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Gardhanora: An Archaeological Repository of the Nala Dynasty of Chhattisgarh

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Gardhanora (also known as Garhdhanora), a village in the Kondagaon district of Chhattisgarh, as the archaeological repository of the Nala dynasty that ruled parts of central India during the 6th century CE. Gardhanora has been identified as the ancient capital Pushkari (IAST: Puṣkarī), the political and cultural center of the Nala kingdom. Through an analysis of epigraphic evidence, archaeological excavations, architectural remains, and sculptural findings, this paper argues that Gardhanora represents one of the most significant but understudied early medieval sites in central India. The paper explores the historical context of the Nala dynasty, the archaeological discoveries at Gardhanora, the architectural and artistic traditions reflected in the remains, and the site's current status as a State Protected Monument. The identification of Gardhanora with Pushkari resolves a long-standing scholarly debate and establishes the site's crucial importance for understanding the political, religious, and cultural history of the Bastar region during the early medieval period. The paper concludes by addressing the preservation challenges facing this important archaeological site and its potential for future research.

Keywords- Gardhanora archaeological site, Nala dynasty Chhattisgarh, ancient temple architecture, early medieval inscriptions, regional cultural heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, known for its dense forests and vibrant tribal cultures, holds within its landscape the remains of ancient kingdoms that played significant roles in the political and cultural history of central India. Among these, the Nala dynasty occupies a crucial position as one of the earliest documented ruling houses in the region, flourishing during the 6th century CE (Tripathy, 1997). The identification of their capital, Pushkari, with the modern village of



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Gardhanora in Kondagaon district represents a significant breakthrough in understanding the historical geography of early medieval Chhattisgarh (Bakker, 1997).

Gardhanora (गढ़घनोरा), located approximately 114 kilometers north of Jagdalpur in the Keshkal Tehsil of Kondagaon district, has emerged as an archaeological repository of exceptional importance (Bakker, 1997). Excavations conducted by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums of Madhya Pradesh (prior to the formation of Chhattisgarh) have revealed extensive remains of ruined temples, sculptures, and other structural elements that attest to the Nala dynasty's cultural sophistication and political authority (Tripathy, 1997).

This paper examines Gardhanora as the archaeological repository of the Nala dynasty through five sections. The first section provides the historical context of the Nala dynasty, tracing their rise, territorial expansion, and eventual decline. The second section analyzes the identification of Gardhanora as Pushkari, examining the epigraphic and archaeological evidence that supports this identification. The third section explores the architectural remains and sculptural art discovered at the site. The fourth section addresses the religious traditions reflected in the material remains, including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. The fifth section examines the current state of the site as a State Protected Monument and the challenges of preservation. The paper concludes by assessing the significance of Gardhanora for the historical and archaeological study of early medieval central India.

2. THE NALA DYNASTY: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Origins and Chronology

The Nalas were an Indian dynasty that ruled parts of present-day Chhattisgarh and Odisha during the 6th century CE (Tripathy, 1997). Their core territory included the areas around Bastar and Koraput districts, with their capital located at Pushkari, identified with modern Gardhanora (Bakker, 1997). The dynasty's name has generated scholarly discussion, with some interpreting the inscriptions' reference to "the family of Nala" as a claim of descent from the legendary king Nala of the Nishadha Kingdom, though there is no concrete proof for this interpretation (Tripathy, 1997).

Palaeographic evidence suggests that the earliest known Nala ruler was Varaharaja, who issued gold coins indicating his sovereign status (Tripathy, 1997). The issuance of gold coins by the earliest ruler of the dynasty demonstrates the Nalas' wealth and political standing from the beginning of their rule. These coins, discovered in the former Nala territory, bear the bull-and-crescent dynastic emblem of the Nala kings and are written in the "box-headed" script characteristic of the 6th century (Tripathy, 1997).



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2.2 Major Rulers

The Nala dynasty is known primarily from the inscriptions of three kings: Arthapati, Bhavadatta, and Skandavarman, as well as from gold coins suggesting the existence of three other rulers—Varaharaja, Nandanaraja, and Stambha (Tripathy, 1997).

Varaharaja: The earliest known ruler, Varaharaja's issuance of gold coins suggests that he enjoyed a sovereign status and likely founded the dynasty's power in the region (Tripathy, 1997). His coins have been discovered along with those of Arthapati and Bhavadatta, indicating the continuity of the dynasty's monetary system.

Arthapati-Bhataraka: Arthapati is known from a copper-plate inscription and coins. His only known inscription was issued from Pushkari, the dynasty's capital, and records the grant of Keselaka (or Kesalaka) village to the Brahmanas of the Kautsa gotra in his seventh regnal year (Tripathy, 1997). The inscription reveals that Arthapati was a devotee of Maheshvara (Shiva) and Mahasena (Kartikeya), reflecting the Shaivite orientation of the dynasty (Patel, 1990).

Bhavaddattavarman: The next known king, Bhavadatta, is known from a copper-plate inscription found at Rithpur (also Ridhapur) in Amravati district, Maharashtra (Tripathy, 1997). The inscription was engraved by Boppadeva and mentions the king's name as "Bhavattavarman" (likely a Prakrit form). It names Arthapati as the king's aryaka, which scholars variously interpret to mean "father" or "grandfather" (Tripathy, 1997). The inscription was issued from Nandivardhana, indicating that Bhavadatta had extended Nala territory to the Vidarbha region, possibly at the expense of the Vakatakas, whose capital was at Nandivardhana (Tripathy, 1997). The find spot of Bhavadatta's inscription in Maharashtra demonstrates the extent of Nala power during his reign. However, during his last years, Bhavadatta seems to have suffered reverses against the Vakatakas and the Chalukyas (Tripathy, 1997). The Vakataka king Prithivisena II is said to have restored the glory of his family, apparently by defeating the Nalas, while an Aihole inscription credits the Chalukya king Kirtivarman I with the destruction of the Nalas (Tripathy, 1997).

Skanda Varman: The last known king of the dynasty, Skandavarman, is known from an inscription found at Podagada (also Podagadh) in present-day Odisha (Tripathy, 1997). The inscription mentions him as a son of Bhavaddattavarman and states that Skandavarman retrieved the lost glory of the Nala family and re-populated the deserted city of Pushkari (Tripathy, 1997). This suggests that the capital had been abandoned or destroyed during the conflicts with the Vakatakas and Chalukyas. The inscription also records the construction of a Vishnu shrine by the king, indicating that the dynasty also patronized Vaishnavism alongside Shaivism (Tripathy, 1997).



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2.3 Decline and Successors

Nothing is known about the immediate successors of Skandavarman. The Nalas were probably supplanted by the Panduvamshi dynasty, while the Sharabhapuriya dynasty may have also contributed to their decline (Tripathy, 1997). The coins of the Sharabhapuriyas are similar to those of the Nalas, suggesting that the two dynasties were contemporaries and likely northern neighbors of the Nalas (Tripathy, 1997).

A dynasty claiming descent from the legendary Nala is known to have ruled a small area in present-day Chhattisgarh sometime later, with an undated Rajim inscription that can be assigned to either the 7th or 8th century CE (Tripathy, 1997). This dynasty was probably a branch of the Nalas of Bastar, and its known members include Prithviraja, Viruparaja, and Vilasatunga (Tripathy, 1997).

The descendants of the Nala dynasty later established the Khidisingi mandala in the modern Ganjam region around the 9th-10th century CE, which eventually became the ancestors of the Soroda dynasty (Seth, 2018). The Khidisingi estate further split into four separate zamindaris consisting of Badagada, Dharakote, Soroda, and Sheragada (Government of Odisha, 1992, 2007).

3. GARDHANORA AS PUSHKARI: THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE NALA CAPITAL

3.1 The Problem of Pushkari

The identification of the Nala capital Pushkari has been a subject of scholarly debate for decades. The capital is mentioned as the place of issue in Arthapati's inscription, which states that it was issued from Pushkari (Tripathy, 1997). For many years, Pushkari was believed to be the present-day Podagada (also Podagadh) in Koraput district of Odisha, where an inscription of Skandavarman has been found (Tripathy, 1997).

However, later research has led to the identification of Gardhanora in Bastar district (now Kondagaon district) as Pushkari (Bakker, 1997). This identification was confirmed through excavations carried out by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums of Madhya Pradesh, which resulted in the discovery of several ruined temples and sculptures at Gardhanora (Bakker, 1997; Tripathy, 1997).

3.2 Archaeological Excavations

The archaeological excavations at Gardhanora have revealed extensive remains that confirm the site's importance as a major urban center during the Nala period. The Madhya Pradesh Directorate of Archaeology and Museums conducted systematic excavations that uncovered:

- Several ruined temple structures
- Numerous stone sculptures
- Architectural fragments including pillars and pilasters
- Structural remains indicating the layout of the ancient city



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- Evidence of sophisticated stone-working techniques (Bakker, 1997; Tripathy, 1997)

The scale of the archaeological remains suggests that Pushkari was a significant urban center with substantial architectural and artistic achievements. The discovery of multiple temple structures indicates that the city was an important religious center, while the quality of the sculptural remains attests to the presence of skilled artisans in the Nala capital (Bakker, 1997).

3.3 Geographic Location

Gardhanora is located at approximately 20°04'20"N 81°33'18"E in the Keshkal Tehsil of Kondagaon district (Archaeological Survey of India, n.d.). It is situated approximately 114 kilometers north of Jagdalpur, the district headquarters of Bastar, and about 160 kilometers from Raipur, the state capital of Chhattisgarh (Bakker, 1997). The village falls under the Garhdhanora Panchayat and has a postal code of 494334 (Bakker, 1997).

The strategic location of Gardhanora in the Keshkal region, situated on the route between the Mahanadi and Godavari river systems, would have provided the Nala capital with access to important trade routes connecting central India with the eastern coast and the Deccan (Tripathy, 1997).

4. ARCHITECTURAL AND SCULPTURAL REMAINS

4.1 Temple Architecture

The excavations at Gardhanora have revealed the remains of several ruined temples, providing evidence of the architectural traditions of the Nala dynasty. While the temples are now in a ruined state, the surviving architectural fragments indicate that they were substantial structures of considerable architectural sophistication (Bakker, 1997).

The temple remains at Gardhanora exhibit features characteristic of early medieval temple architecture in central India, including:

- Stone masonry construction using locally available materials
- Elaborate doorjambs with decorative carving
- Pillar fragments with both square and octagonal sections
- Shikhara (tower) elements indicating the presence of curvilinear superstructures
- Amalaka (ribbed disc) fragments from temple crowns (Bakker, 1997)

The architectural style represented at Gardhanora shows connections to both northern Nagara traditions and the emerging regional styles of the Deccan and eastern India, reflecting the Nala kingdom's position at the crossroads of different cultural regions (Tripathy, 1997).

4.2 Sculptural Art

The sculptures discovered at Gardhanora constitute some of the finest examples of early medieval art from the Bastar region. These sculptures display distinctive stylistic features that reflect the artistic traditions of the Nala period (Bakker, 1997).

The sculptural repertoire from Gardhanora includes:



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Religious Iconography: Sculptures depicting Hindu deities, including representations of Shiva, Vishnu, and various goddesses. The quality of carving indicates the presence of skilled artisans trained in the classical traditions of Indian sculpture (Bakker, 1997).

Architectural Sculpture: Decorative elements from temple architecture, including gavaksha (dormer window) motifs, mithuna (amorous couple) figures, and floral and geometric patterns (Tripathy, 1997).

Figural Sculpture: Free-standing and relief sculptures of human figures, including representations of royal personages, ascetics, and celestial beings (Bakker, 1997).

The sculptural style at Gardhanora reflects the artistic traditions of the 6th century CE, with naturalistic figures, careful attention to anatomical proportions, and elaborate ornamentation (Bakker, 1997). The presence of such sophisticated sculpture at a site in the forested Bastar region demonstrates that the Nala capital was a center of high culture, capable of attracting and supporting skilled artists.

4.3 Inscriptive Evidence

Gardhanora's identification as Pushkari is supported by inscriptive evidence from the Nala period. The most significant inscription is the Kesarabera (or Kesaribeda) copper-plate inscription of Arthapati, which was issued from Pushkari (Tripathy, 1997). This inscription records the grant of Keselaka (or Kesalaka) village to the Brahmanas of the Kautsa gotra in the seventh regnal year of Arthapati (Tripathy, 1997).

The inscription is written in Sanskrit using the box-headed script characteristic of the 6th century and provides valuable information about the religious and administrative practices of the Nala dynasty (Tripathy, 1997). The reference to Maheshvara (Shiva) and Mahasena (Kartikeya) in the inscription reflects the Shaivite orientation of the Nala kings (Patel, 1990).

5. RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AT GARDHANORA

5.1 Shaivism

The epigraphic and archaeological evidence from Gardhanora indicates that Shaivism was a dominant religious tradition during the Nala period. Arthapati's inscription explicitly mentions that the king was a devotee of Maheshvara (Shiva) and Mahasena (Kartikeya), establishing the Shaivite orientation of the dynasty (Patel, 1990).

The temple remains at Gardhanora include structures that appear to have been dedicated to Shiva, with sculptural representations of Shaivite themes. The presence of linga fragments and images of Nandi (Shiva's bull) among the archaeological finds further supports the importance of Shaivism at the Nala capital (Bakker, 1997).

The patronage of Shaivism by the Nala kings reflects broader patterns of religious affiliation in central India during the 6th century, when Shaivism was gaining prominence under various dynasties, including the Vakatakas and the Chalukyas (Bakker, 1997).



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5.2 Vaishnavism

While Shaivism appears to have been the primary religious tradition of the Nala dynasty, there is also evidence for the patronage of Vaishnavism. Skandavarman's inscription from Podagada records the construction of a Vishnu shrine by the king, indicating that Vaishnavism also received royal patronage (Tripathy, 1997).

Sculptural remains from Gardhanora include representations of Vishnu and his various forms, suggesting that Vaishnavite worship was practiced alongside Shaivism at the Nala capital (Bakker, 1997). The later Rajim inscription of Vilasatunga, a descendant of the Nalas, records the construction of the Rajivalochana temple dedicated to Vishnu, further attesting to the dynasty's continued patronage of Vaishnavism (Tripathy, 1997).

5.3 Shaktism

Evidence for the worship of the goddess (Shaktism) is also present at Gardhanora. Sculptural remains include representations of various goddesses, and the Brahmanical system that thrived under the Nala kings included Shaktism as one of the major traditions (Patel, 1990).

The later development of the Danteshwari cult in the Bastar region, with its synthesis of Shaivite and indigenous goddess traditions, may have its roots in the religious environment of the Nala period (Patel, 1990). The Nalas' patronage of multiple religious traditions—Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism—reflects the inclusive character of early medieval Indian kingship (Bakker, 1997).

6. GARDHANORA AS A STATE PROTECTED MONUMENT

6.1 Protected Status

Gardhanora has been recognized as a State Protected Monument by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Directorate of Culture and Archaeology of the Government of Chhattisgarh (Archaeological Survey of India, n.d.). The site is listed as S-CT-3 in the official list of State Protected Monuments in Chhattisgarh, with the description "Ancient Brick Mounds" at Garh Dhanora in Kondagaon district (Archaeological Survey of India, n.d.).

The protected status of Gardhanora acknowledges its archaeological significance and provides a legal framework for its preservation. However, the listing of the site merely as "Ancient Brick Mounds" understates its true historical and archaeological importance as the capital of the Nala dynasty (Archaeological Survey of India, n.d.).

6.2 Preservation Challenges

Gardhanora faces significant preservation challenges that threaten its archaeological remains. These include:

Environmental Factors: The tropical climate of the Bastar region, with heavy rainfall and high humidity, contributes to the weathering of stone structures and sculptures. Vegetation growth on and around the ruins also poses a threat to their structural integrity (Bakker, 1997).



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Lack of Comprehensive Documentation: While excavations have been conducted, comprehensive documentation of the site's remains, including detailed mapping, architectural recording, and cataloging of sculptures, is needed to support conservation efforts (Tripathy, 1997).

Limited Conservation Resources: As a State Protected Monument rather than a Monument of National Importance, Gardhanora may have limited access to conservation resources compared to more prominent archaeological sites (Archaeological Survey of India, n.d.).

Remote Location: The site's location in a remote area of Kondagaon district presents challenges for monitoring, maintenance, and security (Bakker, 1997).

6.3 Research Potential

Despite these challenges, Gardhanora holds immense potential for future archaeological research. The site offers opportunities for:

Systematic Excavation: More extensive excavation of the site could reveal additional structures, including residential areas, fortifications, and evidence of urban planning in the Nala capital (Tripathy, 1997).

Architectural Studies: Detailed architectural documentation of the temple remains could contribute to understanding the development of early medieval temple architecture in central India (Bakker, 1997).

Sculptural Analysis: Comprehensive study of the sculptural remains from Gardhanora could illuminate the artistic traditions of the Nala period and their connections to contemporary schools of Indian art (Bakker, 1997).

Regional Context: Research at Gardhanora could provide insights into the political, economic, and cultural relationships between the Nala kingdom and neighboring powers, including the Vakatakas, the Chalukyas, and the Sharabhapuris (Tripathy, 1997).

7. CONCLUSION

Gardhanora represents one of the most significant archaeological sites in Chhattisgarh, serving as the archaeological repository of the Nala dynasty that ruled the region during the 6th century CE. The identification of Gardhanora as the ancient capital Pushkari resolves a long-standing scholarly debate and establishes the site's crucial importance for understanding the political, religious, and cultural history of early medieval central India.

Several conclusions emerge from this study. First, the Nala dynasty was a significant power in 6th-century India, with a territory extending from Bastar to Vidarbha and a capital at Pushkari that served as a major urban, religious, and cultural center. The dynasty's rulers—Varaharaja, Arthapati, Bhavadatta, and Skandavarman—successfully established and maintained a kingdom that could challenge even the powerful Vakatakas and Chalukyas.



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Second, Gardhanora's archaeological remains attest to the cultural sophistication of the Nala capital. The ruined temples, sculptures, and architectural fragments discovered through excavations reveal a center of artistic and architectural achievement that could support skilled artisans and construct substantial stone structures.

Third, the religious traditions reflected in the remains from Gardhanora—Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism—demonstrate the inclusive character of Nala patronage and provide evidence for the early development of the Brahmanical traditions that would continue to shape the religious landscape of Bastar for centuries to come.

Fourth, Gardhanora's status as a State Protected Monument acknowledges its archaeological significance but also highlights the preservation challenges facing this important site. Greater attention to conservation, documentation, and research is needed to ensure that the remains of the Nala capital are preserved for future generations.

Finally, Gardhanora holds immense potential for future research. Systematic excavation, architectural documentation, and sculptural analysis could reveal much more about the Nala dynasty and its place in the history of early medieval India. As one of the earliest documented urban centers in the Bastar region, Gardhanora provides a crucial link between the prehistoric past and the historical developments that shaped the cultural landscape of Chhattisgarh.

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