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Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman I

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Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman I

Who were Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman I? They were father and son, kings of the Pallava dynasty of Kanchi. The father built the first rock-cut temples and lost to the Chalukyas. The son won the revenge in 642 CE. Together they made the Pallavas a great power.

1 Who were these two kings?

The Pallavas ruled from Kanchi, a temple town in today's Tamil Nadu. Mahendravarman I was the son of Simhavishnu. Narasimhavarman I was the son of Mahendravarman I.

When did they rule?

Mahendravarman I ruled from about 600 to 630 CE. His son ruled from about 630 to 668 CE. Some books give slightly different years, so learn the rough spans.

Who were their rivals?

The Chalukyas of Vatapi lay to the north. Their great king was Pulakeshin II. The Pallavas and the Chalukyas fought for generations.

What is the memory hook?

Think "father builds, son avenges".

> **Quick check 1.** Narasimhavarman I was the father of Mahendravarman I. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: vajiramandravi.com; igntu.ac.in

2 What titles did Mahendravarman take?

Mahendravarman I loved titles. Each one told people something about him. Exams often ask which king held which title.

Which titles did he take?

- Mattavilasa means “addicted to pleasures”.
- Vichitrachitta means “curious-minded”.
- Gunabhara means “full of virtues”.
- Lalitankura means “charming offspring”.
- Chitrakarapuli means “tiger among the painters”.

Why do these titles matter?

They show a king who was also an artist. He was a poet, a musician and a builder. So his titles are about art and learning, not only war.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Mattavilasa, Vichitrachitta, Gunabhara = Mahendravarman I”.

> **Quick check 2.** Vichitrachitta means "curious-minded" and was a title of Mahendravarman I. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: igntu.ac.in; vajiramandravi.com

3 What did Mahendravarman build?

Mahendravarman I started a new way of building temples. He also wrote a comic play.



The rock-cut cave temple at Mandagapattu, built by Mahendravarman I. Photo by Ms Sarah Welch, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

What are rock-cut temples?

A rock-cut temple is carved into a hillside. Builders cut a hall out of solid rock. They used no bricks, timber or lime. This is called the Mahendra style.

Where are his caves?

He cut cave temples at Mandagapattu, Dalavanur and Tiruchirapalli. They are early steps toward the Dravidian style of South India.

What play did he write?

He wrote the Mattavilasa Prahasana. A prahasana is a short comic play in Sanskrit. It pokes fun at the habits of its day.

Did he lose a war?

Yes. The Chalukya king Pulakeshin II beat him at Pullalur near Kanchi. Pulakeshin came close to Kanchi. That defeat is the debt his son later repaid.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Mahendra = caves, comic play, Pullalur defeat”.

> **Quick check 3.** Mahendravarman I started the building of rock-cut temples in the Pallava kingdom. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

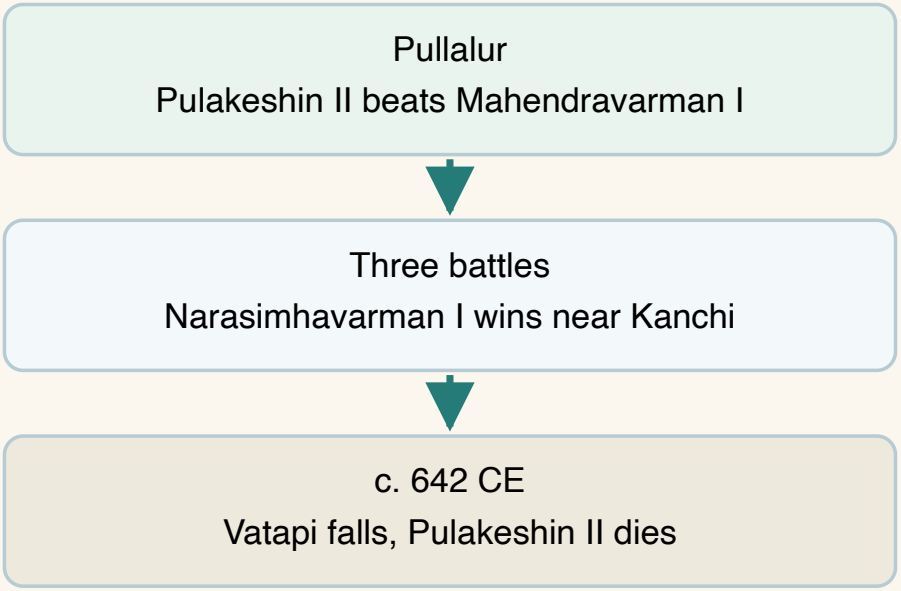
Sources: vajiramandravi.com; worldhistory.org

4 How did Narasimhavarman take revenge?

Narasimhavarman I wanted to avenge his father. He built up his army first. Then he beat the Chalukyas again and again.

What was the title Mamalla?

Mamalla, or Mahamalla, means “great wrestler”. He earned it as a famous warrior.



A father loses, and his son repays it. Original explanatory diagram.

What happened in 642 CE?

His army won battles at Pariyala, Suramana and Manimangalam near Kanchi. Then it marched north. Around 642 CE it took Vatapi, the Chalukya capital. Pulakeshin II died in this war.

What was the title Vatapikonda?

Vatapikonda means “conqueror of Vatapi”. He took this title after the victory. Vatapi is modern Badami.

What is the memory hook?

Think “642, Vatapi falls, Mamalla is Vatapikonda”.

Quick check 4. Narasimhavarman I took Vatapi around 642 CE. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; igntu.ac.in; vajiramandravi.com

5 What else did Narasimhavarman do?

Narasimhavarman I was more than a general. He also looked overseas and built a port city.

What happened in Sri Lanka?

An exiled Sinhalese prince named Manavamma asked him for help. Narasimhavarman sent an army by sea to put the prince back on his throne.

What did he build?

He built the port city of Mamallapuram, also called Mahabalipuram. It is named after his title Mamalla. His reign saw the carving of the monolithic rathas there. A monolithic ratha is a temple carved out of one big rock.

What did the Chinese visitor see?

The Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang came to Kanchi in his reign. He saw that Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism all flourished there. He also noted that Kanchi prized learning.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Mamalla builds Mamallapuram”.

> **Quick check 5.** Narasimhavarman I helped a Sinhalese prince named Manavamma. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: vajiramandravi.com; worldhistory.org

6 What did they leave behind?

Pallava building moved through stages. Each stage is named after a king or a style.

What were the stages?

Pallava architecture had four styles. They are the Mahendra, Mamalla, Rajasimha and Nandivarman styles. The first two belong to our two kings.

How did the style change?

Rock-cut caves came first. Then came the monolithic rathas. Later, builders made structural temples from cut stone. So the father and son stand at the start of this road.

What is the memory hook?

Think “cave, ratha, structural temple”.

> **Quick check 6.** Pallava architecture began with the Rajasimha style. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: vajiramandravi.com; worldhistory.org

7 What do exams ask?

Exams ask which king took which title. This UPSC question gives three titles and asks for the king.

How do you answer it?

Mattavilasa, Vichitrachitta and Gunabhara were titles of Mahendravarman I. Narasimhavarman I was known as Mamalla and Vatapikonda. The answer is (a).

What is the memory hook?

Think “the father has the fun titles”.

> **Quick check 7.** In the UPSC 2025 question, the three titles belong to Narasimhavarman I. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

For the question itself, see: Vajiram & Ravi, Pallavas of Kanchi; UPSC CSP 2025, General Studies Paper I, Q14

Practice MCQs

1. Which Pallava king took the title Vatapikonda?

A. Narasimhavarman II

B. Narasimhavarman I

C. Simhavishnu

D. Mahendravarman I

See answer ↓

2. Which Chalukya king defeated Mahendravarman I at Pullalur?

A. Jayasimha

B. Pulakeshin II

C. Vikramaditya I

D. Kirtivarman I

See answer ↓

3. What does the title Mamalla, taken by Narasimhavarman I, mean?

A. Great wrestler

B. Tiger among painters

C. Lion of the earth

D. Conqueror of Vatapi

See answer ↓

4. Which Sanskrit comic play is credited to Mahendravarman I?

A. Mattavilasa Prahasana

B. Mricchakatika

C. Mudrarakshasa

D. Kiratarjuniya

See answer ↓

5. Which port city did Narasimhavarman I build, named after his title?

A. Muziris

B. Korkai

C. Kaveripattinam

D. Mamallapuram

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The answer is Narasimhavarman I. He took the title after his army captured Vatapi, the Chalukya capital, around 642 CE. Vatapikonda means conqueror of Vatapi. His father Mahendravarman I is known for other titles. Memory hook: Vatapi falls, Vatapikonda. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is Pulakeshin II. He beat Mahendravarman I near Kanchi and almost reached the capital. Mahendravarman's son Narasimhavarman I later took revenge. Memory hook: Pulakeshin wins at Pullalur. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The answer is great wrestler. Mamalla, or Mahamalla, was his title as a warrior. Conqueror of Vatapi is Vatapikonda. Tiger among painters is Chitrakarapuli, a title of his father. Lion of the earth is Avanisimha, a title of Simhavishnu. Memory hook: Mamalla, wrestler. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The answer is the Mattavilasa Prahasana. A prahasana is a short comic play. It shares its name with his title Mattavilasa. Kiratarjuniya was written by the poet Bharavi. Memory hook: Mattavilasa, king and play. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The answer is Mamallapuram, also called Mahabalipuram. It is named after his title Mamalla. His reign saw the carving of its monolithic rathas. Memory hook: Mamalla builds Mamallapuram. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** it is false. Mahendravarman I was the father. Narasimhavarman I was his son. ↑ 1
2. **True.** It is one of his best-known titles. ↑ 2
3. **True.** Pallava architecture began with his Mahendra style. ↑ 3
4. **True.** Pulakeshin II died in this war. ↑ 4
5. **True.** He sent an army to Sri Lanka. ↑ 5
6. **False.** it is false. It began with the Mahendra style, then the Mamalla style. ↑ 6
7. **False.** it is false. They belong to Mahendravarman I. ↑ 7

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