. The expedition was successful, but he was disgusted by what he saw of the cruelties and horrors of war. He declared, in certain inscriptions that still exist, that he would no longer seek conquest by war, but by religion, and the rest of his life was devoted to the spreading of Buddhism throughout the world. He seems to have ruled his vast empire in peace and with great ability. He was no mere religious fanatic.⁹

After this first ‘descriptive’ paragraph, Wells proceeds to emphasize the role of Buddhist teachings in motivating Aśoka’s repentance and ‘conversion’ towards a tolerant and socially beneficial way of ruling, therefore feeding another long-lasting stereotype:¹⁰

[p. 370] How entirely compatible that way of living then was with the most useful and beneficent activities his life shows. Right Aspiration, Right Effort, and Right Livelihood distinguished his career. He organized a great digging of wells in India, and the planting of trees for shade. He appointed officers for the supervision of charitable works. He founded hospitals and public gardens. He had gardens made for the growing of medicinal herbs. Had he had an Aristotle to inspire him, he would no doubt have endowed scientific research upon a great scale. He created a ministry for the care of the aborigines and subject races. He made provision for the education of women. He made, he was the first monarch to make, an attempt to educate his people into a common view of the ends and way of life. He made vast benefactions to the Buddhist teaching orders, and tried to stimulate them to a better study of their own literature. All over the land he setup long inscriptions [p. 371] rehearsing the teaching of Gautama, and it is the simple and human teaching and not the preposterous accretions. Thirty-five of his inscriptions survive to this day.¹¹

Such a eulogistic portrait of Aśoka is meant to say that, if the events occurred exactly in this way, his paradigmatic example deserves to be seriously known, considered and remembered by all politicians and leaders of the 21st century: due to its writer’s celebrity, such words firmly inscribed this Aśoka stereotype into the collective imaginary.¹²

In particular, the final sentence of Well’s depiction of Aśoka seems to be intentionally disposed to confer immortal fame to such an ‘extraordinary’ king:

[p. 371] For eight and twenty years Asoka worked sanely for the real needs of men. Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star. From the Volga to Japan his name is still honoured. China, Tibet, and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserve the tradition of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory to-day than have ever heard the names of Constantino or Charlemagne.¹³

The influence exercised by Wells’ idealization of Aśoka has been conspicuous and reached a rather large audience. For decades, his fertile words resounded in the works of many European and American authors, more or less aware of the fact that their voicing words were based on unsteady foundations.

In the following years, the figure of Aśoka progressively increased its global visibility, up to the point when Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), the first Prime Minister of

post-independence India, made repeated appeals at his iconicity: in his writings and public speeches Nehru magnified Aśoka, once even quoting verbatim Wells' evocative sentences.¹⁴

After such a consecration, the idealized stereotype of a tolerant Aśoka's became the Weberian 'ideal type' of the 'ancient righteous ruler', gaining usages also in academic scholarship. This ideal type became employed even by exponents of postcolonial studies,¹⁵ and since then repeated again and again, *ad nauseam*.

Not having been subjected to serious scrutiny, this fragile but authoritative ideal type of 'tolerance' travelled in time and space, until the Bengali Nobel Prize for Economics (1998) Amartya Sen inserted it into his late historical-philosophical writings. Sen received and embraced the logical construction of Wells' portrait, restating to his own global audiences the formula according to which since the ruler Aśoka *was* a paradigmatic example of 'tolerance', then Aśoka *is* a 'Great Emperor'.

These are the words that Sen wrote in 2005, words perceived as even more fertile since they are written by a Nobel Prize:

It was indeed a Buddhist emperor of India, Ashoka, who, in the third century BCE, not only outlined the need for toleration and the richness of heterodoxy, but also laid down what are perhaps the oldest rules for conducting debates and disputations, with the opponents being 'duly honoured in every way on all occasions'.¹⁶

Similar bombastic statements, variously repeated in Sen's writings,¹⁷ are meant to lead to the 'logical' conclusion that Aśoka has to be seen as the '[...] most articulate and ardent advocates of tolerance and mutual respect in India [...]'.¹⁸

Even within the paragraphs of his *Argumentative Indian* in which Sen seems aware of the hazardousness and fragility of his words, he is ultimately rapt by the 'ideal type' of Aśoka and could not resist magnifying the admirable character of his compatriot ruler:

It is true that tolerance has not been advocated by all in the Asian traditions. Nor has that advocacy typically covered everyone (though some, such as Ashoka, in the third century BCE, did indeed insist on completely universal coverage, without any exception).¹⁹

With such words Sen is saying to his audience that, since this is *actually* the case, there are no objections to his 'logical' way of arguing in favour of Aśoka, one of the pillars on which the rationale of his defence of public reasoning is based.²⁰

Finally, in another portion of his *Argumentative Indian*, Sen draws the following conclusions, echoing and emulating Wells' eulogistic sentences quoted above:

Ashoka's championing of tolerance and freedom may not be at all well known in the contemporary world, but that is not dissimilar to the global unfamiliarity with calendars other than the Gregorian. There are, to be sure, other Indian classical authors who emphasized discipline and order rather than tolerance and liberty, for example Kautilya in the fourth century BCE.²¹

After a century of authoritative *vulgata*'s repetitions, the fertile words employed to depict the ideal type and paradigmatic Aśoka are firmly consecrated in the public *doxa*, within which they continue to act as one of the golden rules of political thinking, too often with no exceptions.

Fertile words rooted in fragile grounds: Questioning the foundations of Aśoka paradigmatic depictions

The majority of the fertile, but fragile, words employed to shape the visible contour of such *vulgata* are directly derived from the reading of other concretely less fragile words: the epigraphical corpus of Aśoka's edicts. A corpus consensually attributed to the Maurya ruler Aśoka and therefore often intended as his own words, directly reflecting his own intentions and ruling policy.

In fact, all the standardized depictions of the 'magnanimous and tolerant Emperor Aśoka' – who, *therefore*, has to be considered as *an* 'ideal ruler' and *a* 'Great Monarch' – follow a sort of canonical pattern of edicts' quotations, through which the reader is *informed* about Aśoka by Aśoka himself. Words embedded in historical stones, willing to tell us that Aśoka ruled a wide-ranging empire under the moral imperative of *dharma* *mavijaya*, a compound that has to be understood as referring to the principle that inspired Aśoka's 'legendary' ethical reform: '[...] Dharma seems to have meant for Aśoka a moral polity of active social concern, religious tolerance, ecological awareness, the observance of common ethical precepts, and the renunciation of war'.²²

But the factual ground into which all these plain and fertile words are rooted is far from stable and pacific, being the historical ground of political turbulences, dynastic antagonisms, economic rivalries, a ground continually shaken by alliances' fractures, *coups d'état* and court treacheries.²³ Aśoka's world was an indomitable one,²⁴ made out of unforeseen contingencies and pragmatic solicitations, in order to cope with rulers needs to operate severe reversals in governance topology, royal propaganda and in political claims. When the concrete coordinates within which the exercise of rulership takes place are kept in mind and well pondered, then a rather different picture of Aśoka's political experience can be drawn. Consequently, by re-evaluating the structural ambiguity of the pragmatic world that it is referring to, the corpus of Aśoka's inscriptions has to be critically handled, always keeping in mind the many factors involved in concrete acts of rulership.²⁵

Now, leaving the fragile soil of the *vulgata* and venturing into less travelled roads, those seriously interested in the evaluation of the standardized depictions of the 'magnanimous and tolerant Emperor Aśoka' have to expand the limits of their approach to royal policy and governance: by consulting and synoptically employing recent scholarship on semiotics of kingship, topology of governance, normative speech acts, and on ancient systems of communication and trading networks, serious inquirers can profitably go back to question the large amount of materials available on the political and economic history of precolonial South Asia.²⁶

Looking through these new lenses at the systemic scenario in which the Maurya ruler carried on his policy would be enough to overturn Wells' romantic image of the 'Great

Monarch Aśoka' as well as to exhibit the futility of the fragile portrait of Aśoka as the 'champion of tolerance'.²⁷

By doing so, a newly disposed political scenario will be visible and its febrile interactivity would be enough to rapidly dissolve many of the still diffuse archaic prejudices and naïve contrapositions that will thus result groundless and off-track: indeed, when exposed to specialized and critical academic literature, most of the prejudices and dichotomies regarding the separation between 'politics and religion'²⁸ – or between 'religion and violence' –²⁹ will appear clearly untenable as well as logically obsolete.³⁰ Most of the bicentennial old Orientalist's images and representations will lose their plausibility, and even the imperishable portrait of ancient India as the motherland of tolerance and 'non-violence' will fade away.³¹

Keeping in mind these preliminary considerations, I'm now going to concentrate on what has been intended as the crucial event of Aśoka's political career as an ideal and righteous 'tolerant Emperor': the Kalinga war episode, mainly depicted in the *Rock Edict XIII*.³²

Overturning fragile depictions through philology, political history and semiotic of law

The historical specificity of the *vulgata* on Aśoka requires that the overturning of its ideal types start from 'his own words'. Since all the *vulgata*'s figural and conceptual ideal types have been built using Aśoka's edicts portions as clay bricks, its scrutiny needs to begin from those same words engraved on stone, although quite differently explored. In this regard, what recent specialized scholarship is suggesting is that any new reading of the Aśoka's inscriptions have to be synoptically aware of various aspects: edicts' spatial and geopolitical dispositions;³³ the variety of the edicts' addressees; edicts' internal chronology; the political implications behind the sequence of their composition;³⁴ as well as the philological, linguistic and semiotic intricacies presented by edicts' parallel versions.³⁵

Considering the limits of this work, I thought appropriate to focus on one single edict, which, nevertheless, occupies a peculiar place within the entire collection of the inscriptions attributed to our Maurya rules: the edict in question is the *Rock Edict XIII* and appears to be the first of Aśoka's inscriptions accompanied with an explicit chronological referent. According to the edicts' internal chronology, the *Rock Edict XIII* was issued during the 8th year of the kingdom, which started after Aśoka's ascent to the throne, followed by the solemn ritual of the 'pouring down' (*abhiśeka*). Therefore, since the conventional time frame for Aśoka's ruling period (273–232 BCE) has been recently confirmed by the epigraphist Richard Salomon,³⁶ the date of the violent 'conquest of Kalinga' (*kalimḡā vijitā*) to which the edict is referring to could be posit around the 265–264 BCE.

The *Rock Edict XIII* language is a form of Prākṛit, while the scripts used in the five parallel versions are Brāhmī or Kharoṣṭhī.³⁷ As far as its variances in length and shape, in the last decades, archeologists, philologists and epigraphists collected and restored the available versions, setting up a rich and complex critical apparatus.³⁸

Apart from its technicalities, the text of the *Rock Edict XIII* deserves to be studied carefully mainly for its content: it presents a unique case of intertwining between political pragmatism and imaginative sophistication, concrete rulership and semantic idealization.

One of the best examples of the edict's author ability to engage and to reassess previous discourses on normativity and governance is the semantic turn it impressed on the term *dharma* (*dharma* in Sanskrit, *dhamma* in Pāli, but also presented in Prākṛit as *dhaṃma* or *dhrama*, depending from the regional variant adopted by the edicts' scribe, alternatively written as *dhaṃma* in the Brāhmī script of the Gīrnār versions, or as *dhrama* in the Kharoṣṭhī script of the Śhāhbāzgarhī versions). A semantic torsion progressively shaped within the many decades covered by the temporal extension of Aśoka's inscriptions, and that, for its strategic cogency, had an enormous fortune in South Asia, on which I will come back later. With the intent to increase the visibility of the structural role played, within the logical architecture of this edict, by Aśoka's renewed notion of *dharma*, in the following translation of its text I always replace the word 'morality' – originally chosen by Hultzsch – with the term *dhaṃma*. A word that, precisely in this context, I would translated as 'rule of law', in order to recall the 'ideal superintendence domain' in accordance to which the set of practical norms propounded by Aśoka was intended to function as embodied regulatory constrains.

The words of the edict through which the violent event of the 'conquest of Kaliṅga' is strategically epitomized portrait an episode that plays a crucial role within the shaping of the Aśoka's paradigmatic life trajectory that the author of the inscription is putting on stage.

Here they are, following Hultzsch's translation of the Kālsī version of *Rock Edict XIII*.³⁹

[p. 47] [A] When king Dēvānāmpriya Priyadarśin had been anointed eight years, (the country of) the Kaliṅgyas was conquered by (him) [*kaligvā vijitā*].

[B] One hundred and fifty thousand in number were the men who were deported thence [*dīyaḍha-mite pāna-śat(a)śaha(ś)e*], one hundred thousand in number were those who were slain there [*ye (ta)phā apavudhe (śa)ta-(śa)haśa-mite*], and many times as many those who died [*tata hate bahu-tāvatake vā maṭe*].

[C] After that, now that (the country of) the Kaliṅgyas has been taken [*adhunā ladheśa kaligyeśu tīve*],⁴⁰ Dēvānāmpriya (is devoted) to a zealous study of *dhaṃma* [*dhaṃma (vāy)e*], to the love of *dhaṃma* [*dhaṃma-k(ā)matā*], and to the instruction (of people) in *dhaṃma* [*dhaṃmānuśathi cā*].

[D] This is the repentance [*athi anuśaye*] of Dēvānāmpriya on account of his conquest of (the country of) the Kaliṅgyas [*vijin(i)tu kaligyāni*].

[E] For, this is considered very painful and deplorable [*vedaniya-mute g(u)l(u)-mut(e) cā*] by Dēvānāmpriya, that, while one is conquering an unconquered (country) [*avijitam hi vijinamane e tatā*], slaughter, death, and deportation of people (are taking place) there [*vadha vā malane vā apavahe (vā) jan(a)śū*].

[F] But the following is considered even more deplorable [*galu-matatale*] than this by Dēvānāmpriya.

[G] (To) the Brāhmaṇas or Śramaṇas, or other sects or householders [*pāsamḍa gih(i)tha vā*], who are living there, (and) among whom the following are practised: obedience to those who receive high pay [*a(gabhu)t(i)-śuśuśā*], obedience to mother and father [*m(ā)ta-piti-śuśuśā*], obedience to elders [*galu-śuśā*], proper courtesy to friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives, to slaves and servants, (and) firm devotion [*mita-śamthuta-śahāya-nātikeśu dāśa-bha(ta)kaś(i śa)m(y)ā-paṭipati diḍhabhatitā*], – to these then happen injury or slaughter or deportation of (their) beloved ones [*(upa)ghāte vā vadhe vā abhila-tānaṃ vā vinikhamane*].

[H] Or if there are then incurring misfortune [*pāpunāta*] the friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives of those whose affection (for the latter) is undiminished, although they are (themselves) well provided for, this (misfortune) as well becomes an injury to those (persons) themselves [*tata śe (pi) t(ā)namev(ā) upaghāt(e) hoti*].

[I] [During conquests] this is shared [*paṭibhāge*] by all men [*ś(a)va-manu(śāna)ṃ*] and is considered deplorable [*gul(u)-m(a)te*] by Dēvānāmpriya.

[J] There is no country where these (two) classes, (viz.) the Brāhmaṇas and the Śramaṇas, do not exist, except among the Yōnas; and there is no (place) in any country where men are not indeed attached to some sect [*jan(a)padaśi (ya)tā n(a)thi m(a)nuśān(a) ekatalaś(i) pi pāśaśaśi no n(ā)ma paśāde*].

[K] Therefore even the hundredth part or the thousandth part of all those people [p. 48] who were slain, who died, and who were deported at that time [*(ha)te c(ā) maṭ(e) cā (apavudhe cā)*] when (the country of) the Kālīngas was taken [*(ladheśu)*], (would) now be considered very deplorable [*aja gulu-mate vā*] by Dēvānāmpriya.
[...]⁴¹

[L] And Dēvānāmpriya thinks that even (to one) who should wrong (him) [*apakareyati kśamitaviya-mate va*], what can be forgiven is to be forgiven [*yaṃ śako kśamanaye*].

[M] And even (the inhabitants of) the forests which are (included) in the dominions [*vijite bhoti*] of Dēvānāmpriya, even those he pacifies (and) converts [*ta pi anuneti anunijapeti*].

[N] And they are told of the power (to punish them) [*anutape pi ca prabhave*] which Dēvānāmpriya (possesses) in spite of (his) repentance,⁴² in order that they may be ashamed (of their crimes) and may not be killed [*vucati teṣa kiti avatrapeyu na ca (ha)ṃṇeyasu*].
[...]⁴³

[O] ... [For Dēvānāmpriya (Śhāhb.)] desires [*iccati*] towards all beings [*savra-bhuta-na*] ... [abstention from hurting (Śhāhb.)], self-control, impartiality [in (case of) violence (Śhāhb.)], (and) kindness [*akśati sa(m)yamaṃ sama(ca)riyaṃ rabhasiye (Śhāhb.)*].

[P] But this ... [conquest is considered the principal one – *ayi ca mukha-mut(a) vijaye* – (Śhāhb.)] by Dēvānāmpriya, the conquest by *dhamma* [*ye dha(m)ma-vijaye*].

[Q] And this (conquest) has been won repeatedly [*ś(e) ca punā ladhe*] by Dēvānāmpriya both [here] and among all (his) borderers, even as far as at (the distance of) six hundred *yōjanas*, where the Yōna king named Antiyoga (is ruling), and beyond this Antiyoga, (where) four – 4 – kings (are ruling), (viz. the king) named Tulamaya, (the king) named Antekina, (the king) named Makā, (and the king) named Alikyashudala, (and) likewise [*hevamev(ā)*] towards the south, (where) the Chōḍas and Pāṇḍyas (are ruling), as far as Tāmraparṇī.

[R] Likewise [*hevameva*] here in the king's territory, among the Yōnas and Kambōjas, among the Nābhakas and Nābhapaṅktis, among the Bhōjas and Pitinikyas, among the

Andhras and Pāladas, – everywhere (people) are conforming to Dēvānāmpriya's instruction in *dhamma* [(śa)vatā (d)evā(na)ṃpi(ya)śā dhammānu(śa)thi anuvataṃti].

[S] Even those to whom the envoys [*dutā*] of Dēvānāmpriya do not go, having heard [*t(e) pi sutu*] of the duties of *dhamma* [*dh(amma)-vutaṃ*], the ordinances [*v(i)dh(a)na(m)*], (and) the instruction in *dhamma* [*dhammānusa(th)i*] of Dēvānāmpriya, are conforming to *dhamma* and will conform to (it) [*dha(m)ma(m) anuvidhiyaṃ (a)nuvidhiyisaṃ (c)ā*].

[T] This conquest, which has been won by this everywhere [*ye se (la)dhe etakenā hoti savatā*], causes the feeling of satisfaction [*vi[ja]ye piti-lase se*].

[U] Firm becomes this satisfaction [*gadhā sā hoti piti*], (viz.) the satisfaction at the conquest by *dhamma* [*piti dhamm(a)vijayaśi*].

[p. 49]

[V] But this satisfaction is indeed of little (consequence) [*lahukā v(u) kho sā piti*].

[W] Dēvānāmpriya thinks that only the fruits in the other (world) are of great (value) [*pālaṃtikyameve maha-phalā maṃṇaṃ(ti)*].

[X] And for the following purpose has this rescript on *dhamma* been written [*dha(m)ma-lipi likhitā*], (viz.) in order that the sons (and) great-grandsons (who) may be (born) to me [*kiti putā papotā me a(su)*], should not think that a fresh conquest ought to be made [*nava(m) vijay(a) ma vijayataviya maṃṣu śayakaśi no*]; (that), if a conquest [*vi(ja)yaśi*] does please them [*locetu*], they should take pleasure in mercy and light punishments [*khamti cā lahu-damḍatā (cā) locetu tameva cā*]; and (that) they should regard the conquest by *dhamma* as the only (true) conquest [*vijayaṃ manatu ye dhamma-vijaye*].

[Y] This (conquest bears fruit) in this world (and) in the other world [*śe hidalokikya palalokiye*].

[Z] And let all (their) pleasure be the pleasure in exertion [*śavā ca ka nilati hot(u) uyāmalati*].

[AA] For this (bears fruit) in this world (and) in the other world [*sā hi hi(da)lokika pa(la)lokikya*].⁴⁴

When the doxastic suggestions transmitted by the *lectio vulgaris* are left unheard – and then overturned – the scene illustrated in the text of this edict is rather clear: it is a momentum of political transaction within which two controversial and contradicting images of the ruler Aśoka are both still visible and known. Indeed, Aśoka is initially portrayed as the embodiment of conquest and the prototype of tyranny, cruelty, intolerance, despotism, violence, greediness and avidity for power. Then, right after the Kalinga war, the character of Aśoka is metaphorically transposed into a regretting, repentant, deeply moved, benevolent and merciful king. Indeed, the first portion of the edict is evidently meant to show that, although having reigned for 8 years over a large territory – partially inherited from previous emperors – Aśoka is still driven by the thirst for land and empires. An insatiable thirst pushed him towards the eastern coasts of the continent, where he managed to violently conquer the not yet subdued region of Kalinga.⁴⁵ In this way, the dark side of Aśoka is intentionally exhibited by the author of the edict, evidently aware that the negative figuration has to precede its own overturning and disappearance, to which the second portion of the edict is devoted. In order to be semiotically more effective, the construction of the figure of an ideal ruler requires

– as can also be seen in others cultural and historical contexts⁴⁶ – that eulogies and utterances of kingly glory need to be preceded by words of blaming.

Later Buddhist Sanskrit and Pāli doxographies and hagiographies, in fact, explicitly talks about the opposition between ‘Aśoka the cruel’ (*caṇḍāśoka*) and ‘Aśoka the righteous’ (*dharmāśoka*),⁴⁷ in order to sharply illustrate the antinomy of his two mindsets, before and after Aśoka’s acceptance of the ‘tolerant’ *dharma* of the Buddha.⁴⁸

Indeed, if read from the point of view of the semiotics of moral and normative discourses, the edict’s frequent recourse to bipolarities, contrapositions and ambiguities concerning political and moral feelings, has to be considered a crucial characteristic of its logical disposition: in fact, while manifesting political and collective tensions among modes of ruling (the mere ‘conquest’ [*viḥaya*] versus the ‘conquering under the rule of law’ [*dharmaviḥaya*]),⁴⁹ the text of the edict also invokes moral and inner tensions among modes of feeling (i.e. cruelty, arrogance, insolence *versus* tolerance, modesty, sorrow, solidarity).

Seen from such perspectives, the text of the *Rock Edict XIII* could be responsible not only for having introduced in the public discourse the distinction between two forms of conquest, but also for having discursively transformed the mere act of conquest (*viḥaya*) into a more longevous and long-lasting form of conquest (*dharmaviḥaya*), preferable because embedded with higher order legitimacy. If anything, it is this rhetorical advocacy and public display of a ‘meta-political rule of law’ called *dharma* that must be seen as one of Aśoka’s most relevant innovation: a ‘rule of law’ under which supervision operates a variety of subordinate and instrumental means, among which proclaiming repentance and promising tolerance are decisive.

Moreover, to further understand the advances of Aśoka’s political theology and the role played in it by ‘tolerance’, it is necessary to consult the textual materials contained within the vast catalogue of classical South Asia normative sources.⁵⁰ Consulting such sources could enlarge the understanding of the reasons why the term *dharma* was so important for Aśoka to be posited as the political *epicentrum* around which a kingdom has to be ruled.⁵¹ Within the entire corpus of the edicts, in fact, there are numerous newly coined compounds based on the word *dharma*, as in the cases of *dharmaviḥaya*, *dharmalipi*, *dharmaghoṣa*, *dharmānuśiṣṭi*, *dharmānuśaśana*, *dharmasuśruṣa*, *dharmacarāṇa*, *dharmaniyama*, *dharmavāya*, *dharmasīla*, *dharmapratipatti*, *dharmayātrā*, *dharmamaṅgala*, *dharmarati*, *dharmakāmatā*, *dharmadāna*, *dharmasaṃstava*, *dharmasaṃvibhāga*, *dharmasaṃbandha*, *dharmayukta*, *dharmavṛddhi*, *dharmaguṇa*, *dharmamahāmātra*.

When read collectively, it would be evident that in all these compounds the presence of the term *dharma* is meant to semantically re-qualify the meaning of the word that follows. Moreover, since in all these compounds the words that comes after *dharma* denote various kind of actions, such semantic operation has to be seen as a pragmatic and political overturn.

These are the main socio-political motivations and implications that can be drawn from the contents of this edict, quite categorically summarized by Kenneth Robert Norman – a leading philologist and specialized scholar of Aśoka’s inscriptions – at the end of his important paper on the same edict:

It seems to me quite certain, therefore, that the messengers who were sent to the Greek kings were not charged with the propagation of Buddhism, as some scholars have proposed. It would seem clear that they were sent in an attempt to persuade the rulers, probably despotic rulers, of the neighbouring states that they too should give up their desire for conquest (perhaps – we may suspect – of parts of Aśoka's territory) by war, and should try to institute the reign of security, self-restraint, impartiality and gentleness, based upon the principles of Aśoka's *dhamma*. In these circumstances, to talk, as some do, about the Aśokan missionary expansion of Buddhism among the Greeks, seems to me to be a mistake.⁵²

The close reading of Aśoka's edicts definitely testify the mastery on political matters of its author, which had a rather lucid understanding of the governance utility played by blaming and praising biopolitical devices. That said, Aśoka's convictions, ideals, notions and proposals on governance and collective policy – although reputed paradigmatic – could be seen as worthy of scholarly attention only when, and if, corroborated with accurate intertextual analysis and accompanied with historically attested evidence connected to their efficacy. When there are no other proofs rather than the mere literary evidence furnished by Aśoka's edicts corpus itself, such ideals ideas should be treated for what they are, mere and fragile words.

Last fragile words on words' fragility

In the initial paragraphs of this work I have extensively quoted from authors that depicted and promoted an idealized Aśoka willing to convince their readers that the greatness of his figure and of his ideals has to be reputed, *de jure*, out of discussion. Most of these authors, animated by a rather dogmatic attitude, went on repeating for decades the *ipsissima verba* of Wells' formula, according to which, since the ruler Aśoka *was* a paradigmatic example of concrete 'tolerance', then Aśoka *is* a 'Great Emperor' and has to be celebrated and morally praised.⁵³ Such esteemed authors were all doxastically involved into the ritual repetition of words and syllogisms reputed fertile, but that appears rather fragile as soon as they are read in contrast with the wording of the edicts itself.

Nevertheless, although fragile, words have the power to firmly tie one thing to another. Through words, something can also be taken from a remote past and combined with something present. By their being acoustic vehicles, words are transposable idealized images.

It is through the sound of words, in fact, that ideals, concepts, notions, images and figures from distant times and places can travel abroad, for centuries: the 'tolerance' of Aśoka and his *dharma* has been named and *abstracted* from ancient India in order to be *concretely* inserted within post-independence politics or postcolonial academic discourses. Within these discourses the words 'tolerance', '*dharma*', 'Aśoka' and 'ancient India', although constituted by conventional semiotic idealization – and therefore extremely fragile – do not appear for what they were. For many of those who participated in such discourses, words like 'tolerance', '*dharma*', 'Aśoka', and 'ancient India' were all intended as referring to factual and concrete historical realities. Very few, indeed, perceived that 'tolerance', '*dharma*', 'Aśoka', and 'ancient India' were *all* prescriptive

idealized images, *all* resulting salients and due to the efficacious blending of dialectical arbitrary abstractions, pragmatic reifications, and performative claims.⁵⁴

But the persuasive power of such ‘eloquent’ and ‘insistent images’ should not be naively confined to the cultural and historical domains here explored to make my argument:⁵⁵ the same powerful cognitive processes and procedures are in action within all those contexts in which clusters of mere wordy depictions are disposed and meant to function as operational acts of identification. The same, in fact, can be seen when words like ‘non-violence’, ‘*satyāgraha*’, ‘Gandhi’ and ‘modern India’ – or also ‘tolerance’, ‘*Dulce bellum inexpertis*’, ‘Erasmus of Rotterdam’ and ‘early modern Europe’,⁵⁶ and so on⁵⁷ – are clustered together to condense into a minimum space the performative power of word-images eloquence.

Seen in this perspective, the otherwise merely ‘antiquarian’ experience of reading an exotic Prākṛit inscription, can function as a profitable space for serious intellectual self-questioning and self-testing: while exploring the semiotics and political efficacy of Aśoka’s figuration, we can also ask to ourselves how much we are aware of the fact that semiotic processes and trajectories transforms the status of the things perceived just by stating and declaring words about their ‘substantial conditions’. Or, less abstractly, are we really able to firmly establish the border line which separates – with absolute clarity and with no traces of ambiguity – tolerance from intolerance, *vijaya* from *dharma-vijaya*, *himsā* from *ahimsā*, *satya* from *asatya*, *dharma* from *adharma*, and, finally – assuming that *śoka* stand for pain, deep distress, strong concern, and sorrow – *śoka* from *aśoka*?⁵⁸

Fortunately, having to be critical, scholarship must be bold and thoughtful – as well as self-reflexive – deeply pondering conceptual differences without ever disjoining them from pragmatic differentiation procedures: is this, thanks to the *devatā* of immanence, the only antidote to the alluring temptation to sell tolerance by the pound.

Notes

1. Since the 1909 volume of Vincent A. Smith, the figure of Aśoka has been strongly bounded with the idea of ‘tolerance’, therefore becoming the protagonist of a very long-lasting *vulgata*. See V. A. Smith, *Asoka. The Buddhist Emperor of India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).
2. See S. S. Gupta, *Ashoka. The Great and Compassionate King* (Delhi: Penguin, 2009).
3. See B. Rich, *To Uphold the World. The Message of Ashoka and Kautilya for the 21st Century* (Delhi: Viking, 2008).
4. See W. T. Ross, *H.G. Wells’ World Reborn. The Outline of History and its Companions* (New York: Susquehanna University Press, 2002).
5. The intentions that moved Wells’ setting of his millennia extended historiographical scene are clearly stated from the first paragraph of the *Introduction*. See H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History. Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1921) (1st ed., 1920), v.
6. See Wells, *The Outline of History*, vii–viii.
7. Wells, *The Outline of History*, 371.
8. Wells, *The Outline of History*, 371.
9. Wells, *The Outline of History*, 369.

10. See Dalai Lama, "Afterword," in *To Uphold the World. A Call for a New Global Ethic from Ancient India*, ed. B. Rich (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 183–4.
11. Wells, *The Outline of History*, 370–71.
12. See R. Amossy, "La notion de stéréotype dans la réflexion contemporaine," *Littérature* 73, no. 1 (1989): 29–46.
13. Wells, *The Outline of History* (3rd ed., revised and rearranged by author [first ed. 1920]), 371.
14. See J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1946), 132–5. See also S. Gopal and U. Iyengar, ed. *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).
15. See A. Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," *Alternatives* 13 (1988): 171–200 (in part. pp. 188, 192).
16. A. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian. Writings On Indian History, Culture And Identity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), xxii–xiii.
17. See A. Sen, *La democrazia degli altri. Perché la libertà non è una invenzione dell'Occidente* (Milano: Mondadori, 2004), 24–25.
18. A. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian. Writings On Indian History, Culture And Identity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 46–47.
19. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 136.
20. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 12.
21. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 284.
22. J. S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka. A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008) (rist. ed. 1989), 4.
23. See V. I. Kalyanov, "On Kṛṣṇa's diplomatics in the *Mahābhārata*," *Indologica Taurinensia* 7 (1979): 299–308; V. I. Kalyanov, "On the military code of honour in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Amṛtadhārā. Prof. R.N. Dandekar Felicitation Volume*, ed. S. D. Joshi (Delhi: Ajanta, 1984), 00–00.
24. See U. Singh, *Political Violence in Ancient India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), P. Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India. Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); R. Salomon, "Ancient India: Peace Within and War Without," in *War and Peace in the Ancient World, The Ancient World: Comparative Histories*, ed. K. Raaflaub (New York: Malden, 2007), 53–65.
25. See N. Fogle, *The Spatial Logic of Social Struggle. A Bourdieuan Topology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011).
26. See F. Squarcini, Pāṣaṇḍin, Vaitaṇḍika, Vedanindaka and Nāstika. "On Criticism, Dissenters and Polemics and the South Asian Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction," *Orientalia Suecana*, LX (2011): 101–115.
27. See F. Squarcini, *La logica della tolleranza di Aśoka e la genealogia di una nuova politica religiosa, a lato del mondo ellenistico*, in *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico. Poteri e indirizzi, forme del controllo, idee e prassi di tolleranza*, ed. G. A. Cecconi and C. Gabrielli (a cura di) (Bari: Edipuglia, 2011), 67–96.
28. See I. Strenski, *Why Politics Can't be freed from Religion* (London: Blackwell, 2010); G. Agamben, *Il regno e la gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo. Homo sacer vol. 2.2* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2007).
29. See M. Juergensmeyer, M. Kitts and M. Jerryson, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); M. Juergensmeyer and

- M. Kitts, ed. *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
30. See Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion. A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
31. See U. Singh, *Political Violence in Ancient India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); R. C. Tripathi and P. Singh, ed. *Perspectives on Violence and Othering in India* (Delhi: Springer, 2016); A. Sanderson, "Tolerance, Exclusivity, Inclusivity, and Persecution in Indian Religion During the Early Mediaeval Period," in *Honoris Causa. Essays in Honour of Aweek Sarkar*, ed. J. Makinson (Washington: Allen Lane, 2015), 155–224; K. Roy, *Hinduism and the Ethics of Warfare in South Asia. From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); R. Aquil and K. Roy, ed. *Warfare, Religion, and Society in Indian History* (Delhi: Manohar, 2012); J. L. Whitaker, *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength. Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
32. Within the all corpus of Aśoka's inscription, the reference to the violent conquest of the coastal region of Kālīṅga seems to appear only in the parallel versions – that is, Gīrnār, Kālsī, Yerraguḍi, Shāhbāzgarhī, Mānsehrā – of the RE XIII.
33. See, D. K. Chakrabarti, *Royal Messages by the Wayside. Historical Geography of the Asokan Edicts* (Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2011); H. Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts. A Source-Book With Bibliography* (Mainz: Monographien zur indischen Archäologie, 2006).
34. See H. Prabha Ray, "Archeology and Aśoka. Defining the Empire," in *Reimagining Asoka. Memory and History*, eds. P. Olivelle, J. Leoshko, H. Prabha Ray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65–92.
35. See K. R. Norman, "The Languages of the Composition and Transmission of the Aśokan Inscriptions," in *Reimagining Asoka. Memory and History*, eds. P. Olivelle, J. Leoshko and H. Prabha Ray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 38–62.
36. See R. Salomon, "Aśoka and the 'Epigraphic Habit' in India," in *Aśoka in History and Historical Memory*, ed. P. Olivelle (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009), 48.
37. See vers. Gīrnār (from Gujrat peninsula [in Brāhmī script]); vers. Kālsī (from Delhi area [in Brāhmī script]); vers. Yerraguḍi (from south Andhra [in Brāhmī script]); vers. Shāhbāzgarhī (from north Gandhara [in Kharoṣṭhī script]); vers. Mānsehrā (from north Gandhara [in Kharoṣṭhī script]).
38. See N. P. Rastogi, *Inscriptions of Aśoka* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1990); U. Schneider, *Die Grossen Felsen-Edikte Ashokas* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978) (in part., pp. 104–144, for a philological reconstruction of prototypes). See also, P. K. Andersen, *Studies in the Minor Rock Edicts of Aśoka. I. Critical Edition* (Freiburg, 1990).
39. What is following is the entire text of the Kālsī version of RE XIII, chosen for its completeness in terms of words, with the exception of the [L], [M], [N] portions, here taken from Shāhbāzgarhī version. For compliance reasons with the edition of the original text of the edict, the translation as well as the Prākṛit text's insertions here presented are both from E. J. T. Hultsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum. Vol. I. Inscriptions of Asoka* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925). Nevertheless, I had closely consulted K. R. Norman, "Aśoka's Thirteenth Rock Edict," in *Indologica Taurinensia*, 23–24 (1997–1998), 459–84; Schneider, *Die Grossen* (in part., pp. 116–119, for the philological reconstruction of edict's possible prototype); D. C. Sircar, *Aśokan Studies* (Calcutta: Indian Museum, 1979), 30–36.
40. See also [K], [Q] and [T] *infra* for the term *ladha*, 'gained', 'conquest', 'achieved'.

41. Since in Kālsī version [L], [M], [N], are *omissis*, what follows are the translation of the RE XIII in the Śhāhbāzgarhi version. See Hultzsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, 69.
42. To be read, synoptically, with *supra* [D] for *athi anuśaye*, and with *infra* [R] and [S] for *dhammānu(śa)thi*.
43. To complete the fragmented texts also of [O] and [P] of the Kālsī version, I have inserted portions from Hultzsch's translation of Śhāhbāzgarhi version, portions marked as (Śhāhb.).
44. Hultzsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, 47–49 (with minor modifications and insertion, in square brackets, of the Prākṛit originals).
45. In *Mahāvamsa*, 5.20 it is said that Aśoka, in order to remain as the only candidate at the succession to his father, the emperor Bindusāra, managed to kill 99 of his 100 brothers. Further details of Aśoka's cruelty and violent behaviour are presented in the *Aśokāvadāna*. See S. Mukhopadhyaya ed. *The Aśokāvadāna. Sanskrit text compared with Chinese Versions* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1963), 42–43, 45 (on violences before his acceptance of Buddha's *dharma*); 52, 67–68, 122 (on violences even after his acceptance of Buddha's *dharma*).
46. To publicly denounce previous faults and misdeeds seems to be rather effective political propaganda, as in the case of Costantine (306–37 d.C.). See R. Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 305). Furthermore, T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius. Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
47. See the pāli *Mahāvamsa*, 5.189 (*caṇḍāsoko ti nāyittha pure pāpena kammunā / dhammāsoko ti nāyittha pacchā puññena kammunā* |). Similar picture is present in the sanskrit *Dīvyāvadāna*, 381.
48. Another long-lasting stereotype. See M. Jerryson, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road. Buddhism, Politics, and Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); M. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury. Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); M. Jurgenmayer and M. Jerryson, ed. *Buddhist Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); M. Zimmermann, ed. *Buddhism and Violence* (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006).
49. See P. Olivelle, "Aśoka's Inscriptions as Text and Ideology," In *Reimagining Asoka. Memory and History*, eds. P. Olivelle, J. Leoshko and H. Prabha Ray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 157–83.
50. See P. Olivelle and D. R. Davis, ed. *Hindu Law. A New History of Dharmaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
51. Another clear example is the *Pillar Edict*, VII (Delhi-Toprā), an edict redacted when Aśoka was at the 'XXVII year of the kingdom' and which, within its 43 lines of text, presents 30 times the term *dhamma* in compounds. See also P. Olivelle, "The Semantic History of Dharma. The Middle and Late Vedic Periods," In *Dharma. Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History*, ed. P. Olivelle (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009), 71–89; Schneider, *Die Grossen*, 156–60 (par. 'Exkurs: Aśokas Dhamma-Belehrungen').
52. Norman, *Aśoka's Thirteenth*, 483.
53. M. Deeg, "Aśoka: Model Ruler Without a Name?," In *Reimagining Aśoka. Memory and History*, eds. P. Olivelle, J. Leoshko and H. Prabha Ray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 362–79.
54. See K. Lawlor, *Assurance. An Austinian view of Knowledge and Knowledge Claims* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

55. See E. Tabakowska, C. Ljungberg and O. Fischer, ed. *Insistent Images* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007); M. E. Hocks and M. R. Kendrick, ed. *Eloquent Images. Word and Image in the Age of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT, 2003). C. Gauker, *Words and Images. An Essay on the Origin of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); V. Plesch, J. Baetens and C. MacLeod, ed. *Efficacité/Efficacy. How to Do Things with Words and Images?* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011); R. C. Homem and M. de Fátima Lambert, ed. *Writing and Seeing. Essays on Word and Image* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).
56. Often depicted as an ideal ‘pacifist’ (Erasmus, *De Sarcienda Ecclesiae Concordia*, 1533), Erasmus of Rotterdam was not so naïve to ignore the pragmatic of war (Erasmus, *De Bello Turcico*, 1530).
57. This list could proceed *ad libitum*, referring to figures like Constantine, Akbar, Locke, Voltaire, Tocqueville, Nehru, etc.
58. After remarking the degree of synonymy of the terms *aśoka* and *viśoka* – where the last could stand for ‘one deprived from sorrow’ (the couple *aśoka/viśoka* is already used – while referring to the *aśoka* tree – in *Mahābhārata*, 3.61.99; 3.61.102; *Rāmāyaṇa*, 3.60.17) – it is relevant to mention here that the Sanskrit term *aśoka* can be intended as referring to someone ‘which is sorrowless’ or that ‘has no sorrows [for him]’, but also as indicating someone that ‘brings no sorrows [to others]’, and even as pointing to someone ‘who has no sorrow/mercy [for others]’ and therefore ‘merciless’.