

# Sacred, mundane and religious geography of the Mahābhārata

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A few kinds of geographies are associated with the Mahābhārata (MBh). The first one is the sacred geography depicting the world in which the gods and the epic heroes operate. There are worlds of divine beings, miraculous mountains and giant trees whose fruits form rivers of nectar. Alongside the sacred geography in the MBh we find mundane geography, in which India known to the bards is depicted. Here we find kingdoms and their capitals, places of pilgrimage, mountains and rivers which can be placed on the contemporary map. Both of these geographies intertwine and the heroes easily cross between them. There is also a third geography which is inspired by the epic. The events of the MBh have become part of the religious imaginings of the believers, and the spots where they were supposed to take place became sacred. Pilgrims want to set foot in the place where Draupadī married the Pāṇḍavas, see the tree on which Arjuna hid his weapons or visit the pond where the Yakṣa asked questions of Yudhiṣṭhira.

The aim of my paper is to discuss the interdependence of these three geographies. In the first part I present cosmology of the MBh. I show how the epic authors could imagine the whole universe. In the second part I try to present how the bards conceived India as it was known to them. After presenting the geographical context of the MBh I deal with the present-day places of pilgrimage identified with the epic. I divide them into categories and try to discover the mechanisms behind their formation.

## Sacred geography – three cosmological views

The cosmology is introduced in the sixth book of the MBh (6.5-13). Among similar descriptions presented in the Purāṇas it is distinguished by its archaic nature. There are motifs that do not appear in later tradition. The picture is far from coherent and sometimes it seems to contradict itself. Therefore to analyze it, it is useful to compare it with the more consistent cosmology of the Purāṇas<sup>1</sup> which is often done by later commentators and researchers (e.g. Ali 1966, Kirfel 1920). However, such unification removes archaic fragments that do not fit into the whole picture. In contrast, my attempt is to pay special attention to these archaic fragments.

The cosmological section which I discuss is called “The Shape of the Jambu Land” (jambukhaṇḍavinirmāṇa), “The World Structure” (bhuvanakośa), or simply “The section of the Earth” (bhūmīparva). It mixes mundane geography with the mythological worlds of divine beings. In 6.5 Dhṛtarāṣṭra inquires about the features of the Earth for which rulers are ready to die. The question affords an opportunity to present a cosmological description. Sañjaya begins with depicting the land of Sudarśana. In its center there is Mount Meru and its shape is known from the reflection on the Moon (6.6-9). To complete the picture, in the following chapters the authors describe lands such as Śāka, Kuśa and Krauñca, their divine inhabitants and the marvelous oceans surrounding them (6.11-13).

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<sup>1</sup> I have presented the Puranic cosmology in the article: “The cosmological models in the Bhāgavat-Purāṇa” (Babkiewicz 2012).

The Earth is divided into lands (dvīpa – literally islands), and these into districts (varṣa) separated from each other by mountain ranges. The districts are inhabited by peoples who form the kingdoms (janapada). However the whole structure can be imagined at least in three different ways:

1. the Earth covered with irregular lands, resembling spots on the Moon,
2. the Earth structured of numerous regular islands with a tree or a mountain in the center,
3. the Earth formed by seven ring-islands surrounding the Jambu land.

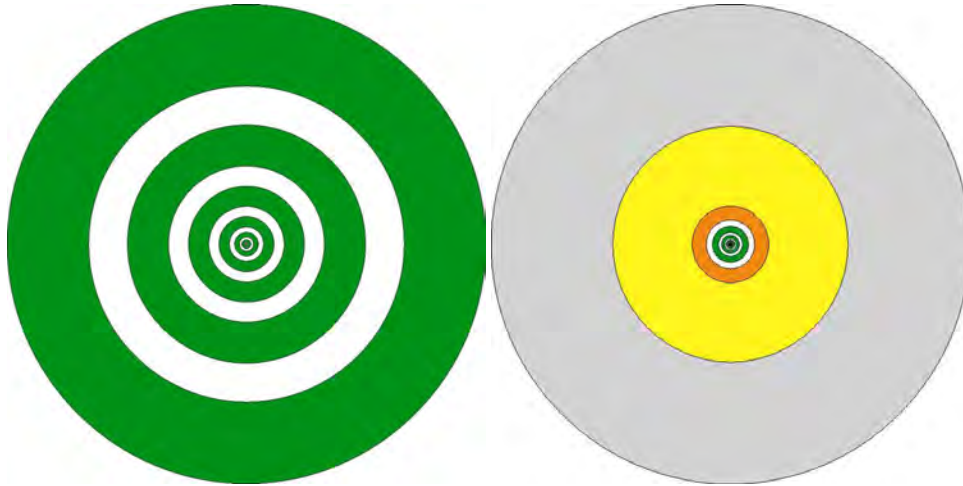
The unique version, probably the archaic one, is the first. The second version seems to be primal for the earliest editors of the MBh. The third one definitely belongs to the latest layer. The fragments systematizing it were removed from the critical edition (6.7.6; 6.7.11, 6.7.35, 6.8.12, 6.12.9, 6.12.9, 6.13.1-2). We can assume that it was introduced by the last editors when the vision of the Earth divided into the seven ring-islands was widely accepted.

### 1. Seven ring-islands

We start the description with the latest version which covered the previous ones. This is how the cosmology was understood by later commentators and recipients of the epic. But its reconstruction is not possible merely on the basis of the MBh. Bards do not deal with all seven islands and do not mention them in the order known later. So to do that we must turn to the Purāṇas. The land of Jambu is surrounded by an ocean of salty water which is encircled by the ring-islands, beginning with Plakṣa. The width of each successive ring is twice as much as the previous one, and the surrounding ocean measures the same<sup>2</sup>:

Island (dvīpa)	Ocean (samudra)	width (in yojana)	radius (in yojana)
Jambu (black plum)		100	50
	Lavaṇoda (salty water)	100	150
Plakṣa (ficus virens)		200	350
	Ikṣurasodaka (cane juice)	200	550
Śālmala / Śālmali (cotton tree)		400	950
	Suroda (wine)	400	1 350
Kuśa (halfa grass)		800	2 150
	Ghṛtatoya / Sarpis (clarified butter)	800	2 950
Krauñca (demoiselle crane)		1 600	4 550
	Kṣīroda (milk)	1 600	6 150
Śāka (teak tree)		3 200	9 350
	Dadhimaṇḍodaka (yogurt or cream)	3 200	12 550
Puṣkara (lotus)		6 400	15 750
	Gharmasāgara (warm) / Śuddhodadhi (clean water)	6 400	18 950
Loka (varṣa)		15 750	41 100
Lokāloka (varṣa)		83 900	125 000
Aloka (varṣa)		125 000	250 000

<sup>2</sup> Table and diagrams based on the Bhāgavatapurāṇa – Bhp 5.16-24 (Babkiewicz 2012).



1. Seven lands (Saptadvīpa) – according to the proportions from the BhP (green circles – lands, white – oceans)
2. Earth (Bhūmaṇḍala) – farther lands (orange, yellow and gray circles) up to the cover of the universe (the green and white circles in the center – Saptadvīpa with oceans)

According to the BhP, each ring-island is divided by seven mountain ranges into seven provinces through which seven rivers flow. The inhabitants of each land are grouped into four social classes (varṇa). This version agrees with the MBh only formally. At the beginning the authors announce that there are numerous lands, of which they will describe seven (6.12.4). However, they do not keep their word. Only the land of Jambu, in the MBh more commonly called Sudarśana, is described in detail (6.6-9). Briefly are introduced the lands of Śāka (6.12), Kuśa and Krauñca (6.13). Two other lands are only mentioned (Śālmala/Śālmalika 6.12.3; 6.13.6; Puṣkara 6.13.24-25), and Plakṣa does not appear at all.

## 2. Numerous islands

The earlier bards of the MBh seem to imagine all of the lands (dvīpa) exactly like Jambu. There are not seven but numerous islands that cover the vast ocean. This is also confirmed in the descriptions showing the Earth as a reflection on the Moon (6.7.52-53). Two additional islands are mentioned here, not described elsewhere (Nāgadvīpa, Kaśyapadvīpa).

All four islands (Jambu, Śāka, Kuśa and Krauñca) are described according to the same paradigm. In their center there is a gigantic mountain or a tree from which they take their names. They are divided by mountain ranges into provinces. It is hard to visualize this on a ring-island. It is impossible to place a mountain or a tree in the center of such a ring. In the case of Śāka island, the bards mention seven mountain ranges and seven districts, so they can be distributed on a circle-ring plan. However, in other cases (Jambu<sup>3</sup>, Kuśa, Krauñca) they stick to the version of six mountain ranges and seven districts. Such a division does not fit into such a shape. The authors suggest that the division into districts should be made from south to north (6.12.7) which is also difficult to visualize on a ring-shaped island.

## 3. The Moon as a mirror

In some parts of the MBh the land of Sudarśana was not imagined as a smooth circle. The MBh 6.6.15-16 informs that it is reflected in the Moon disc 'like a face of a man in a mirror'. In the imagination of bards the spots on the Moon are arranged into a rabbit. The rabbit has a permanent

<sup>3</sup> In the case of Jambu the MBh 6.7.2 mentions only 6 mountain ranges. The Mālyavat and Gandhamādana mountains are added in later description (6.7.7).

place in the Sanskrit name of the Moon. It is called 'rabbit-marked' (śaśāṅka). The shape of the rabbit seen in the lunar spots can be visualized in several ways:



It will be relevant to our discussion to mention that the myth about the rabbit on the Moon is also present in Chinese literature. It appears for the first time in the Song of Chu (Chuci) from the Warring States period (the end of the era in 221 BC)<sup>4</sup> It is said that there is a rabbit on the Moon churning herbs for the immortals.



Moon Goddess Chang with rabbit Churning Herbs, Tang Dynasty (618-906)<sup>5</sup>.

There is a correlation between the Moon, the juice of plants and immortality in both cultures. One of the Sanskrit names for the Moon, Soma, means 'juice'. Post-Vedic tradition identifies it with the nectar of immortality (amṛta) drunk by gods and ancestors. The story of the rabbit on the Moon is told in a Buddhist Jātaka tale (story 316<sup>6</sup>). It is about the heroic sacrifice of the rabbit for which he was placed on the Moon by Śakra.

According to the MBh (6.6.16), next to the rabbit, there is also a pippala (*Ficus religiosa*) on the Moon. The authors do not specify whether it is a leaf or a whole tree, but we can conclude that the bards left some free space on the Moon's disc for another image apart from the rabbit. We do not find images of the rabbit in the early reliefs, but judging by the figures of other animals (see below), it could be depicted in profile, preferably in a naturalistic way.

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<sup>4</sup> Chu-tzu and Hawkes 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Source: wikimedia 1.

<sup>6</sup> Cowell 1895.



Fragments of reliefs from Sanchi<sup>7</sup> and Bharhut.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the image of a little rabbit seen in the upper spots of the Moon (shown above as second from the left) fits best to the description of the MBh. Bards see the Moon as a mirror reflecting the land of Sudarśana. Following this interpretation, in order to get a map of the Earth, we should transform the image of the Moon into a mirror reflection. The MBh 6.7.52-53 provides supplementary information about the rabbit on the Moon:

- the entire land of Jambu is shaped like a rabbit,
- the two sides of the rabbit are the northern and southern districts,
- five other districts fit into his body up to his neck,
- the rabbit's ears are two other islands: the Snake (Nāgadvīpa) and the Tortoise (Kaśyapadvīpa),
- Mount Mālya (a mountain range of the Śāka land or the southern part of the western Ghats) is visible in the shape of a rabbit and is coppery in color.

Unfortunately, the authors do not elaborate on this archaic picture. Although Dhṛtarāṣṭra demands a description of the pippala (6.7.1), Sañjaya does not come back to the topic. We can only guess that the other lands were represented in the shape of the pippala.



Depiction of lands on the Moon surface as bards could imagine it.


<sup>7</sup> The visit of Indra and Brahma to the Buddha, Stupa1, 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, Eastern Gateway, source: wikimedia 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ruru Jātaka, Bharhut, 125-100 BCE, friezes from railings, red stone, Calcutta Museum, source: wikimedia 3.


## Sudarśana

The MBh 6.7 abandons the idea of a rabbit-shaped Sudarśana in favor of a round disk of the Earth geometrically divided into equal districts. Ultimately, it is divided by eight mountain ranges into nine districts which is well established in the Puranic cosmology.

district ( <i>varṣa</i> )	mountains range ( <i>parvata</i> )
<b>Bhārata / Jambudvīpa</b> (black plum district)	<b>Himavat</b> (snow-covered)
<b>Kiṃpuruṣa</b> (ape district)	<b>Hemakūṭa</b> (golden peaks)
<b>Hari</b> (Hari's district)	<b>Niṣadha</b>
<b>Ilāvṛta</b> (district surrounded by lands)	<b>Nīla</b> (navy blue / banyan)
<b>Ramaṇaka</b> (charming district)	<b>Śveta</b> (white)
<b>Hiraṇmaya / Hairaṇyaka / Hairaṇvata</b> (gold district)	<b>Śṛṅgavat / Śṛṅgin</b> (having peaks)
<b>Uttarakuru</b> (Northern Kuru) / <b>Airāvata</b> (full of food district)	<b>Mālyavat</b> (garlanded)
<b>Bhadrāśva</b> (having good horses district)	<b>Gandhamādana</b> (intoxicating with its scent)
<b>Ketumāla</b> (district with a garland mark)	<b>Meru</b>

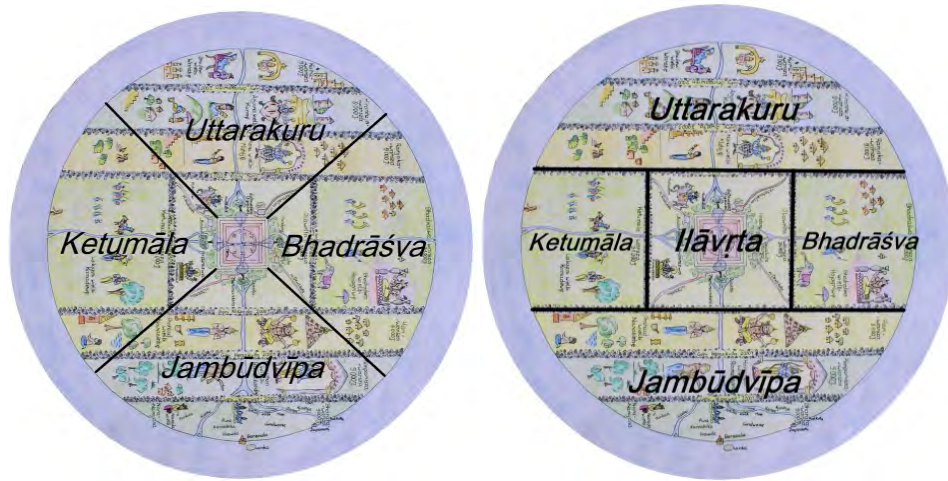


Districts of Sudarśana



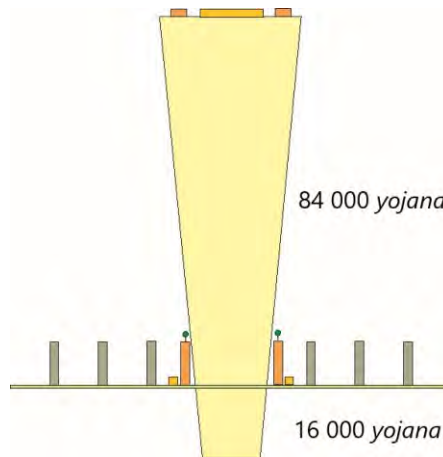
Mountain ranges of Sudarśana

However, in the MBh 6.7.11 an alternative version of this division appears. Sudarśana land is divided into four districts surrounding Mount Meru. To this quadruple division, the authors add the fifth district (Ilāvṛta) located in the middle. Then they specify that the north and south districts resemble bows (6.7.36).



Two possible models for a four- and five-division of Sudarśana.

The MBh pays a lot of attention to Mount Meru, which is supposed to be in the center of Sudarśana. Even its dimensions are given above and below the Earth's surface (6.7.9-10).



Mount Meru sketched according to BhP 5.16 (Babkiewicz 2012:31)

The Sun, Moon and other celestial bodies move around Meru. This is the place where the gods (Brahma, Rudra, Śakra) and the seers (Nārada, Kaśyapa, saptarṣi) perform sacrifices and gather during the festivals. Meru Peak is inhabited by the rivals of the gods – the Daityas with their preceptor Uśanas. They own all the treasures, the fourth part of which is ruled by Kubera. The abode of Śiva and Umā is on the northern side of Meru in a forest of karṇikā trees. Probably here the authors locate Cow-eared Mount (Gokarṇa). It is also here that Ganga falls on the head of Śiva and forms the Lunar Pond (Cāndramasa).

To the west of Meru there is a forest of jambu trees, which resemble Indra's garden of paradise (Nandana). To the west of Gandhamādana is the abode of Kubera. However, this god also lives on the peak of Kailāsa, located in the Hemakuta range. Lake Bindusaras, from which seven rivers flow, is located near Mount Kailāsa. Like the karṇikā forest north of Meru, the authors consider the vicinity of Mount Kailāsa to be the abode of Śiva, the place of sacrifices to the gods, the asylum of seers (Brahma, Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Manu) and the place of the descent of Gaṅgā. The MBh 6.7.48-49 connects mountain ranges with specific types of divine beings. However, in other parts of the text, these beings are mentioned in almost all divine places.

mountain	divine beings
Himavat	rakṣas
Hemakūṭa	guhyaka
Niṣadha	sarpa, nāga, gandharva (serpents and celestial singers)
Nīla / Gokarṇa	tapodhana, brahmaṛṣi (ascetics and seers)
Śveta	deva, asura
Śṛṅgavat	pitṛ (ancestors)



In the center of the land, between the Nīla and Niṣadha ranges, there is a jambu tree called Sudarśana. Its height is 1,100 yojanas, which is much less than Meru Mountain (84,000), but according to the authors it still reaches heaven. The river, made from the juice of the fruit of this tree, runs around Meru to the right. The location of the jambu tree in the center of Sudarśana contradicts the other passages that place Mount Meru there. This seems to be an attempt to reconcile two alternative cosmologies. The ‘tree of life’ placed in the center of the world may be an older version that has gradually been replaced by the mountain as an axis mundi.

North of Meru is the Northern Kuru province (Uttarakuru). Only twins are born there and spend their lives together as couples (6.8.9). Air burials are practiced there (6.8.11). North of Mount Meru flows the golden-bearing Jāmbūnādī, which is the river formed from the juice of the giant fruits of the jambu tree (6.8.18-25). It is the source of valued gold (jāmbūnada). East of Meru is the province of Bhadrāśva and the Mālyavat Mountains extending up to the ocean. In these lands, people fallen from divine worlds are born. Their lives are full of happiness and fabulously long.





The lives of the inhabitants increase towards the north. In the Bhadrāsva district they live 10,000 years, and in Airāvata 13,000 years. Apart from Bhārata the districts are more like paradises than earthly worlds. The golden-bearing river (Hiraṇvatī) flows through the Hiraṇvata district. The three peaks of the Śrṅgavat mountain are made with crystal, gold and gems (maṇimaya, raukma, sarvaratnamaya). The goddess Śāṅḍilī (elsewhere named Prajapati's wife) lives there.

In the land of Airāvata, which extends in the north up to the ocean, the Sun is not shining, only the Moon illuminates it. That could be an observation of the changes of the Sun's height above the horizon with the observer going northward. It could be even a polar night experience. Behind Airāvata, the authors place the Milk Ocean and the abode of Viṣṇu. The reference to his name Vaikuṅṭha suggests that they imagine it as a paradise. God lives there in a cart (śakaṭa, yāna). The term used indicates that it is not imagined as a chariot (ratha) but rather as a wagon. It has eight wheels, is made of gold, its color resembles fire, and it moves at great speed.

From the context, it can be assumed that this cart is an astronomical object. In Indian astronomy, the term 'śakaṭa' describes the constellation Rohiṇī consisting of five stars in the vicinity of the Bull's eye (Aldebaran, Babkiewicz 2007:10–13), but it would not make sense to place it in the north. Taking into account the archaic nature of the fragment and lack of development of the motif in the Indian cosmological tradition, it can be presumed that the name of the constellation was derived from Babylonian astrology.

From at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE the Mesopotamian universe is divided into three spheres:

1. the heaven of Ana / Anu,
2. the air and earth of Enlil,
3. the subterranean ocean of Enki / Ea.

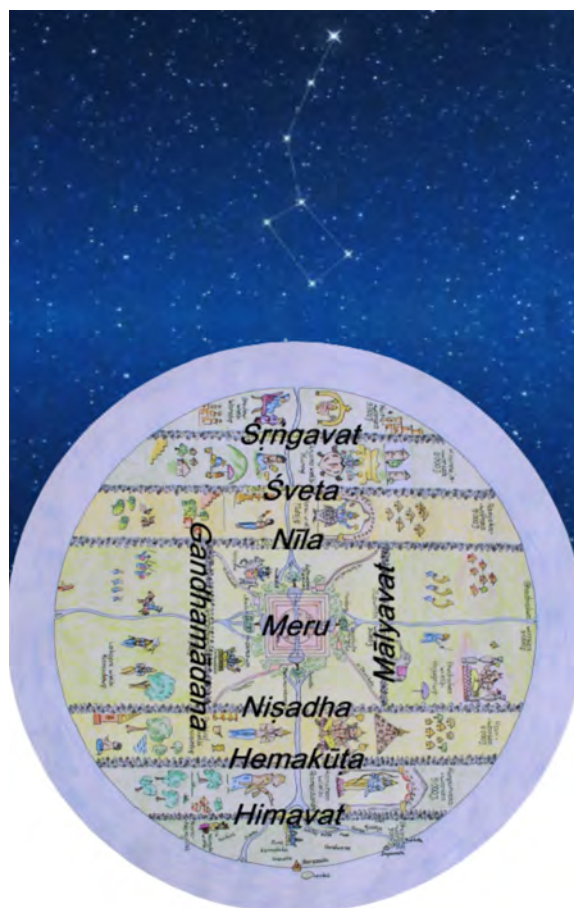
This division is followed by later astrolabes (the oldest one comes from the library of Tiglath-pileser I, 1114-1076 BCE). These are round or rectangular tablets listing three stars assigned to each of the twelve months. These three stars are arranged in corresponding columns (Softysiak 2003:31):

1. the path of Enlil,
2. the path of Anu,
3. the path of Ea.

Two constellations called ‘the Cart’ and ‘the Cart of Heaven’ (Enlil 15 and Enlil 19) appear on the path of Enlil. They are identified as the Big Dipper (Ursa Major) and the Little Dipper (Ursa Minor) respectively. Both carts are visualized similarly. Unlike the constellation of the Chariot (Enlil 3, identified as Sagittarius), these are four-wheeled vehicles associated with the cosmic rope that is used by the gods to control the world. In Mesopotamia the constellation of the Dipper, sometimes called the center of heaven, is not only important in an astronomical context, it often appears in prayers to the stars and in astral magic (Sołtysiak 2003:78).

In the first phase (until about the 2nd century BCE), Indian astrology developed under Babylonian influence (Pingree 2019: 9). It is therefore very likely that it could use the nomenclature developed in the Mesopotamian culture. It would not be surprising that when describing the abode of Viṣṇu, a deity whose iconography could have Mesopotamian origins, the astronomical nomenclature of the Middle East could be mentioned.

The Ocean of Milk (kṣīrodasamudra) may define the northern sky or more precisely the Milky Way. In Indian cosmology, the Milky Way is identified with Gaṅgā, which is called ‘the milk-carrier’ (kṣīradhārā 6.7.26). The lake that Gaṅgā creates on the north side of Meru is compared to the ocean. Thus, Hari's cart (śakaṭa), resting in the Ocean of Milk, may be the constellation of the Little Dipper, located in the center of the northern sky and spinning around the Pole Star.



## Śāka, Kuśa, Krauñca Islands and the edge of the world

In Puranic cosmology the Śāka island is placed as the sixth island-ring and does not play a significant role. However in the MBh it seems to be very important. Several facts indicate strongly that it was placed by the earlier bards as the second after Jambu and that it played a more important role than others:

1. the Śāka land is discussed immediately after Jambu,
2. a whole chapter is devoted to it (6.12),
3. its size is twice as large as Jambu (general rule: successive lands increase twice),
4. it is located on the Milk Ocean (6.12.9) which lies to the north of Jambu (6.9.15-18).

Bards of the MBh derive its name from the śāka tree (*Shorea robusta*) but it may come from the Śāka people which are identified as Scythians. Already in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE during the time of Darius the Great, they waged wars with the Achaemenids<sup>9</sup>. Later Achaemenids divided them into three groups: Śakas beyond the sea, Śakas with pointy hats, and haoma drinkers (Briant 2002:173). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE under the pressure of the Yuezhi, they entered the territory of Baktria and then Gāndhāra, where they created the Indo-Scythian empire. The land of Śāka can be a reminiscence of the earliest contacts with the Scythians. It can show the importance of a new culture and its distinct nature by giving it a separate island.

The land of Śāka is divided into seven provinces. To each of the provinces one of the seven rivers is assigned<sup>10</sup>:

mountains range (parvata)	district (varṣa)	river (nadī)
Meru	Mahākāśa	Sukumārī
Malaya	Kumudottara	Kumārī
Jaladhāra (water-carrier)	Sukumāra	Sītā
Raivatāka	Kaumāra	Kāverakā
Śyāma (black)	Mañcaka	Mahānadī
Durgāśaila	Modākin	Mañijalā
Kesarin	Mahāpuman	Ikṣuvarhanikā

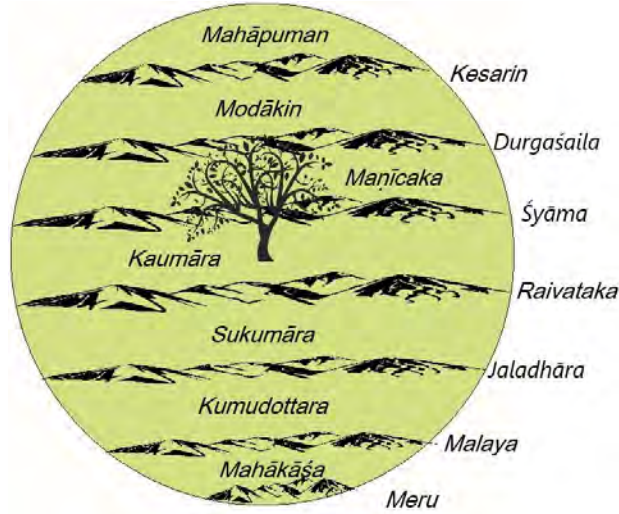
The first mountain has the same name as the peak in the center of the Jambu land. When we put it together with the fact that it is the only island divided by seven rather than six mountain ranges, we can assume that earlier bards placed the land of Śāka to the north of India beyond the Himalayas.

In the middle of the land there is a teak tree (śāka), which is supposed to be larger than the jambu tree on Sudarśana. The whole land is divided into four kingdoms (janapada: Magā, Maśakā, Mānasa, Mandagā), inhabited by four social classes (brāhmaṇa, rājanya, vaiśya, śūdra). The authors clearly distinguish the divisions of land into provinces (varṣa) and kingdoms (janapada). The first are associated with the topography, and the second with the population inhabiting them. Dividing lands

<sup>9</sup> The Śakas are present on the relief depicting the ethnicities of the Achaemenid Army on the tomb of Darius I. They are also mentioned in the famous Behistun Inscription.

<sup>10</sup> BhP, while mentioning mountains, provinces and rivers of the Śāka land, does not give any of the names present in the MBh.

into the four social classes shows clearly that the bards identify the process of the emergence of social groups with the process of emergence of nations and countries.



In a similar pattern bards present the mountains and districts of Kuśa (6.13.9-15) and Krauñca (6.13.17-23) islands:

<b>Kuśa</b>	
<b>mountains range (parvata)</b>	<b>district (varṣa)</b>
	Audbhida
Sudhāman (beautiful headquarters)	Veṇumaṇḍala
Dyutimat (shining)	Rathākāra
Kumuda (white lily)	Pālana
Puṣpavat (flowery)	Dhṛtimat
Kuśeśaya (a bed of kuśa grass)	Prabhākara
Harigiri (Hari's mountain)	Kāpila

<b>Krauñca</b>	
<b>mountains range (parvata)</b>	<b>district (varṣa)</b>
	Kuśala
Krauñca (crane)	Manonuga
Vāmanaka	Uṣṇa
Andhakāraka	Prāvaraka
Maināka <sup>11</sup>	Andhakāraka
Govinda	Munideśa
Nibiḍa	Dundubhisvana

<sup>11</sup> Maināka – son of Himavat and Menakā or Menā. The mythical mountain on Krauñcadvīpa; in its vicinity there are lakes Bindusara and Hiranyaśṛṅga. He was the only one who did not lose wings when Indra cut them off from other mountains.

The MBh is not systematic in showing the increasing size of mountains and districts. In the case of Śāka, the mountain ranges are twice as large (6.12.22, it is not known if it is width or height), in the case of the lands of Kuśa and Krauñca, the land is twice wider.

The MBh does not list the oceans (samudra) in the order established in later tradition. The bards seem to do it randomly. Here is the order of the oceans presented in the MBh 6.13.1-2 (information from the critical apparatus is marked in gray):

- Dugdhodaka / Kṣīroda (Milk Ocean)
- Ikṣurasodaka (Cane Juice Ocean)
- Ghṛtatoya / Sarpis (Ocean of Ghee)
- Dadhimaṇḍodaka (Ocean of Cream and Yogurt)
- Suroda (Wine Ocean)
- Gharmasāgara (Warm Ocean)
- Śuddhodadhi (Ocean of Clear Water)

Oceans are sometimes assigned to the islands they surround. However, this assignment is not systematic and we only know about three correlations:

- Śālmala island – Surā (Wine Ocean)
- Kuśa island – Sarpis (Ocean of Ghee)
- Śāka island – Kṣīroda (Milk Ocean)

At the edge of the world there is a square area called Sama, divided into thirty-three circles (maṇḍala). It is an archaic image absent in later cosmologies. The number of circles may correspond to the number of gods. So the area can be imagined as the abode of gods with elephants (diggaja) guarding the directions. These elephants are responsible for winds blowing from four directions. Contrary to later cosmologies, the MBh does not assign them the function of holding the world.



## Mundane geography

The demarcation line between sacred and mundane geographies is the limit of bards' knowledge about the physical world. It is measured by the distance from the well-known lands, i.e. Doab, Punjab and Central India. The further lands are more and more exotic for them. This is clearly visible in the description of the Pāṇḍavas' conquests (2.24-29). The brothers sent by Yudhiṣṭhira depart from Indraprastha in four directions. Their first steps can be easily traced on the map but next (especially of Arjuna's conquest) are the descriptions of the sacred geography known from the previous section of my article.

The identity of the MBh heroes is determined by their lineage and their kingdom. Each of them is called by the name derived from the folk or kingdom they come from. Mutual sympathies and animosities often come from geographical location. Even very old legendary conflicts pass from father to son and to grandson. Therefore, knowing the relations between kingdoms and their characteristics helps in understanding the attitudes of the heroes.

The map of the MBh kingdoms differs from the division into 16 kingdoms (mahājanapada) present in the Buddhist and Jain texts which is most often merged with it (Cunningham 1871, Sircar 1971, Kapoor 2002). Bards put emphasis elsewhere, as they consider other kingdoms important. My goal is to reconstruct the map of the epic as it is perceived by its speakers. It is not the map of any historical period. It should be kept in mind that the MBh was being created over hundreds of years during which knowledge about the world was changing, whole empires arose and collapsed.

To achieve this goal I had to do a complete list of the kingdoms. Such lists appear in numerous places of the MBh. The most important excerpts are related to the conquests (digvijaya), because they indicate the possible positions of the kingdoms in relation to each other:

- the conquest of Pāṇḍu (1.105.8-16)
- the conquest of Arjuna (north) (2.24-25)
- the conquest of Bhīma (east) (2.26-27)
- the conquest of Sahadeva (south) (2.28)
- the conquest of Nakula (west) (2.29)
- the conquest of Karṇa (3.241.15; 7.4.4-6)
- the conquest of Kṛṣṇa (5.47.58-103)

Other lists are connected with pilgrimages (tīrthayātrā) and the journeys of the heroes. They also suggest the geographical location of the kingdoms:

- Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa's trip to Jarāsandha (2.16-22)
- Yudhiṣṭhira's pilgrimage (3.80-165)
- Balarāma's pilgrimage (9.33-53)

List of allies, especially of Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas:

- kings cooperating with Jarāsandha 2.13
- list of kingdoms related to the Kuru dynasty (by Arjuna, 4.9-16)
- potential allies of the Pāṇḍavas (by Drupada, 5.4)
- list of rulers who brought armies (akṣauhiṇī) to Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas (5.19.1-27)

Lists of rulers who came to special assemblies, e.g. sacrifices, royal rites, marriage tournaments:

- the marriage of Draupadī (1.177)
- coronation of Yudhiṣṭhira (2.31)

The longest list of kingdoms (peoples of the Earth) appear in the cosmological description (the list is divided into three sections: the central, the southern and the barbarian north, 6.10.37-68). Shorter lists can be found scattered in many places, e.g. warriors and the attacking troops:

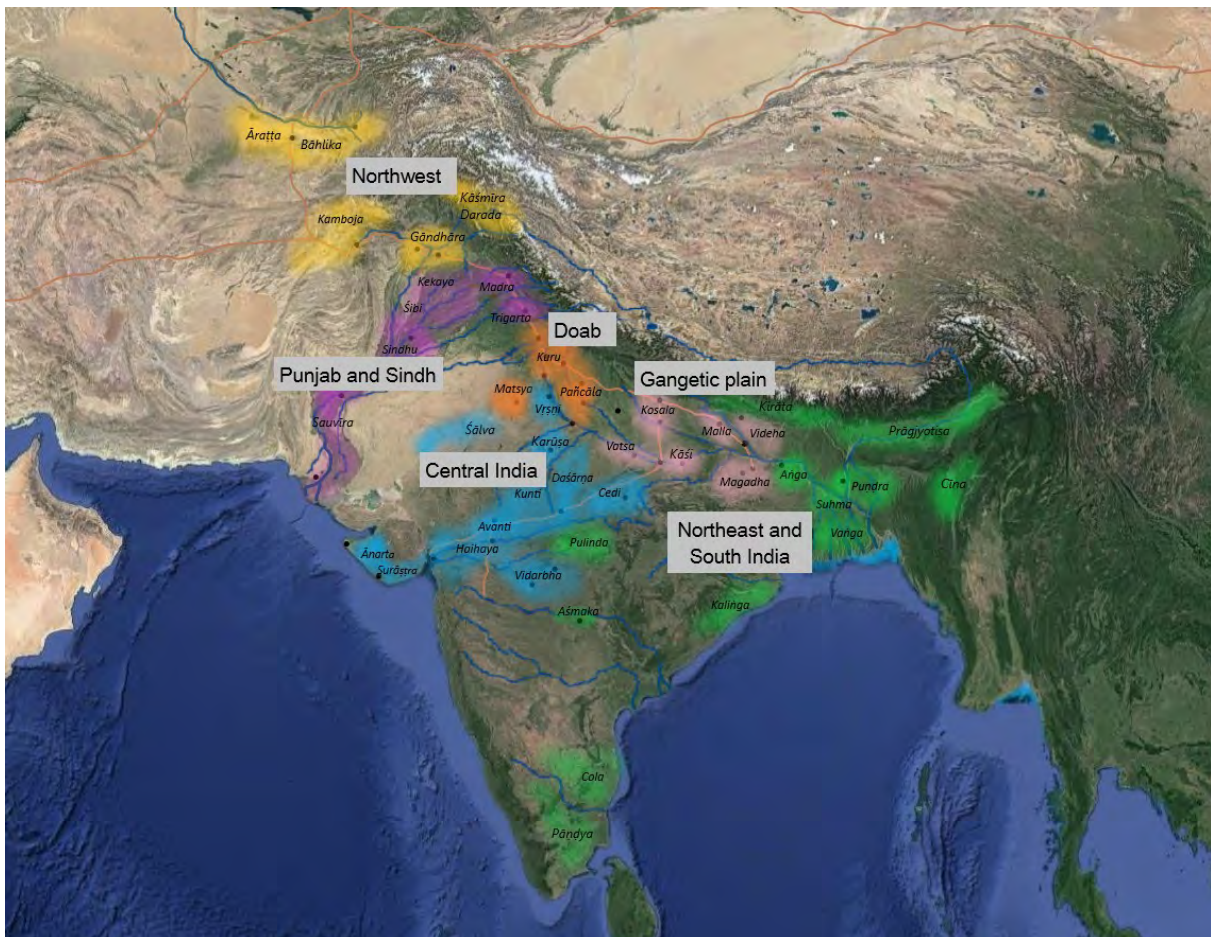
- warriors born from the Krodhavaśagaṇa (1.61)
- list of warriors attacking Duryodhana's troops (characteristics of their horses, 7.22)
- clans attacking Arjuna (7.68.41-42).

Then I considered the number of mentions of each of the kingdoms and the importance of the heroes coming from them. In my reconstruction I take into account the most frequently mentioned kingdoms only (31 kingdoms) and those closely related to them (belonging to the Pañcāla confederation, Yādava confederation, etc.). Sometimes I include less important kingdoms, but only those for which we have curious historical information such as Āraṭṭa, Abhisāra or Darada. For the sake of transparency, I omit less important ones about which we know almost nothing. Finally, based on the connections between the kingdoms I divided them into six groups associated with larger geographical areas:

1. **Northern India** (Doab) – the epicenter of the epic plot – the areas between the Ganges and the Yamuna and adjacent lands. In total, there are three kingdoms in which the epic is mostly set: Kuru, Pañcāla (Śrñjaya, Somaka, Prabhadraka) and Matsya.
2. **Central India** – mainly the lands of the descendants of Yadu (Yādava) spread over a large area south of the Ganges, beyond the Vindhya Mountains up to the Godavari and reaching Gujarat to the west: Sātvata (Bhoja, Vṛṣṇi, Dāśārha, Andhaka), Vidarbha, Avanti and Śālva.
3. **Punjab and Sindh** – these are the lands located along the Northern Trade Route (uttarapatha) west of the Kuru land: Trigarta, Madra, Kekaya and the kingdoms along the Indus Valley: Śibi, Sindhu, Sauvīra.
4. **Northwest** – the farthest area on the border of the Aryan culture, where the barbarians live: Yavanas and Śakas. Contact with them is possible through the three important lands: Gāndhāra, Kamboja and Bāhlika.
5. **Gangetic plain** – the kingdoms important for the development of Buddhism (Magadha, Kāśi, Vatsa, Kosala, Malla) and the ancient land of the Upanishads – Videha.
6. **Northeast and South India** – in the Northeast there are barely known areas of Bengal and Odisha mentioned in one breath (Aṅga, Vaṅga, Puṇḍra, Kaliṅga) and the wild lands of Assam and Burma's frontiers (Prāgjyotiṣa, Kīrāta, Cīna). The South of India plays almost no role in the MBh. The southern regions (Pāṇḍya, Cola) appear among the countries ruled by demons (rākṣasa).

To place the kingdoms on the map, I use historical analysis of the geography of ancient India (Cunningham 1871, Sircar 1971, Kapoor 2002) and the dictionaries of the MBh describing its geography (Sorensen 1978, Mehendale 1999). I locate kingdoms around their capitals. In many cases it is very uncertain where the capitol was situated, so I had to arbitrarily choose one from several locations proposed by researchers. When drawing the boundaries of the kingdoms, I tried to take into account the topography of the area (rivers, mountains). Actually in those days, inhabited areas were small islands in the midst of dense forests, wilderness and mountains. They were city-states based on clans and families rather than vast political structures. Hence, on the maps I mark only small areas around the capitals that could be controlled and inhabited by one clan.

Numerous other problems are encountered with such a reconstruction. Often it is not clear whether the name in the MBh describes the land, the people or the capital city. Lands are named after heroes, heroes are named with reference to lands, lands are named as cities, etc. So, for example, it can be only arbitrarily decided whether Prāgyotiṣa is the name of the land, capital city or the ruler. Further, at the time of recitation the bards evoked kingdoms that no longer existed, preserved only in memory; or they added the nations with whom they came in contact. One of the interpolations is the term 'Roman', appearing several times in the text, which indicates possible contact with the Romans. The term 'Hūṇa', naming the Hephthalites (Śveta Hūṇa, the White Huns), who invaded India in the 4th century during the Sassanid Empire, is an even later interpolation. On the other hand, the MBh is silent about the Vṛjī kingdom prominent at the time of the Buddha, but mentions the kingdom of Videha with its capital Mithilā, which flourished in the same region at the time of the Upanishads. Thus, the reconstruction of the mundane geography of the MBh is only a reflection of the ideas of the bards who were not politically involved. It does not reflect the realities of a specific historical period.





**Editorial information:**

- The number of mentions in the MBh is given in brackets (e.g. placed after the city name).
- The information from the critical apparatus of the MBh is marked in gray.
- The city that I chose to put on the map is marked with an underline. Unless otherwise stated, I consulted the following books while locating them: Cunningham 1871, Sircar 1971, Mehendale 1999, Kapoor 2002.
- The last column in the tables indicate the conflicting parties:

P	Pāṇḍava
K	Kaurava

## Northern India (Doab)

kingdom / people		capital	ruler	number of mentions	party
<b>Kuru</b>	Kuru	Hāstinapura (41) / Gajāhvaya (7)	Dhṛtarāṣṭra	1659	K
	Kuru (paśc.)	Indraprastha (36)	Yudhiṣṭhira		P
<b>Pañcāla</b> (Pāñcāla)	Pañcāla	Kāmpilyā (4)	Drupada	636	P
	<b>Sṛñjaya</b>		Uttamaejas	242	P
	<b>Somaka</b>			130	P
	<b>Prabhadraka</b>		Dhṛṣṭadyumna	35	P
	<b>Aśmaka</b>		Aśmaka	7	K P
	Pañcāla (utt.)	Ahicchatrā	Aśvatthāman		K
<b>Matsya</b>		Virāṭanagar(33) / Upaplavya(22)	Virāṭa	368	P

The center of the epic's action is the land of Kuru torn by conflict into two states: the eastern Kuru (capital: **Hāstinapura**) and the western Kuru (capital: **Indraprastha** identified as the Purana Qila in Delhi). The Kuru region stretches between the Ganges and the Yamuna up to the Himalayas in the north. The MBh mentions several other towns apart from the two capitols:

- **Kurukṣetra** (96) / **Samantapañcaka** (20) (identified as Thanesar) – a place chosen by the ancestor of the dynasty and plowed to ensure the prosperity of the citizens (9.52). Balarāma visited it during his pilgrimage along the Sarasvatī (9.33-53). It was chosen as the site of the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.
- **Vāraṇāvata** (38) (identified as Barnava) – the Pandavas reached the city on the eighth day of the month Phalgunā and lived there in a flammable shellac house (lākṣāgrha) constructed by Purocana (1.114, 1.147).
- **Vṛkasthala** (7) – a place that the Pāṇḍavas asked for to avoid war (5.31.19 / 70.15 / 80.7-8). Kṛṣṇa stopped there on the way from Upaplavya to Hāstinapura.

The city of Udayendu is also mentioned (7.22.22), where Bhīma's son Sutasoma was born.

To the southeast of the Kuru was the kingdom of the **Pañcālas**, composed of numerous clans: Sṛñjaya, Somaka, Prabhadraka and Aśmaka. Their capital was **Kāmpilyā** (4) (identified as Kampil), which was ruled by Drupada. It was here that the svayaṃvara of Draupadī took place, during which the Pāṇḍavas won her as their spouse. The city was besieged and conquered by the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas at the request of Droṇa. This conflict between Droṇa and Drupada resulted in dividing the kingdom into the Northern Pañcāla (uttara) where Droṇa made his son Aśvatthāman a king and the Southern Pañcāla (dakṣina). The capital of northern Pañcāla, not mentioned in the MBh, was **Ahicchatrā** (identified as Ramnagar, Kapoor 2002:16). Near the country of the Pañcālas there was **Ekacakrā** (18) (identified as Etawah), a place where the Pāṇḍavas were hiding after the unsuccessful attempt to burn them in Vāraṇāvata (1.55). The famous **Naimiṣa** (31) (identified as Neemsar), a place of pilgrimage where the Purāṇas and the MBh were recited, could be within the range of the Pañcāla's influence.

South of the Kuru land was the **Matsya** kingdom. In the capital named **Virāṭanagara** or **Upaplavya** (identified as Bairat) King Virāṭa ruled. His lineage was descended from Matsya – one of the twins found in the belly of a fish and born from the semen of king Vasu Uparicara. Satyawatī marries King Śāntanu and her brother Matsya becomes the founder of the dynasty. At the court of Virāṭa the Pāṇḍavas chose to hide during the final year of their exile, having assumed false identities.



## Central India (*Yādava*)

kingdom / people		capital	ruler	number of mentions	party	
Sātvata (179)	Śūra (sena)	Mathurā (6)		30	K	P
	Vṛṣṇi		Yuyudhana	341	K	P
	Dāsārha	Ānarta (22): Dvāravatī (30) Dvārakā (67) Surāṣṭra (10): Prabhāsa (33)	Kṛṣṇa	127	K	
	Andhaka		Kṛtavarma	111	K	P
	Bhoja			109	K	
	Kuntibhoja		Kuntibhoja	53	K	
	Kukura			15	K	P
Cedi		Śuktimatī (4)	Dhṛṣṭaketu	152	P	
Haihaya		Māhiṣmatī (8)	Nīla	20	K	
Vidarbha		Kuṇḍina (4) Bhojakaṭa (3)	Bhīṣmaka, Rukmin	36		
Daśārṇa		Vidiśā	Hiraṇyavarman (?),	29	K	
Karūṣa			Dantavakra	24	P	
Avanti (Āvantya)		Ujjayinī	Vinda i Anuvinda	58	K	
Śālva		Mārttikāvata (1) Saubha (10)	Śālva	153	P	
Ābhīra					K	

Like the Kuru people, the Yādavas (98) derived their genealogy from the legend of Yayāti. Yadu, the eldest son of Yayāti, was a ruler of Hāstinapura. However, for disobedience he was banished from the city. Yayāti cursed him and the other disobedient sons that their descendants would not become monarchs. Thus, Yadu as the progenitor of the family is a tragic figure – the Yādavas will never equal Kauravas in supremacy over the region and will feel inferior to the descendants of Pūru. The Yādava clans include:

1. Cedi
2. Haihaya
3. Vidarbha
4. Karūṣa
5. Sātvata

**Cedi** – a land located south of the kingdoms of Vatsa and Kāśi, towards the sources of the Narmada River. Its capital was **Śuktimatī** (identified as Rewa or Bunda) whose name was identical to the nearby river (perhaps the Beehar, a tributary of the Tamas). The Cedi come from the Yādava family, but the MBh considers Vasu Uparicara as the king of the Cedi, who conquered their lands. His

descendents ruled in Māgadha, Vatsa and Malla. The later ruler of Cedi was Śiśupāla, the sworn enemy of Kṛṣṇa, and after him his son Dhṛṣṭaketu.

**Haihaya** – its capital was **Māhiṣmatī** (identified as Maheshwar), also known as the southern capital of Avanti. The most famous ruler of the Haihaya dynasty is **Arjuna Kārtavīrya**. His youngest son Rāma killed the ruler class twenty-one times. From their blood, five lakes were created on the Kuru field (Samantapañcaka). Rāma practiced asceticism in the Mahendra Mountains. Karṇa mastered the military art (dhanurveda) under his supervision. Haihaya's land on the southern side of the Vindhya Mountains above the Narmada could extend as far as **Bharukaccha** (2) (identified as Bharuch). It was an ancient port at the mouth of the Narmada, known to the Greeks as Barygaza. The fact that Kārtavīrya is called the ruler of the seaside country (3.11.19, Anūpapati) indicates that the Haihaya land stretched down to the ocean.

**Vidarbha** – its king is Bhīṣmaka, the father of Rukmiṇī. He rules in the capital **Kuṇḍina** (identified as Kaundinyapur). When Bhīṣmaka's son Rukmin was defeated by Kṛṣṇa, he didn't return to the capital, but built the city of **Bhojakoṭa** at the site of his defeat. It was located on the western border of Vidarbha (maybe near Mehkar<sup>12</sup>).

**Karūṣa** – was located north of the Cedi land (the capital is identified as Datia). Its ruler was Dantavakra, a follower of Jarāsandha and Śiśupāla, and an opponent of Kṛṣṇa. Despite Dantavakra's opposition to Kṛṣṇa, the Karūṣa people are in the army of Yudhiṣṭhira.

**Sātvata** – this is the most important Yādava clan. Its progenitor is Satvat, son of Madhu of the Yādava dynasty. His son Bhīma ruled in Mathura. The Sātvata confederation consisted of the following clans:

1. Andhaka
2. Bhoja
3. Kukura
4. Vṛṣṇi
5. Dāśārha

The boundaries between the clans are fluid. The main heroes such as Kṛṣṇa or Yuyudhāna are called Yādava, Vārṣṇeya, Sātvata and Dāśārha. The Yādava-Sātvata clans didn't seem to have a single ruler, having instead apparently created tribal republics or confederations. Among them the **Vṛṣṇis** are prominent and in the MBh they are often called Yādavas.

The MBh mentions the transfer of the Sātvatas from **Mathurā** (identified as Mathura) located in the Śūrasena land, to **Dvārakā** (identified as Dwarka). It happened because of the repeated attacks by the ruler of Magadha, Jarāsandha, on Mathurā. Kṛṣṇa was the chief of the **Dāśārha** people who were his adjutant army. His abode was in the land of **Ānarta**, with Dvārakā as its capital. Kṛṣṇa often travelled to Ānarta from Indraprastha through the Upaplavya or came back by the same path. Tradition identifies Ānarta and Surāṣṭra with Gujarat. It is in Surāṣṭra that the famous **Prabhāsa** pilgrimage site (identified as Somnath) is located. From Prabhāsa Balarāma began his pilgrimage along the Sarasvatī and in this place the Vṛṣṇi-Yādava dynasty died in a fratricidal fight.

Near Ānarta, where the Sarasvatī disappears (vinaśana), the **Ābhīras** lived. They were pastoral people treated as barbarians in the MBh. They were defeated by Nakula during his conquests. Prophecies say that in the age of Kali, the Ābhīras will be kings. They formed the eyes of Droṇa's formation (suparṇavyūha) on the twelfth day of the battle. The MBh informs us that there were knights who became śūdras because they gave up their duties in fear of Paraśurāma. When

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<sup>12</sup> My guess.

Arjuna escorted their women and children to Indraprastha after the destruction of the Vṛṣṇi-Sātvata dynasty, the Ābhīras attacked him and stole most of the women.

The **Kuntibhoja** people are also associated with the Sātvatas. Sometimes they are understood as a combination of two clans: Kunti and Bhoja. The Kunti kingdom, where the mother of the Pāṇḍavas was born, was located north of Avanti. In the later times (the 11th century) the Bhoja clans inhabited the areas north of Godavari, through the land of Avanti, up to Vidiśa.

The **Daśārṇa** people inhabited the area between the Betwa River and Dhasan (Daśārṇa). Their ruler was Hiraṇyavarman who became connected with the Pañcālas through his daughter's marriage (she married Śikhāṇḍin). Their capital could be **Vidiśā** (identified as Vidisa). The term is mentioned twice in the MBh, but in the sense of a river. In the village of Bais (Besnagar), 3 km from Vidisa, archaeologists made important discoveries – the temple of Vasudeva and the so-called Heliiodorus pillar. 9 km west of Vidiśā there is the famous Sanċi stupa with an inscription in Brahmi script by which the village was identify (ve-di-sa).

The land of **Avanti** was divided in two by the Vindhya range. The capital of the northern part was **Ujjaynī** (not mentioned in the MBh), and the southern **Māhiṣmatī**. However, the MBh considers Māhiṣmatī to be the capital of the Haihayas.

An important land from the perspective of the MBh is **Śālva**, also known as Mārttikāvata. Its capital was Saubha and its ruler Śālva. The land may have been located somewhere in Rajasthan near the kingdom of Ānarta. Śālva attacked Dvārakā and as revenge Kṛṣṇa with his army went to his capital and chased him up to the ocean (3.21.14). The capital of Śālva could be imagined as Siwana<sup>13</sup>, whose strategic location resembles that of the capital of the Matsyas. The Luni River, important for the Sarasvatī flow hypothesis, is lost in the sands nearby.



<sup>13</sup> My guess.

## Punjab and Sindh

kingdom / people		capital	ruler	number of mentions	party	
<b>Śibi</b> (Śaibya)	Śibi		Govāsana	98	K	
	<b>Madra</b> (Madraka)	Śākala (4)	Śalya	356	K	
	<b>Kekaya</b> (Kaikeya)		Kekaya (brothers)	182	K	P
	<b>Sauvīra</b>	Roruka		29	K	
<b>Trigarta</b> (Traigarta)		Prasthala (5)	Suśarman	114	K	
<b>Sindhu</b> (Saindhava)		Vṛṣadarbha (Vṛṣādarbhi 14)	Jayadratha	289	K	

Śibi is considered to be the founder of the Punjab dynasty. He had four sons, each of whom founded his own dynasty:

1. **Suvīra**,
2. **Madraka**,
3. **Kekaya**,
4. **Vṛṣadarbha**.

These kingdoms lie west of the Kuru along the Northern Trade Route (**uttarapatha**) and extend down the Indus Valley. The first kingdom east of the Kuru in today's Indian part of Punjab was **Trigarta**. Suśarman was the ruler of the Trigartas who stole the cows of the Matsyas. The capital of the kingdom was Prasthala (identified as Jalandhar).

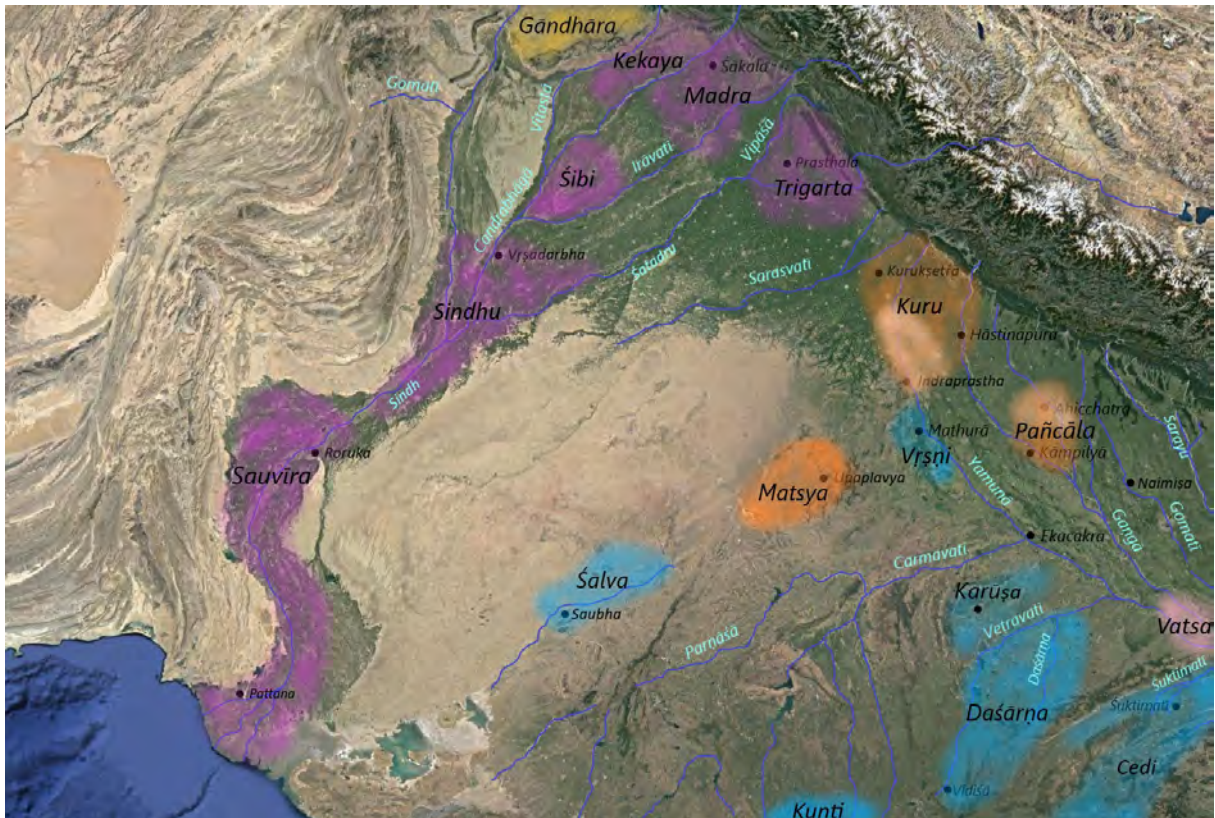
Further east, somewhere between the Ravi and the Chenab rivers, was the kingdom of **Madra** with its capital Śākala (identified as Sialkot). The king of Madra, **Śalya**, was also the ruler of the lands of Sauvīra and Bāhlika. In Madra, women were said to have more freedom and the brahmins had less social importance. From Madra came Paṇḍu's younger wife, **Mādrī**.

Still further north, between Madra and Gandhara was the kingdom of **Kekaya**. It was divided into two factions before the battle. Five brothers, of whom Bṛhatkṣatra is mentioned, joined Yudhiṣṭhira (their mother was the sister of the Pāṇḍavas' mother – mātṛṣvaṣṭ 7.9.53). The rest, led by Vinda and Anuvinda, fought on the side of Duryodhana.

The **Śibi** kingdom was situated somewhere in the valley of the Chenab River (Candrabhāgā). Sometimes its capital is identified as the present-day Multan. It was ruled by **Govāsana**, who gave his daughter (Devikā) to Yudhiṣṭhira as a wife. This family tie should ensure Govāsana's friendship towards the Pāṇḍavas, but he is mentioned in the Kaurava army. However, another ruler of Śibi is mentioned on the side of the Pāṇḍavas.

The Indus Valley (**Sindhu**) was the realm of Jayadratha. The capital of the kingdom was Vṛṣadarbha (identified as Multan). The lord of Sindhu (Saindhava) is the sworn enemy of the Pāṇḍavas. Sindhu was one of the lands famous for **horse breeding**. Healthy, well-mannered horses are often called saindhava in the epic. However, in this sphere, kingdoms further to the northwest were the leaders.

**Sauvīra** is mentioned mostly along with the land of Sindhu. According to the Buddhist texts, its capital was Roruka (identified as Rohri). Al-Biruni (11th century) claimed that the land was situated in the southern Punjab at the confluence of the rivers and included Multan. If we take Rohri as the capital of the Sauvīras, the land was rather located in the lower course of the Indus down to the mouth of the river and could include a port known to the Greeks and Romans as Patala (identified as Thatta or Banbhore). It was a Scytho-Parthian city inhabited at least from the 1st century BC. In the MBh it appears as **Pattana** (17), situated by the ocean (referred to with the words: sāgara, arṇava, dvīpa) in the seaside country (Anūpa).





## Northwest

kingdom / people		capital	ruler	number of mentions	party
<b>Gāndhāra</b>		Takṣaśilā (2), Puṣkalāvātī	Śakuni	84	K
<b>Kamboja</b> (Kāamboja)	Kamboja	Rājapura (2) / Kāpiśī	Sudakṣiṇa	96	K
	<b>Yavana</b>			45	K
	<b>Śaka</b>			35	K
Kāśmīra (6)	<b>Darada</b>			19	K
	<b>Abhisāra</b>	Abhisārī (1)		7	K
	<b>Dārva</b>			5	K
Aśvaka (?)	<b>Bāhlika</b>		Somadatta	81	K
	<b>Āraṭṭa</b>			13	K
	<b>Vanāyu</b>			7	K

**Gāndhāra** has always been the gateway to the Indian subcontinent. A trade route led along the Khyber Pass. It was one of the few roads leading through the Hindu Kush and the Sulaiman Mountains. **Takṣaśilā**, the capital of Gāndhāra, was a famous center of education. Here Pāṇini wrote the sūtras of Sanskrit grammar, Kauṭilya was to compose the art of polity (Arthaśāstra), and the foundation of Indian medicine (āyurveda) was created. The MBh tells the story of the brahmin Uttanka who went to Takṣaśilā for his education (1.3.179). Janamejaya's snake sacrifice took place in the capital of Gāndhāra, during which the MBh was recited for the first time (5.18.29). The earlier capital of Gāndhāra, preceding the Achaemenid times, was **Puṣkalāvātī** (Greek: Peukelaotis). The city is not mentioned in the MBh but it appears in Rāmāyana. Puṣkalāvātī ruins were discovered near Charsadda (28 km north of Peshawar).

The Kauravas have close ties with the Gāndhāra people. From Gāndhāra comes the wife of the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra, **Gāndhārī**. Her brother **Śakuni**, the uncle of the Kauravas, was fueling Duryodhana's hatred of the Pāṇḍavas. It is he who, as an expert in dice, won the kingdom from the Pāṇḍavas and sent them into exile.

The land of **Kamboja** is supposed to have been inhabited by warriors (kṣatriya) who had gone astray from the brahminical culture (earliest mention: Pāṇini 4.1.75). The land was situated behind Gandhara, and its capital was **Rājapura** (identified as Rajouri in Kashmir or Bagram near Kabul). The land was to be conquered by Karṇa during his conquests (7.4.4). Researchers give several clues to identify the location of Kamboja (Gankovsky 1971:64–67, West 2009:359):

- In Ptolemy's Geography (6.12.2, 6.13.3) the term **Komedes** appears, describing an ethnic group from central Asia (Śaka, Baktria, Sogdiana, Transoxiana). The Komedes were to live somewhere around Amu Darya (Oxus) and Syr Darya (Jaksartes).
- Pāṇini (4.2.92) mentions the town of **Kāpiśī** (identified as Bagram, 60 km north of Kabul), famous for its wine. The city and kingdom of Kāpiśī is sometimes identified as Kamboja. Both

names (kamboja and kāpiśī) are presumed to come from the same, unidentified word transcribed into Sanskrit.

- The sacred geography of MBh mentions a district called Kumuda (**kumudottara**) from which waters are coming, which was situated near Mount Meru (6.12.23, identified with Pamir – the sources of Amu Darya and Syr Darya).

Following these clues, Kamboja could be identified with the Achaemenid satrapy called Parupraesanna ('beyond Hindu Kush'; the term uparaesanna 'higher than eagles' was used to designate Hindu Kush), which is listed in Greek texts as Paropamisadae. In other sources it is located in Pamir or in Kashmir, where Kamboj is still a name used in the local ethnic community here<sup>14</sup>.

Kamboja in the MBh is associated with the newcomers from the west – the **Yavanas** and the Śakas. The ruler of Kamboja, Sudakṣina, leads these peoples into battle. The term yavana (in prakrits: yoṇa) comes from the name of the ancient region of Anatolia – Ionia, inhabited by the Ionian tribe. The name was introduced by the Persians, who called the Greeks (on both sides of the sea) Yaunā (inscription of Darius, Kent 1953:136). It was adopted in India to describe the Seleucid and Indo-Greek state. This name appears in the edict of Ashoka to describe Antiochus II Theos (Aṃtiyoko nama yonaraja – 13th rock edict in Gāndhāri language). On the Heliodorus pillar it describes Antialcides Nikephoros (Aṃtalikitas) ruling in Takṣaśilā. The Indo-Greek ruler Menander I (Milinda) is also called Yavana. The Yavanas in India were famous for their astrological knowledge. One of the first treatises on the Indian astrology is called Yavanajātaka.

The **Śakas** are a nomadic people related to the Scythians, who inhabited steppes of Central Asia. The Achaemenids waged wars with the Śakas. In the 2nd century BC the Śakas under the pressure of Yuezhi enter the territories of Bactria and then India, and created the Indo-Scythian empire. In the sacred geography the land of Śāka (6.12.26-37) could be a reminiscence of India's contacts with this people.

The lands of **Darada**, Abhisāra and Dārva are located around Kashmir. Darada is a country and people living north of Kashmir (identified with Gilgit-Baltistan). The Darada peoples are often mentioned along with the Kambojas. These people were defeated by Arjuna during his conquests (digvijaya). Darada's representatives were present at the rājasūya sacrifice of Yudhiṣṭhira. The Pāṇḍavas pass through their country on their way from Badarī to the capital of King Subāhu (King of Kāśī, Cedi or Kulinda). While gathering followers the Pāṇḍavas send messengers to them. **Abhisāra** bordered with Kashmir on the south and west. The city of Abhisārī was conquered by Arjuna. The land of **Dārva** is often mentioned with the previous one. Its people are described as warriors (kṣatriya) who became śūdras.

In the MBh **Somadatta** and his son **Bhūriśravas** are the rulers of the **Bāhlika**. The fact that they are also called Kauravas indicates a close relationship of the Kurus with the northwest people. The ruler of Madra – Śalya is also titled a king of the Bāhlika. This region is sometimes identified with Bactria, especially with its former capital, Balkh. The city was famous as the center of Zoroastrianism. Buddhism also flourished there. Another important city of Bactria was Ai-Khanoum, identified as Alexandria-Oxus, and situated at the confluence of the Panj and the Kokcha rivers. The oldest coins with images of Kṛṣṇa-Vasudeva and Balarāma-Saṅkarṣaṇa (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) were found there.

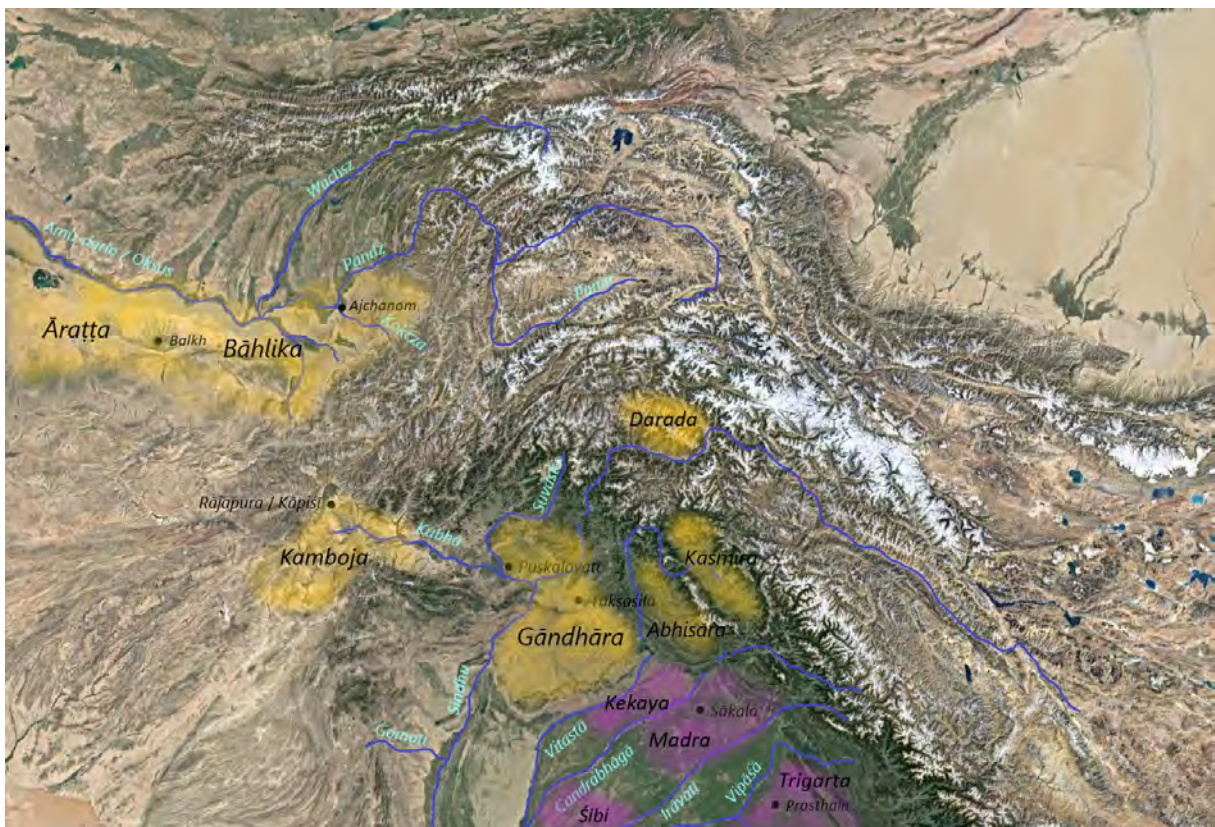
Sometimes the country of Bāhlika is identified with the land of **Āraṭṭa** in the MBh. The bards locate it outside Punjab (the land of the rivers: Śatadru, Vipāśā, Irāvātī, Candrabhāgā, Vitastā, Sindhu, 8.30.35) and call it forbidden for the brahmins because staying there destroys righteousness

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<sup>14</sup> More information about the Kamboj community on the Deepak Kamboj's website: <https://www.kambojsociety.com/>.

(naṣṭadharmā 8.30.36). The term Aratta as a land of gold, silver and lapis lazuli appears in the Mesopotamian myths of the 1st dynasty of Uruk (e.g. “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta”). Lapis lazuli has been obtained and imported from the land of Badakhshan at the springs of Amu Darya. Aratta was to be the land of the goddess Inanna who had transferred herself to Uruk. Michael Witzel draws attention to the similarity of these names from the MBh and from Mesopotamia (Witzel 1999:8). Taking this into account, Aratta may be identified with Khorasan, the land to which the trade route from Mesopotamia ran.

There are lists of lands associated with **horse breeding** in the MBh (7.35.36). These are Vanāyu, mountain areas (pārvatīya), Kāmboja, Āraṭṭa and Bāhlika. It can therefore be assumed that horses were brought to India from Persia and Bactria. The best Indian horses came from the Indus Valley and Punjab. The Purāṇas and Buddhist texts (e.g. Buddhacarita 2.22.1) refer to the northeastern peoples as **Aśvaka**. This term comes from the word ‘horse’ (Sans. aśva, Prakrit: assa, Avestan: aspa). People calling themselves the Aśvakas live in the Peshawar Valley and eastern Afghanistan to this day.



## Gangetic plain

kingdom / people		capital	ruler	number of mentions	party	
<b>Magadha</b> (Māgadha)		Girivraja (15) / Rājagṛha (4)	Jayatsena	145	K	P
<b>Kāśi</b>	Kāśi	Vārāṇasī (15)	Kāśirāja	73		P
	<b>Vatsa</b>	Kauśāmbī	Vatsa	(128)		P
Ikṣvāku	<b>Kosala / Kośala</b>	Ayodhyā (19) / Sāketa (?)	Bṛhadbala	38	K	
	<b>Videha</b>	Mithilā (29)	Janaka	27		
	<b>Malla</b>	Kuśinagara		21		P

The lands along the Ganges on which the first historical empire of the Maurya arose (Magadha, Kosala, Kāśi) and which are important in the development of Buddhism are not significant to the epic. Malla – the kingdom important in the time of the Buddha, appears only in name in the MBh and the Vṛjji tribal confederation does not appear at all. The kingdoms of this region and their capitals are mentioned in the conquests of the Kauravas: they were conquered by Paṇḍu, subdued by Bhīma on the order of Yudhisthira, and forced under sovereignty by Karṇa. The rulers of Magadha and Kāśi (Jarāsandha and Kāśirāja) play a significant role in the events leading up to the war. All the lands along the Ganges have founding myths that often speak about the conflict between the brahmin and warrior classes.

The history of **Magadha** begins with the mythical king **Vena**. Having seen his cruelty, the sages (ṛṣi) decided to kill him. From the dead body of the king, two beings were born: from the right thigh emerged a grumpy man, the progenitor of the **Niṣāda** tribe and barbarians (mleccha)<sup>15</sup> inhabiting the Vindhya mountains. From the right arm the seers formed the second Indra, learned in the Vedas, pious king **Pṛthuvainya**. At the time of his coronation Śukra becomes his priest, Garga his astrologer, and the two bards, **Sūta** and **Māgadha**, sing about the king's deeds. The king gives the swampy lands on the shore of the ocean (anūpadeśa) to one bard, and the land of Magadha to the other. The bard gifted by the king becomes the progenitor of the people of Magadha. The first capital of the kingdom was **Rājagṛha**, also known as Girivraja, as it was located in a valley surrounded by mountains. It was ruled by king **Jarāsandha**, the great enemy of Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas. **Gayā** (10), the famous pilgrimage site where the Pāṇḍavas performed rites for the ancestors, is situated near Rājagṛha.

The kingdoms of **Kāśi**, Vatsa and Haihaya are linked by one founding myth related to the story of Yayāti. Yayāti had a daughter Mādhavī who married Divodāsa. The son of Mādhavī **Pratardana** passes his merits to his grandfather so that he can enjoy heaven again. Pratardana and his paternal ancestors were the rulers of the Kāśi peoples, whose capital was **Vārāṇasī**.

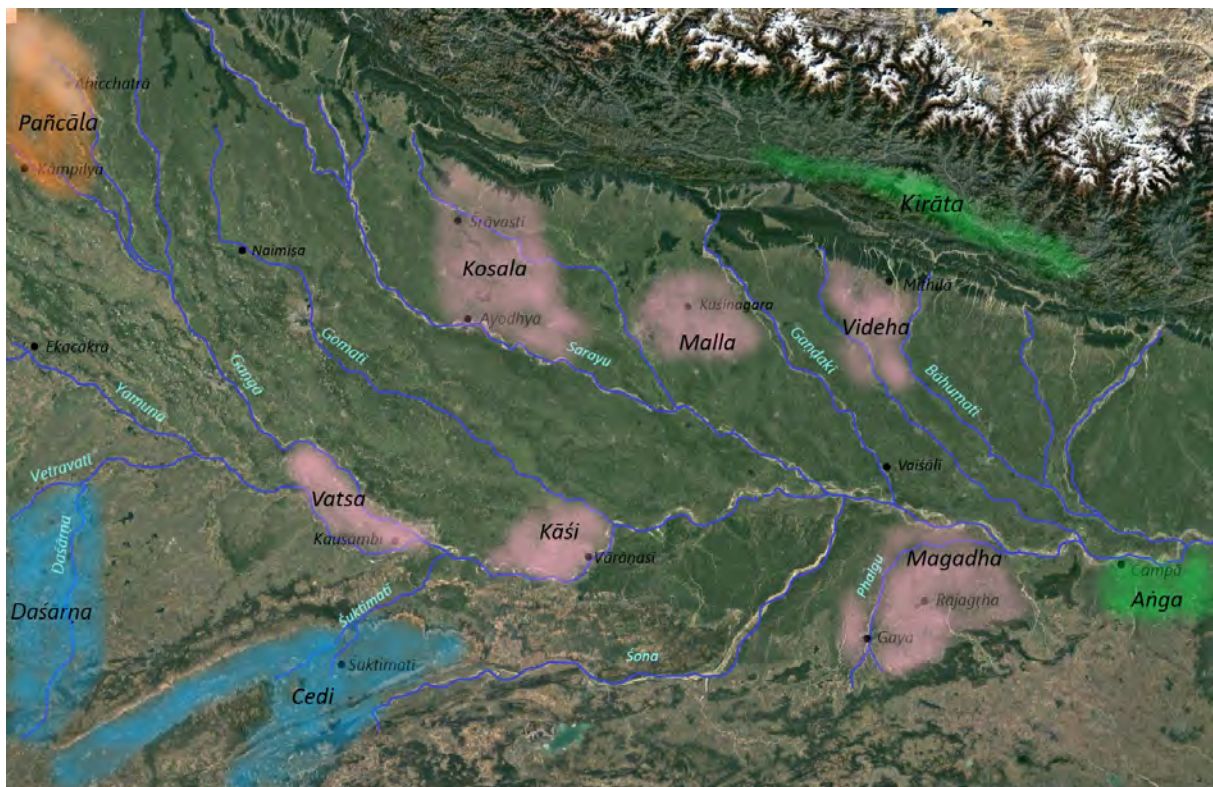
Pratardana was the father of **Vatsa**. According to the legend, the name of his son 'Little Calf' comes from the fact that he was raised among calves. Vatsa becomes the ancestor of a people and

<sup>15</sup> The Niṣāda tribes side with the Kauravas (7:45, 21) and are associated with the inhabitants of the Vindhya Mountains. The term mleccha refers to all foreigners and barbarians. The MBh (7.68.44) describes them: "Hairy faces, half-shaven, with a bun on the other half, unclean" (*muṇḍārdhamuṇḍajaṭilān aśucīñ jaṭilānanān*).

kingdom in the vicinity of Kāśi. The land was situated at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna, and its capital was Kauśāmbī. It is not mentioned in the MBh but appears in the Rāmāyaṇa and is also called the city of the Vatsas (Vatsapattana). In the MBh, the kingdom of Vatsa is connected with Kāśi. Vatsa's son is **Haihaya**, the progenitor of the people and the land of Haihaya near Avanti. However, these people are more often considered to belong to the Yādava confederation.

The land of **Videha** with its capital **Mithilā** (identified as Janakpur in Nepal or Balirajgarh) and the land of **Kosala** with the capital **Ayodhyā** are inseparably connected in the epic with the life and history of Rāma and his father Daśaratha. The first one was ruled by the father of Sītā, king **Janaka** (another king of Videha, defeated by Bhīma, had the same name). The ruler was famous for his disputes with brahmins. Paṇḍu conquered Mithila during his conquests, and Kṛṣṇa visited it on the way from Indraprastha to Rājagṛha. The kingdom of Videha flourished in the late Vedic period. It is connected with the rise of the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads (e.g. Bṛhadāraṇyaka) and the activities of the sages such as Yājñavalkya. At the time of the Buddha, the kingdom probably no longer existed and was replaced by the Vṛjji tribal confederation with the capital in Vaiśālī.

Janaka's wife and Sita's mother was Kausalyā. Her name indicates that she comes from Kosala and that both kingdoms were related. The history of Kosala is linked to the dynasty of king Ikṣvāku. He was the son of Vaivasvata Manu and the founder of the solar kṣatriya dynasty (sūryavaṃśa). During the great MBh battle **Bṛhadbala** was the ruler of Kosala. He took the side of the Kauravas, and on his banner was a lion (siṃhaketu). He was killed by Abhimanyu (7:46:22). The capital of Kosala in the time of the Buddha was **Śrāvastī**, mentioned once in the MBh (3.193.4) when discussing the descendants of Ikṣvāku. The city was built by Śrāvasta. **Vaiśālī** was the capital of the Vṛjji people. The etymology of this name is derived from a king Visāla. In the MBh Vṛjji was the name of Visāla's daughter and the wife of Vasudeva but not the city. The capital of the Mallas was **Kuśinagara**, not mentioned in the MBh.



## Northeast and South India

kingdom / people		capital	ruler	number of mentions	party
<b>Kaliṅga</b> (Kāliṅga)			Śrutāyudha	110	K
<b>Aṅga</b>	Aṅga	Campā (6)	(Lomapāda+)	56	K
	<b>Vaṅga</b>		Karṇa	31	K
	<b>Puṇḍra</b>	Puṇḍrasya nāgara (1)	Paṇḍra	20	P
	<b>Suhma</b>			11	
<b>Prāgjyotiṣa</b> (danava)	Prāgjyotiṣa		Bhagadatta	47	K
	<b>Kirāta</b>			55	K
	<b>Pulinda</b>			12	
	<b>Cīna</b>			12	K
rākṣasa	<b>Pāṇḍya</b>			35	P
	<b>Cola</b>			5	

The kingdoms of the far northeast do not play an important role in the MBh, but the area of Bengal and the Burmese borderlands were known to the authors. The progenitor of the lands of Bengal and Odisha was **Dīrghatamas**. He was a son of Mamatā (the sister of Bṛhaspati) and Utathya. While still in the womb, he kicks its uncle, for which he is cursed by the uncle to be born blind, and therefore receives the name ‘Long-darked’ (Dīrghatamas; after being cured of his blindness, he became a great seer, receiving the name Gotama). The boy married a brahmin girl and lived in the community of the sages. From the descendant of Surabi (Saurabheya) he learned sexual freedom (godharma), for which he was rejected by his wife and expelled from the community. King Bali gave him shelter and asked him to conceive offspring with his wife Sudeṣṇā. He touched her body and announced that she would give birth to five sons named **Aṅga**, **Vaṅga**, **Kaliṅga**, **Puṇḍra** and **Suhma**, and they would be the founders of families named after their names.

The realms of Aṅga, Vaṅga and **Kaliṅga** are often mentioned together, and are associated with Karṇa, who was hastily crowned as their ruler by Duryodhana. The ruler of Kaliṅga (identified as Odisha) was Śrutāyudha. The capital of the **Aṅgas** was Campā (identified with the villages near Bhagalpur) called the city on the bank of the Ganges. In ancient times its ruler was **Lomapāda**. It is also referred to as the city of Adhiratha – the father of Karṇa and the sage Devaśarman. In the MBh Lomapāda is known for offering his daughter Śāntā to the sage Rṣyaśṛṅga and asking him to come to his kingdom and free the country from lack of rainfall. The ruler of Aṅga was killed together with his elephant by Bhīma as he rushed to the aid of Duryodhana (7.25.14-18). The Aṅga people fight on elephants under the leadership of Karṇa (7.68.31). They are called barbarians (mleccha) and ugly looking (nānāvikṛta-darśana).

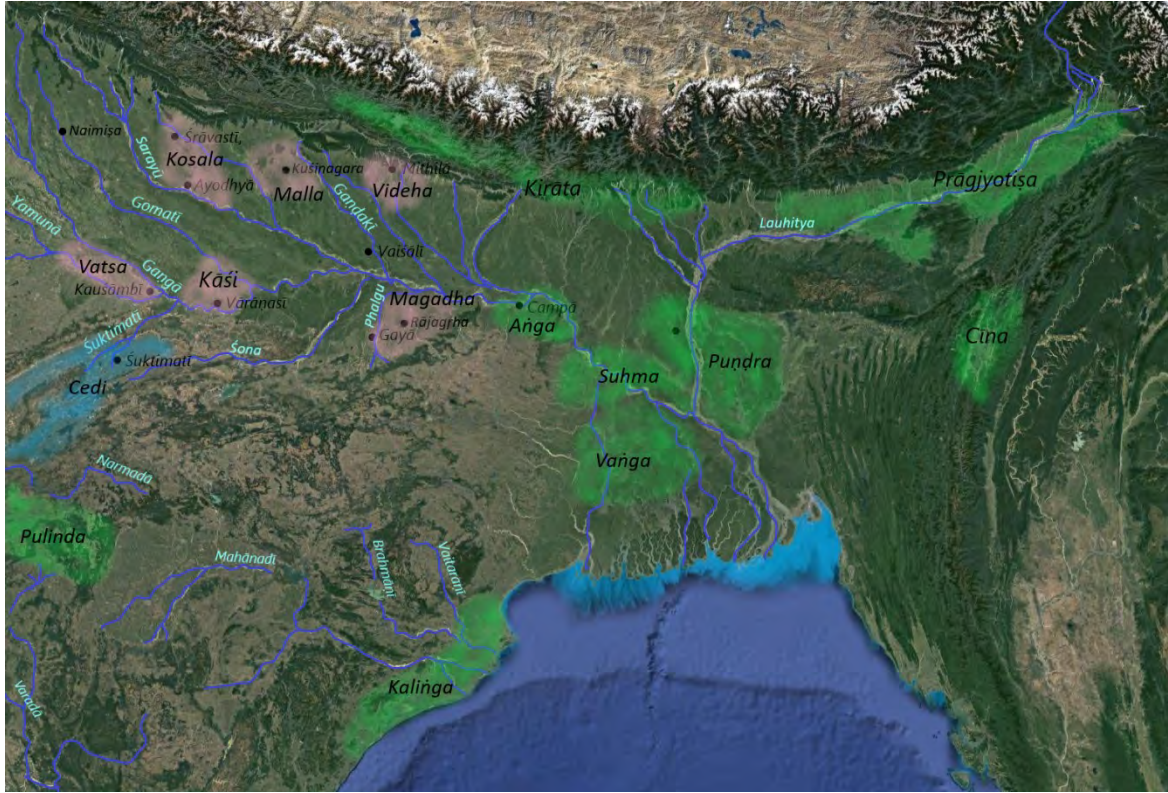
The **Puṇḍra** peoples had paid tribute to Yudhiṣṭhira and they are troops in his army. Their ruler was named Paṇḍra, Paṇḍraka or **Vāsudeva**. The conch of Bhīma is also called Paundra, which

may indicate Bengal (Bangladesh) as its place of origin. Mahasthangarh is considered to be the former capital of Pundra.

**Prāgjyotiṣa** was the kingdom of the son of the Earth (Bhūmi) **Naraka** (Bhauma, Daitya, Dānava). The country was the legacy of the descendants of the Danu dynasty (Dānava) such as: Hiranyakaśipu, Prahlāda, Virocana, Bali, Bāṇa. When Naraka was killed by Kṛṣṇa, **Bhagadatta**, also known as Prāgjyotiṣa, became the ruler of the country. During the battle, he rode an elephant and fought surrounded by the Kīrātas, the Cīnas and other inhabitants of the coast. The land is identified with Kamarupa and Davaka – the first historical kingdoms of Assam during the Gupta period.

In the MBh the term **Kirāta** describes barbarians and hunters living in mountains, especially the Himalayas (from Nepal through Bhutan to Arunachal Pradesh). They appeared from Vasiṣṭha's cow as an army against Viśvāmitra. Such an origin is attributed to numerous tribes considered barbaric: Cīna, Hūṇa, Pulinda, etc. The best elephants were from their territories: with thick skin and well-trained. Śiva is also called Kirāta when he fights with Arjuna in the guise of a hunter. The Kirātas are mentioned along with the Cīnas. The Pāṇḍavas pass through the country of Cīna on their way from the Himalayas to king Subāhu (king of Kāśi, Cedi or Kulinda). The term is believed to identify China which name comes from the Qin dynasty (founded in 221 BC by the First Emperor). However, in the MBh, the name most often appears in the context of the northeastern lands and may be used for local tribal people there.

The kingdoms of the south are identified by the MBh with demons (**rākṣasa**). This is a class of semi-divine beings to whom the bards assign different origins, e.g. they are offspring of Lawlessness and Unrighteousness (Nirṛti and Adharma). The demons involved in the war include Alambuṣa and Alāyudha, who sided with Duryodhana, and Ghaṭotkaca who fought for the Pāṇḍavas. The MBh announces that in the land of Pāṇḍya there is Mount Ṛṣabha. The land of Cola (identified with Thanjavur) is mentioned extremely rarely and probably as a later interpolation. The countries of the south are introduced on the occasion of Sahadeva's conquests but a significant part of the description was not included in the critical edition. The authors know some of the rivers of the south (Carmaṇvatī, Kāverī, Tāmraparṇī). Many places and names of rulers are connected to the Rāmāyaṇa (Kiṣkindhā, Dvividā, Śūrpāraka, Rāmaka, Vibhīṣaṇa).





## Religious geography

The MBh has been inspiring the imagination of its audiences for centuries. It is a part of the mass culture spread through religious gatherings and family tales. As an epic, the MBh builds national consciousness of the Hindus and occupies a prominent role in promoting national values. Today, proving the historicity of the MBh seems to be an element of forming national identity. Do such attitudes influence the development of pilgrimage sites associated with the MBh? There seem to be several mechanisms by which places of pilgrimage are identified, and the participation of saints, ashrams, local communities and great politics is involved in that process. The believers are responsible for mapping religious geography. It is they who, through their touristic choices, decide which spot becomes a popular place of pilgrimage. However, their decisions are influenced by various factors.

As religious geography of the MBh I understand the map of the pilgrimage sites that the believers recognize as related to the action of the epic, which increase their religious feelings and helps them to recall the contents of the MBh. I am not interested in their historical authenticity or the time of their arising, which may be the subject of another article. My goal is to sketch a basic map of the religious geography of the MBh and reflect on the mechanisms of emergence of pilgrimage sites.

In this article I mainly deal with the places mentioned in the MBh as the capitals of the kingdoms, to which I add some places important for the action of the epic. For the sake of clarity, I divide them into:

1. multicomplex pilgrimage sites of historical religious importance: Mathurā, Kurukṣetra, Dvārakā;
2. famous places dedicated to a single story: Naimiṣāraṇya, Barnava (Varṇavat), Gayā, Katasraj (Kaṭākṣa);
3. capitals of the MBh, archaeologically suggested: Hastināpura, Indraprastha, Rajgir (Rājagrha), Kampil (Kāmpilyā), Bairat (Virāṭanagar), Taxila (Takṣaśilā);
4. shrines and local places of pilgrimage: Bagpat, Parikshitgarh, Dankaur.

To make it easier to find the discussed places, most often their names are given in the form appearing in the Google Maps (especially in photo descriptions). Placing the name in the search engine should direct straight to their location. Photos in the article, when not otherwise stated, were taken by me during my journey dedicated to the MBh pilgrimage sites which took place in December 2019 and January 2020.

### Multicomplex pilgrimage sites

As multicomplex pilgrimage sites associated with the MBh I consider those places which are known all over India, which attract crowds of believers throughout the whole year and masses during the festivals. They are not individual temples, but rather pilgrimage complexes full of small sanctuaries commemorating events of the MBh. Saints, who settle in them, often establish new sanctuaries and add them to the pilgrimage map. The appointed priests care about their promotion among the saints' followers.

An example of such a multicomplex pilgrimage site is the **Mathurā** district, the pilgrimage map of which was mainly set by the Goswāmis of Vṛndāvana. In the 16th century they came to this spot from Bengal and systematically discovered places related to Kṛṣṇa's pastimes. As their hagiographies describe, they made it with the help of their dreams and spiritual revelations. In addition to founding the main temples of Vṛndāvana, they are credited with discovering such places

as the place where Kṛṣṇa met with the cowherd girls (Seva Kunj), places where he killed demons (e.g. Kaliya Ghat, Keshi Ghat), or where he used a hill as an umbrella (Govardhan) to humiliate Indra, etc.



Kaliya Ghat



Keśi Ghat



Seva Kunj



Govardhana

(author's photos 2007 r.)

The pilgrimage paths extend beyond Vṛndāvana. In Mathurā pilgrims visit the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa, the fortress considered to be the court of Kaṁsa (Kans Qila) or steps on the Yamuna river where Kṛṣṇa rested after killing his uncle (Vishram Ghat).



Kans Qila (Mathura)



Vishram Ghat (Mathura)

The pilgrims move around an area of some 1,500 square kilometers. In total, the route of the Vraja Mandal Parikram is 84 kos (approx. 300 km) and is almost twice that of the Kurukshetra pilgrimage, which is circa 150 km long and is called 48 kos Parikrama.

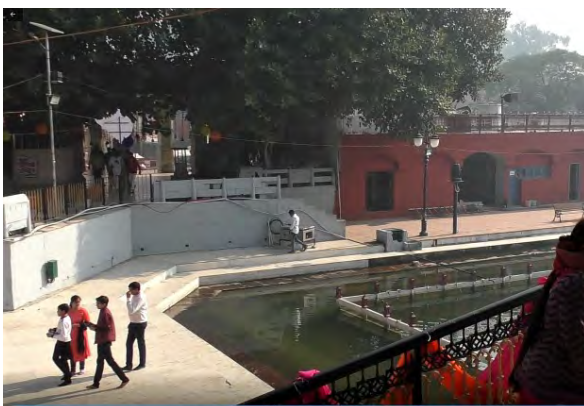


Vraja Mandal Parikram (Mathura)



48 kos Parikrama (Kurukshetra)

The former capital of Harsha (590-647), Thanesar (Sthāneśvara), is today widely recognized as Kurukshetra (**Kurukṣetra**, also called Samantapañcaka) – a field that was plowed by Kuru, where Paraśurāma washed the blood after killing the warrior class and which became the site of the epic war. During the full pilgrimage, the followers visit 134 places mainly related to the stories of the MBh. Generations of believers have established many places related to the plot of the battle. For example, there is a place where the BhG is claimed to have been recited (Jyotisar), the place where Bhīṣma died on the bed of arrows (Bheeshma Kund), and the hill where Karṇa handed out alms to the brahmins (video 1: Karn Ka Tila). In the center of the city there is a pond, Brahma Sarovara, the ghats of which are named after the Pāṇḍavas.



Jyotisar



Bheeshma Kund



Karn Ka Tila



Brahma Sarovara

Dwaraka (**Dvārakā**) attracts pilgrims as the place of Kṛṣṇa's residence after he left Mathura. Although, according to the MBh, Dwaraka was plunged into the ocean after Kṛṣṇa's death, believers still go to Gujarat to experience contact with places sanctified by God's deeds. Next to the main Dvarkadhish Temple they can cross the Sudama Bridge (Sudama Setu) over which Kṛṣṇa's friend was supposed to have gone to Dwaraka; they can visit the Rukmiṇī temple (Rukmani Devi Mandir) commemorating the most beloved of the queens; they can take clay from Gopi Talab – the lake where Kṛṣṇa met with the cowherd girls for the last time; or they can go to Bet Dwarka – the island where the palaces of the queens of Kṛṣṇa's harem were located.



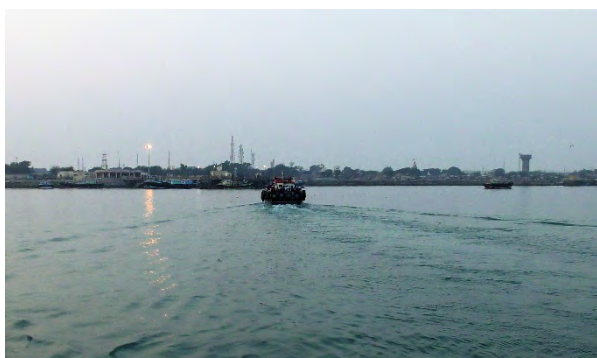
Sudama Setu



Rukmani Devi Mandir



Gopi Talab



Bet Dwarka

Those who have more time continue their pilgrimage along the coast, where they first reach Porbandar, the home of Sudama. After visiting the temple dedicated to him (Sudama Temple), they reach Somnath, identified as Prabhāsa. There are numerous shrines related to the MBh plot. It was from here that Balarāma began his pilgrimage along the river Sarasvatī. But first of all, it is a place where the Yādava family died. The believers visit the sanctuary commemorating the death of Kṛṣṇa (Bhalka Tirth Temple), and the place where from Balarāma's mouth came the serpent to take his spirit and end the earthly life of God (Gita Temple). Going north from Somnath, the faithful reach Girnar. This is identified as Raivataka – a mountain mentioned in the MBh as the place where the citizens of Dwaraka celebrated holidays (1.211.1, 14.58.4). At the top of the mountain there is Dattatreya Temple, to which a steep staircase leads.



Sudama Temple



Bhalka Tirth Temple



Gita Temple



Girnar

## Places dedicated to a single story

A popular pilgrimage site associated with the MBh is the Neemsar (Misrikh-cum-Neemsar), located on the shore of the Gomati river, identified as the **Naimiṣa** forest. According to the tradition, it was here that the conversation between Śaunaka and Suta Ugraśrava took place, the exchange that is the closing narrative frame of the MBh (video 2: Svāmī-ātmānanda-saṃskṛta-śikṣaṇa-saṃsthāna). It was here that Vedavyasa is said to have divided the Vedas into four and dictated the MBh. This is commemorated by a temple erected in his honor (Vyasa Gaddi). The pilgrimage route leads from the pond, which was created by the Viṣṇu disc (Chakra Teerth), through the temples dedicated to the Purāṇas, with the deity of their speaker Śuka in the form of a parrot (Anandamayi Ashram), up to the shore of Gomati.



Chakra Teerth



Vyasa Gaddi



Anandamayi Ashram



Gomati River in Neemsar

Barnava is identified as **Vāraṇāvata** – the place where the Pāṇḍavas went to the festival and where Duryodhana tried to burn them in a flammable house made of shellac (lākṣāgrha 1.114, 1.147). As in most places related to the MBh in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, Jainism is prevalent here. The Barnava Jain Temple dominates over the city. In the 1960s, Brahmarshi Krishnadatta settled on the nearby hill and dedicated himself to revive the site believed to be the burned house of the Pāṇḍavas. After some time, he was considered the incarnation of Śṛṅga Ṛṣi who performed sacrifice Putreṣṭi for king Daśaratha. Thanks to this sacrifice Rāma and other sons of Daśaratha were born. A Sanskrit school and an ashram were established here under his patronage. To commemorate the escape of the Pāṇḍavas, tunnels were dug at the foot of the hill. Through such an underground corridor they ran away from the burning palace (video 3: interview with Guruvacan, teacher from the Sanskrit school in Barnava).



Barnava Jain Temple



Lakshagrah Ashram



The tunnel commemorating the escape of the Pāṇḍavas



The hill identified as Lākṣāgrha

Gaya (**Gāya**) is a place of pilgrimage related to the performance of rites for the dead. The atmosphere of the city is focused on the funeral rites taking place on the bank of the Falgu River. Although pilgrims are aware that it is here that the Pāṇḍavas performed the rites for those killed in the Battle of Kuru, there are not many shrines dedicated to the plot of the MBh. The situation is different in the nearby Bodh Gaya, where Hinduism competes with thriving Buddhist pilgrimage tourism. After Alexander Cunningham discovered the Temple of the Great Awakening (Mahabodhi) in 1880, the site became one of the most important pilgrimage centers for the Buddhist community. In 1891, the Śaivas from Śaṅkarācārya Math took control of the temple, transforming it into a Hindu temple. In response to this, the Maha Bodhi Society was founded in Colombo and a court battle for control began. In 1949, the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee was established, which is supposed to be a compromise solution to the situation. There are four Buddhists and four Hindus on its board, including the head of the Śaṅkarācārya Math. To this day, the rivalry of both religions can be seen in the temple area. For example, the Hindus hold that the five sculptures of Buddha in the sanctuary next to the temple are the five Pāṇḍavas (video 4: Pañcapāṇḍava in Bodh Gaya). Every day they worship a broken śivaliṅga on the floor of the main temple. One of the sites related to the MBh is the Dharmaranya Temple, located on the other side of the Falgu River. It is believed that in this place the Pāṇḍavas performed penance during the funeral rites.



Mahabodhi Temple



Dharmarany Temple

The situation is different in **Katas Raj** (Kaṭākṣa). In the past, it was one of the most important pilgrimage sites related to the MBh. It is mentioned by Chinese pilgrims: Faxian (4th century) and Xuanzang (7th century). Between the 7th and 10th centuries, a complex of Hindu temples was built here. It was here that the precursor of Indology, the Islamic scholar Al-Biruni, learned Sanskrit. The followers believe that here Yudhiṣṭhira answered the Yakṣa's questions and saved his brothers from death. This place is commemorated with a pond (artificially irrigated today) on the shore of which this event was supposed to take place. After the Partition, the complex happened to be within the borders of Pakistan, so it was cut off from Hindu pilgrims and fell into neglect. Finally, after the riots in 1965, pilgrims from India were completely forbidden to visit. The situation started to improve somewhat along with the warming of international relations. In 2005, the former Deputy Prime Minister of India visited the place and restoration works began the following year. Currently, the complex is fairly well maintained; it even has guides familiar with Hinduism (video 5: the guide in Katas Raj). However, due to the difficulty of obtaining visas, pilgrimage tourism is small. In 2018, Pakistan agreed to admit 139 Hindu pilgrims.<sup>16</sup>



Katas Raj Temple (pond)



Katas Raj Temple (panoram)

(author's photo, 2018)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pakistan-issues-visas-to-139-indian-pilgrims-to-visit-katas-raj-dham/story-d2krGbtNZfhQ5VRDFtyzuJ.html>



## Capitals of the MBh, archaeologically suggested

Archaeological discoveries of places related to the life of the Buddha, such as Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Kushinagar, and Vaishali, helped to develop thriving pilgrimage centers. Buddhist pilgrims welcomed the discoveries related to the history of their religion with great enthusiasm and created pilgrimage sites there. Today, thousands of pilgrims from Japan, China and Korea visit archaeological sites related to the life of the Buddha every year. A complex tourist infrastructure has developed, offering all the facilities along with guides specializing in guiding tourists in the footsteps of the Buddha.

The question arises whether similar archaeological discoveries made in the cities considered great capitals of MBh—Hastināpura, Indraprastha, Kampil (Kāmpilyā), Bairat (Virāṭanagar), Rajgir (Rājagṛha) or Taxila (Takṣaśilā)—can arouse similar interest of Hindu believers. The answer seems to be negative. Archaeological findings made in these places turned out to be not very spectacular, disappointing the hopes of believers awaiting confirmations of the majestic palaces and urban splendor described in the MBh. Maybe this is why these places have not attracted so much attention of followers and has not significantly affected the structure of Hindu pilgrimage networks.

Most of the mentioned places had some tradition related to the MBh. In many cases (Hastināpura, Kāmpilyā, Rājagṛha) they were looked after by the Jain communities, who had their centers of worship there. There are alternative versions of the MBh that describe the history of the Pāṇḍavas from a Jain perspective (Harivaṃśapurāṇa 8th CE, Pāṇḍava-carita, Pāṇḍava-purāṇa 13th CE). It can be one of the reasons of Jains' interest in spreading the MBh. Additionally, nowadays, members of the Jain community are interested in archaeological discoveries, and support them significantly (e.g. Sanjay Kumar Manjul – Joint Director General ASI or Amit Rai Jain – author of popularizing books, including those promoting archaeological discoveries). Thanks to their interest in academic knowledge, these places are revived and linked to the certified history.

In **Hastināpura**, identified by believers as the capital of the Kauravas, there are several extensive Jain temple complexes. One is located near the hill where archaeological excavations were carried out by B.B. Lal. There is a 46-meter-high tower, resembling the minaret in Sammara, dedicated to the tīrthaṅkara Ṛṣabhadeva (Śvetambara Jain Ashtapad Tirtha). In front of it there is a complex dedicated to Jain cosmology (Jambudweep Jain Tirth) consecrated by Gyanamati Mataji.

Pilgrims encounter other smaller shrines in Hastināpura directly related to the MBh. The Pandeshvar Mahadev Temple is said to be the place where the Pāṇḍavas used to spend their time as young boys. In its proximity, the faithful can see a well from which they are said to have drawn water. The temple of Draupadeshvar also alludes to the MBh. There is a Śivaliṅga which is said to have been worshiped by Draupadi. Although these temples arose during the Maratha Empire period, this does not prevent the believers from seeing them as directly related to the epic.



Hastinapur Jain Shwetambara Tirth



Digambar Jain Prachin Bada Mandir,  
Jambudwip Jain Tirth

Although the archaeological excavations in Purana Qila (Delhi) did not confirm the thesis about the existence of a vast urban agglomeration there, the idea of identification of the Mughal fort with the Pāṇḍava capital, **Indraprastha**, has not been abandoned, as it is suggested in tourist guides, in popularizing materials, and even on the boards of the local museum. The place, however, does not attract a large number of believers. It is rather a typical tourist place, treated by visitors as a park, suitable for relaxation. Those with religious preferences visit the Bhairava Temple (Kalikari Mandir) adjacent to the north-eastern wall. It is claimed that the deity of Śiva worshiped there was worshiped already by the Pāṇḍava.

Kampil (**Kāmpilyā**) is considered the capital of the Pañcālas. This is where Drupada lived, and Arjuna won the hand of his daughter. Archaeological excavations in this place have confirmed its antiquity (Dallaporta i Marcato 2011). Despite that, it does not attract many pilgrims. The epicenter of worship is the Jain temple (Vimalanath Shwetamvar Jain Tirth). There are only a few places associated with the MBh. Pilgrims can hear about them as well as the religious importance of Kāmpilya from the priest of the local temple (video 6: Rameshwar Nath Mandir). There is a freshly restored Draupadī pond located next to the Mughal ghats. The Ganges used to flow here, but today its old bed (Old Ganga River) is located 1.5 km from the city.



Draupadi kund



Vimalanath Shwetamvar Jain Tirth

Bairat (**Virāṭanagar**), also called Upaplavya, is recognized as the capital of the Matsyas, the site of King Virāṭa. Here the Pāṇḍavas were to spend the last year of their exile. Archaeological

excavations confirmed the archaic past of the place. The inscription of Aśoka and the ruins of a Buddhist monastery with the foundations of a rare round temple were found here. There are many stories about places associated with the Pāṇḍavas. In the nearby Sariska Tiger Reserve, a spot named Pandu Pol is believed to be the hiding place of the Pāṇḍavas from Duryodhana's spies. Close by, there is the temple of Hanuman, who met Bhīma here and promised to help the brothers in the coming fight. Near the Aśoka inscription, the pilgrims are shown a cave where Bhīma was supposed to hide (Bhima Gari), and near the temple complex in Mundawara tehsil, they can see trees called taal (not palmyra trees, tāla, but leafy trees), on which the Pāṇḍavas hid their weapons (Taal Vriksh).



Pandu Pol Hanuman Ji Mandir (Paramahans Ashram)



Pandu Pol



Bhima Gari



Taal Vriksh

Rajgir (**Rājagṛha**) was the first capital of Magadha. To this day, cyclopean walls surround the older part of the city, located in a mountain valley. At its northern exit there is a rectangular square on which a newer city stood, probably founded by Ajata Śatru (Ajata Shatru's Kella). Although most of the excavated monuments in Rajgir have Buddhist and Jain origin, Hindu believers inscribe the MBh stories into local monuments. In the old city there is a temple of Jara (Jara Devi Temple) – dedicated to the demoness who connected the two halves of the body of Jarāsandha, the ruler of Rājagṛha. He is also related to the place called Rana Bhumi (Battle Ground of Jarasandh). It is a stone platform that the believers consider the place of his duel with Bhīma. In a large park there is a pond (Pandu Pokhar) with a statue of King Paṇḍu. It is supposed to remind of his conquest of Rājagṛha.

Despite there being such places associated with the MBh, the capital of Magadha remains mainly a Buddhist pilgrimage site. Hindu people are primarily attracted by the Hot-Springs, with its many facilities for bathing.



Jara Devi Temple



Rana Bhumi



Pandu Pokhar



Hot-Springs

Taxila (**Takṣaśīlā**) was the capital of Gandhāra. The MBh mentions it as a place of brahminical education (1.3.179) and as the place where the Snake Sacrifice was performed, during which the MBh was first recited (18.5.29). Its location was discovered by John Marshall, who began excavations here in 1913. The director of the Archaeological Survey of India came to India with an experience gained in Knossos under Sir Arthur Evens, so it is no wonder that his dream was to discover an ancient city visited by Alexander the Great. Marshall's work was continued by Mortimer Wheeler. Three cities were discovered in the area: Bhir Mound, Sirkap and Sirsukh. The oldest, Bhir Mound, remembers the Achaemenid times, and the youngest, Sirsukh, was founded by the Kushans.

After the Partition in 1947, Taxila became part of Pakistan. Currently, over 96% of the country's inhabitants are Muslims,<sup>17</sup> and the authorities are little interested in the history before the invasion of Muhammad ibn al-Kasim. For this reason, Gandhāra, its art and history, remains the subject of concern only to a small group of archaeologists and historians in Pakistan. Taxila, although located only 20 km from the capital, is rarely visited by tourists. Due to the political situation, access to historical sites is significantly limited. Because Taxila creates a pilgrimage multicomplex with Swat Valley, extremely important for the development of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, slowly Buddhist pilgrimage tourism is revived here.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan/Religion>



Bhir Mound



Sirkap



Sirsukh



Museum of Taxila

(author's photo, 2018)

## Shrines and local places of pilgrimage

In India, there are plenty of sanctuaries associated with the MBh that have local character. Some have a long tradition, others are emerging nowadays. Most often this happens in places that have a reputation of sanctity. From generation to generation people living in these places kept repeating rumors of their relation with the epic, about some incident from the MBh that occurred here. Then the authenticity of such a place has to be confirmed by a saint who, attracted by the story, will settle in that place. By his meditations and dreams he discovers the details of an event and sanctifies the place by erecting sanctuaries.

This process is observed quite widely, and since the number of places mentioned in the MBh is limited, sometimes the stories start to duplicate. A good example is the story of the Pāṇḍavas hiding during the last year of their exile. The most famous hiding place is Bairat, which is justified by the location of the court of King Virāṭa. However, there are more places in India that aspire to this honorable title. In Somnath pilgrims can find a rock cave where the Pāṇḍavas are said to have hidden (Panch Pandava Gufa). Similarly, when visiting Neemsar, in the local Sanskrit school (Svāmī-ātmānanda-saṁskṛta-śikṣaṇa-saṁsthāna), one can hear that nearby is the hiding place of the Pāṇḍavas, and even that a certain tree is where they hid their weapons. It shows the efforts to legitimize the sanctity of the places – the first stage in forming a pilgrimage site.



Panch Pandava Gufa (Somnath)



Sanskrit school near Neemsar

The MBh mentions five villages (grāma) which the Pāṇḍavas ask for to avoid war (5.31.19, 5.70.15, 5.80.7-8). Four of them are mentioned by name, and the fifth can be whatever other place the Kauravas offer them (kiṁ cid eva tu pañcamam). The most frequently mentioned are Kuśasthala, Vṛksthala, Vāraṇāvata, and Avasāna. Other versions include two others—Avisthala and Mākandī. Although there is not much evidence for this, the modern tradition, repeated in popularizing sources (e.g. plaques in the Qila Purana Museum), informs that the four villages are **Baghpat** (Vyagraprastha), Tilpat (Tilaprastha), Sonipat (Suvarnaprastha), and Panipat (Panaprastha). The Vṛksthala ('place of the wolves') from the MBh can match Baghpat ('the place of the tigers'). The MBh states that Kṛṣṇa stops in Vṛksthala on the way from Upaplavya to Hāstinapura, which corresponds to the route between the capital of the Kauravas and Matsyas. Although pilgrimage tourism has not developed here, and the most important sanctuary in the area belongs to the Jains (Trilok Teerth Dham in the Badagaon), the memory of the relationship with the MBh is still cultivated in the city.

A few other places in the former Kuru region are also worth mentioning. **Parikshitgarh** is considered the place where the grandson of the Pāṇḍavas settled after ascending to the throne. To reflect on final events of the MBh, pilgrims visit the pond of Gāndhārī (Gandhari Talab), where

Duryodhana's mother performed funeral rites for her sons. South-west of the city is the ashram of Śṛṅgin (Shringi Rishi Mandir). He was the son of the brahmin Śamīka, who in his anger cursed Parikṣit for hanging a dead serpent on his father's chest (1.38). It is said that here is where his father Samīka lived and Parikṣit was cursed.

**Dankaur** is another place related to the MBh. In its center is the temple of Droṇa (Guru Dronacharya temple). Believers maintain that this is where the military teacher of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas lived, and it was here that the princes learned martial arts. On this legacy the Sanskrit school named Guru Prabhat Ashram was established near Meerut. Apart from Sanskrit, students are involved in physical development, including archery. Students also recall the nearby Vishvamitra Ashram in Gagol, where Rama and Lakshmana are said to have learned archery.

## Summary

The three geographies related to the MBh interact with each other. In the paper I define mundane geography as a map of India as it was imagined by the bards. Its starting point is the kingdom of Kuru seen as the epicenter of the world. Here I have reconstructed it on the basis of the number of mentions of the kingdoms and the importance of the heroes belonging to them. The analysis of mutual relations of the kingdoms formed six areas of the subcontinent within which the kingdoms were placed. Finally, using the archaeological evidence and the assumptions of historians, I mapped the capitals of kingdoms and marked areas of their possible extent. The reconstruction gives an overall orientation in the geography imagined by the bards. It is worth emphasizing that the purpose of the reconstruction is not to reflect any historical age. The text of the MBh was written over centuries during which the knowledge of the bards about geography was changing.

The demarcation line between mundane and sacred geography is the distance from the Kuru kingdom to the farthest places that could be reached by travelers. Beyond the reach of travelers is the world of gods and divine beings. These are wondrous worlds accessible only to a select few. They can be reached by taking long journeys (2.25) or in dreams (7.57). When describing sacred geography, I pay special attention to the three cosmological versions which can be found in the MBh. I suppose that the oldest is the version of continents reflected on the surface of the Moon. The islands scattered on the ocean could be a further development of it and the ultimate version is the ring-islands surrounded by the oceans. The foremost continent known to bards was the land of Sudarśana. Right behind it to the north was the land of Śāka, what may suggest that this version appeared during the Scythian influence on the Indian subcontinent. It's worth to notice the possible inclusion of astronomical content taken from the Babylonian tradition into Indian cosmology – the Viṣṇu Cart in the north may be a reference to the Little Dipper from Babylon.

Mundane and sacred geography from the MBh influence the religious geography – pilgrimage sites related to the epic. It is a constant process, some mechanisms of which I tried to trace in the third part of the article. For the sake of clarity, we divided the pilgrimage sites into four groups, trying to capture their specificity. I pointed out slight influence of archeological finds in forming the MBh pilgrimage sites, the problem of pilgrimage places outside India, and attempts to dominate over Buddhists sanctuaries. On a few occasions I exemplify the mechanism behind the emergence of pilgrimage sites. Saints and ascetics, who are credited with spiritual vision of the past, play an important role in this process. They mainly shape the Indian pilgrimage map; however, they do not act capriciously, but rely on folk tales, adding subsequent chapters to the already existing story.



## Editorial footer

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wikimedia 3:

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## Video

video 1: Karn Ka Tila, Kurukshetra (Filip Ruciński, Mahendranath Tripathi)

video 2: Svāmī-ātmānanda-saṃskṛta-śikṣaṇa-saṃsthāna, Neemsar (Mahendranath Tripathi)

video 3: interview with Guruvacan, teacher from the Sanskrit school in Barnava (Filip Ruciński)

video 4: Pañcapāṇḍava in Bodh Gaya (Mahendranath Tripathi)

video 5: the guide in Katas Raj

video 6: Rameshwar Nath Mandir, Kampil (Mahendranath Tripathi)

## Polish translation project

This article is presented as part of the MBh translation project. The project is conducted under a grant from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, National Humanities Development Program 2016 Uniwersalia Module 2.2 (Project ID: 22H 16 0357 84). There are 6 researchers participating in the project, 5 translators—Joanna Jurewicz (project manager), Anna Trynkowska, Monika Nowakowska, Przemysław Szczurek, Andrzej Babkiewicz—and one IT supervisor, Sven Sellmer

### **Aim:**

translating the battle books of the Mahābhārata into Polish (MBh 6-11)  
(about 1/4 of the entire text – 23,023 out of 75,603 stanzas of the critical edition)

### **Goals:**

1. publication in paper version (Polish translation):
  - 6 volumes – introductions and footnotes
  - 1 volume – reconstruction of MBh universe (Elipsa Publishing House)
2. Mahabharata-wiki (website based on Wikipedia structure, open sources):
  - reconstruction of the Epic Universe
  - helpful tools to visualize some aspects of MBh environment
  - interactive map of the epic

(Digital Humanities Laboratory of the University of Warsaw - LACH)
3. a tool for group text translation

**Deadlines:** 2017.10.26 – 2022.10.25.