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The Dhauli Rock-Cut Elephant: India’s Earliest Buddhist Sculpture

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The Dhauli Rock-Cut Elephant: India’s Earliest Buddhist Sculpture

Four famous Indian monuments, four different centuries. Ranking them by age is a classic exam trap, and the earliest one surprises most people.

> **Oldest** Dhauli elephant, 3rd c. BCE
> **2nd** Udayagiri Varaha, 5th c. CE
> **3rd** Mahabalipuram, 7th c. CE
> **Newest** Lingaraja Temple, 11th c. CE

1 The oldest of the four monuments

1.1 Which of the four monuments is oldest?

The rock-cut elephant at Dhauli is the oldest. It dates to Ashoka’s reign, centuries before the other three. Think of the four monuments as four people standing in a queue by age. Dhauli is the eldest, and the exam usually asks who stands where.

1.2 When was the Dhauli elephant carved?

The ASI dates it to the Mauryan period, the 3rd century BCE. It sits above Ashoka’s rock edicts. That link matters: the elephant and the edicts belong to the same Mauryan site, so the site’s date helps fix the elephant’s date.

See Ashokan Edicts as Inscriptions for the edicts.

1.3 How much of the elephant is actually carved?

Only the forepart of the elephant is carved. The rest merges into the rock.

So the animal looks as if it is emerging from the rock. The sculptor used the natural boulder as part of the animal. This is why only the front is shaped, and the rest stays as plain rock.



The rock-cut elephant above the Ashokan edicts at Dhauli, Odisha. Photo: Rajashree Talukdar, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

1.4 Who rediscovered the site?

The British officer Markham Kittoe discovered the Dhauli edicts in 1837.

The ASI calls the rock-cut forepart of the elephant the earliest sculptural piece of Odisha. The ASI says the forepart is labelled Gajatme. Rediscovery does not mean creation. Kittoe found the site again in modern times. The carving itself is from Ashoka's age.

1.5 What is the full chronological ranking?

Oldest to newest: Dhauli elephant (3rd c. BCE), Udayagiri Varaha (5th c. CE), Mahabalipuram (7th c. CE), Lingaraja Temple (11th c. CE). A simple memory trick is the order of centuries: 3rd BCE, then 5th, 7th and 11th CE. The numbers only grow, so there is one clean sequence to learn.

Oldest to newest

1. Dhauli elephant	3rd c. BCE	Mauryan
2. Udayagiri Varaha	5th c. CE	Gupta
3. Mahabalipuram	7th c. CE	Pallava
4. Lingaraja Temple	11th c. CE	Somavamshi

Original diagram: the four monuments in order of age. The green row is the oldest.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: The Dhauli elephant is the oldest of the four monuments. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: The whole elephant at Dhauli is fully carved in the round. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: en.wikipedia.org; ignca.gov.in; whowaswho-indology.info; mcqquestion.com

2 Dhauli, Udayagiri and Mahabalipuram

2.1 What does the Dhauli elephant represent for Odisha?

The ASI calls it the earliest sculptural piece of Odisha. In other words, when you trace the story of sculpture in the region, you start here.

2.2 How do historians read the elephant's meaning?

The ASI gives one reading of the elephant.

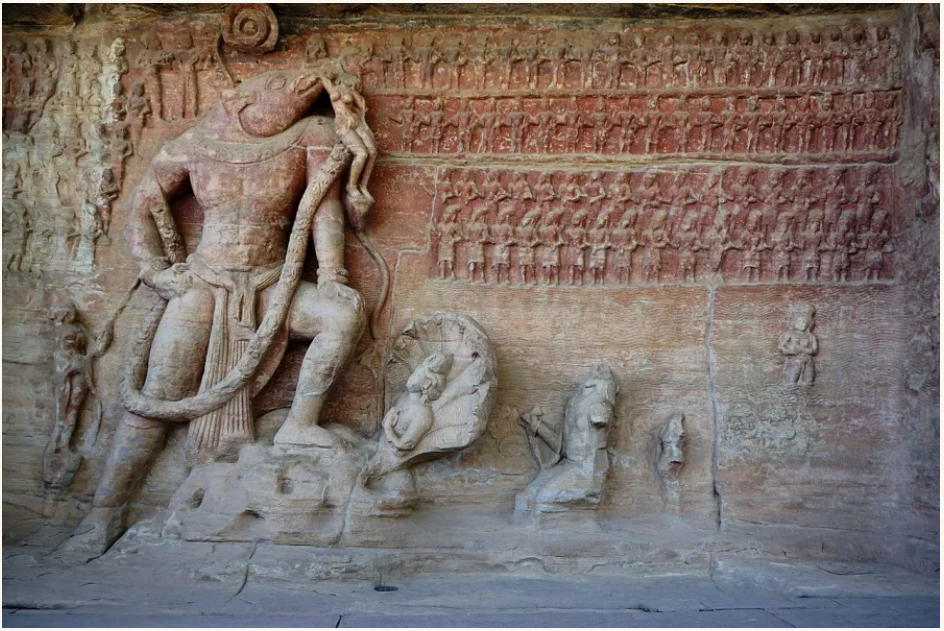
The ASI says the elephant, labelled Gajatme, symbolises the conception of the Buddha.

Separately, Dhauli is widely believed to be the site of the Kalinga War. Keep the two ideas apart. One is how the ASI reads the elephant. The other is a belief about the place.

2.3 What is the Udayagiri Varaha?

The Varaha image at Udayagiri, near Vidisha, is Gupta work of about 400 CE, the early 5th century.

It shows Vishnu as a boar. He lifts the earth goddess Bhudevi from the cosmic ocean, while gods and sages look on. The story is about rescue. The world has sunk, and Vishnu in boar form lifts it back up.



The Varaha relief in Cave 5 at Udayagiri near Vidisha. Vishnu as the boar lifts the earth goddess. Photographer: Dharma. CC BY 2.0, Wikimedia Commons.

2.4 How do we know the Udayagiri site's date?

A Cave 6 inscription is dated Gupta year 82, about 401 CE. A Cave 20 inscription is dated 425 CE.

Another inscription names Chandragupta II as a visitor.

Some scholars see Chandragupta II in a worshipper in the Varaha panel. That is an interpretation, not an inscribed fact. For the exam, treat inscriptions as firm evidence and scholars' guesses as opinion.

2.5 What are the Mahabalipuram monuments?

The rock-cut monuments at Mahabalipuram are from the 7th and 8th centuries CE, under the Pallavas.

The town is named for Mamalla, Narasimhavarman I. Mahabalipuram is therefore a Pallava site. See Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman I.



The Descent of the Ganges relief at Mahabalipuram, a Pallava work. Image by Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0, from Wikimedia Commons.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: The Udayagiri Varaha shows Vishnu in boar form. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: The Lingaraja Temple is older than the monuments at Mahabalipuram. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: en.wikipedia.org

3 The newest, and the time span

3.1 Which monument is actually the newest?

The Lingaraja Temple at Bhubaneswar dates to the 11th century CE. It is the newest of the four.

The Somavamshi dynasty is credited with building it. Some accounts name the king Yayati I. So Lingaraja belongs to a dynasty of eastern India, far from the Gupta and Pallava centres in the other monuments.

3.2 What is the Kalinga Deula style?

Lingaraja is the best-known example of Kalinga temple architecture.

It has four parts in a line: the sanctum (vimana), an assembly hall (jagamohana), a festival hall (natamandira) and a hall of offerings (bhogamandapa).

The heights fall in that order. The central tower rises about 55 metres. Think of it as a building that steps down as you walk away from the shrine, from the tallest tower to the lowest hall.



The Lingaraja Temple, Bhubaneswar, an 11th-century Kalinga-style temple. Credit: Benjamin Preciado, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

3.3 How wide a time span do the four monuments cover?

Together they span roughly 1,300 years of Indian art and architecture. That is a long story. It runs from Mauryan rock carving, through Gupta and Pallava work, to a Somavamshi temple.

3.4 Why do exam questions ask about this ranking?

This question tests whether you know each monument's period, not just its name.

A grand monument like Lingaraja can look old and still be the newest in the set. Do not judge age by size or fame. Learn each monument with its dynasty and its century.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: The Lingaraja Temple is the newest of the four. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: en.wikipedia.org; incredibleindia.gov.in

Connect the lesson to a previous-year question

UPSC CSP 2015, GS Paper I, asked which of four monuments was made earliest. The options were the Lingaraja Temple, the rock-cut elephant at Dhauli, the rock-cut monuments at Mahabalipuram and the Varaha image at Udayagiri.

The answer is the rock-cut elephant at Dhauli. Open the full 2015 paper to see the original question.

The trap: Lingaraja looks ancient and huge, so it tempts you. It is actually the newest.

How to prepare: learn the four in order, with the dynasty for each: Mauryan, Gupta, Pallava, Somavamshi. A question can swap any two and ask you to spot the error.

Remember this

- **Dhauli elephant:** 3rd c. BCE, Mauryan. Oldest. Only half carved from the rock.
- **Udayagiri Varaha:** 5th c. CE, Gupta. Vishnu rescues Bhudevi.
- **Mahabalipuram:** 7th c. CE, Pallava. Rock-cut monuments.
- **Lingaraja Temple:** 11th c. CE, Somavamshi. Looks oldest, is the newest.

Explain it back: Say why the Dhauli elephant is the oldest of the four. Then say why Lingaraja is easy to mistake for the oldest.

Practice MCQs

1. The rock-cut elephant at Dhauli was carved during whose reign?

A. Chandragupta Maurya

B. Ashoka

C. Kanishka

D. Samudragupta

See answer ↓

2. Which of these monuments was made earliest?

A. Lingaraja Temple at Bhubaneswar

B. Rock-cut monuments at Mahabalipuram

C. Rock-cut elephant at Dhauli

D. Varaha image at Udayagiri

See answer ↓

3. Which part of the Dhauli elephant is actually carved?

A. The front part of the elephant

B. The whole body in the round

C. Only the tusks

D. Only the tail and hind legs

See answer ↓

4. What does the Udayagiri Varaha panel show?

A. Buddha preaching at Sarnath

B. Shiva as Nataraja

C. Durga slaying Mahishasura

D. Vishnu as a boar lifting the earth goddess

See answer ↓

5. An inscription in Udayagiri's Cave 6 is dated Gupta year 82.

Which date is that, roughly?

A. 301 CE

B. 401 CE

C. 501 CE

D. 201 CE

See answer ↓

6. Which dynasty patronised the rock-cut monuments at Mahabalipuram?

A. Pallava

B. Chalukya

C. Chola

D. Rashtrakuta

See answer ↓

7. Which dynasty is credited with building the Lingaraja Temple?

A. Pallava

B. Somavamshi

C. Gupta

D. Mauryan

See answer ↓

8. The Lingaraja Temple is the best-known example of which temple style?

A. Hoysala

B. Dravida

C. Vesara

D. Kalinga

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The Dhauli elephant dates to Ashoka's reign, carved above his rock edicts around the 3rd century BCE. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The Dhauli elephant is from Ashoka's time, about the 3rd century BCE. The other three are from the 5th to the 11th century CE. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** Only the forepart is carved. The rest of the body merges into the surrounding stone. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The panel shows Vishnu as a boar. He lifts the earth goddess Bhudevi from the cosmic ocean. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** Gupta year 82 corresponds to about 401 CE. This anchors the Udayagiri site in the Gupta period. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** The Mahabalipuram monuments are from the 7th and 8th centuries CE. They were built under the Pallavas. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** The Somavamshi dynasty is credited with building the Lingaraja Temple in the 11th century CE. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** Lingaraja is the best-known example of Kalinga architecture. Its tower rises about 55 metres. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** It dates to Ashoka's reign, about the 3rd century BCE. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Only the forepart is carved. ↑ 2
3. **True.** Vishnu as a boar lifts the earth goddess. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Mahabalipuram is 7th century CE. Lingaraja is 11th century CE. ↑ 4
5. **True.** It dates to the 11th century CE. ↑ 5

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