

# Palaeography

There exists no standard terminology for the classification of the writing styles of Gupta and early post-Gupta Mālava. Before acceptable terms can be established, an overarching palaeographic analysis needs to be carried out. Early giants such as Georg Bühler have done much of the groundwork for this, while A. H. Dani has added copious detail but was reluctant to coin a nomenclature for script varieties beyond a separation of a Malwa, Mathurā and Kauśāmbī style. Sushil K. Bose (1938, 325–32) has presented a detailed palaeographic study of inscriptions from Mandsaur, noting (p. 325) that the Malwa region was “scornfully overlooked” from a palaeographic point of view, but he too preferred to retain the basic distinction of “northern” versus “southern” scripts and suggested a revision of the criteria for categorisation rather than the introduction of new categories. It is my hope that the burgeoning of electronic resources such as Siddham, IndoSkript and READ<sup>9</sup> will in the near future facilitate further analysis and, ultimately, a more accurate and meaningful classification.

For the present time, however, I have chosen to apply a simplistic and somewhat subjective classification of the palaeography of the inscriptions treated in this volume, which fall quite naturally into two basic types of script within the generic category of Mālavan Late Brāhmī. I provisionally name these the rounded and the angular variety on the basis of the generic shape of characters, which is apparent at a glance. The rounded form would be classified as a specimen of the western variety of the southern alphabets by Bühler (1896, 61–62, 1904, 62–64) and as subtype ii of Group B.IV – the proto-regional scripts of Malwa and Rajasthan – by Dani (1963, 157–58). Fleet (CII3) and Sircar (1965b) describe most of the inscriptions I assign to this type as “southern class,” and Bose (1938, 325–27) does likewise. The angular form, in turn, would probably be called a variety of or a precursor to the acute-angled or *siddhamāṭṛkā* script by Bühler (1896, 50, 1904, 49–50). Bose (1938, 330) assigns it to the western variety of the northern alphabet. Dani (1963, 157–58) would call it subtype iii or iv of the same Group

B.IV, whereas G. H. Ojha (1959, 62) would call it *kuṭila*. While the accuracy and usefulness of the term *kuṭila* are doubtful (Dani 1963, 115–16), a good case can be made for *siddhamāṭṛkā* as the name of a script widely used from the seventh to the tenth century (Salomon 1998, 39), and thus *proto-siddhamāṭṛkā* may be a good term for my angular Mālavan Late Brāhmī.

In addition to the overall ductus of the characters, salient distinguishing features of the two script varieties include the following (see Figure 1 for specimens). The principal test letters are *ṇa* and *ma*: the former is always looped in the rounded and open-mouthed in the angular form,<sup>10</sup> while the latter consistently has the archaic looped form in the rounded variety,<sup>11</sup> but is always open-mouthed in the angular variety, where it may or may not have a tail and its left limb may be straight or bent. The verticals of *ka*, *ra* and initial *a* are also quite distinctive: they are extended and almost always hooked in the rounded form, while in the angular form they never have a hook (though they often end in a knob) and are often, especially in the later specimens, quite short. In addition, the lower left limb of initial *a* curves inward in the rounded, and outward in the angular script. In the rounded variety, *bha* is of the broad type, with the two legs roughly equal in length, while the angular variety's *bha* has a shorter left leg with a footmark, which joins the right leg at an acute angle. The body of *da* is more pronounced in the rounded type, typically bent twice to form a rectangle or a rounded rectangle open on the right; the angular *da* has a triangular body with a single sharp bend that may sport a pronounced tail. A very similar distinction applies to *ca*, whose body resembles a broad quadrangle in the rounded variety (rounded on the bottom left and beaked at the top left corner), and a triangle (usually with a tail on the single left corner) in the angular variety. *Dha* is less distinctive, but it is generally oval (sometimes pointed) in the rounded alphabet, while in the angular form the right and top sides tend to be straight, with an acute angle at the bottom right corner. The tail of *la* is normally elongated and curves to the left and down in both scripts, but in the rounded form this curve is flatter and

<sup>9</sup> See page 4 about the epigraphic database Siddham. IndoSkript is a palaeographic tool developed by Harry Falk and Oliver Hellwig, initially as standalone software and recently as an Internet resource (<http://www.indoskript.org>). READ, short for *Research Environment for Ancient Documents*, is a software toolkit for epigraphical and manuscript research, developed primarily by Stefan Baums, Andrew Glass, Ian McCrabb and Stephen White and available as open-source software (<https://github.com/readsoftware/read>).

<sup>10</sup> Except the Chhoti Sadri inscription of Gauri (A7), which follows the rounded model but uses the tripartite northern *ṇa*.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, looped *ma* appears to be of two types: in some inscriptions the arms start from two separate points of the circle, while in most the character forms a single loop, with the arms starting from one point. A variety of this more common form appears to be drawn as a pinched shape (an hourglass open at the top) rather than as an actual loop, and this form may be transitional to the open-mouthed *ma*.

	a	ā	i	ī	u	e	o	au	ka	ca	ḍa	ḥa	ṇa	ḍa	dha	na	bha	ma	ya	ra	la	śa	sa	ha	variants	
A1																										
A2																										
A3																										 
A4																										
A5																										
A6																										
A7																										
A8																										
A9																										
A10																										
A11 A12																										
A13 A14																										
A15																										

**Figure 1:** Some distinctive character forms in rounded and angular scripts. Snippets of photographs and rubbings standardised to uniform height. Image credits as per the illustrations under each respective inscription. **A1:** Mandsaur, Naravarman; **A2:** Bihar Kotra cave; **A3:** Gangdhar; **A4:** Dattabhata; **A5:** Chhoti Sadri; **A6:** Chhoti Sadri; **A7:** Chhoti Sadri; **A8:** Chhoti Sadri; **A9:** Chhoti Sadri; **A10:** Chhoti Sadri; **A11** and **A12:** Chhoti Sadri; **A13** and **A14:** Chhoti Sadri; **A15:** Chhoti Sadri. Inscription labels shaded in grey indicate scripts I assign to the rounded variety.

may extend down to the baseline or beyond it to the left of the body, while in the angular form the curve is a high arch that does not go further back than the left side of the body, and may be replaced by a simple vertical extension of the stem or, especially in later inscriptions, by a short stem. In the rounded form *sa* has a separate left leg, but in the angular form the left leg is cursively simplified into a small triangle.

Medial *i* is as a rule represented by a circle in the rounded form, and *ī* with a dot or other mark inside the circle. In the angular form, the bottom of the circle is open on the left for *i* and on the right for *ī*, and the vowel mark may have a tail that extended downward. The marks for medial *ā*, *e* and *o* are normally slanting lines above the character body in the rounded variety; in the angular variety, horizontal marks bending downward at a 90° angle alternate with slanting marks or replace them entirely.

In spite of numerous such differences, the two scripts also share a number of features. Both usually employ wedge-shaped headmarks (nail heads), though these may be inconspicuous in both varieties; or, in the rounded variety, they may also be exaggerated, or may alternate with box heads or knobs within a single inscription. *Ya* as a primary consonant is always tripartite in both scripts and may or may not have a loop on the left limb. However,

its bottom is straighter in the angular form, often with an acute angle at the bottom right; and if the loop is present, it is upright, whereas it lies horizontally in the rounded form. *Pa* is angular in both forms, without a rounding of the bottom corners, and with the left arm bent optionally in the rounded form, and always in the angular form. The rounded variety is on the whole the more conservative of the two and has more in common with southern scripts of the period, while the angular variety is more innovative and shares more with northern scripts. There is, however, no clear temporal or geographic boundary between the two styles. In the sample set discussed in this book, the angular style's prevalence increases with time (becoming exclusive in the sixth century) and, geographically, it is more common in the northwest (the Mandsaur region and modern Rajasthan). There may be dynastic associations as well: the Later Aulikaras, the Naigamas and Kumāra-varman employ an angular script, while the Early Aulikaras and Gauri, along with Dattabhaṭa and the silk weavers, favour the rounded one. However, even this limited sample affords clear evidence that the two varieties could coexist in time and space. Of the two Bihar Kotra inscriptions of the time of Naravarman, created in the same year at the same site, the cave inscription (A3) is a perfect example of the rounded style, while the stone inscription (A2) has most of the hallmarks of the angular style.

