ANCIENT ODISHA

The Date of Kharavela

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • October 4, 2026 • 28 min read



Few questions in the history of ancient Odisha have generated as much scholarly discussion as the date of Kharavela. The debate has lasted for more than a century and a quarter, and the proposals advanced have ranged across nearly three hundred years: from the late 3rd century BCE to the early 1st century CE. The matter is not merely of antiquarian interest. Kharavela's reign is the chronological anchor for the history of post-Mauryan Kalinga. His date determines when the Mahameghavahana dynasty rose to power, how long Kalinga remained under Mauryan control after Ashoka, and when the great caves of Udayagiri and Khandagiri were excavated.

The question also has implications far beyond Odisha. The Hathigumpha inscription appears to refer to the Satavahana king Satakarni, to the Nandas, to Magadha and its king, possibly to a Greek ruler, and to the Pandyas and a Tamil confederacy. If Kharavela can be dated, these references help to date other dynasties and events. If his date is wrongly fixed, errors spread through the chronology of much of India. The art historian Walter Spink argued exactly this. In his view, the early dating of Kharavela, and the consequent assumption that he was a contemporary of an early Satakarni, led scholars to date many Satavahana inscriptions and early Buddhist monuments of the Deccan two or three centuries too early. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription)

The difficulty arises from the nature of the evidence. The Hathigumpha inscription records events by Kharavela’s regnal years, but it does not date them in any continuous era. It is badly damaged, especially in the middle lines that contain most of the possible synchronisms. Many of its key words can be read in more than one way. Of its seventeen lines, only about four can be read completely, and lines 7 to 15 show severe damage and large gaps. (EPFL Graph Search: Kharavela; Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription) Every argument about Kharavela’s date therefore depends, sooner or later, on the reading of a damaged passage, and different readings lead to different chronologies.

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1. The History of the Debate

Indraji and the “Maurya era” (1885)

The first serious attempt to date the inscription was made by **Bhagwan Lal Indraji**, who presented his reading at the Sixth International Congress of Orientalists at Leiden. Indraji read a passage in line 16 as containing the words *Raja-Muriya-kala*, which he took as a reference to an era of the Maurya kings, together with a number that he interpreted as the year 165 of that era. (A.C. Mittal, *An Early History of Orissa*; Jainism in Kalingadesa) On this basis he concluded that Kharavela was born in 127 BCE and became king in 103 BCE. (EPFL Graph Search: Kharavela) Other scholars who accepted the existence of a Maurya era, counting it from the accession of Chandragupta Maurya around 321 BCE, arrived at somewhat different figures. Some placed the inscription around 157 BCE and Kharavela’s accession around 170 BCE. The “Maurya era” reading was accepted for some time by many historians, including V.A. Smith.

Fleet, Lüders and the rejection of the era (1910 onwards)

The Maurya era interpretation was challenged by **J.F. Fleet** in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1910), who denied that the inscription contained any date in an era. Fleet was followed by **Heinrich Lüders**. Lüders then turned to the reference in line 6 to a canal opened by a Nanda king, reading the interval as 103 years (*ti-vasa-sata*). Counting this from about 322 BCE, the supposed end of the Nanda dynasty, he placed Kharavela’s accession around 224 BCE. (Mittal, *An Early History of Orissa*) Fleet’s critics also noted that if Chandragupta had founded an era, it is inexplicable that Ashoka dated his own edicts in regnal years rather than in that era, and that no other instance of a Maurya era is known. (Chronological Systems of Gujarat)

Konow, Jayaswal and Banerji

The Maurya era theory was revived by **Sten Konow** and taken up by **K.P. Jayaswal** and **R.D. Banerji**. After repeated examination of the rock, however, Jayaswal and Banerji abandoned the idea of a dated era. Their joint edition in *Epigraphia Indica* vol. 20 (1929–30) nonetheless placed Kharavela in the first half of the 2nd century BCE. They based this on other synchronisms, notably the identification of the Yavana king with Demetrius and of Bahasatimita with the Shunga king Pushyamitra. (Mittal, *An Early History of Orissa*; Live History India) This “early” chronology became widely influential and still appears in many textbooks.

The re-reading of line 16

Closer study of line 16 led to a decisive reinterpretation. B.M. Barua first read the disputed words differently and later corrected his reading to *makhiya-kala*. D.C. Sircar read *mu[khi]ya-kala*, and Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya likewise read *mukhya-kala*, “the principal art” or “the main era”, rather than *Muriya-kala*. (Chronological Systems of Gujarat; EPFL Graph Search: Kharavela) Other scholars came to understand the passage as referring to the compilation of Jain canonical texts that had been lost or disrupted during the Maurya period, rather than to a date. (Bool Chand, *Jainism in Kalingadesa*) By the mid-20th century, the view that the inscription contains no date in a Maurya era had largely prevailed.

Sircar and the “late” chronology

D.C. Sircar, in his *Select Inscriptions* (1942; 2nd edn 1965) and other works, argued on palaeographic, linguistic and historical grounds that the inscription belongs to the second half of the 1st century BCE or possibly the early decades of the 1st century CE. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription) His arguments, discussed below, were supported by the work of art historians such as Walter Spink and by subsequent research on Satavahana chronology. They have been followed by many recent scholars.

Summary of proposed dates

Scholar	Approximate date proposed for Kharavela	Principal basis
Bhagwan Lal Indraji (1885)	Accession c. 103 BCE	Reading of a “Maurya era” year 165 in line 16
Maurya-era supporters (e.g. Sten Konow)	Inscription c. 157 BCE; accession c. 170 BCE	Maurya era counted from c. 321 BCE
H. Lüders	Accession c. 224 BCE	Nanda interval read as 103 years from c. 322 BCE; no Maurya era
K.P. Jayaswal and R.D. Banerji (*EI* 20)	First half of the 2nd century BCE	Yavana king = Demetrius; Bahasatimita = Pushyamitra
Shashi Kant (1971/2000)	Inscription c. 172 BCE	Early-chronology reconstruction
D.C. Sircar	Second half of the 1st century BCE, or early 1st century CE	Palaeography, language, Bahasatimita of Pabhosa/Mora, Nanda interval as 300 years
Walter Spink and many recent scholars	1st century BCE	Satavahana chronology and art history

(Mittal, *An Early History of Orissa*; Shashi Kant, *Hathigumpha Inscription and Bhabru Edict*, chronological table; Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription)

2. The Internal Evidence: Synchronisms in the Hathigumpha Inscription

Since the inscription contains no era date, scholars have sought to date Kharavela by identifying rulers and events that it mentions and whose dates can be established from other sources. Each of these possible synchronisms is examined below.

The Nanda interval (line 6)

In describing his fifth regnal year, Kharavela records that he brought into the capital a canal excavated by a Nanda king. The interval is expressed by the Prakrit phrase *ti-vasa-sata*. This can be understood as “103 years” or as “300 years”, and some early scholars, including Jayaswal, also considered whether it referred to the year 103 of a Nanda era. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription; *Epigraphia Indica* vol. 20, notes)

The consequences of these readings are dramatic. If the Nanda king is taken to be one of the last Nandas, ruling until about the 320s BCE, the reading of 103 years places Kharavela’s fifth year in the late 3rd century BCE. That is the basis of Lüders’ date of about 224 BCE for his accession. The reading of 300 years places it in the late 1st century BCE. D.C. Sircar, agreeing with Barua’s view that the phrase could mean 300 years, argued that this must be the correct interpretation. Since the Nandas were overthrown in the late 4th century BCE, and since Kharavela cannot belong to the 3rd century BCE, the reading of 300 years is the only one consistent with the other evidence. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription) The phrase is thus capable of supporting either an early or a late date, depending on how it is read and which Nanda is meant. On its own it cannot settle the question.

Satakarni (line 4)

In his second year, according to the Jayaswal–Banerji reading, Kharavela sent an army to the west “disregarding Satakarni”. Satakarni is a well-known name of the Satavahana dynasty of the Deccan, and the earliest prominent ruler of that name is Satakarni I, husband of queen Naganika, whose Nanaghat inscription records his achievements. If Kharavela’s Satakarni is this king, the date of Kharavela depends on the date of the early Satavahanas. That is itself a contested question. Earlier scholars, following the long chronology suggested by the Puranas, placed the beginning of the Satavahana dynasty in the 3rd century BCE and Satakarni I in the early 2nd century BCE. Many later scholars have argued for a shorter chronology, placing the beginnings of the dynasty in the 1st century BCE. Walter Spink argued that the early dating of Satakarni, partly derived from the early dating of Kharavela,

was mistaken, and that both should be moved later. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription) The Satakarni synchronism therefore does not independently fix Kharavela's date. It links his date to that of the early Satavahanas, which must be established on other grounds.

The Yavana king (line 8)

The most famous of the proposed synchronisms is the passage in line 8 that Jayaswal and Banerji read as stating that, on hearing of Kharavela's exploits, a Yavana (Greek) king named "Dimita" retreated to Mathura. They identified this king with Demetrius I of Bactria, whose campaigns in India have often been dated to the early 2nd century BCE. The identification therefore provided strong support for an early date for Kharavela. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription)

This reading is now generally regarded as extremely doubtful. The passage is badly damaged, and Jayaswal himself admitted that he read the name only with great difficulty. W.W. Tarn, the historian of the Greeks in Bactria and India, observed that the inscription is so defaced that almost everything about it is a matter of controversy or conjecture. (Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge) Ramaprasad Chanda and others pointed out that the identification produces chronological impossibilities. D.C. Sircar showed that dating Kharavela by Demetrius would push the Nandas back into the early 5th century BCE and create contradictions with the accepted dates of the Mauryas, the Buddha and Mahavira. Sailendra Nath Sen concluded that if a Yavana ruler is mentioned, he was certainly not Demetrius and may have been a later Indo-Greek ruler of the eastern Punjab. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription) Romila Thapar, by contrast, has continued to describe the Yavana king as probably the Indo-Greek Demetrios, which shows that the question is not entirely closed. Most scholars, however, no longer regard this passage as a reliable basis for dating.

Bahasatimita, king of Magadha (line 12)

In his twelfth year, Kharavela is said to have made Bahasatimita, king of Magadha, bow at his feet. Jayaswal identified Bahasatimita with the Shunga king **Pushyamitra**, arguing that the god Brihaspati is the regent of the lunar asterism Pushya, so that the two names could designate the same person. This argument has been rejected as far-fetched by most

scholars. (Mittal, *An Early History of Orissa*) Sircar regarded the identification with Pushyamitra as chronologically impossible.

A more promising identification is with a king named **Bahasatimita** or **Brihaspatimitra** known from other sources. Cast and struck coins bearing the legend *Bahasatimitasa* have been found at Kosam, ancient Kaushambi. A king of this name is mentioned in the **Pabhosa** cave inscription near Kaushambi, in which Ashadhasena describes himself as his maternal uncle, and in an inscription from **Mora** near Mathura. (*Epigraphia Indica* vol. 20, notes; Shashi Kant, discussion of Bahasatimita; Indoskript: Pabhosa inscription) Brihaspatimitra is now generally regarded as a ruler of the Mitra dynasty of Kaushambi, and his reign has been placed by some scholars around the mid-1st century BCE. (Wikipedia: Brihaspatimitra) Even here, however, the evidence is not straightforward. John Allan argued that the coins attest two different kings of this name, Brihaspatimitra I and II, and dates assigned to the coins on stratigraphic grounds have ranged from the early 2nd to the 1st century BCE. (Mittal, *An Early History of Orissa*; Shashi Kant) The identification of Kharavela's Bahasatimita with the Kaushambi ruler is attractive. It tends to support a later date, but it cannot by itself fix Kharavela's date with precision.

Other references

The inscription also mentions the breaking up of a Tamil confederacy that had lasted 113 years, gifts from the Pandya king, and the destruction of Pithunda, a city founded by an earlier "Ava" king. None of these can be dated independently with sufficient precision to help fix Kharavela's chronology. They are, however, broadly consistent with the political landscape of peninsular India in the last centuries BCE.

3. Palaeography and Language

In the absence of a secure synchronism, the letter forms of the inscription provide one of the most important lines of evidence. Palaeography dates an inscription by comparing its script with that of inscriptions whose dates are known from other sources. It cannot provide precise dates, but it can indicate the broad period to which a record belongs.

The palaeographic evidence

Scholars have long agreed that the Hathigumpha inscription is later than the Ashokan edicts of the 3rd century BCE. They have disagreed about how much later. Georg Bühler concluded that the inscription could not be earlier than the 2nd century BCE nor later than the 1st century BCE. In 1919 R.P. Chanda argued that it was contemporary with the **Nanaghat** inscription of the Satavahana queen Naganika, which pointed to the 1st century BCE. In 1922 R.D. Banerji placed it slightly later than Nanaghat. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription ; Puratattva: chronology of the inscription) T.P. Verma's study of Brahmi palaeography concluded that the inscription dates from the middle of the 1st century BCE to the early 1st century CE. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription)

D.C. Sircar compared the letter forms of the Hathigumpha inscription with those of dated or datable records of the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. These included the **Besnagar Garuda pillar inscription** of Heliodorus, of the time of King Bhagabhadra, and the Nanaghat inscription. He concluded that the Hathigumpha characters belong to a later stage of development and point to the second half of the 1st century BCE. (Lucknow University lecture notes: Kharavela)

Linguistic and stylistic evidence

Sircar also drew attention to features of language and style. The use of the title *maharaja* for Kharavela in the first line, and the ornate, poetic (*kavya*) style of the composition, are features that he regarded as characteristic of a relatively late date. They are more typical of inscriptions of the 1st century BCE and later than of the Mauryan or immediately post-Mauryan period. (Lucknow University lecture notes: Kharavela) The Hathigumpha inscription is in fact one of the earliest examples of the *prashasti* genre. Its literary character suggests a stage in the development of royal eulogy later than that represented by the plain, didactic prose of Ashoka's edicts.

Limitations of palaeographic dating

Palaeographic arguments have important limitations. Scripts developed at different rates in different regions. A conservative scribe might use older forms, and a progressive one newer forms. The comparison depends on the dates assigned to the reference inscriptions, which are themselves often uncertain. A handwriting analysis of the Hathigumpha inscription suggests that it was engraved by three different scribes, which complicates the comparison further. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription) Palaeography can therefore indicate a probable range of a century or so, but not a precise date. Within these limits, however, the palaeographic evidence as interpreted by most specialists favours the 1st century BCE over the early 2nd century BCE.

4. External Evidence

The Guntupalli inscriptions

Inscriptions found at **Guntupalli** in the West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, an important early Buddhist site, record kings of the **Sada** family. These include Maha Sada, Sivamaka Sada and Asaka Sada, who describe themselves as lords of Kalinga and Mahisaka and as belonging to the Mahameghavahana family. (Wikipedia: Mahameghavahana dynasty) These records confirm that the Mahameghavahana name continued to be used by rulers of the eastern coast, and they have been used by D.C. Sircar and others to confirm Kharavela’s place within an established Mahameghavahana lineage. (Wikipedia: Kharavela) Richard Salomon has noted that the Guntupalli discoveries shed further light on the Hathigumpha inscription. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription) Their own dating is approximate, but they fit more comfortably with a picture in which the Mahameghavahanas flourished around the turn of the Common Era than with one in which Kharavela ruled in the early 2nd century BCE.

Satavahana chronology

As noted above, the reference to Satakarni ties Kharavela's date to that of the early Satavahanas. Research on Satavahana coins, inscriptions and archaeology over the past several decades has tended to support a shorter chronology than that implied by the Puranic king-lists. In this shorter chronology, the dynasty's rise falls in the 1st century BCE rather than the 3rd. If Kharavela's Satakarni is Satakarni I of the Nanaghat inscription, and if that king belongs to the 1st century BCE, then Kharavela too should be placed in that century. This argument has been especially associated with Walter Spink, who emphasised the consequences of the date for the history of Deccan art. (Wikipedia: Hathigumpha inscription)

The art of the Udayagiri and Khandagiri caves

The rock-cut caves of Udayagiri and Khandagiri, excavated by Kharavela, his family and his successors, provide another line of evidence. Their relief sculptures, especially the long friezes of the Rani Gumpha and the Ganesh Gumpha, have been compared with the sculpture of other early sites in central and western India, notably Bharhut and Sanchi. Art historians have generally placed the Udayagiri reliefs in a stylistic stage comparable to or later than that of the Sanchi gateways. That stage is usually dated to the 1st century BCE. Stylistic dating is, like palaeography, approximate, and the caves were excavated over an extended period. Nonetheless, the art-historical evidence is broadly consistent with a 1st-century BCE date for the main phase of the caves, and thus for Kharavela.

Archaeology

Archaeological evidence from Kalinga itself has not yet provided a decisive answer. Excavations at **Sisupalgarh**, often identified with Kharavela's capital Kalinganagari, show that the city was occupied from at least the 3rd century BCE to the 4th century CE, with earlier deposits going back to the 6th–7th centuries BCE. (Wikipedia: Sisupalgarh) This long occupation is consistent with any of the proposed dates for Kharavela. Future excavation of securely stratified deposits associated with Kharavela's building works, together with

scientific dating, could in principle provide independent evidence, but this has not yet been achieved.

5. The Views of Odia Historians

Historians from Odisha have made a distinctive contribution to the debate over Kharavela's date. For them Kharavela is not only a figure of Indian history but a founding figure of the region's own past and a symbol of Odia identity. Their work has drawn on close familiarity with the Udayagiri–Khandagiri caves and with the regional epigraphic record, and it has often been published in the *Orissa Historical Research Journal* (OHRJ), the *Odisha Review* and the Utkal University *History of Orissa*. Their conclusions, however, have not been uniform. They range from the late 3rd century BCE to the late 1st century BCE, which reflects the same divisions found in the wider scholarship.

Manmatha Nath Das: an early date

In his *Glimpses of Kalinga History* (1949), the historian **Manmatha Nath Das**, later Vice-Chancellor of Utkal University, devoted considerable attention to Kharavela's rise. He described it as a remarkable revival of Kalinga "from the depth of ruin" after the Mauryan conquest. Das was of the opinion that Kharavela was born in **207 BCE**. (Live History India) This would place his accession around 183 BCE, consistent with the early chronology of Jayaswal and Banerji, which was dominant when Das wrote.

Nabin Kumar Sahu: the late chronology and a detailed timetable

The most influential Odia contribution came from **Nabin Kumar Sahu**. He prepared a revised reading of the Hathigumpha inscription for the Utkal University *History of Orissa*, vol. 1 (1963–64), and later published a monograph, *Kharavela* (Orissa State Museum, 1984). (Puratattva: chronology of the inscription; Wikipedia: Kharavela) Sahu placed Kharavela firmly in the later part of the 1st century BCE, and he supported this conclusion with three lines of argument, summarised in an extract from the Utkal University history reprinted in the *Orissa Historical Research Journal*. (N.K. Sahu, "Palaeography, Language and Art of Hatigumpha Inscription", *OHRJ* XLVII(3))

- **Palaeography.** Sahu noted that the letters of the Hathigumpha inscription closely resemble those of the Nanaghat inscription of queen Naganika, wife of Satakarni I; the Nanaghat label inscriptions; and the Nasik cave inscription of the time of Krishna. In all of these, letters such as *va*, *pa*, *da* and *cha* are becoming triangular. Citing Bühler, Rapson, R.P. Chanda and D.C. Sircar, he argued that palaeography presents no difficulty in treating Satakarni I as Kharavela's contemporary.
- **Language and style.** He observed that the language of Ashoka's edicts and of the Shunga inscriptions is Magadhi Prakrit. The language of the Hathigumpha inscription, by contrast, is akin to Pali, a trend that in eastern Indian epigraphy indicates a date later than the 2nd century BCE. The inscription's ornate verse and rhythmic prose also mark an advance on the plain style of the Ashokan and Shunga records. In his view, this places it between those records and the fully developed *kavya* style of the later Satavahana inscriptions.
- **Art.** Sahu pointed to the relief sculptures of the Manchapuri cave, excavated by Kharavela's chief queen and his successors Kudepa and prince Vadukha. Art critics consider these reliefs considerably later than those of Bharhut, whose gateway, bearing an inscription of the Shunga feudatory Visadeva, is assigned to the first quarter of the 1st century BCE. Sahu therefore assigned the Manchapuri reliefs to the last quarter of that century.

On this basis Sahu proposed the following approximate chronology, which has been widely followed in Odisha:

Event	N.K. Sahu's approximate date
Foundation of Chedi (Mahameghavahana) rule in Kalinga	c. 73 BCE
Birth of Kharavela	c. 64 BCE
Kharavela as crown prince (*yuvaraja*)	c. 49–40 BCE
Consecration as Maharaja	c. 40 BCE
Last known date of his career (13th regnal year)	c. 27 BCE

(N.K. Sahu, *OHRJ* XLVII(3), extract from Utkal University *History of Orissa*, vol. 1)

Sahu also offered influential interpretations of other parts of the inscription that bear on Kharavela's lineage. He argued that the reading *Cheti* (Chedi) in the first line arose from a crack in the stone, and that *Chetaraja* refers to Kharavela's father and immediate predecessor. He also read *Aira* as the Prakrit form of *arya*, "noble". (Wikipedia: Kharavela)

Gouri Shankar Tripathy: a revived early date

A markedly different view was argued by **Gouri Shankar Tripathy** in an article first published in the *Odisha Review* in November 2008. Tripathy questioned whether there had ever been a Nanda rule in Kalinga before Ashoka. Following B.M. Barua, he identified the *Nandaraja* of the Hathigumpha inscription with Ashoka himself, arguing that Ashoka, like his grandfather Chandragupta at Girnar, was known to have undertaken irrigation works. He then turned to the disputed phrase *ti-vasa-sata*. Tripathy compared it with two similar compounds in the same inscription: *sata-dasa-lena-sata* in line 15, which scholars understand as 117 caves rather than 1,700, and *terasa-vasa-sata* in line 11, which cannot mean 1,300 years. He argued that the parallel construction requires *ti-vasa-sata* to mean 103 years, not 300. Taking Ashoka's Kalinga canal to date from about 257 BCE, when the Dhauli and Jaugada edicts were engraved, he placed Kharavela's fifth regnal year at about 154 BCE and his accession at about **159 BCE**. This places Kharavela in the 2nd century BCE. (Gouri Shankar Tripathy, "Date Line of Kharavela the Great", *Odisha Review*, Nov 2008, reprinted at History of Odisha)

Tripathy's grammatical argument from parallel compounds is a distinctive contribution to the debate. His identification of the Nandaraja with Ashoka, however, is not widely accepted. Most historians, including N.K. Sahu, continue to accept a period of Nanda rule in Kalinga before the Mauryas.

Kailash Chandra Dash and recent Odia scholarship

More recent Odia scholarship has generally followed the later chronology. **Kailash Chandra Dash**, in his book *Aira Mahameghavahana Maharaja Kharavela: The Illustrious King of Early Odisha*, describes Kharavela as the greatest king of early Kalinga in the **1st century BCE**. He draws on the readings of Jayaswal, Barua and Sahu and acknowledges Sahu's inspiration for his work. He also presents Kharavela as an unmistakable symbol of Odia identity in its early phase. (Exotic India: K.C. Dash, *Aira Mahameghavahana Maharaja Kharavela*) Other regional works, such as Sadananda Agrawal's *Sri Kharavela* (Cuttack, 2000), have helped to keep Kharavela at the centre of Odisha's historical consciousness. The general histories of Odisha by H.K. Mahtab and K.C. Panigrahi also discuss the Hathigumpha record at length.

Summary of Odia historians' views

Historian	Work	Proposed date	Principal basis
Manmatha Nath Das	*Glimpses of Kalinga History* (1949)	Born c. 207 BCE	Early chronology (following Jayaswal and Banerji)
Nabin Kumar Sahu	Utkal University *History of Orissa*, vol. 1 (1963–64); *Kharavela* (1984)	Born c. 64 BCE; consecrated c. 40 BCE; last known date c. 27 BCE	Palaeography (Nanaghat, Nasik); Pali-like language; *kavya* style; Manchapuri reliefs later than Bharhut
Gouri Shankar Tripathy	"Date Line of Kharavela the Great", *Odisha Review* (2008)	Accession c. 159 BCE	Nandaraja = Ashoka; *ti-vasa-sata* = 103 years by analogy with parallel compounds
Kailash Chandra Dash	*Aira Mahameghavahana Maharaja Kharavela*	1st century BCE	Readings of Jayaswal, Barua and Sahu

The Odia historiography thus mirrors the larger debate. One strand has kept the early chronology alive through fresh arguments, notably Tripathy's grammatical analysis. The dominant strand, shaped above all by N.K. Sahu, has provided the most detailed version of the late chronology, and it is this version that informs most current teaching and research in

Odisha.

6. Weighing the Arguments: Early versus Late Chronology

The evidence reviewed above can be grouped into two broad positions.

The early chronology (first half of the 2nd century BCE)

The early chronology rests principally on four arguments: the supposed reference to a Maurya era in line 16; the identification of the Yavana king of line 8 with Demetrius; the identification of Bahasatimita with Pushyamitra Shunga; and the assumption of a long Satavahana chronology placing Satakarni in the early 2nd century BCE. Lüders' variant placed Kharavela still earlier, in the late 3rd century BCE, on the basis of the reading of 103 years for the Nanda interval.

Each of these arguments has been seriously weakened. The Maurya era reading has been abandoned by most epigraphists in favour of readings such as *mukhiya-kala*, and there is no other evidence that a Maurya era ever existed. The Demetrius reading is regarded by most scholars as extremely doubtful, and it leads to chronological contradictions. The identification of Bahasatimita with Pushyamitra rests on an astrological equation widely rejected as far-fetched. The long Satavahana chronology has been challenged by much recent research. The early chronology retains some supporters, and it continues to appear in older textbooks and popular accounts, but its foundations are now regarded by most specialists as insecure.

The late chronology (second half of the 1st century BCE)

The late chronology rests on several independent lines of evidence. The palaeography of the inscription points to the 1st century BCE, as Chanda, Sircar and Verma concluded. The use of the title *maharaja* and the literary *kavya* style also suggest a relatively late date. The reading of 300 years for the Nanda interval is consistent with a 1st-century BCE date. The probable identification of Bahasatimita with the Brihaspatimitra of Kaushambi, known from coins and from the Pabhosa and Mora inscriptions, also tends to support it. So do the shorter

Satavahana chronology, the art-historical position of the Udayagiri sculptures, and the evidence of the Guntupalli inscriptions. No single argument is conclusive. Their convergence, however, gives the late chronology considerably greater weight.

Comparison

Line of evidence	Early chronology (2nd century BCE)	Late chronology (1st century BCE)	Current assessment
Line 16 ("Maurya era")	Read as a Maurya-era date	Read as *mukhiya-kala*; no era	Maurya era reading largely abandoned
Nanda interval (line 6)	103 years	300 years	Ambiguous; 300 years fits other evidence better
Satakarni (line 4)	Long Satavahana chronology	Short Satavahana chronology	Depends on Satavahana dating; short chronology now favoured
Yavana king (line 8)	Demetrius I	Reading doubtful; possibly a later Indo-Greek, or none	Demetrius reading widely rejected
Bahasatimita (line 12)	Pushyamitra Shunga	Brihaspatimitra of Kaushambi	Pushyamitra equation rejected; Kaushambi identification favoured
Palaeography	Earlier stage of Brahmi	Comparable to or later than Nanaghat and Besnagar	Most specialists favour the 1st century BCE
Language and style	—	*Maharaja* title; *kavya* style	Supports a later date
Art of the caves	—	Comparable to or later than Sanchi gateways	Broadly supports the 1st century BCE

An assessment

On the present evidence, the most defensible conclusion is that Kharavela reigned in the 1st century BCE, probably in its second half, though a date in the earlier part of that century cannot be excluded. The early chronology, influential as it was in the first half of the 20th

century, depended on readings and identifications that have not withstood critical scrutiny. Nevertheless, the research scholar should recognise that the question is not definitively settled. The inscription’s key passages remain damaged and open to interpretation, and new discoveries could alter the balance of evidence. These might include fresh readings obtained through modern imaging techniques, new inscriptions or coins, or securely dated archaeological contexts. Any account of Kharavela’s reign should therefore state which chronology it follows and acknowledge the alternatives.

Conclusion

The debate over the date of Kharavela illustrates both the richness and the fragility of the evidence for early Indian history. For more than a century, scholars have tried to fix the reign of Kalinga’s greatest ancient king from a single damaged inscription. They have relied on readings of individual words and on identifications of rulers named in passing. Early scholars, misled by the apparent reference to a Maurya era and by readings that linked Kharavela with Demetrius and Pushyamitra, placed him in the 2nd century BCE or even earlier. These foundations have since been undermined. Palaeography, the study of the inscription’s language and style, the reinterpretation of the Nanda interval, the probable identification of Bahasatimita with a ruler of Kaushambi, the revision of Satavahana chronology and the evidence of art history have together shifted the balance of scholarly opinion towards the 1st century BCE.

This later dating has consequences beyond Odisha. It implies that Kalinga remained under Mauryan control, or at least outside the historical record, for longer than once supposed. It also brings Kharavela into the same broad period as the early Satavahanas and the great Buddhist monuments of central India. For the research scholar, the most important lesson is methodological. The date of Kharavela is not a settled fact but a reasoned inference, and it remains open to revision as new evidence emerges.

Glossary of Technical Terms

Term	Meaning
Chronology	The arrangement of events in time; here, the dating of Kharavela’s reign
Era	A continuous system of counting years from a fixed starting point
Regnal year	A year counted from a king’s accession
Synchronism	A link between two events or persons that allows one to be dated by the other
Palaeography	The study of ancient scripts, used to date undated records
Muriya-kala	Disputed reading in line 16, once taken as “Maurya era”
Mukhiya-kala	Alternative reading of the same passage, usually understood as “the principal art”
Ti-vasa-sata	Phrase in line 6 giving the interval since a Nanda king; read as 103 or 300 years
Bahasatimita / Brihaspatimitra	The Magadhan king humbled by Kharavela; identified variously
Long and short chronology	Alternative schemes for dating the Satavahana dynasty
Prashasti	A royal eulogy in an inscription
Kavya	Ornate literary style in Sanskrit and Prakrit

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. When did Kharavela rule? His date is disputed. Many recent scholars place him in the 1st century BCE, probably its second half, while older scholarship often placed him in the early 2nd century BCE.

2. Why is Kharavela’s date so difficult to determine? The Hathigumpha inscription has no era date, is badly damaged, and its key passages can be read in different ways.

3. Does the Hathigumpha inscription mention a Maurya era? Bhagwan Lal Indraji read a “Maurya era” in line 16, but most later scholars reject this reading and do not believe the inscription contains any era date.

4. What is the significance of the Nanda reference? Line 6 mentions a canal dug by a Nanda king. The interval can be read as 103 or 300 years, and the choice greatly affects Kharavela's date.

5. Did Kharavela fight the Greek king Demetrius? This was once widely believed. Most scholars now regard the reading of the Yavana king's name as "Dimita" (Demetrius) as extremely doubtful.

6. Who was Bahasatimita? He was the king of Magadha humbled by Kharavela. Identification with Pushyamitra Shunga is now generally rejected, and many scholars identify him with Brihaspatimitra of Kaushambi.

7. Why does Kharavela's date matter for Indian history? It affects the chronology of the Satavahanas, the dating of early Buddhist monuments in the Deccan, and the history of post-Mauryan Kalinga.

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This article is a survey intended as a guide. For research, cite the epigraphic editions and specialist studies listed below directly.

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