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Samudragupta: Conquests and the Prayaga Prashasti

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Samudragupta: Conquests and the Prayaga Prashasti

Samudragupta won so many wars because he did not treat every defeated king the same way. He ruled in the 4th century CE. His court poet Harisena recorded it all on a pillar at Prayaga.

1 Who was Samudragupta?

Samudragupta was the second great Gupta king. He was the son of Chandragupta I. His father chose him as heir out of all his sons. He ruled in the 4th century CE, and the exact years are still debated.

What did he want?

- He wanted to bring much of India under one power.
- He fought many wars to reach that goal.
- His conquests made the Gupta Empire large and rich.

Did he fight in person?

- Yes. He fought many battles himself and led from the front.
- Harisena says his body carried the scars of a hundred battles.
- The inscription calls him a fearless fighter.
- A king who shares the danger earns the loyalty of his soldiers.

Who was Kacha?

- Some coins carry the name Kacha.
- Scholars still debate who he was.
- One view says Kacha was an elder brother of Samudragupta.

- Another view says Kacha was the king's own personal name.
- Ray Chaudhuri says the new king may also have been known as Kacha.
- Either way, the Prashasti names Samudragupta as the chosen heir.

Why is he called the "Napoleon of India"?

The historian Vincent Smith gave him this nickname. It was a modern label. No ancient text calls him that. It only tells us that later writers saw him as a great general.

What is the memory hook?

Think "chosen heir, chosen wars".

> **Quick check 1.** Samudragupta was chosen as heir by his father Chandragupta I. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; jainqq.org; livehistoryindia.com

2 How was the north won?

In the north, Samudragupta used force and kept the land. The Prashasti lists the northern kings he uprooted. Their lands became part of the Gupta Empire.

Who were the northern kings?

- The list includes Rudradeva, Matila and Nagadatta.
- It also names Chandravarman, Ganapatinaga, Nagasena and Achyuta.
- Nandin and Balavarman close the list.
- The text calls this region Aryavarta, the northern heartland.

What happened to the forest kings?

Kings of the forest regions were made his servants. These regions are called Atavika Rajyas in the inscription. They were a lower rank than the tribute-paying frontier states.

Why did he annex the north?

The north lay on his borders. Rule there was easier to hold. Think of a shopkeeper who owns the shop next door. He can watch it every day.

What is the memory hook?

Think “near land, keep the land”.

> **Quick check 2.** Samudragupta annexed the lands of the northern Aryavarta kings. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

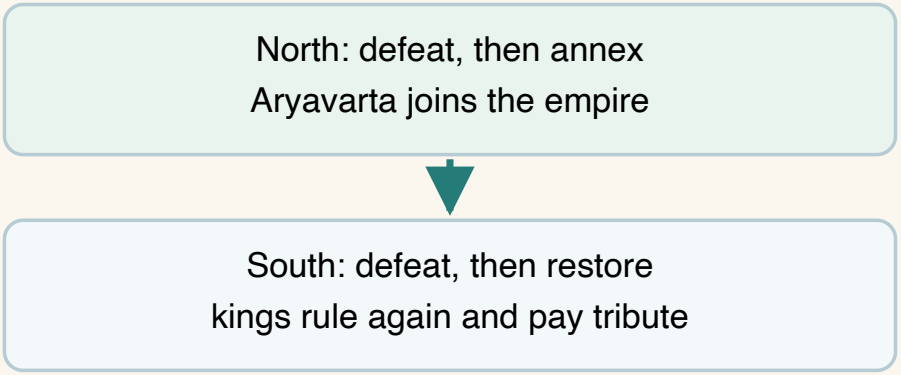
Sources: worldhistory.org; jainqq.org; livehistoryindia.com

3 How was the south treated?

In the south, Samudragupta did something different. He defeated the kings. Then he let them rule again. They paid tribute but kept their kingdoms.

Which southern kings are named?

- Mahendra of Kosala and Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara.
- Vishnugopa of Kanchi, a ruler in present-day Tamil Nadu.
- Hastivarman of Vengi and Kubera of Devarashtra.
- Dhananjaya of Kusthalapura was also on the list.



Two regions, two policies. Original explanatory diagram.

Why did he give the land back?

Ray Chaudhuri calls this “dharmavijaya”, the way of a righteous conqueror. In the north Samudragupta was a “digvijayi”, a conqueror of the quarters. In the south he defeated kings but did not annex their land. The south was far away. Ruling it directly would have cost too much.

Is this like a school prefect?

Yes. The head teacher cannot watch every corridor. So a trusted prefect keeps order and reports back. A tributary king played the same role for the emperor.

What is the memory hook?

Think “north kept, south returned”.

> **Quick check 3.** Samudragupta annexed the southern kingdoms, as he did in the north. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; jainqq.org

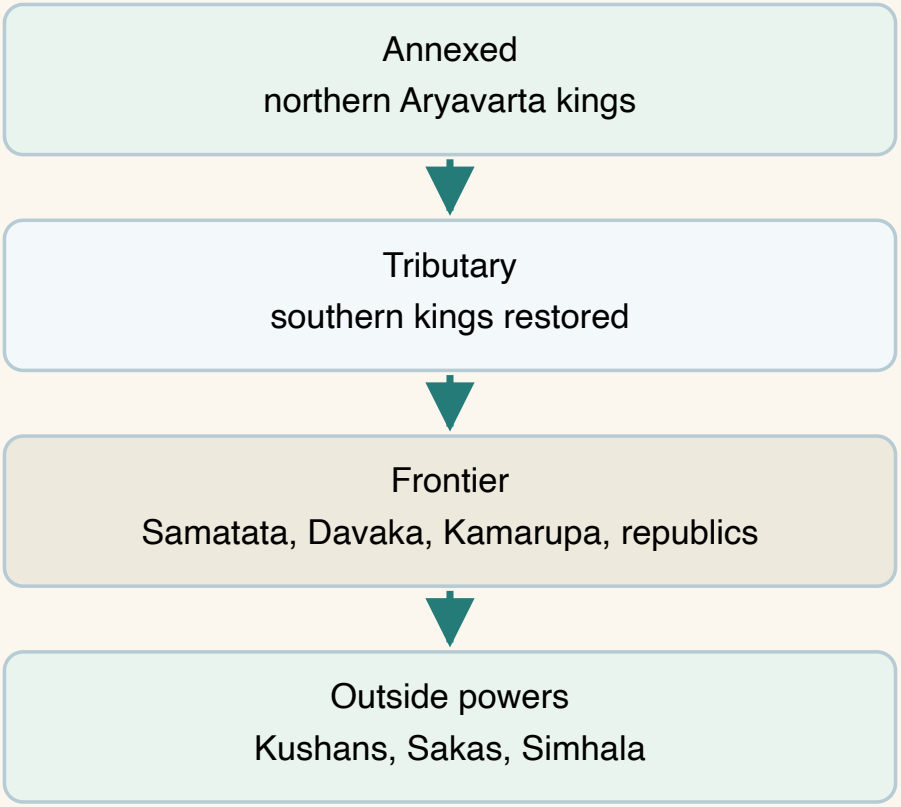
Sources: jainqq.org; livehistoryindia.com

4 Who paid tribute?

The Prashasti names rulers beyond the conquered lands. They paid tribute, obeyed orders and came to his court.

Which rulers were on the frontier?

- Samatata, Davaka and Kamarupa lay in the east.
- Samatata was part of eastern Bengal.
- Kamarupa was roughly in Assam.
- Tribal republics such as the Malavas and Yaudheyas lay in the north-west.
- The Madrakas were another republic on the list.



From most control to least control. Original explanatory diagram.

Which outside powers sent gifts?

- The Kushans and the Saka Murundas are named.
- The king of Simhala, or Sri Lanka, is named too.
- That king was Meghavarna.
- He sent gifts and asked leave to build a monastery at Bodh Gaya.
- Samudragupta gave his permission.

How do the tiers compare?

Tier	Who	Treatment
Annexed	Northern Aryavarta kings	Uprooted; land joined the empire
Restored	Southern kings such as Vishnugopa	Defeated, then ruled again as tributaries
Frontier	Samatata, Davaka, Kamarupa, and republics like the Malavas	Paid tribute, obeyed orders, came to court
Forest	Atavika kings	Made servants
Outside	Kushans, Sakas, Simhala	Sent gifts or asked favours

Why does this matter?

The pillar shows layers of power. Some kings lost land. Some kept land but paid tribute. Some only sent gifts. An exam may ask where one king fits.

What is the memory hook?

Think “lose, pay, or gift”.

> **Quick check 4.** The king of Sri Lanka was a tribute-paying frontier state. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org

Sources: jainqq.org

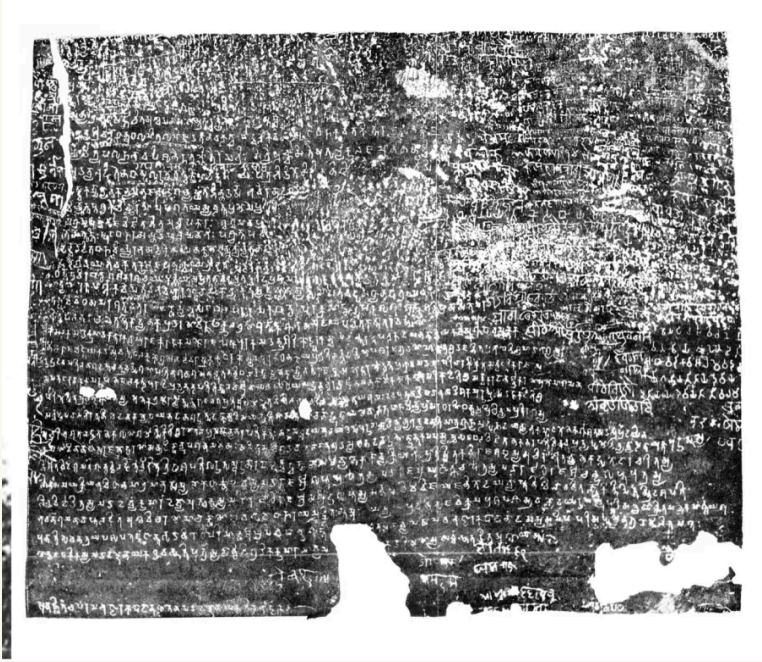
Sources: jainqq.org; livehistoryindia.com

5 Who wrote the Prashasti?

Harisena wrote the Prayaga Prashasti. He was a court poet and a high official. A prashasti is a Sanskrit poem in praise of a ruler. This one is also called the Allahabad Pillar Inscription.

What do we know about Harisena?

- Ray Chaudhuri says he was the son of Dhruvabhuti.
- He was also one of the king’s great commanders.
- Harisena wrote about the king in praise, so it is a one-sided record.
- Even so, it is the chief source for these campaigns.



A rubbing of the Prayaga Prashasti, inscribed on the Allahabad Pillar. Photo by J.F. Fleet, c. 1870, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Why is the pillar special?

- The pillar had already been inscribed with three types of Ashoka's edicts.
- Samudragupta's record was added centuries later on the same pillar.
- So one stone carries two rulers' words.
- Only the later text praises Samudragupta.

Is a praise poem reliable?

Treat it like a school prize speech. It tells true events but chooses kind words. A historian checks it against coins and other records.

What is the memory hook?

Think "Ashoka's stone, Samudragupta's story".

> **Quick check 5.** Harisena, who wrote the Prashasti, was also a high official. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; jainqq.org

Sources: livehistoryindia.com; whatisindia.com

6 Was he only a warrior?

No. Samudragupta was also a poet and a musician. His coins show both sides of the king.

What do his coins show?

- The archer and battle-axe coins show his strength.
- The lyrist coins show him playing the veena, a stringed instrument.

- A coin with the legend Ashvamedha-parakramah marks the horse sacrifice.
- The horse sacrifice, or Ashvamedha, was a ritual claiming a king's rule.



A gold coin of Samudragupta. Photo: PHGCOM, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Was he a poet too?

- Yes. Harisena calls him a skilled poet.
- Modern writers repeat this praise of his art.
- A king who writes verse gains a place among scholars.

- Ray Chaudhuri notes that the lyrist coins agree with Harisena's praise.

Why show a king with a veena?

A king who only fights is feared. A king who also loves art is admired. The coins told people he was both strong and cultured.

What is the memory hook?

Think "bow on one coin, veena on another".

> **Quick check 6.** Samudragupta's coins show only his skill as a warrior. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; jainqq.org

Sources: livehistoryindia.com; jainqq.org

7 What do exams ask?

Exams test who the Prashasti praises. The wrong options use famous kings from other ages. Keep the carver of the pillar and the subject of the eulogy apart.

How do you answer it?

The answer is (c) Samudragupta. Ashoka's edicts are on the pillar, but the eulogy is not about Ashoka. Harshavardhana and Bindusara lived in other ages.

What is the memory hook?

Think "pillar of two, praise for one".

Quick check 7. The Prayaga Prashasti praises Ashoka because it shares his pillar. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org; livehistoryindia.com; whatisindia.com

Practice MCQs

1. Which pair of kings did Samudragupta defeat and then restore as tributary rulers?

A. The Malavas and Yaudheyas

B. Rudradeva and Matila

C. Meghavarna of Simhala and the Kushans

D. Vishnugopa of Kanchi and Hastivarman of Vengi

See answer ↓

2. Who composed the Prayaga Prashasti, the praise poem for Samudragupta?

A. Vishakhadatta

B. Harisena

C. Bana

D. Kalidasa

See answer ↓

3. Which king of Sri Lanka sent gifts to Samudragupta and asked to build a monastery at Bodh Gaya?

A. Meghavarna

B. Parakramabahu

C. Mahinda

D. Dutthagamani

See answer ↓

4. Ray Chaudhuri describes Samudragupta's policy towards the southern kings as which of these?

A. Dharmavijaya, a righteous conqueror

B. Ashvamedha, a horse sacrifice

C. Chakravartin, a universal ruler

D. Digvijaya, a conqueror of the quarters

See answer ↓

5. Which type of Samudragupta's gold coins shows him playing the veena?

A. Tiger type

B. Archer type

C. Lyrist type

D. Battle-axe type

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The answer is Vishnugopa of Kanchi and Hastivarman of Vengi. Both were southern kings. Samudragupta defeated them, then let them rule again as tributaries. Rudradeva and Matila were northern kings whose lands were annexed. The Malavas and Yaudheyas were frontier republics. Meghavarna and the Kushans were outside powers. Memory hook: north kept, south returned. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is Harisena. He was a court poet, a high official and a commander under Samudragupta. His poem is the chief source for the king's campaigns. Kalidasa, Bana and Vishakhadatta were later writers or from other courts. Memory hook: Ashoka's stone, Samudragupta's story. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The answer is Meghavarna. He was a contemporary of Samudragupta. He sent an embassy with gifts and got leave to build a monastery near the holy tree at Bodh Gaya. Mahinda, Dutthagamani and Parakramabahu belong to other ages. Memory hook: lose, pay, or gift. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The answer is dharmavijaya. In the south, Samudragupta defeated kings but did not annex their land. In the north he acted as a digvijayi, a conqueror of the quarters. A chakravartin is a universal ruler, and Ashvamedha is a ritual, not a policy. Memory hook: north kept, south returned. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The answer is the lyrist type. It shows the king playing the veena, a stringed instrument. The archer, battle-axe and tiger types show his strength as a warrior. Memory hook: bow on one coin, veena on another. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** He was picked from among the sons. ↑ 1
2. **True.** Their lands joined the Gupta Empire. ↑ 2
3. **False.** it is false. He restored southern kings as tributaries. ↑ 3
4. **False.** it is false. He was an outside power who sent gifts. ↑ 4
5. **True.** He was a court poet and an official. ↑ 5
6. **False.** it is false. Lyrist coins show him with a veena. ↑ 6
7. **False.** it is false. The eulogy praises Samudragupta. ↑ 7

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