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Panchala (Mahajanapada)

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Panchala (Mahajanapada)

A childhood promise, broken years later, split one kingdom into two angry halves. The shamed king performed a fire ritual. Out of the flames came a son built for revenge, and a daughter meant to marry five brothers. That kingdom was Panchala. Its story runs through the Mahabharata.

1 Where was Panchala, and why was it split?

Panchala was one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas of ancient India. It sat in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab, roughly today's western Uttar Pradesh.

What are the key facts?



Panchala among the Mahajanapadas, split by the Ganga into a north and south half. Map by Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

- Region: the Ganga-Yamuna Doab, in western UP.
- Capitals: Ahichhatra in the north and Kampilya in the south.
- Peak era: the epic age of the Mahabharata.
- Famous for: Draupadi and Painted Grey Ware pottery.

What do the key words mean?

- A Mahajanapada was one of sixteen large kingdoms or states named in early Buddhist texts, around the 6th century BCE.
- A swayamvara was an old custom where a princess chose her own husband, often through a contest set by her father.

How was the kingdom laid out?

- Its neighbours were Kuru, Surasena, and Matsya to the west, and Kosala to the east.
- The kingdom split into two halves: North Panchala and South Panchala. The river Bhagirathi, another name for the Ganga here, divided them.
- North Panchala's capital was Ahichhatra, near modern Ramnagar in Bareilly district. South Panchala's capital was Kampilya, in modern Farrukhabad district.
- People lived at Ahichhatra for well over two thousand years. Digs there turned up nearly five thousand old coins.
- Some later texts say Panchala moved toward a group-run style of rule, alongside its older kingship. This claim rests on thinner proof than confirmed group-run states like Vajji, so treat it with care.

Worked example: A question names Ahichhatra or Kampilya and asks which half of Panchala it belonged to. How do you answer?

Ahichhatra goes with North Panchala. Kampilya goes with South Panchala.

What is the memory hook?

Think "A for Ahichhatra, A for Above". Ahichhatra is the northern capital.

> **Quick check 1.** Ahichhatra was the capital of South Panchala. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gutenberg.org; livehistoryindia.com; draupaditrust.org

2 Why did a broken promise matter so much?

The Mahabharata gives Panchala a powerful opening story. It starts with two boyhood friends.

What happened between Drupada and Drona?

- Per the Mahabharata, Drupada, king of Panchala, and Drona once studied together as boys, under the sage Bharadwaja. They became close friends.
- Young Drupada promised to share half his future kingdom with Drona. Once Drupada became king, he broke that promise.
- Drona later became teacher to the Kuru princes, including Arjuna. With his students' help, he defeated Drupada in battle and took half of Panchala as his fee.
- Shamed, Drupada performed a yajna, a fire ritual, seeking a son able to kill Drona.
- Two children came out of that fire: Dhrishtadyumna, meant to fulfil that goal, and his twin sister, Draupadi.

What did each man keep?

- Drona's share was the northern half. Its capital was Ahichhatra.
- Drupada kept the southern half. He lived at Kampilya.
- This is why Panchala had two capitals in the epic.

Think it through. Why does one broken childhood promise matter so much to Panchala's whole later story?

That one broken promise sets off everything else. It splits the friendship, costs Drupada half his kingdom, and pushes him to create the children who later win Panchala the war and Draupadi's famous marriage. One small act of bad faith shapes an entire epic.

What is the memory hook?

Think “promise, fee, fire”. The promise was broken, half the land became the fee, and the fire made the children.

> **Quick check 2.** Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna were born from a special fire ritual, not from a normal birth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gutenberg.org; wisdomlib.org

3 What happened at Draupadi's swayamvara?

Draupadi’s swayamvara is the best-known scene in Panchala’s story. It tied the kingdom to the Pandavas.

How did the contest work?



Arjuna wins Draupadi at her swayamvara, held at Kampilya. Kalighat painting, c. 1885, Victoria and Albert Museum collection. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

- Drupada held Draupadi’s swayamvara at Kampilya, South Panchala’s capital.
- Suitors had to string a heavy bow, then hit a spinning target while looking only at its reflection.

- Versions of the story differ on Karna. In one, Draupadi stopped him from even trying, because of his lower birth. In another, he strung the bow, but she still refused him.
- Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin along with his brothers, won the contest and Draupadi's hand.
- This marriage tied Panchala closely to the Pandavas. That tie later became a real alliance, not just a family bond.

Worked example: A question asks where Draupadi's swayamvara took place. What is the answer?

The answer is Kampilya, South Panchala's capital, not Hastinapura or Indraprastha.

What came after the contest?

- The other princes were angry. A poor Brahmin had won a Kshatriya princess.
- Draupadi chose Arjuna by garlanding him. The brothers then took her home as their wife.

What is the memory hook?

Think "Kampilya, bow, reflection". Those three words hold the whole scene.

> **Quick check 3.** Draupadi's swayamvara took place at Kampilya. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

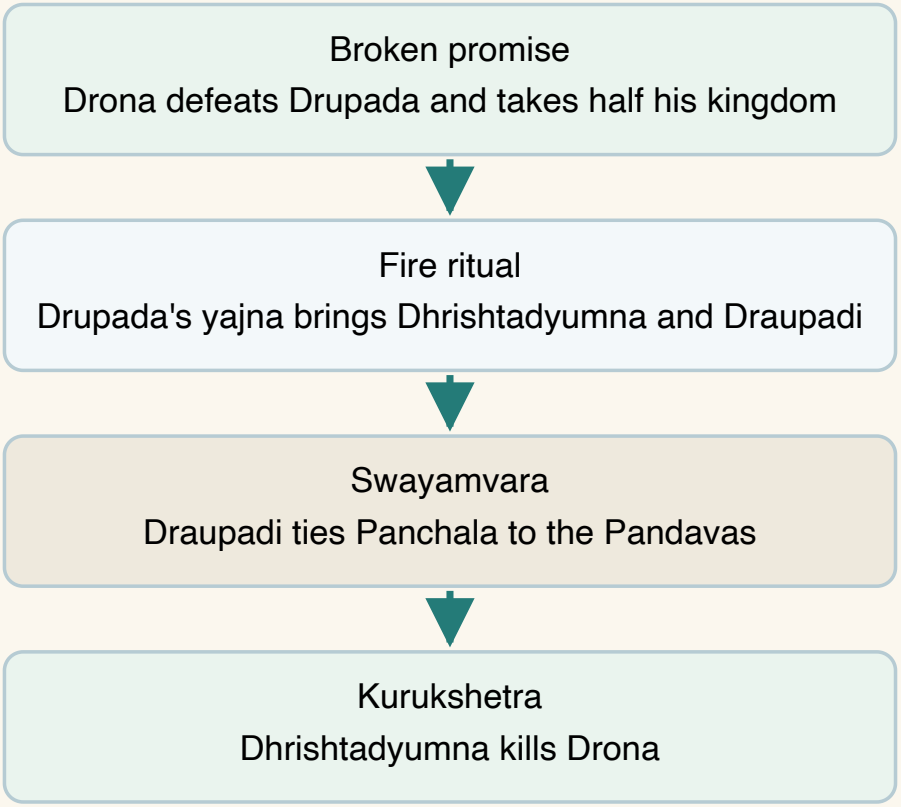
Sources: wisdomlib.org; gutenberg.org

4 How did Panchala fare in the Kurukshetra War?

Panchala fought on the winning side. The old promise came full circle there.

What did Dhrishtadyumna do?

- When the Kurukshetra War began, Panchala fought for the Pandavas. Drona fought against them, for the Kauravas.
- On Krishna and Arjuna's advice, Dhrishtadyumna was made commander-in-chief of the Pandava army.
- He beheaded Drona in battle, completing the very purpose his birth was meant for.
- Drupada himself was killed by Drona earlier in the same war. He never saw his son finish that revenge.



Promise, fire, bond, revenge. Original explanatory diagram.

How does the whole chain fit together?

- Drona breaks Drupada and takes half his kingdom.
- Drupada’s yajna produces Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi.
- Draupadi’s swayamvara ties Panchala to the Pandavas.
- Dhrishtadyumna kills Drona in the Kurukshetra War.

Where does real history enter?

Ahichhatra, Panchala's own capital, also holds a special place in real digging history. It is where diggers first found Painted Grey Ware pottery, now used to date a whole period of history across northern India. See Painted Grey Ware Culture for more.

This article covers Panchala on its own. For the wider sixteen-state picture, see The Mahajanapadas and the Rise of Magadha.

Think it through. Panchala shows up twice in this story: as a famous Mahabharata kingdom, and as a real history site. Why does that matter for exam prep?

The epic story explains why Panchala is famous. But Ahichhatra's role in Painted Grey Ware pottery is a hard, checkable fact from real digs, unlike the story. Exams tend to reward that second kind of fact, the one you can't just guess from the story.

What is the memory hook?

Think "promise, fire, fee, revenge". It runs from Drona's first bargain to his last battle.

> **Quick check 4.** Dhrishtadyumna killed Drona in the Kurukshetra War. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: wisdomlib.org; gutenberg.org; livehistoryindia.com

5 What do the Vedic books say about Panchala?

Panchala is more than an epic kingdom. Old Vedic books name its peoples and kings too.

Which old peoples fed into Panchala?

- A University of Lucknow report on Kampil lists five old families linked to the area.
- These are the Krivis, Turvasus, Keshins, Srinjayas and Somakas.
- The name Panchala is often read as “five peoples joined together”. The lists differ from book to book, so treat the idea with care.

Which kings do the books name?

- The Shatapatha Brahmana names a king called Keshin.
- It also says that kings Kaivya and Durmukha held an Ashvamedha at Kampil. An Ashvamedha was a horse sacrifice that showed a king’s power.
- Pravahana Jaivali is the best-known Panchala king of the Upanishads.

How does the Chandogya Upanishad show Panchala?

- In the Chandogya Upanishad, Shvetaketu goes to the court of the Panchalas.
- King Pravahana Jaivali asks him whether his father has taught him.
- He says yes. The king then puts five questions to him, and the young man cannot answer one.
- This tale leads into the teaching on the five fires.

Think it through. In this tale a king tests a priest’s son and the son fails. What does that tell us about Panchala’s court?

It shows the court was known for learning, not only for war. The tale pictures a king who knew deep ideas and could teach them. That is why Pravahana Jaivali is the Panchala name to remember from the Upanishads.

What is the memory hook?

Think “five peoples, five questions”. Five clans made Panchala, and five questions stumped Shvetaketu.

> **Quick check 5.** In the Chandogya Upanishad, Shvetaketu answered all five questions that Pravahana Jaivali asked. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: draupaditrust.org; wisdomlib.org

6 What do the digs at Kampil show?

Kampil in Farrukhabad district is the old Kampilya. Spades have told a quieter story than the epic.

What is the site like?

- The mound lies on the old bed of the Ganga, called the Burhi Ganga.
- Alexander Cunningham visited it in March 1878 and linked it with Kampilya.
- The Archaeological Survey of India listed it as a protected site in 1920, along with Ahichhatra and Hastinapur.

What did the University of Lucknow dig find?

- The dig went down through 7.15 metres of layers.
- The diggers split them into five periods: before Painted Grey Ware, Painted Grey Ware, Northern Black Polished Ware, Kushana and Gupta, and medieval.
- The oldest layer was about 60 centimetres thick.
- Later pits had disturbed the Kushana and Gupta layers. Clay figures still point to people living there.

What did an Italian team add?

- An Italian team surveyed the site in 1997 and 1999.
- Its report says the fort walls it dug date from after the Mauryas, with Kushana repairs.
- It also says the town was left empty around the 1st century CE, as the Ganga moved away.

What is safe to say?

- The digs show an old town with several periods of life.
- They do not prove the events of the epic.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Kampil: five periods, one old river”. The layers run from pre-Painted Grey Ware to the medieval age.

> **Quick check 6.** The digs at Kampil proved that the events of the Mahabharata took place. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: draupaditrust.org; organiser.org

7 What did the digs at Ahichhatra reveal?

Ahichhatra is the star site of Panchala. It gave archaeology a new kind of pottery.

What is the site like?

- The ruins sit near Ramnagar in Bareilly district.
- A brick wall shaped like a rough triangle runs about 6 km around.

- The site shows eight cultural phases, from Ochre Coloured Pottery to the early medieval age.
- People lived there until the 11th century CE.

What made it famous?

- Digs between 1940 and 1944 first found Painted Grey Ware here.
- Painted Grey Ware is a mark of the early Iron Age in northern India.
- The site grew largest in the Mitra-Panchala period, from about the 3rd century BCE to the 4th century CE.

What do later visitors tell us?

- The Chinese monk Xuanzang came in the 7th century CE.
- He reported twelve monasteries with about a thousand monks, and nine Hindu temples.
- In the Gupta age the city was a hub for clay sculpture. A fine Ganga figure from here is now in the National Museum, Delhi.
- A Jain account links the city's name to Parshvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara. A serpent king is said to have sheltered him from a flood.
- Seals found at the site suggest the Guptas ruled it as a division of their empire.

What is the memory hook?

Think "1940 to 1944, Ahichhatra, first grey pots". The first Painted Grey Ware came from here.

> **Quick check 7.** Painted Grey Ware was first found at Ahichhatra in digs between 1940 and 1944. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

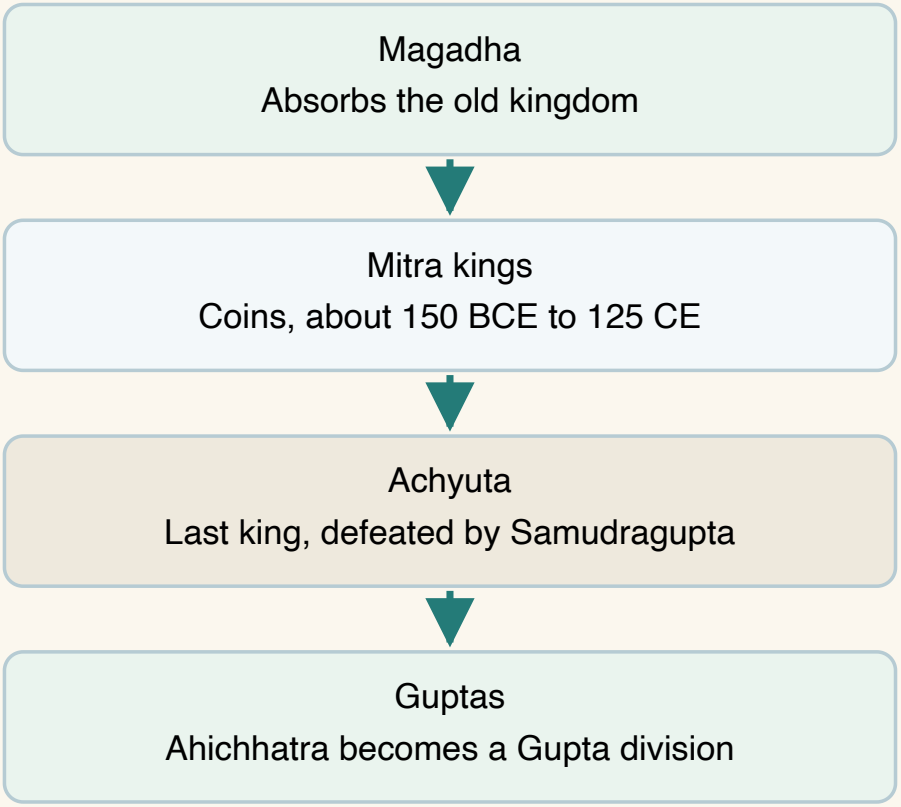
Sources: livehistoryindia.com; ijmra.us

8 How do coins tell the later story of Panchala?

After the epic age, Magadha took over Panchala. Later local kings brought it back, and their coins survive.

Who were the Mitra kings?

- Panchala was absorbed by Magadha. It was later rebuilt under a line of kings with Mitra in their names.
- Their coins are among the earliest Indian coins to carry written names, in Brahmi script.
- Names include Vangapala, Dhruvamitra, Suryamitra, Bhanumitra, Agnimitra and Phalgunimitra.
- Experts place the main series between about 150 BCE and 125 CE. The exact dates are debated.



Absorbed, rebuilt, defeated, absorbed again. Original explanatory diagram.

How do the coins look?

- Each coin has a sunken square stamp. It holds the king’s name and three Panchala symbols.
- The front often shows the god in the king’s name.
- Agnimitra’s coins show Agni, the fire god. Bhanumitra’s show the sun, called Bhanu.

How did Panchala end?

- Achyuta was the last Panchala king. Samudragupta defeated him.

- His coins show a wheel with eight spokes. In one study of 400 coins, 399 had eight spokes.
- After that, Panchala became part of the Gupta empire. Ahichhatra stayed a Gupta division.

Think it through. Why can coins tell us more about kings than a story like the Mahabharata can?

A coin is a real object that a king ordered made. It carries his name and his symbols, and diggers find it in a known layer. A story has no such proof. That is why historians trust coins for the names and the order of kings.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Mitra names, deity faces”. The god on the coin matches the king’s name.

> **Quick check 8.** Achyuta was the last Panchala king, and Samudragupta defeated him. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: coinindia.com; livehistoryindia.com

9 Which mix-ups should you avoid?

Panchala has a few easy traps. Each one is a favourite for exam writers.

What are the traps?

- **North or south?** Ahichhatra is the capital of North Panchala. Kampilya is the capital of South Panchala.
- **Epic or evidence?** The fire-born twins belong to the epic. Painted Grey Ware at Ahichhatra is a dig result.

- **Where did the swayamvara happen?** Kampilya, not Hastinapura or Indraprastha.
- **Whose pottery?** Painted Grey Ware was first found at Ahichhatra, not at Kampil.
- **Who killed Drona?** Dhrishtadyumna, the fire-born son of Drupada.

Misconception: Panchala ended with the Mahabharata war. In fact the kingdom lasted for centuries. Mitra kings struck coins into the early centuries CE, and Achyuta fell to Samudragupta much later.

What are the quick answers?

- Which two capitals did Panchala have? Ahichhatra for the north and Kampilya for the south.
- What broken promise started the rivalry between Drupada and Drona? Drupada's boyhood promise to share half his future kingdom.
- Who won Draupadi's swayamvara at Kampilya? Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin.
- Which pottery is linked to Ahichhatra? Painted Grey Ware, first found there.

What is the memory hook?

Think "A is above, K is key". Ahichhatra is the north, and Kampilya is the south and the swayamvara site.

> **Quick check 9.** Panchala ended with the Mahabharata war. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: livehistoryindia.com; draupaditrust.org; coinindia.com

Practice MCQs

1. Panchala, one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas, was located in which region?

A. The Indus delta

B. The Ganga-Yamuna Doab

C. The Malwa plateau

D. The Deccan plateau

See answer ↓

2. At which Panchala site did diggers first find Painted Grey Ware, in 1940-44?

A. Kampil

B. Hastinapur

C. Ahichhatra

D. Mathura

See answer ↓

3. Which Panchala king questions Shvetaketu in the Chandogya Upanishad?

A. Janaka

B. Drupada

C. Ajatashatru

D. Pravahana Jaivali

See answer ↓

4. In the Lucknow University dig at Kampil, which pottery layer followed Painted Grey Ware?

A. Medieval glazed ware

B. Harappan Red Ware

C. Ochre Coloured Pottery

D. Northern Black Polished Ware

See answer ↓

5. In the Mahabharata, what did Drona take from Drupada as his fee?

A. The kingdom of Kuru

B. Half of Panchala

C. All of Panchala

D. The city of Indraprastha

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The answer is the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. Panchala sat in roughly today's western Uttar Pradesh. It had two halves, North and South Panchala. Memory hook: A for Ahichhatra, A for Above. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The answer is Ahichhatra. Digs there between 1940 and 1944 first found this pottery. It is a mark of the early Iron Age in northern India. Memory hook: first grey pots at Ahichhatra. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The answer is Pravahana Jaivali. Shvetaketu goes to the court of the Panchalas. The king puts five questions to him, and he cannot answer one. Memory hook: five peoples, five questions. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The answer is Northern Black Polished Ware. The dig found five periods. Period I was before Painted Grey Ware, and Period III was Northern Black Polished Ware. Memory hook: Kampil, five periods, one old river. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** The answer is half of Panchala. Drupada had promised Drona half his kingdom and then broke the promise. Drona later defeated him and took half. Memory hook: promise, fee, fire. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** it is false. Ahichhatra was the capital of North Panchala. ↑ 1
2. **True.** Drupada held the yajna to get a son who could kill Drona. ↑ 2
3. **True.** Kampilya was South Panchala's capital. ↑ 3
4. **True.** His birth had been meant for exactly this. ↑ 4
5. **False.** it is false. He could not answer even one. ↑ 5
6. **False.** it is false. The digs show an old town, not epic events. ↑ 6
7. **True.** It is a mark of the early Iron Age in northern India. ↑ 7
8. **True.** After that, Panchala became part of the Gupta empire. ↑ 8
9. **False.** it is false. Mitra kings struck coins for centuries after the epic age. ↑ 9

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