

Hindi number in ancient temple inscription: is it 270 or 210?

The cover photograph on the 10 August 2010 issue of *Current Science* shows a 9th century inscription in a temple at Gwalior with the number २७० inscribed on it (Figure 1). It has been wrongly interpreted to be 270, and is more likely to be 210. The shape of the middle numeral resembles a less perfectly drawn 1 (१) than 7 of Hindi numerals in Devanagari script. The shape of 7 written in Hindi numerals in Devanagari script somewhat resembles the shape of the English numeral 6 inclined by 90° to the left (७). Thus the number 270 in Devanagari



Figure 1. Cover photograph.

०	१	२	३	४	५	६	७	८	९
shunya	ek	do	teen	char	panch	chhah	saat	aath	nau
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Zero	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Eight	Nine
	—	=	≡	+	h	५	७	८	९

Figure 2. Hindi digits and their equivalent Arabic/English and Brahmi (lower row) numerals.

script would look like २७० and not 270 (Figure 2). Furthermore, the exact shape of 7 of the current English numerals was not used in 9th century India.

In an anonymous response to this suggestion, the possibility has been raised that 'there are also various instances where 7 written in Brahmi is like the middle numeral in the inscription': Saxena replies:

Although the middle numeral written in the inscription is similar to 7 in the Brahmi script, which is comparable to 7 in the Arabic/English numerals, the first numeral of the inscribed number is not comparable in shape to the numeral used for depicting the number 2 in Brahmi script (in Brahmi, 2 is written as '—'; see Figure 2). Instead, it is more readily identifiable with the numeral 2 of the Devanagari script. The Brahmi numerals

were not used as a positional system with a zero. Rather, there were separate numerals for each of the tens (10, 20, 30, etc.). There were also symbols for 100 and 1000, which were combined in ligatures with the units to signify 200, 300, 2000, 3000, etc. Thus, the number shown in the cover photograph is written in Devanagari and not Brahmi script. Hence the middle numeral in the inscribed number is more likely to be 1 of Devanagari script and not 7 of Brahmi script. Accordingly, the number is likely to be 210 and not 270.

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