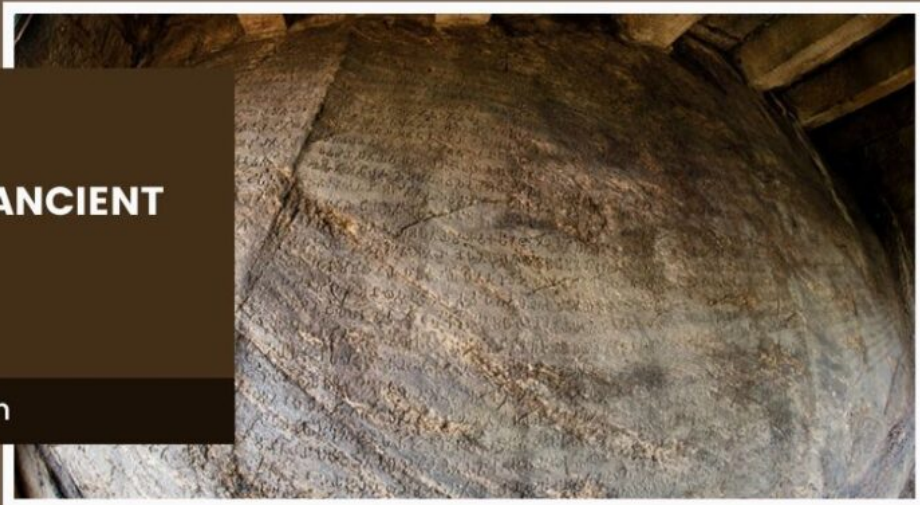


History of Ancient Odisha

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • February 28, 2017 • Updated October 9, 2026 • 13 min read

HISTORY OF ANCIENT ODISHA

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Period guide · Prehistory to c. 1100 CE

History of Ancient Odisha: *from Kalinga to the Gangas*

A source-based guide to Odisha before the medieval age — its first settlements, the Kalinga War, Emperor Kharavela, the great dynasties, temples, Buddhist centres and seafaring trade — with direct links to every in-depth article on this site.

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta**, MA (Gold Medalist)Updated **October 2026****15 min** read

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- **4,000+ yrs**of settlement evidence
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01 · Overview

What is ancient Odisha?

Ancient Odisha in 60 seconds

- Ancient Odisha was known as **Kalinga**, **Utkala**, **Odra** and, in the west, **Kosala** — each name covering a different region at different times.
- Farming villages existed here about **4,000 years ago**; iron-using communities followed.
- The **Kalinga War (c. 261 BCE)** turned Ashoka towards *Dhamma* and is recorded in his own edicts.
- **Kharavela** made Kalinga a great power again; his **Hathigumpha inscription** records his reign year by year.
- The **Matharas**, **Sailodbhavas**, **Bhaumakaras**, **Somavamsis** and **Eastern Gangas** built temples, patronised Buddhism and slowly united the region.

- Coastal ports linked Kalinga to **Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia** — still remembered in Bali Jatra.

The **history of ancient Odisha** runs from the first human settlements in the region to the early twelfth century CE, when the Eastern Ganga ruler Anantavarman Chodagangadeva brought the coast under one imperial dynasty and the medieval age began.

Across these centuries Odisha was never a single fixed kingdom. Kalinga, Utkala, Odra, Tosali, Kongoda and Kosala rose, merged and separated. What connects them is a shared coastline, the river valleys of the Mahanadi, Brahmani and Baitarani, and a culture that absorbed Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and tribal traditions.

- Period **Prehistory - c. early 12th century CE**
- Ancient names **Kalinga, Utkala, Odra, Tosali, Kongoda, Kosala**
- Defining event **Kalinga War, c. 261 BCE**
- Greatest early ruler **Kharavela (c. 1st century BCE)**
- Key inscriptions **Dhauli & Jaugada edicts; Hathigumpha**
- Key sites **Sisupalgarh, Dhauli, Udayagiri-Khandagiri, Ratnagiri, Bhubaneswar**

02 · Timeline

Timeline of ancient Odisha

Many early dates are approximate and some are still debated. This timeline follows the most widely accepted dating; gold markers show turning points.

1. Stone Age

Stone tools from river valleys in Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Dhenkanal and other districts show hunter-gatherers in the region; painted rock shelters survive in western Odisha.

2. c. 2000 BCE onward

Farming villages with pottery appear, as at [Durgadevi in Balasore](#) and Golabai Sasan near Khurda.

3. 1st millennium BCE

Iron-using communities spread, as shown by [early Iron Age tools at Jalalpur, Cuttack](#).

Kalinga appears in the epics, Puranas and Buddhist texts.

4. 4th century BCE

A Nanda king controls Kalinga for a time — recalled centuries later in the Hathigumpha inscription.

5. c. 261 BCE

Ashoka conquers Kalinga in the [Kalinga War](#); Tosali and Samapa become Mauryan administrative centres.

6. c. 1st century BCE

[Kharavela](#) of the Mahameghavahana (Chedi) line restores Kalinga's power and patronises Jainism at Udayagiri-Khandagiri.

7. c. 4th–5th century CE

Samudragupta's southern campaign passes through the region; the [Matharas](#) rule in Kalinga.

8. c. 6th–8th century CE

The [Sailodbhavas](#) rule Kongoda and the first Bhubaneswar temples rise. Xuanzang visits Odra, Kongoda and Kalinga in the 7th century.

9. c. 8th–10th century CE

The [Bhaumakaras](#) rule from near Jajpur; Ratnagiri and Lalitgiri flourish as Buddhist centres.

10. c. 10th–11th century CE

The [Somavamsis](#) unite Kosala, Utkala and Kalinga; the Mukteswar and Lingaraj temples are built.

11. Early 12th century CE

[Anantavarman Chodagangadeva](#) of the [Eastern Gangas](#) brings Utkala under Ganga rule — the start of [medieval Odisha](#).

03 · Evidence

Sources of ancient Odisha's history

Historians rebuild Odisha's ancient past from four kinds of evidence: **inscriptions** on rock and copper plates, **coins**, **literary texts** (Indian and foreign) and **archaeological remains**. Inscriptions are the most reliable, because they were written at the time by or for the rulers themselves.

- [Start here](#) Sources of Ancient History of Odisha Inscriptions, coins, texts and excavations — what each tells us and how far to trust it. [Read article →](#)
- [Inscription](#) The 13th Major Rock Edict of Ashoka Ashoka's own account of the Kalinga War and his remorse. [Read article →](#)
- [Coins](#) Ancient Coins of Odisha Punch-marked, Puri-Kushana and later coins, 6th century BCE to 6th century CE. [Read article →](#)
- [Foreign accounts](#) Odisha in Ancient Greek Writings How Greek and Roman writers described Kalinga and its people. [Read article →](#)
- [Foreign accounts](#) Odisha in the Account of Huan Tsang The Chinese pilgrim's 7th-century description of Odra, Kongoda and Kalinga. [Read article →](#)
- [Chronicle](#) Madala Panji The temple chronicle of Puri and how far it can be trusted for early history. [Read article →](#)

04 · Land & names

Historical geography and ancient names

Kalinga usually meant the coastal belt between the Mahanadi and the Godavari; **Utkala** and **Odra** referred to the northern and central coastal plains; **Tosali** was a Mauryan province, and **Kongoda** the land around Ganjam and Chilika. Western Odisha formed part of **Dakshina Kosala**. These boundaries shifted with every dynasty, so the same place can carry different names in different sources.

- [GeographyHistorical Geography of OdishaHow Kalinga, Utkala, Odra and Kosala grew into one state.Read article →](#)
- [KingdomAncient Tosali Kingdom of OdishaThe Mauryan province and its later history. Read article →](#)
- [Epics & PuranasKalinga in the Puranas and MahabharataWhat the epics and Puranas say about early Kalinga.Read article →](#)
- [EpicsKalinga after the Mahabharata WarThe traditional story of Kalinga's kings after Kurukshetra.Read article →](#)

05 · Before kingdoms

Earliest settlements: Stone Age to Iron Age

Long before any kingdom, people lived along Odisha's rivers and hills. Stone tools, painted rock shelters, early farming villages and iron implements show a continuous story of settlement — and recent excavations keep pushing that story further back.

- [ExcavationA 4,000-Year-Old Settlement Discovered in OdishaPottery, ornaments and house remains from Durgadevi, Balasore.Read article →](#)
- [ExcavationEarly Iron Age Tools Found at Jalalpur, CuttackEvidence for iron-using communities in the Mahanadi delta.Read article →](#)

06 · Four-part series

The Buddha and Kalinga

Buddhist tradition links Kalinga and Utkala with the Buddha's own lifetime — from the merchants Tapassu and Bhallika, remembered as his first lay followers, to the tooth relic said to have been carried to Dantapura in Kalinga after his death.

- [Part 1 Landmarks in the Life of Goutam Buddha and Kalinga](#) Key events of the Buddha's life and their Kalinga connections. [Read article →](#)
- [Part 2 Parents of Goutama Buddha](#) Siddhodana and Maya Devi — the family the Buddha was born into. [Read article →](#)
- [Part 3 Magadha and Kalinga](#) Two neighbouring powers and the spread of the Buddha's teaching. [Read article →](#)
- [Part 4 A Prince Dies: The Great Demise of the Buddha](#) The Mahaparinirvana and the fate of the relics. [Read article →](#)

07 · c. 261 BCE

The Kalinga War

Kalinga was one of the few regions outside the Mauryan Empire when Ashoka came to the throne. In about the eighth year of his reign he invaded. In his [13th Major Rock Edict](#) Ashoka records that 150,000 people were deported, 100,000 were killed and many more died afterwards — and that the suffering filled him with remorse. The war marked his turn to *Dhamma*.

!

Did you know? The 13th edict is **left out** at Dhauili and Jaugada, the two edict sites in Kalinga itself. In its place Ashoka issued the **Separate Kalinga Edicts**, telling his officers at Tosali and Samapa to treat the people of Kalinga fairly.

Sisupalgarh: an ancient fortified city

On the edge of Bhubaneswar lie the ramparts of **Sisupalgarh**, one of the best-preserved early historic cities in India — roughly square, each side a little over a kilometre long, with massive earthen walls and eight monumental gateways. It was first excavated by B. B. Lal in 1948 and studied again by Monica L. Smith and R. K. Mohanty in the 2000s. Many scholars identify it with Tosali or with Kharavela's capital, Kalinganagari, though this is not settled.

- [Main articleKalinga War: Causes and ConsequencesWhy Ashoka invaded, how the war was fought and what changed afterwards.Read article →](#)
- [AnalysisNature of the Kalinga State at the Time of the WarWas Kalinga a monarchy or a republic? The evidence examined.Read article →](#)
- [Primary sourceThe 13th Major Rock Edict of AsokaThe war in Ashoka's own words.Read article →](#)

08 · Mahameghavahana dynasty

Kharavela, emperor of Kalinga

Kalinga regained its independence after the Mauryas, and under **Kharavela** of the Mahameghavahana (Chedi) family it became one of the strongest kingdoms in India. The [Hathigumpha inscription](#) on Udayagiri hill describes his reign year by year: repairing his capital after a cyclone, campaigns against the Satavahanas, Magadha and a southern confederacy, remitting taxes, and building caves for Jain monks. His date is debated, but most historians place him in the 1st century BCE.

- [Main articleKharavelaFamily, year-by-year reign, date, religion and successors.Read article →](#)
- [Primary sourceThe Hathigumpha InscriptionWhat the inscription says and how it has been read.Read article →](#)
- [ReligionKharavela: The Philanthropic Emperor of JainismHis patronage of Jainism and the Udayagiri-Khandagiri caves.Read article →](#)

- [ProfileKharavela: The Great Philanthropic EmperorHis public works and care for his subjects.Read article →](#)
- [ChronologyDate Line of Kharavela the GreatThe competing theories on when Kharavela lived.Read article →](#)

09 · Ruling houses

Dynasties of ancient Odisha

From the 4th century CE, copper-plate land grants make Odisha’s history clearer again. Smaller ruling families — the Nalas of Koraput, the Pitrbhaktas, the Vighrahas, the Bhanjas, Sulkis and Tungas — ruled alongside the major dynasties below.

Major dynasties of ancient Odisha

Dynasty	Approx. period	Core region	Best known for
Mahameghavahana	c. 1st c. BCE	Kalinga	Kharavela; Hathigumpha inscription; Jain caves
Mathara	c. 4th–5th c. CE	Southern Kalinga	Copper-plate grants after Samudragupta’s campaign
Sailodbhava	c. 6th–8th c. CE	Kongoda (Ganjam–Puri)	Early Bhubaneswar temples, e.g. Parsurameswara
Bhaumakara	c. 8th–10th c. CE	Tosali / Utkala, near Jajpur	Buddhist patronage; Ratnagiri; women rulers
Somavamsi	c. 10th–11th c. CE	Kosala, then Utkala	Unifying the region; Mukteswar and Lingaraj
Eastern Ganga	c. 5th c. CE onward	Kalinganagara, later Cuttack	Bridge to medieval Odisha; Jagannath Temple

- **The Matharas**

c. 4th–5th century CE · Southern Kalinga

Known mainly from copper-plate grants that also tell us about land, villages and Brahmin settlement in the period after Samudragupta's campaign.

[Read: The Matharas →](#)

- **The Sailodbhavas**

c. 6th–8th century CE · Kongoda

Rulers of the land around Chilika and the Rushikulya; their reign saw the start of the Kalinga temple style in the [Parsurameswara temple](#).

[Read: The Sailodbhavas →](#)

- **The Bhaumakaras**

c. 8th–10th century CE · Coastal Odisha

Largely Buddhist early kings under whom Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri and Udayagiri became great centres of learning; several queens ruled in their own right.

[Read: The Bhaumakaras →](#)

- **The Somavamsis**

c. 10th–11th century CE · Kosala → Utkala

Rising in western Odisha, they were the first to rule Kosala, Utkala and Kalinga together; the [Mukteswar](#) and [Lingaraj](#) temples belong to their age.

[Read: The Somavamsis →](#)

- **The Eastern Gangas**

c. 5th century CE onward · Kalinganagara

In the early 12th century [Anantavarman Chodagangadeva](#) conquered Utkala and began the Jagannath Temple at Puri, opening the imperial, medieval chapter.

[Read: The Eastern Gangas →](#)

10 · The sea

Maritime trade and Kalinga's seafarers

Kalinga's long coast made it a natural base for sea trade. Ports such as Palur, Manikpatna and Khalkatapatna connected it with Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the islands of Southeast Asia, and finds of foreign pottery and coins confirm these links. The festivals of **Bali Jatra** and **Boita Bandana** still remember the voyages of the old *sadhabas* (merchants).

- [Maritime history](#)[Mariners of Ancient Odisha and the Monsoon](#)[How Odia sailors used the monsoon winds for long voyages.](#)[Read article →](#)
- [Coins](#)[Kumaragupta's Legacy: Gold Coins of Balasore](#)[Gupta gold coins found in Balasore and what they reveal about trade.](#)[Read article →](#)

11 · New evidence

Recent archaeological discoveries

New finds keep changing what we know about ancient Odisha — especially about Buddhism in the Jajpur region and early trade on the coast.

- [Buddhist site](#)[1,300-Year-Old Buddhist Stupa Found in Jajpur](#)[A stupa and artefacts from the Bhaumakara-era Buddhist landscape.](#)[Read article →](#)

- [Buddhist siteBuddha Statue from the Paravadi Stupa](#)A sculpture recovered during the same excavation.[Read article →](#)
- [Coin findGold Coins of Kumaragupta in Balasore](#)A Gupta-period find from northern Odisha.[Read article →](#)
- [Settlement4,000-Year-Old Settlement at Durgadevi](#)Evidence of early village life in Balasore district.[Read article →](#)

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4. [Odisha in Ancient Greek Writings](#)
5. [Extent of Odisha in the Account of Huan Tsang](#)
6. [Madala Panji](#)

Early Kalinga & prehistory

1. [A 4,000-Year-Old Settlement Discovered in Odisha](#)
2. [Early Iron Age Tools Found at Jalalpur, Cuttack](#)
3. [Kalinga in the Puranas and Mahabharata](#)

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3. [A 1,300-Year-Old Buddhist Stupa in Jajpur](#)
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Ancient temples (Kalinga style)

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4. [Architecture of Mukteswar Temple](#)
5. [Architecture of Lingaraj Temple](#)

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13 · For OPSC & university exams

Quick revision: points to remember

1. Ashoka's edicts in Odisha are at **Dhuli** (Khurda) and **Jaugada** (Ganjam); both omit Rock Edicts XI-XIII and add two Separate Kalinga Edicts.
2. The Hathigumpha inscription is in **Prakrit**, written in **Brahmi**, and opens with a Jain invocation.
3. Kharavela calls himself **Kalingadhipati** and belongs to the Chedi (Mahameghavahana) line.

4. Xuanzang describes **Wu-cha** (Odra), **Kong-yu-to** (Kongoda) and **Kie-ling-kia** (Kalinga).
5. Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri and Udayagiri form the Buddhist “**Diamond Triangle**” of Jajpur-Cuttack.
6. The **Somavamsis** were the first to rule Kosala, Utkala and Kalinga together.

14 · FAQ

Frequently asked questions about ancient Odisha

What was Odisha called in ancient times?

Ancient Odisha was known by several names — Kalinga, Utkala, Odra, Tosali, Kongoda and, for the western region, Dakshina Kosala. Each referred to a different part of the present state at different times. See [Historical Geography of Odisha](#).

When did the Kalinga War take place?

The Kalinga War was fought in about 261 BCE, in the eighth year of Ashoka’s reign. His 13th Major Rock Edict describes the war and his remorse. See [Kalinga War: Causes and Consequences](#).

Who was Kharavela?

Kharavela was the most powerful ruler of the Mahameghavahana (Chedi) dynasty of Kalinga, generally dated to the 1st century BCE. His Hathigumpha inscription at Udayagiri records his campaigns, public works and patronage of Jainism. See [Kharavela](#).

What are the main sources of ancient Odisha’s history?

Inscriptions (Ashoka’s edicts, the Hathigumpha inscription and copper-plate grants), coins, literary texts including the epics, Puranas and Buddhist works, foreign accounts such as Greek writers and Xuanzang, and excavated sites like Sisupalgarh and Ratnagiri. See [Sources of Ancient History of Odisha](#).

Which dynasties ruled ancient Odisha, in order?

The Mahameghavahanas (c. 1st century BCE), Matharas (4th–5th century CE), Sailodbhavas (6th–8th century), Bhaumakaras (8th–10th century), Somavamsis (10th–11th century) and the Eastern Gangas, who became the imperial power in the early 12th century.

Who built the Lingaraj Temple?

The Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar is generally attributed to the Somavamsi kings of the 11th century CE, with later additions under the Eastern Gangas. See [Architecture of Lingaraj Temple](#).

When does ancient Odisha end and medieval Odisha begin?

Most historians take the rise of the imperial Eastern Gangas under Anantavarman Chodagangadeva in the early 12th century CE as the start of medieval Odisha. Continue with [History of Medieval Odisha](#).

Sources & further reading

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