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Later Mauryan Kings and the Decline of the Empire

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Later Mauryan Kings and the Decline of the Empire

After Ashoka died around 232 BCE, the Mauryan Empire lasted less than fifty years. Historians give several causes for its fall, and none is settled. The end came around 185 BCE, when the general Pushyamitra killed the last king, Brihadratha.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **After Ashoka** He died c. 232 BCE.

02 **Dasharatha** Gave three caves to the Ajivikas.

03 **Decline** Several theories, none settled.

04 **The end** Pushyamitra kills Brihadratha, c. 185 BCE.

Who ruled after Ashoka?

1 After Ashoka

1.1 Who ruled after Ashoka?

Ashoka died around 232 BCE. The Mauryan Empire then lasted less than fifty years. Its later kings left few records, so their reigns are hard to piece together.

1.2 What happened to his sons?

Ashoka had several sons. Only one is named in his own inscriptions. He is Tivala, son of the second queen, the Kaluvaki. The Queen's Edict calls her "the mother of Tivala". Tivala does not seem to have become emperor.

Other sons come from later Buddhist books. These say Mahinda became a monk and Kunala was blinded. Smith called the Kunala story "mere folk-lore". Even Mahinda's link to Ashoka is uncertain. Some scholars think he was a brother.

1.3 Who were the later kings?

The Puranas are old Hindu histories. They list the later Mauryas, but the lists disagree on names, order and number. Dasharatha is called Ashoka's grandson. Samprati is called Kunala's son in Jain and Buddhist books. The Matsya and Vayu Puranas make him Dasharatha's son instead.

So Dasharatha is called Ashoka's grandson. Samprati counts as a grandson only in the Jain and Buddhist line. The Puranas make him Dasharatha's son. Smith called the brothers idea little more than a guess.

13. **Think it through:** A book says Dasharatha and Samprati were brothers. Why should you hesitate? See answer ↓

Quick check 1. True or false: Only one of Ashoka’s sons, Tivala, is named in his own inscriptions. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: All Puranas agree on the order of the later Mauryan kings. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: archive.org

2 Caves and Jain tradition

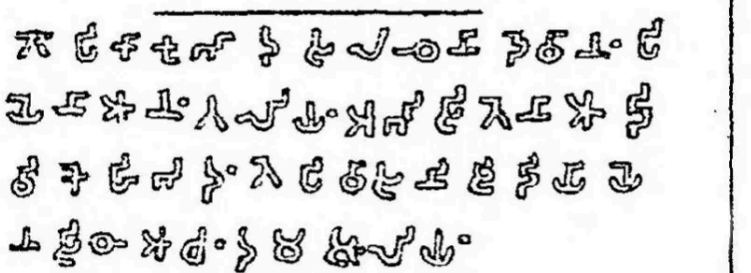
2.1 What did Dasharatha build?

Dasharatha gave three caves at Nagarjuni to the Ajivika monks. The Ajivikas were an ascetic sect. His inscription says the Vahiyaka cave was given “to the venerable Ajivikas as a dwelling-place, for as long as sun and moon endure”.

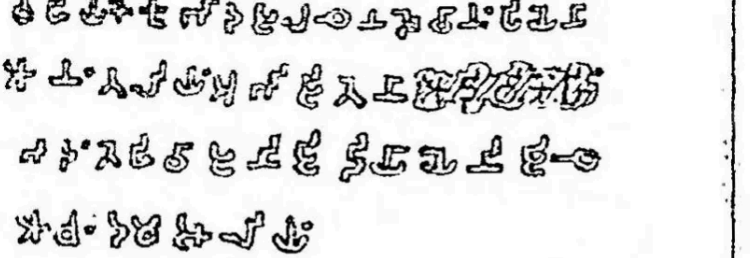
He used the title Devanampiya, as Ashoka had. The Nagarjuni caves sit in a hill group beside the four Barabar caves. Ashoka also gave caves to the Ajivikas, so this gift continued an older habit.

NÂGÂRJUNI CAVES

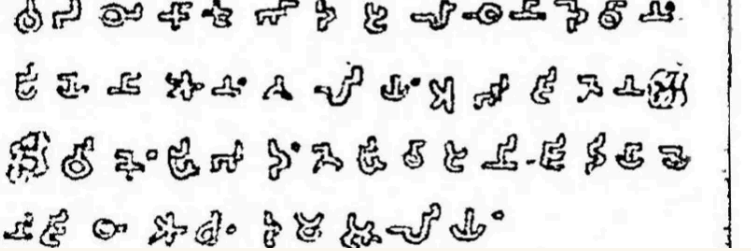
IV. Gopika, or Nâgârjuni.

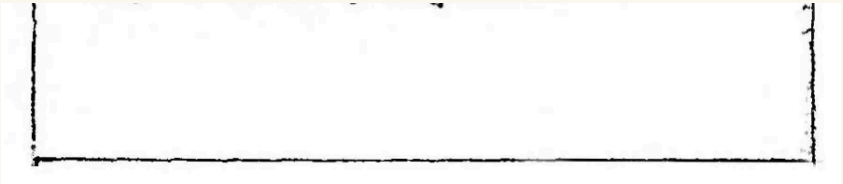


V. Vapiya, or Well Cave.



VI. Vadathi Cave.





Dasharatha Maurya's own dedication at the Nagarjuni Caves, Barabar. It is one of the few surviving records of any later Mauryan king. Public domain (Cunningham, 1871), via Wikimedia Commons.

2.2 What is Mauryan polish?

Mauryan polish is a mirror-like finish on hard stone. Smith describes cave interiors "polishing the interiors like a mirror". The name Mauryan polish is modern. The cave shows that fine stonework went on after Ashoka, even as the empire weakened.

2.3 What do Jain books say about Samprati?

Jain writers praise Samprati as highly as Buddhists praise Ashoka. One Jain text says he built viharas, or monasteries, for monks even in non-Aryan lands. Jain books place him at Pataliputra and Ujjayini.

All of this is Jain tradition. No inscription of Samprati has been found in this article's sources. Treat his Jain link as tradition, not proof.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Dasharatha’s Nagarjuni caves were given to Buddhist monks. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: Samprati’s support for Jainism is known from his own inscriptions. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why did the empire weaken?

3 Why the empire weakened

3.1 Was it only weak kings?

No single reason explains the fall. Raychaudhuri thinks the empire was already weak long before the end. He calls it “a shrivelled and attenuated carcase” before Pushyamitra’s coup. That is one historian’s view, not a settled fact.

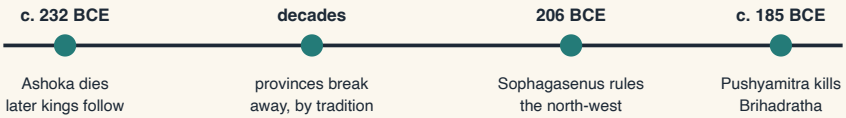
3.2 What went wrong in the provinces?

The city of Taxila revolted twice. In the tradition, its people said they did not oppose the prince, but “these wicked ministers insult us”. Ashoka also warned his officers at Tosali against unjust imprisonment. Raychaudhuri links these signs to rule by oppressive officials.

3.3 Which lands broke away?

Later books say Jalauka made himself independent in Kashmir. They say Virasena took Gandhara. Kalidasa’s play also shows Vidarbha, in the Deccan, splitting off. These are traditions and have no firm dates.

One date is firm. Around 206 BCE the Greek writer Polybius says Antiochos the Great renewed friendship with “Sophagasenus, the king of the Indians”. So the north-west already had its own ruler before the final coup.



Original timeline of the fall of the Mauryan Empire. Dates after Ashoka are modern calculations.

3.4 Did Greek invasions end the empire?

Raychaudhuri says no. The first Greek invasion after Ashoka came around 206 BCE. The break-up had begun long before that.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Raychaudhuri blames Greek invasions as the main cause of the Mauryan fall. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Around 206 BCE a king called Sophagasenus ruled the north-west, according to Polybius. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 Brahmanical backlash?

4.1 What did Shastri argue?

Haraprasad Shastri said Ashoka's pro-Buddhist rule angered the Brahmans. He pointed to the Dhamma officers, called Dharma-mahamatras. He read "equality in lawsuits" as an attack on caste privilege. He wrote that "we clearly see the hands of the Brahmanas in the great revolution".

4.2 Who disagrees, and why?

Raychaudhuri disagrees. He finds “no evidence of any such conflict between the children of Asoka and the Brahmanas”. He adds that the Buddhist remains at Bharhut, built under the Sungas, do not fit a fierce Brahman reaction.

Ashoka’s own Rock Edict XII asks all sects to respect each other. It calls concord “meritorious”. Also, Pushyamitra was himself a Maurya officer before the coup.

Theories of the decline

Theory	Who argued it	Main point against it
Brahmanical reaction	Haraprasad Shastri	Raychaudhuri finds no evidence of such a conflict
Greek invasion	Discussed by Raychaudhuri	The break-up began before the first Greek raid
Oppressive officials	Raychaudhuri	Based on tradition and edicts; still a modern view

All three are modern theories. None is an agreed cause.

14. **Think it through:** A question says the Brahmanical backlash is the settled cause of the decline. What is wrong? See answer ↓

Quick check 7. True or false: Raychaudhuri accepted Shastri’s theory of a Brahmanical revolution. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 8. True or false: Pushyamitra was a Maurya officer before he killed Brihadratha. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How did it end?

5 The final coup

5.1 How did the last king die?

Bana’s Harshacharita is a Sanskrit life of King Harsha. It says the general Pushyamitra killed his master Brihadratha. He did it after showing off his whole army on the pretext of displaying his power. Bana calls him a “base-born general”.

The Puranas say Pushyamitra, the commander-in-chief, uprooted Brihadratha and ruled for 36 years. They then say the kingdom passed to the Sungas.

5.2 When did it happen?

The usual date is about 185 BCE. Raychaudhuri uses c. 187 BCE. Bana gives no year, so the date is a modern calculation. The Puranas say ten Mauryas ruled in all for 137 years.

> **Quick check 9.** True or false: Bana’s Harshacharita gives 185 BCE as the date of the coup. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 10.** True or false: The Puranas say Pushyamitra was the commander-in-chief who removed Brihadratha. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: archive.org

6 Two exam traps

6.1 What is the single-cause trap?

Some questions present one cause as the settled reason for the fall. The cause may be weak successors, a money shortage or a Brahmanical backlash. Historians debate all of these. A cause that has a named critic is a debated cause.

No source in this article proves that Ashoka’s grants to monks emptied the treasury. Treat that claim with care.

6.2 What is the grandsons trap?

A second trap mixes up Dasharatha and Samprati. The safe line is simple. Both are later kings. Tradition calls Dasharatha a grandson of Ashoka. Samprati is Kunala's son in Jain and Buddhist books, but the Puranas make him Dasharatha's son.

Also remember the word "mere tradition". Kunala's blinding, Mahinda's monkhood and Samprati's Jain work all come from later books, not from Mauryan inscriptions.

15. **Think it through:** An option says financial strain is the confirmed cause of Mauryan decline. What is wrong with it? See answer ↓

Quick check 11. True or false: Historians debate several causes for the Mauryan decline, and no single cause is settled. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 12. True or false: Kunala’s blinding is proved by an inscription of Ashoka. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **After Ashoka:** he died c. 232 BCE. Only Tivala is named as a son in his inscriptions.
- **Dasharatha and Samprati:** grandsons by tradition. Do not call them brothers.
- **Dasharatha:** three Nagarjuni caves for the Ajivikas, by his own inscriptions.
- **Decline:** several modern theories. None is the one settled cause.
- **The end:** Pushyamitra killed Brihadratha, c. 185 BCE, by Bana and the Puranas.

Explain it back: Why can a question not call the Brahmanical backlash the settled cause?

Practice MCQs

1. Who was the last Mauryan emperor, assassinated in 185 BCE?

A. Kunala

B. Samprati

C. Brihadratha

D. Dasaratha

See answer ↓

2. Dasharatha gave the Nagarjuni caves to which group?

A. Jain monks

B. Ajivika monks

C. Buddhist monks

D. Brahmin priests

See answer ↓

3. Which son of Ashoka is named in his own inscriptions?

A. Samprati

B. Tivala

C. Kunala

D. Mahinda

See answer ↓

4. The killing of Brihadratha at an army display is told in which work?

A. The Mahavamsa

B. Bana's Harshacharita

C. Megasthenes' Indica

D. The Arthashastra

See answer ↓

5. Which Greek writer shows that Sophagasenus ruled in north-west India around 206 BCE?

A. Arrian

B. Polybius

C. Megasthenes

D. Strabo

See answer ↓

6. Which statement about the Mauryan decline is best supported?

A. Greek invasions caused it alone

B. The Brahmanical backlash is the settled cause

C. The empire weakened for decades before Pushyamitra's coup

D. Ashoka's grants to monks are the proven cause

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The answer is **Brihadratha**. He was the last Mauryan emperor. His general Pushyamitra killed him around 185 BCE. Why the others fail: Dasharatha and Samprati ruled earlier. Kunala is a son of Ashoka known only from tradition. Memory hook: B for Brihadratha, B for the break at the end. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is **Ajivika monks**. His inscription gives the Vahiyaka cave to the Ajivikas for as long as the sun and moon last. Why the others fail: the inscriptions name the Ajivikas, not Buddhists, Jains or priests. Memory hook: Dasharatha, caves, Ajivikas. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The answer is **Tivala**. The Queen's Edict calls the second queen the mother of Tivala. Why the others fail: Mahinda and Kunala come from later books. Samprati is a later king, not a son of Ashoka. Memory hook: Tivala is the inscription son. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The answer is **Bana's Harshacharita**. Bana says the general Pushyamitra killed his master after showing his army. Why the others fail: the Arthashastra and Indica do not describe this. The Mahavamsa is a Sri Lankan chronicle. Memory hook: Bana tells of the review. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** The answer is **Polybius**. He says Antiochos the Great renewed friendship with Sophagasenus, the king of the Indians. Why the others fail: Megasthenes wrote under Chandragupta. The article does not rely on Strabo or Arrian for this event. Memory hook: Polybius, 206, Sophagasenus. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The answer is **the empire weakened for decades before the coup**. Raychaudhuri calls it a shrivelled carcase long before about 187 BCE. Why the others fail: he says the break-up began before any Greek raid. He finds no evidence of a Brahman conflict. No source here proves the grants theory. Memory hook: slow fade, sudden end. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The Queen’s Edict names him. The other sons come from later books. ↑ 1
2. **False.** The lists differ on names, order and number of kings. ↑ 2
3. **False.** His own inscription gives them to the Ajivikas. ↑ 3
4. **False.** It comes from later Jain texts, not from an inscription. ↑ 4

5. **False.** He says the break-up began long before the first Greek raid. ↑ 5
6. **True.** Polybius records Antiochus III renewing friendship with him. ↑ 6
7. **False.** He found no evidence of such a conflict. ↑ 7
8. **True.** He was the commander-in-chief of the last Maurya. ↑ 8
9. **False.** Bana gives no date. The year is a modern calculation. ↑ 9
10. **True.** They call him the commander-in-chief. ↑ 10
11. **True.** Weak officials, breakaway provinces and a Brahman reaction are all argued over. ↑ 11
12. **False.** It comes from Buddhist tradition, and Smith called it folk-lore. ↑ 12
13. **Think it through.** Because the sources disagree. Some Puranas make Samprati the son of Dasharatha. Jain and Buddhist books make him the son of Kunala. No source in this article proves they were brothers. ↑ 13
14. **Think it through.** It is only one theory, and a named historian disputes it. A question that calls any one cause settled is overstating the evidence. ↑ 14
15. **Think it through.** It overstates certainty. Financial strain is only one suggested cause, and the sources read for this article do not prove it. ↑ 15

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