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Kosala (Mahajanapada)

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Kosala (Mahajanapada)

Kosala was a great kingdom of the Buddha's age. Its king, Pasenadi, was the Buddha's friend. This lesson shows where Kosala lay, how it fought and wed into Magadha, and how its royal house fell.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Savatthi** Capital in the Buddha's time.

02 **Pasenadi** Kosala's king and the Buddha's friend.

03 **Sarayu** River that split Kosala in two.

04 **Vidudabha** Pasenadi's son, who took the throne.

The kingdom and its king

1 Where was Kosala?

1.1 What was Kosala?

Kosala was a country of the Kosala people. It lay north-west of Magadha and next to Kashi. It is named second in the list of sixteen Mahajanapadas.

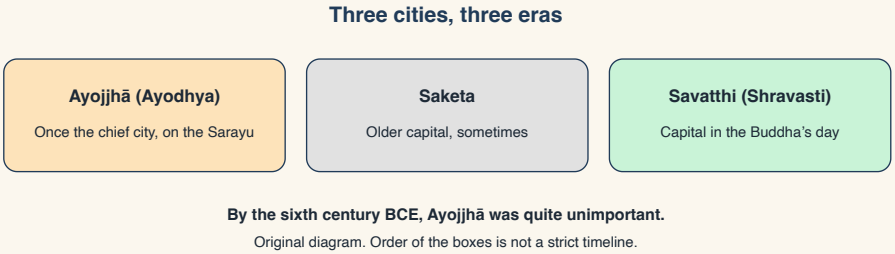


Kosala among the Mahajanapadas. Map by Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

1.2 Which cities mattered?

Savatthi (Shravasti) was the capital in the Buddha's time. It was one of the six great cities of his age. Saketa came next in importance and had sometimes been the capital in ancient days.

Ayojjhā, or Ayodhya, stood on the Sarayu. Judging from the Ramayana, it must once have been the chief city. But by the sixth century BCE it was quite unimportant.



The three main cities of Kosala.

Kosala's cities

City	Role	Detail
Savatthi	Capital in the Buddha's time	One of the six great cities of his age
Saketa	Next in importance	Sometimes the capital in ancient days
Ayojjhā (Ayodhya)	Once the chief city	On the Sarayu; quite unimportant by the sixth century BCE

Source: Dictionary of Pali Proper Names (Kosala and Savatthi entries).

1.3 Which rivers cut across it?

The Sarayu divided Kosala into Uttara (north) and Dakkhina (south) Kosala. Savatthi stood on the banks of the Aciravati. The Pali dictionary identifies the old city with Sahet Mahet on the Rapti.



Votive stupa, Sahet-Mahet (Shravasti), Uttar Pradesh. Photo: Jamuna Prasad sharma, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons.

1.4 Why did the Buddha matter to this city?

He spent twenty-five rainy seasons at Savatthi. Nineteen were at Jetavana and six at the Pubbarama. The Pali dictionary, citing Woodward, says 871 suttas are said to have been preached there.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: The Sarayu river divided Kosala into northern and southern parts. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Ayodhya was Kosala's capital in the Buddha's time. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: palikanon.com

2 Kosala and Kashi

2.1 Who were the neighbours?

Kashi lay next to Kosala. The Jatakas show a long struggle between the two. Sometimes the Kashi king attacked Kosala and ruled it. At other times the Kosala king invaded Kashi and annexed it.

2.2 How did it end?

By the Buddha’s time Kashi was under Kosala. The conquest of Kashi made Kosala much stronger. It also set up a clash with Magadha, which the Pali dictionary calls inevitable.

> 14. **Think it through:** Why does Kashi keep returning in this story?
> See answer ↓

2.3 Who ruled in the Buddha's time?

Pasenadi ruled Kosala in the Buddha’s time. His son Vidudabha followed him.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: By the Buddha's time, Kashi was under Kosala. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: Kashi ruled Kosala for the whole period. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Pasenadi, the Buddha's friend

3.1 Who was he?

Pasenadi, also written Prasenajit, was a son of Mahakosala. He studied at Takkasila with Mahali, a Licchavi, and Bandhula, a Malla prince. His father was so pleased with his skills that he made him king.

3.2 Is Pasenadi a name or a title?

Rhys Davids thought it was an official title. The Pali dictionary says the evidence is not enough to be sure. World History Encyclopedia spells the name Prasanajita. All of these point to the same king.

3.3 How close was he to the Buddha?

Early in the Buddha’s ministry, Pasenadi became his follower and close friend. His devotion lasted until his death. The two were equals in age, so their talks were frank.

- The third Samyutta, the Kosala Samyutta, has 25 short stories about him.
- He still showed favour to other religious orders.
- He built the Rajakarama monastery opposite Jetavana at Savatthi.

3.4 Who stood beside him?

His chief consort was Mallika, a garland-maker’s daughter. He trusted her judgment in all things. The table shows the other main figures.

Who is who at Pasenadi’s court

Name	Who they were	Link to Pasenadi

Name	Who they were	Link to Pasenadi
Mahakosala	Earlier king of Kosala	His father
Kosaladevi	Princess of Kosala	His sister; wife of Bimbisara
Mallika	Garland-maker's daughter	His chief consort
Vasabhakhattiya	Daughter of Mahanama and a slave woman	His Sakya wife; mother of Vidudabha
Vajira	Princess of Kosala	His daughter; wife of Ajatasattu
Bandhula	Malla chief's son	His classmate, a Malla chief's son; killed on a false report
Dighakarayana	Commander in chief	Bandhula's nephew; crowned Vidudabha

Source: Dictionary of Pali Proper Names. Spellings follow the Pali; exams may use Sanskrit forms.

Quick check 5. True or false: Pasenadi became a follower and close friend of the Buddha. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: Mallika was a Sakya princess. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: palikanon.com

War, marriage and betrayal

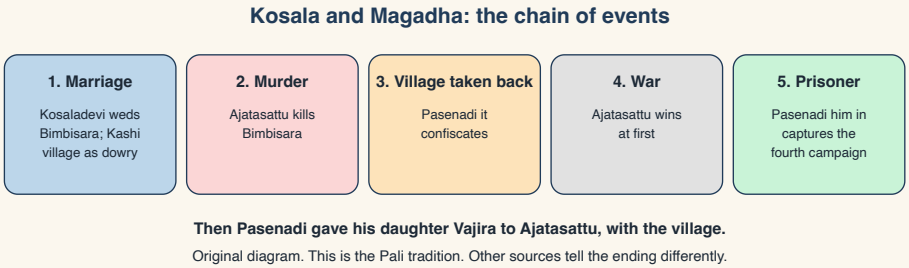
4 Kosala and Magadha

4.1 How did the two kingdoms first link up?

Pasenadi's sister Kosaladevi married Bimbisara of Magadha. A village in Kashi came as her dowry. This marriage ended the old hostility, says New World Encyclopedia.

4.2 What broke the peace?

Ajatasattu killed his father Bimbisara. Kosaladevi died of grief. Pasenadi took the Kashi village back. He said no patricide should own it.



How the Kosala-Magadha quarrel unfolded in the Pali tradition.

4.3 Who won the war?

At first Ajatasattu won. In the fourth campaign, the Pali tradition says, Pasenadi took Ajatasattu prisoner. He freed him once he gave up his claim. Then he gave him his daughter Vajira and the disputed village.

4.4 Do all sources agree?

Not fully. World History Encyclopedia also speaks of a see-saw of fortunes. It says Prasenajit spared the captured Ajatashatru and returned Kashi. New World Encyclopedia says a peace treaty ended the

war, sealed by a marriage.

- **Peace and a marriage:** the Pali dictionary and New World Encyclopedia agree on this.
- **Kosala did not fall in this war:** sources place its loss later.

4.5 What is the exam trap?

Some notes say Magadha simply won this war. Treat that with care. The older accounts above describe a captured Ajatasattu, a peace and a marriage.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: The dowry village of Kashi went from Kosala to Magadha. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: Pasenadi gave his daughter Vajira to Ajatasattu. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org; worldhistory.org

5 The Sakya deception

5.1 Why did he ask for a Sakya bride?

He wanted a closer tie with the Buddha's family. The Sakyas were his vassals. So he asked them for a daughter.

5.2 What did the Sakyas do?

They did not want to give a daughter. But they feared their overlord's anger. So they sent Vasabhakhattiya, the daughter of Mahanama by a slave woman.

5.3 How did the trick work?

Mahanama pretended to eat with her. As he took the first mouthful, a messenger arrived with a letter. He left the food and asked her to finish. He did this to ease Pasenadi's suspicions.

5.4 What happened when the truth came out?

Pasenadi withdrew the royal honours from her and her son. The Buddha told him the Katthaharika Jataka. The king then restored the honours.

> **Quick check 9.** True or false: Vidudabha's mother was a Sakya princess by birth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 10.** True or false: The Sakyas were Pasenadi's vassals. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: palikanon.com

6 The fall of Pasenadi

6.1 What was the Bandhula affair?

Bandhula, a Malla, fled to Pasenadi at Savatthi. He had been the king's classmate. Pasenadi listened to corrupt ministers. He had Bandhula and his sons killed.

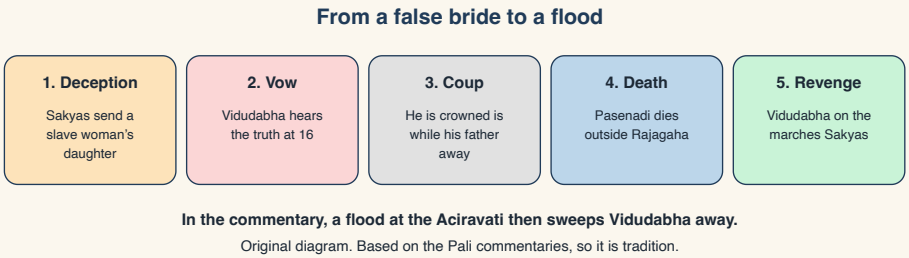
6.2 Who planned the coup?

Dighakarayana, Bandhula's nephew and the commander in chief, never forgave the king. Pasenadi once visited the Buddha at Medatalumpa. He left the royal insignia with Dighakarayana. The commander took the

bodyguard away, left one horse and one maid, and crowned Vidudabha.

6.3 How did Pasenadi die?

He hurried to Rajagaha to ask Ajatasattu for help. It was late and the gates were closed. He lay down in a hall outside the city and died in the night. Ajatasattu held the funeral rites with great pomp.



The chain that ended Pasenadi's line.

6.4 What did Vidudabha do?

At sixteen he visited Kapilavatthu and overheard a slave woman's remark. He learned of the deceit and vowed vengeance.

After he became king he marched on the Sakyas. The tradition says he turned back three times when he saw the Buddha under a tree. The fourth time the Buddha stayed away.

He ordered the Sakyas slain, except Mahanama's followers. The commentary then says a flood at the Aciravati swept him away.

15. **Think it through:** Is the flood story history? See answer ↓

Quick check 11. True or false: Pasenadi died in a hall outside the gates of Rajagaha. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 12. True or false: Pasenadi led the attack on the Sakyas. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: palikanon.com

The end of Kosala

7 How Kosala ended

7.1 When did Magadha take Kosala?

Sources differ. The Pali dictionary says Ajatasattu seems to have gained sway in Kosala after he conquered the Licchavis. World History Encyclopedia says he annexed it after Prasenajit's fall. It also lists Mahapadma Nanda's conquests, which included Kosala.

How did Kosala end? Sources differ

Source	What it says
Dictionary of Pali Proper Names	Ajatasattu seems to have gained sway in Kosala after he conquered the Licchavis
World History Encyclopedia (Ajatashatru)	He annexed Kosala after Prasenajit was deposed by his son
World History Encyclopedia (Magadha)	Mahapadma Nanda made conquests that included Kosala, c. 346 to 324 BCE

Read these as three views. None says Kosala simply faded away.

7.2 Where does this fit?

Kosala is one of several Mahajanapadas that Magadha absorbed. See The Mahajanapadas and the Rise of Magadha for the full story, and Kashi for its neighbour.

> **Quick check 13.** True or false: All sources agree on exactly when Kosala was absorbed. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org

Exam Practice

8 How exams test this

8.1 Which question types come up?

Two UPSC questions show the pattern. Newest first.

8.2 What traps repeat?

- **The river:** the Sarayu goes with Kosala.
- **The wrong region:** Avanti was not part of the Buddha's activity.
- **Two capitals:** Savatthi in the Buddha's day, Ayodhya in the epic memory.
- **The war ending:** the older accounts describe peace and a marriage.

Sources: mcqquestion.com

Remember this

- **Place:** second Mahajanapada in the list; capital Savatthi; the Sarayu split it in two.
- **King:** Pasenadi (Prasenajit), the Buddha's friend; chief consort Mallika.
- **Magadha:** Kosaladevi's dowry village of Kashi; war; peace and Vajira's marriage.
- **Sakyas:** a slave woman's daughter; son Vidudabha took revenge.

Explain it back: Say who wed whom, what the dowry was, and how each marriage changed the war.

Practice MCQs

1. What was Kosala's capital during the historical Mahajanapada era (6th century BCE)?

A. Ayodhya

B. Rajagriha

C. Kaushambi

D. Shravasti

See answer ↓

2. Who was Kosala's most famous ruler, and a close friend of the Buddha?

A. Bimbisara

B. Ajatashatru

C. Vidudabha

D. Prasenajit

See answer ↓

3. Consider these two statements about Vidudabha.

Statement 1: he was born from Prasenajit's marriage to a woman the Sakya clan falsely presented as one of their own princesses.

Statement 2: after Vidudabha usurped the throne, Prasenajit sought Ajatashatru's help and died at the gates of Rajagriha.

Which statement(s) is/are correct?

A. Only Statement 1

B. Only Statement 2

C. Neither statement

D. Both statements

See answer ↓

4. In what order were Kashi and Kosala eventually absorbed into larger powers?

A. Kosala annexed Kashi; Magadha later absorbed Kosala

B. Kashi and Kosala merged as equals then both defeated Magadha

C. Magadha annexed Kashi directly; Kosala was never involved

D. Kashi annexed Kosala; Magadha later absorbed Kashi

See answer ↓

5. Bimbisara's marriage to Kosaladevi of Kosala brought Magadha which territory as dowry?

A. Vaishali

B. Champa

C. Anga

D. Kashi

See answer ↓

6. With reference to ancient India (600–322 BC), consider the following pairs:

I. Asmaka – Godavari

II. Kamboja – Vipas

III. Avanti – Mahanadi

IV. Kosala – Sarayu.

How many of the pairs given above are correctly matched? (UPSC CSP 2025, GS Paper I)

A. Only one

B. Only two

C. Only three

D. All the four

See answer ↓

7. Which of the following kingdoms were associated with the life of the Buddha?

1. Avanti

2. Gandhara

3. Kosala

4. Magadha Select the correct answer using the code given below.

A. 1, 2 and 3

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 3 and 4

D. 3 and 4 only

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The correct answer is **Shravasti**. At the Buddha's time Savatthi (Shravasti) was the capital of Kosala. Ayodhya is wrong because it was quite unimportant by the sixth century BCE. Rajagriha is wrong because Pasenadi went there only to ask Magadha for help. Kaushambi is wrong because it is another city, not Kosala's capital. Memory hook: Shravasti is where the Buddha spent 25 rainy seasons. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The correct answer is **Prasenajit**. Pasenadi, or Prasenajit, was Kosala's king in the Buddha's time. He became the Buddha's follower and close friend early on. Bimbisara and Ajatashatru are wrong because they ruled Magadha. Vidudabha is wrong because he was Pasenadi's son, who took the throne. Memory hook: Prasenajit means Kosala and the Buddha's friendship. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The correct answer is **Both statements**. Vidudabha's mother, Vasabhakhattiya, was sent by the Sakyas as a slave woman's daughter. Later Dighakarayana crowned Vidudabha while Pasenadi was away. Pasenadi hurried to Rajagaha for help, found the gates closed and died in a hall outside the city. So the other three options each wrongly reject one or both statements. Memory hook: false bride, coup, death at the gates. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The correct answer is **Kosala annexed Kashi; Magadha later absorbed Kosala**. By the Buddha's time Kashi was under Kosala. Later Magadha gained the upper hand, though the sources differ on exactly when. The option with Kashi annexing Kosala is wrong because Kosala held Kashi. The option saying Kosala was never involved is wrong because Kosala held Kashi and clashed with Magadha. The option saying they merged and beat Magadha is wrong because no source says so. Memory hook: Kosala swallowed Kashi, then Magadha swallowed Kosala. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The correct answer is **Kashi**. A village in Kashi came to Bimbisara as part of Kosaladevi's dowry. Anga, Champa and Vaishali are wrong because the sources name Kashi as the dowry. Memory hook: the Kosala bride brought Kashi. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** The correct answer is **Only two**. Asmaka–Godavari and Kosala–Sarayu are correctly matched. Kamboja–Vipas is wrong and Avanti–Mahanadi is wrong. That leaves two correct pairs. Memory hook: Ayodhya sat on the Sarayu, and the Sarayu split Kosala. ↑ Q6

7. **D.** The correct answer is **3 and 4 only**. Kosala and Magadha are associated with the Buddha's life. Avanti is wrong because it was not really part of his activity. Gandhara is wrong because its Buddhist link developed centuries later, under the Kushans. Memory hook: Kosala and Magadha, the kingdoms of his own time. ↑ Q7

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The two parts were Uttara Kosala and Dakkhina Kosala. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Savatthi was the capital then. Ayodhya was quite unimportant by the sixth century BCE. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The Pali dictionary says Kashi was under the subjection of Kosala. ↑ 3
4. **False.** The conquests went both ways. In the Buddha's time Kosala held Kashi. ↑ 4
5. **True.** The Pali dictionary says his devotion lasted until his death. ↑ 5
6. **False.** She was the daughter of a garland maker. ↑ 6
7. **True.** Kosaladevi brought it when she married Bimbisara. ↑ 7
8. **True.** He gave her, with the disputed village, after Ajatasattu gave up his claim. ↑ 8
9. **False.** She was the daughter of Mahanama and a slave woman. ↑ 9
10. **True.** The Pali dictionary calls them his vassals. ↑ 10
11. **True.** The gates were closed, so he lay down outside and died in the night. ↑ 11
12. **False.** Vidudabha did, after he became king. ↑ 12
13. **False.** They differ: Ajatasattu, Prasenajit's fall and Nanda conquests all appear. ↑ 13
14. **Think it through.** It was a rich, holy neighbour that both big kingdoms wanted. A village of Kashi is the trigger for the war with Magadha in the next lesson. ↑ 14
15. **Think it through.** It comes from the Dhammapada commentary. Treat it as tradition. The sources do not give it as a dated, outside record. ↑ 15

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