

CHAPTER 2

Kings, Farmers and Towns

CBSE Class 12 · History · Themes in Indian
History I · Chapter 2

CBSE · History · Class 12

WHAT THIS CHAPTER DOES

A

Explain how Prinsep deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi and linked 'Piyadassi' to Asoka.

B

Describe Mauryan administration and the five political centres with specific names.

Boards prep that builds confidence, not anxiety.

TODAY'S MISSION

Today's mission

- 1 Explain how Prinsep deciphered Brahmi and Kharosthi and linked 'Piyadassi' to Asoka.
- 2 Describe Mauryan administration and the five political centres with specific names.
- 3 Distinguish the new notions of kingship under the Kushanas and Satavahanas.
- 4 Score 8/10 marks on this chapter's slice of the board paper.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Why this chapter matters

- 1 8-10 marks every CBSE board paper — among the highest-weight chapters in Class 12 History.
- 2 Introduces WRITTEN evidence (inscriptions, coins) and the skill of reading them critically.
- 3 Source-based questions on Asokan edicts and Megasthenes recur annually — practise the template.

TOPIC

A

Prinsep & the inscriptions

TOPIC

How we read the early states

PRINSEP & PIYADASSI

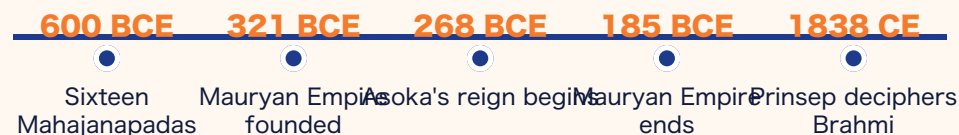
In 1838 JAMES PRINSEP, an official of the East India Company's mint in Bengal, deciphered the

TYPES OF INSCRIPTIONS

Inscriptions of this period appear on **STONE PILLARS, ROCK SURFACES, CAVE WALLS,**

WHAT INSCRIPTIONS REVEAL

Inscriptions are the backbone of political history for c. 600 BCE - 600 CE. Asoka's edicts reveal his



TOPIC

B

The earliest states — Mahajanapadas & Magadha

TOPIC

From sixteen states to one dominant kingdom

SIXTEEN MAHAJANAPADAS

By the sixth century BCE, Buddhist and Jaina texts list SIXTEEN MAHAJANAPADAS ('great realms') across northern India — among them Magadha, Kosala, Vajji, Gandhara and Avanti. Most were MONARCHIES, but some, like the VAJJI confederacy with its

THE RULE OF VARIED STATES

From around the sixth century BCE, brahmanical texts known as the DHARMASUTRAS laid down NORMS for rulers, ideally kshatriyas, who were expected to collect taxes and tribute and protect their subjects. Standing ARMIES and bureaucracies began to

WHY MAGADHA ROSE

Among the mahajanapadas, MAGADHA (in present-day Bihar) became the most powerful between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. Historians point to several advantages: extremely FERTILE land in the Ganga plains; rich IRON ORE mines that supplied tools and weapons;

CAPITALS OF MAGADHA

The early capital of Magadha was RAJAGAHA (modern Rajgir), a town ringed by hills and protected by stone fortifications — its name means 'house of the king'. In the fourth century BCE the capital shifted to PATALIPUTRA (modern Patna), strategically located at the meeting of important

TOPIC

C

An early empire — the Mauryas

THEOREM · LOAD-BEARING RESULT

The Mauryan Empire (c. 321-185 BCE)



The Mauryan Empire was the first large empire in the subcontinent, founded by CHANDRAGUPTA MAURYA and reaching its height under his grandson ASOKA. It was administered from a principal capital and four provincial centres, and is known to us from an unusually rich set of sources.

STATEMENT

Sources: the ARTHASHASTRA (statecraft, attributed to Kautilya/Chanakya); MEGASTHENES' Indica (account of the Greek ambassador to Chandragupta); ASOKAN

WHY THIS MATTERS

- The empire matters because it shows how a single authority tried to hold together regions of very different climate, language and economy — using communication routes, a large army, an administrative network and, under Asoka, the unifying ideology of dhamma.

WATCH OUT FOR

NOTE Don't treat the empire as uniformly and tightly controlled everywhere. Administration was probably strongest along routes and near the five centres, and lighter in remote areas. State this nuance for top marks.

WORKED EXAMPLE

5 pillars of how the Mauryas ruled

- 1** FIVE POLITICAL CENTRES: Pataliputra (capital) + Taxila + Ujjayini + Tosali + Suvarnagiri — Asokan inscriptions cluster near all five.
- 2** SOURCES: Arthashastra (Kautilya) on statecraft + Megasthenes' Indica + Asoka's edicts give a uniquely detailed picture.
- 3** MILITARY: Megasthenes describes a committee of SIX SUB-COMMITTEES coordinating navy, transport, infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants.
- 4** DHAMMA: an ethical code spread after the Kalinga war by DHAMMA MAHAMATTAS — moral integration of a diverse empire (NOT Buddhism as a religion).
- 5** COMMUNICATION & CONTROL: land and riverine routes linked the centres; control was strongest along routes, lighter in remote regions.

TOPIC

D

New notions of kingship

TOPIC

How later kings projected power

AFTER THE MAURYAS

After the Mauryan Empire declined around 185 BCE, no single power dominated the whole subcontinent for several centuries. Instead, a series of regional kingdoms arose, and their rulers EXPERIMENTED with new ways of claiming authority. Two of the most important were the

KUSHANA DIVINE KINGSHIP

The KUSHANAS linked kingship with DIVINITY. They installed COLOSSAL STATUES of their rulers in special shrines — at MAT near Mathura (in India) and at SURKH KOTAL (in Afghanistan) — suggesting that the king was regarded as god-like and worthy of worship. Many Kushana

KUSHANA COINAGE

The Kushanas were also the first to issue EXTENSIVE GOLD COINAGE in the subcontinent. Their coins carried the IMAGE and name of the ruler on one side and a wide range of DEITIES — Indian, Greek, Iranian and others — on the reverse. Circulating along long-distance trade routes from Central Asia

THE SATAVAHANAS

The SATAVAHANAS of the Deccan projected power differently. They emphasised connections to VEDIC sacrifice and lineage; rulers such as GAUTAMIPUTRA SATAKARNI were celebrated in inscriptions — notably one composed by his mother GAUTAMI BALASHRI — as destroyers of enemies

TOPIC

E

A changing countryside

TOPIC

Farming, irrigation and land grants

STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH

Between 600 BCE and 600 CE, agricultural output rose through several STRATEGIES. The most important was the spread of PLOUGH AGRICULTURE in the fertile, well-watered Ganga and Kaveri valleys, using the IRON-TIPPED PLOUGHSHARE which turned the soil far more effectively than earlier

IRRIGATION

A second strategy was IRRIGATION, which let cultivators grow crops independent of erratic rainfall. WELLS, TANKS and, less commonly, CANALS were built — sometimes by individuals, sometimes by communities or kings, who advertised such works in inscriptions as acts of merit. The

DIFFERENCES IN THE VILLAGE

Agrarian growth deepened SOCIAL DIFFERENCES in the countryside. At the top were large landholders and village heads, often called GAHAPATIS (householders), who controlled land, labour and produce. Below them were small peasant proprietors, and at the

LAND GRANTS

From the early centuries CE, kings increasingly made LAND GRANTS, recorded on COPPER PLATES, to brahmanas and religious institutions. These grants often transferred the king's REVENUE and sometimes ADMINISTRATIVE rights over the granted land. Historians DEBATE their effect: some argue

TOPIC

F

Towns, trade and coins

TOPIC

Urban centres, guilds and money

TOWNS

From the sixth century BCE, TOWNS grew up across the subcontinent — many of them political capitals like Pataliputra, Rajagriha, Mathura and Ujjayini, others centres of trade, craft or pilgrimage. Texts list EIGHT GREAT TOWNS (the ashtamahanagaras). Towns housed rulers, officials, craftsmen,

CRAFT & GUILDS

Urban production was organised partly through GUILDS, known as SHRENIS or NIGAMAS — associations of craftsmen or merchants who shared a trade. Guilds procured raw materials, regulated production and the sale of finished goods, and in some cases acted almost like banks, accepting

TRADE ROUTES

An expanding economy was knit together by TRADE along land and water routes. Overland, goods moved through the Ganga valley, across the northwest into Central Asia (the SILK ROUTE) and through the Deccan. By sea, ships sailed across the Arabian Sea to West Asia, the Mediterranean and East

COINAGE & NUMISMATICS

The growth of trade is mirrored in COINAGE, the study of which is called NUMISMATICS. The EARLIEST coins were PUNCH-MARKED COINS — mostly of SILVER, also copper — stamped with symbols and in circulation from about the sixth century BCE. The first widespread GOLD coins were issued

TOPIC

G

Back to basics — how we know

THEOREM · LOAD-BEARING RESULT

Deciphering Inscriptions & Their Limits



Reading the inscriptions of c. 600 BCE - 600 CE required first **DECIPHERING** their scripts. Even once read, inscriptional evidence has clear **LIMITS** that historians must keep in mind.

STATEMENT

DECIPHERMENT: James Prinsep deciphered **BRAHMI** and **KHAROSTHI** in 1838 and identified the inscriptions' Devanampiya Piyadassi with Asoka. **LIMITS:** (1) technical — letters faintly engraved,

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Understanding both decipherment and limits teaches the core historical skill of this chapter: written sources are valuable but **PARTIAL**, and must be combined with coins, texts and archaeology.

WATCH OUT FOR

NOTE When asked for limits, give the **FULL** range (technical + linguistic + content + survival). A common error is to stop at 'letters are damaged' and miss that everyday life was rarely recorded at all.

TOPIC

Asoka's name in his own inscriptions

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Asoka's inscriptions call him 'Asoka'.

✓ **CORRECT** Asoka's own inscriptions almost never use the name 'Asoka'. He is referred to as 'DEVANAMPIYA' (Beloved of the Gods) and 'PIYADASSI' (Pleasant to behold). It was James Prinsep's discovery in 1838 that 'Piyadassi' = Asoka of the Buddhist texts that linked the inscriptions to the famous Mauryan king.

TOPIC

Dhamma is Buddhism

TRAP → TRUTH

- × **MISTAKE** Asoka's dhamma was simply Buddhism imposed on the empire.
- ✓ **CORRECT** DHAMMA was NOT Buddhism as a religion. It was a broad set of ETHICAL PRINCIPLES — respect for elders, kindness to servants and slaves, generosity, non-violence, religious tolerance — meant to hold a diverse empire together. Asoka appointed DHAMMA MAHAMATTAS (special officers) to spread it. It was non-sectarian moral conduct, not conversion to Buddhism.

TOPIC

Mauryan capital

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** The Mauryan Empire was ruled from a single capital.

✓ **CORRECT** There was a principal capital — PATALIPUTRA — but the empire was administered through FIVE MAJOR POLITICAL CENTRES: Pataliputra (capital) plus the provincial centres of Taxila, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri. The provinces had distinct climates, languages and terrains, so a single capital could not control them all directly.

TOPIC

Inscriptions tell the whole story

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Inscriptions give us a complete and reliable history.

✓ **CORRECT** Inscriptional evidence has SERIOUS LIMITS: (1) technical — letters are faintly engraved, damaged or missing; (2) not all words are understood and meanings are debated; (3) routine/everyday matters were rarely inscribed — inscriptions record the grand and durable, biased toward elites/kings; (4) many inscriptions have not survived or been found. So they capture only a fraction of the past.

TOPIC

Megasthenes wrote the Arthashastra

TRAP → TRUTH

- × **MISTAKE** Megasthenes and Kautilya wrote the same book.
- ✓ **CORRECT** TWO DIFFERENT sources. The ARTHASHASTRA is a Sanskrit treatise on statecraft attributed to KAUTILYA (Chanakya), advisor to Chandragupta Maurya. The INDICA is an account written by MEGASTHENES, the Greek ambassador sent by Seleucus Nicator to Chandragupta's court — it survives only in fragments quoted by later Greek writers.

TOPIC

Coinage was always gold

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Ancient Indian coins were mainly gold from the start.

✓ **CORRECT** The EARLIEST coins (c. 6th century BCE) were PUNCH-MARKED COINS, mostly of SILVER (and copper), stamped with symbols. The first widespread GOLD coins were issued by the KUSHANAS (1st century CE). The GUPTAS later issued some of the most spectacular gold coins. So coinage evolved silver-punch-marked → Kushana gold → Gupta gold.

TOPIC

Land grants strengthened the king

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Land grants to brahmanas made the king more powerful.

✓ **CORRECT** Land grants (recorded on copper plates) gave away the king's REVENUE and often ADMINISTRATIVE rights over the granted village to brahmanas or religious institutions. Some historians argue this WEAKENED central authority by creating powerful local lords; others see it as the king extending control into new agrarian areas. The interpretation is DEBATED — state both views in the exam.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

8-mark: 'Describe the administration of the Mauryan Empire / explain the five political

1 SCALE + CAPITAL 1 m

The Mauryan Empire (c. 321-185 BCE) was the first large empire in the subcontinent, founded by Chandragupta Maurya. Its principal capital was PATALIPUTRA (modern Patna), strategically placed at the confluence of rivers in Magadha.

2 FIVE POLITICAL CENTRES 2 m

Administration ran through FIVE MAJOR POLITICAL CENTRES: the capital Pataliputra and four provincial centres — TAXILA and UJJAYINI (on important long-distance trade routes), TOSALI (in the east, Kalinga region) and SUVARNAGIRI (literally 'golden mountain', in the south, near gold mines). Asokan inscriptions are found near all five, showing the empire's reach.

3 COMMUNICATION + CONTROL 2 m

Holding such a vast, varied territory required a system of COMMUNICATION along land and riverine routes, MILITARY mobility, and a network of officials. Megasthenes describes a committee of six sub-committees coordinating military activity (navy, transport, infantry, cavalry, chariots, elephants), indicating sophisticated organisation.

4 DHAMMA + OFFICIALS 2 m

After the Kalinga war, Asoka propagated DHAMMA — a code of ethical conduct — and appointed DHAMMA MAHAMATTAS to spread it across the provinces. This was a tool of moral integration that supplemented coercive administration, helping bind a diverse population.

5 CONCLUSION 1 m

The combination of a strong capital, five regional centres, organised communication and the unifying ideology of dhamma made the Mauryan administration remarkably effective for its time — though scholars debate how uniformly central control actually reached every corner.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

8-mark: 'Explain the new notions of kingship that emerged after the Mauryas.'

- 1 CONTEXT**
1 m
After the Mauryan decline (c. 185 BCE), new ruling houses — notably the KUSHANAS (c. 1st century BCE - 1st century CE) in the northwest and the SATAVAHANAS in the Deccan — experimented with NEW WAYS of projecting royal power.
- 2 KUSHANA DIVINE KINGSHIP**
2 m
The KUSHANAS associated kingship with DIVINITY. Colossal statues of Kushana rulers were installed in shrines (e.g. at Mat near Mathura and at Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan), suggesting the king was treated as god-like. Many Kushana kings adopted the title 'DEVAPUTRA' (son of god), borrowed partly from Chinese ideas of the divine ruler.
- 3 KUSHANA COINAGE AS PROPAGANDA**
2 m
The Kushanas issued the first extensive GOLD COINAGE in the subcontinent, depicting rulers alongside a range of deities (Indian, Greek, Iranian). High-value gold coins broadcast royal grandeur and divine sanction across long-distance trade networks.
- 4 SATAVAHANA IDEAS**
2 m
The SATAVAHANAS, by contrast, emphasised connection to Vedic sacrifice and lineage. Some rulers, like Gautamiputra Satakarni, were described in inscriptions (e.g. by his mother Gautami Balashri) in grand terms; uniquely, they were sometimes identified through METRONYMICS (named after their mothers), though succession was patrilineal.
- 5 CONCLUSION**
1 m
Thus post-Mauryan kingship moved towards claims of DIVINE or SEMI-DIVINE status, projected through monumental statues, high-value coinage and elaborate inscriptions — a shift from the Mauryan ideal of the king as upholder of dharma.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

5-mark: 'What are the limitations of inscriptional evidence?' (or source-based on decipherment).

1 **TECHNICAL + LINGUISTIC LIMITS**
2 m

TECHNICAL: letters are sometimes faintly engraved, damaged, weathered or missing, so reconstruction is uncertain. **LINGUISTIC:** the exact meaning of some words is debated, and the same word can mean different things in different places and times — so even a fully readable inscription can be hard to interpret.

2 **CONTENT BIAS + SURVIVAL**
2 m

CONTENT BIAS: inscriptions record what those who commissioned them thought important and durable — grand royal acts, donations, conquests — while routine everyday life (ordinary farming, women's work, the poor) was rarely inscribed. **SURVIVAL BIAS:** many inscriptions have perished or not yet been discovered, so what survives is only a fraction.

3 **IMPLICATION**
1 m

Therefore historians treat inscriptions as ONE source among many, cross-checking them against texts, coins and archaeology rather than taking them as a complete record.

PYQ PATTERNS



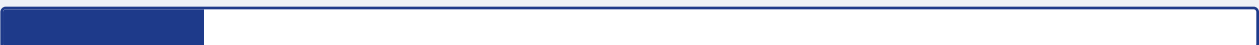


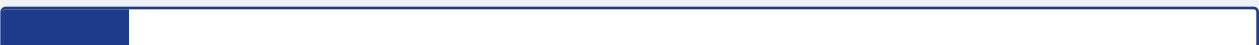


Top PYQ patterns to drill

#1	Describe the administration of the Mauryan Empire / the importance of the five political centres. (8 marks)	Annual
#2	Source-based: read an Asokan edict / Arthashastra extract / Megasthenes passage; answer 3 sub-questions. (5-10 marks)	Annual
#3	Explain the new notions of kingship that emerged after the Mauryas (Kushanas, Satavahanas). (8 marks)	2018, 2020, 2023
#4	How were inscriptions deciphered? OR What are the limitations of inscripational evidence? (3-5 marks)	Most years
#5	Describe the changes in the countryside (agriculture, land grants) between 600 BCE and 600 CE. (5-8 marks)	2019, 2021, 2022

MARKS DISTRIBUTION

10-year marks distribution

10-YEAR PYQ MARKS DISTRIBUTION

Mauryan administration + five political centres + dhamma		30%
Source-based passage on Asokan edict / Arthashastra / Megasthenes		24%
New notions of kingship (Kushanas, Satavahanas, divine kingship)		16%
A changing countryside — plough, irrigation, land grants		16%
Towns and trade — guilds, coinage, eight great towns		14%
Prinsep + decipherment of Brahmi/Kharosthi		10%
Limits of inscriptional evidence		10%
Mahajanapadas + rise of Magadha		10%

RECAP · MEMORISE THESE

Recap

1 States & empire — c. 600 BCE - 600 CE: sixteen Mahajanapadas → Magadha rises → Mauryan Empire (Chandragupta, Asoka, five political centres, dhamma).

2 Kingship, countryside, towns — Post-Mauryan divine kingship (Kushana 'Devaputra' + gold coins; Satavahana metronymics). Iron plough + irrigation + land grants. Towns, guilds, coinage (punch-marked → Kushana/Gupta gold).

3 How we know — Prinsep deciphered Brahmi/Kharosthi (1838); Piyadassi = Asoka. Inscriptions are vital but LIMITED — technical, linguistic, content and survival biases.

WHAT'S NEXT

What's next

- Chapter 3 — Kinship, Caste and Class (early societies, c. 600 BCE - 600 CE).
- Sit the 15-MCQ Quick Drill under a 20-min timer.
- Then the full Board-Pattern Paper — 30 marks.

You've mastered early states and economies.

Mauryas, kingship, trade, inscriptions — now prove it.

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