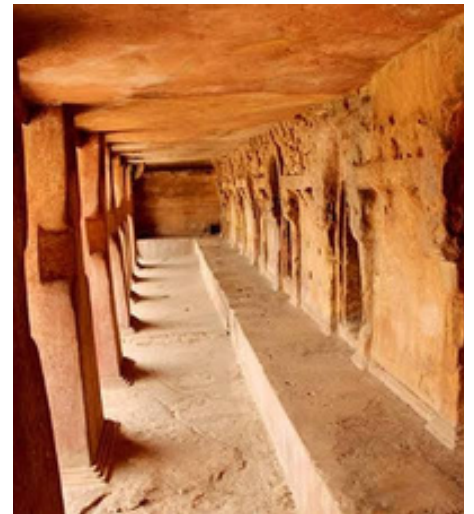


# UDAYAGIRI AND KHANDAGIRI CAVES

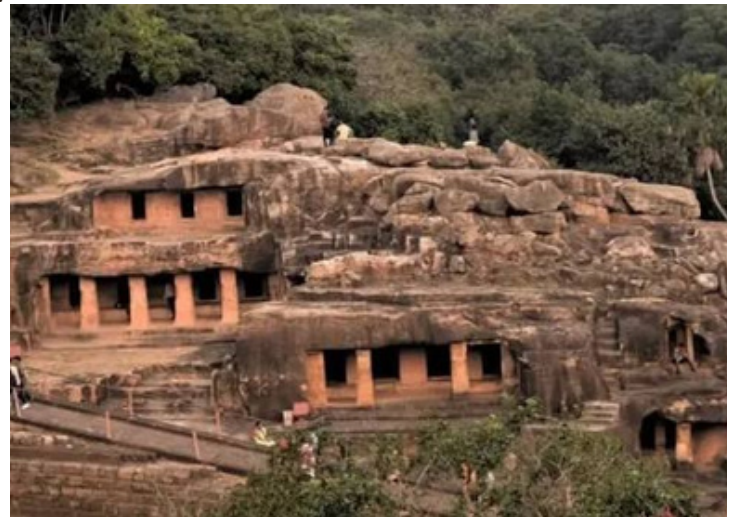
**THE TWIN HILLS OUTSIDE BHUBANESWAR ARE AMONG THE OLDEST HUMAN-MADE SPACES IN EASTERN INDIA.**

It is monsoon, around 100 BCE. A group of Jain monks has been walking for weeks. They need somewhere to shelter during the rains where they can study, and meditate. King Kharavela of the Mahameghavahana dynasty, ruler of ancient Kalinga (roughly today's Odisha), orders his craftsmen to cut caves directly into the sandstone of two small hills outside his capital for the monks to move in.

What makes these caves unusual are the craftsmen who cut the rooms into the rock. They filled the walls, the arches, the spaces above doorways, and the veranda ceilings with carvings. Elephants, women carrying garlands, athletes, soldiers, guard-figures with grimacing faces, the caves became, as art historian Janice Leoshko writes, spaces that were "artfully carved and meant to be viewed with care."



***JAMES PRINSEP,  
THE BRITISH  
SCHOLAR WHO  
FIRST DECIPHERED  
THE BRAHMI  
SCRIPT IN 1837,  
WORKED ON THE  
UDAYAGIRI AND  
KHANDAGIRI  
INSCRIPTIONS.  
THEY WERE AMONG  
THE FIRST BRAHMI  
TEXTS EVER READ  
BY A MODERN  
SCHOLAR.  
— LEOSHO,  
ARTIBUS ASIAE  
2010***

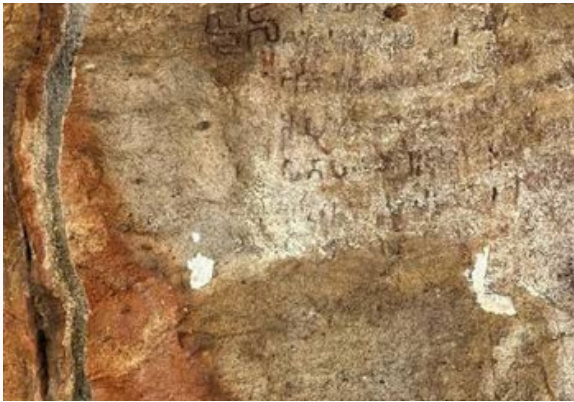


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Originally there were 117 of them. Thirty-three survive: 18 on Udayagiri (Sunrise Hill) and 15 on Khandagiri (Broken Hill). They are some of the earliest examples of Jain rock-cut architecture in all of India. Most of the caves at Udayagiri and Khandagiri are small. The ceiling is low. The rooms are narrow. There are stone benches along the walls where the monks slept.

Above the entrance to Cave 14 on Udayagiri, the Hathigumpha, or Elephant Cave there is an inscription carved in Brahmi script. It runs to 17 lines and records, in careful detail, the first thirteen years of King Kharavela's reign. It is the longest inscription from ancient Odisha and the only historical document that tells us anything about Kharavela.



The inscription was sheltered with a stone roof erected over it in 1902 to protect it from rain.. But 13 of the 17 lines are already damaged beyond easy reading, partly from centuries of monsoon exposure before the shelter was built, and partly from something more recent, visitors. Modern names and mobile numbers scratched directly into the sandstone around and on the inscription have been documented.

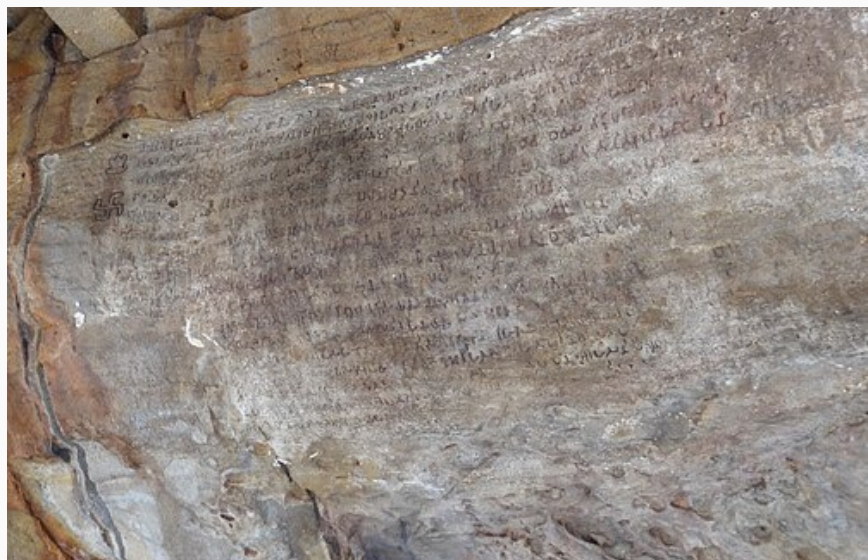
## WHAT IS BRAHMI?

BRAHMI IS ONE OF THE OLDEST WRITING SYSTEMS USED IN INDIA. MOST INDIAN SCRIPTS LIKE DEVANAGARI (USED FOR HINDI), ODIA, BENGALI, TAMIL, TELUGU DESCENDED FROM IT. JAMES PRINSEP CRACKED ITS CODE IN 1837 USING BILINGUAL COINS. THE HATHIGUMPHA INSCRIPTION WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TEXTS EVER READ IN BRAHMI BY A MODERN SCHOLAR.

THE ODIA SCRIPT YOU SEE ON SIGNS AROUND BHUBANESWAR TODAY IS A DIRECT DESCENDANT OF THE SAME BRAHMI LETTERS THAT KHARAVELA'S CRAFTSMEN CUT INTO THE ELEPHANT CAVE WALL 2,200 YEARS AGO.

**THE INSCRIPTION SAYS KHARAVELA RECOVERED THE "KALINGA JINA". A SACRED JAIN OBJECT THAT HAD BEEN TAKEN FROM HIS KINGDOM BY A RIVAL. MOST SCHOLARS ASSUME IT WAS A STATUE OF A JAIN TIRTHANKARA. BUT NO SUCH EARLY JINA IMAGE EXISTS AT THE CAVES. SOME SCHOLARS HAVE SUGGESTED IT WAS A THRONE, OR A SET OF SACRED FOOTPRINTS, RATHER THAN A FIGURATIVE IMAGE. THE QUESTION HAS NEVER BEEN RESOLVED.**

SOURCE: LEOSHKO, ARTIBUS ASIAE 2010 · MOHAPATRA, UDAYAGIRI & KHANDAGIRI, 1981



There are modern names and phone numbers scratched into the wall of Cave 14 at Udayagiri, the Hathigumpha, the Elephant Cave directly adjacent to a 2,200-year-old Brahmi inscription. This is not a new problem. Photographs from the early 2000s show the same thing. It has not been stopped. Meanwhile, 13 of the inscription's 17 lines are already damaged beyond easy reading centuries of monsoon rain before the 1902 shelter was built, and the continued wear of visitors who get too close.

In November 2025, the National Monument Authority approved a Rs 52 crore "integrated development plan" for the two hills. Budget proposals from early 2026 suggest this figure may be scaled up to Rs 100 crore. The Odisha Deputy Chief Minister confirmed the plan publicly; the Tourism Corporation is coordinating. All construction, officials stress, will remain outside ASI-protected monument boundaries.

What does the plan include? Organised parking. A pedestrian link between the two hills which the busy national highway currently bisects. An information centre. A cafeteria. Rest areas. An amphitheatre for cultural events. Barrier-free pathways. Electric vehicle shuttles. These are, without exception, things that improve the visitor experience. None of them address what is happening to the inscription.

The site needs money. The path between the hills is poorly maintained. There is almost no good signage. The lack of visitor facilities is real and it does affect the experience. A pedestrian link across the national highway is genuinely important right now, getting between the two hills means crossing live traffic. These problems deserve solutions.

But there is an order to things. A 2,200-year-old inscription is being damaged by visitors right now this month, probably this week. The caves are on India's tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage nomination, a process that requires India to demonstrate credible conservation management, not improved parking. Physical barriers around the Hathigumpha inscription, trained guards with authority to intervene, surface consolidation by a conservator, systematic documentation of the state of each cave: none of these appear prominently in any press release about the Rs 52 crore plan.

An amphitheatre and a cafeteria are not conservation management. They are tourism amenities. Both are fine things to have. But the priority at a site where the primary heritage asset, a unique, irreplaceable historical document is actively being destroyed must be to stop the destruction first.

**More amenities attract more visitors. More visitors without proportional investment in monitoring and enforcement means more pressure on caves already at their limit. This is not theoretical — it is what happened at dozens of similar Indian sites after heritage tourism investment.**



## Rani Gumpha — Cave 1 Queen's Cave

The biggest and most decorated cave in the entire complex. Two storeys, side wings at each end, and wall carvings on every surface. The upper storey has scenes of charging elephants, royal processions, and figures in dramatic poses that scholars are still trying to identify. Nobody is sure exactly what all the stories are. That uncertainty, as art historian Janice Leoshko points out, is itself interesting: the carvings tell stories that don't need captions.



## Ganesh Gumpha — Cave 10 Ganesh's Cave

Named for a Ganesh image added later, but notable for its earlier carvings: two royal women on either side of the entrance, a man rescuing a woman from an elephant, and scenes that seem to show a king kidnapping a woman.



GANESH GUMPHA

***THE CAVES WERE NOT BUILT ALL AT ONCE. SCHOLARS BELIEVE THEY WERE ADDED OVER ONE TO TWO CENTURIES. SOME CAVES CLEARLY BELONG TO KHARAVELA'S PERIOD — AROUND 100 BCE. OTHERS ARE LATER. THE NAVAMUNI CAVE'S FIGURES MAY DATE TO THE 8TH CENTURY CE.***  
— R. L. BROWN,  
**JOURNAL OF ASIAN STUDIES, 1982**

## Hathi Gumpha — Cave 14 Elephant Cave

Elephants carved at the gate, and on the wall above one of the most important inscriptions in Indian history. Seventeen lines of Brahmi script that record King Kharavela's reign year by year: his battles, his building projects, his restoration of a sacred statue. This inscription is why we know anything about Kharavela at all. It is also being damaged.



HATHI GUMPHA



RANI GUMPHA



## Tatowa Gumpha — Cave 2 Parrot Cave

Two parrots carved above the entrance arch. Look up as you enter and you will see them talking parrots were associated with Jain storytelling traditions, and their placement here was probably deliberate.



TATOWA GUMPHA



## Barabhuji Gumpha — Cave 9 Twelve-Armed Cave

Two relief images of twelve-armed Sasana Devis (Jain protective goddesses) plus Tirthankara figures. The twelve-armed form is unusual and doesn't appear at many other Jain sites.



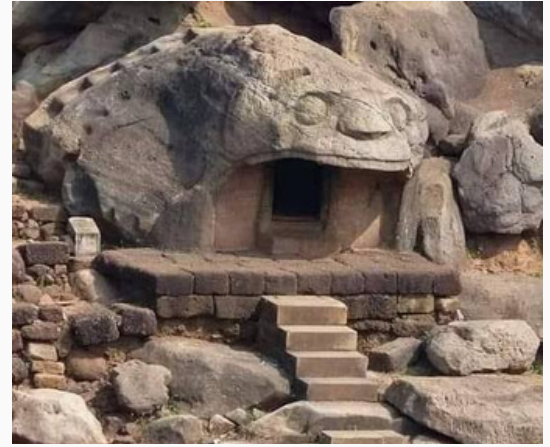
## Bagha Gumpha — Cave 12 Tiger's Cave

The entrance is shaped like an open animal mouth. You walk through the jaws of a tiger to get inside. Around it are carvings of figures emerging from the rock. It is one of the most photographed spots at the site and most people don't realise they're entering through a sculpted face until they step back and look.



## Navamuni Gumpha — Cave 7 Nine Sages' Cave

Nine Jain Tirthankaras (enlightened teachers) are carved here in a row. Compare them to the guardian figures in the adjacent caves, the similarity to the Hindu saptamatrikas (seven mothers) carved on temples in the region points to exchanges between Jain and Hindu artistic traditions that scholars are still mapping.



BAGHA GUMPHA



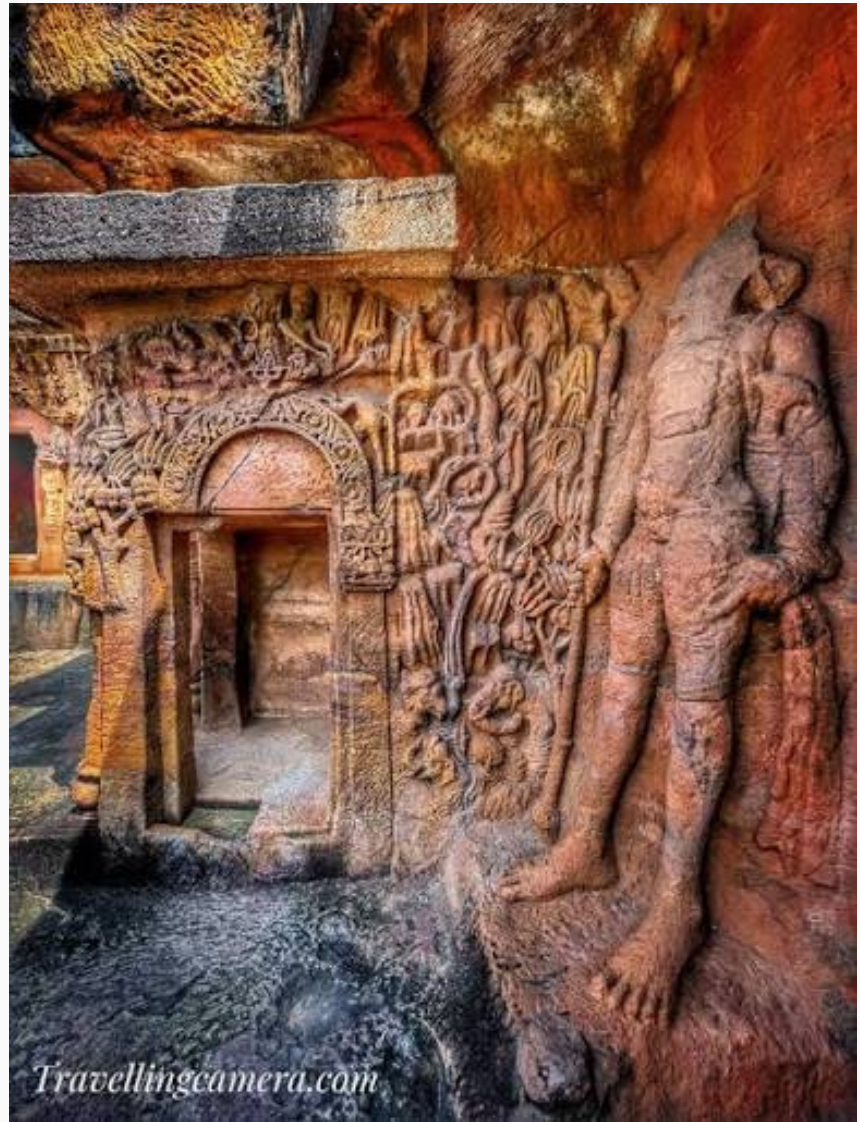
## Ananta Gumpha — Cave 3 Endless Cave

The most impressive cave on Khandagiri. Two storeys, decorated with carvings of women, children, athletes, lions, bulls, and other animals. The name refers to the serpent Ananta; carved serpents appear in the arch above the doorways. The tympanum the semicircular space above each door has deeply cut garland and lotus work.

### HOW TO READ A CAVE ARCH

**EACH CAVE ENTRANCE FOLLOWS THE SAME STRUCTURE. TWO CARVED PILASTERS (COLUMNS) FRAME THE DOOR. AN ARCH HORSESHOE-SHAPED, CALLED A CAITYA ARCH SITS ON TOP. THE TYMPANUM, THE SPACE INSIDE THE ARCH ABOVE THE DOORWAY, IS OFTEN DECORATED WITH GARLANDS, LOTUSES, OR FIGURES. LOOK AT THE TYMPANUM FIRST. IT IS THE PART MOST VISITORS WALK STRAIGHT PAST.**

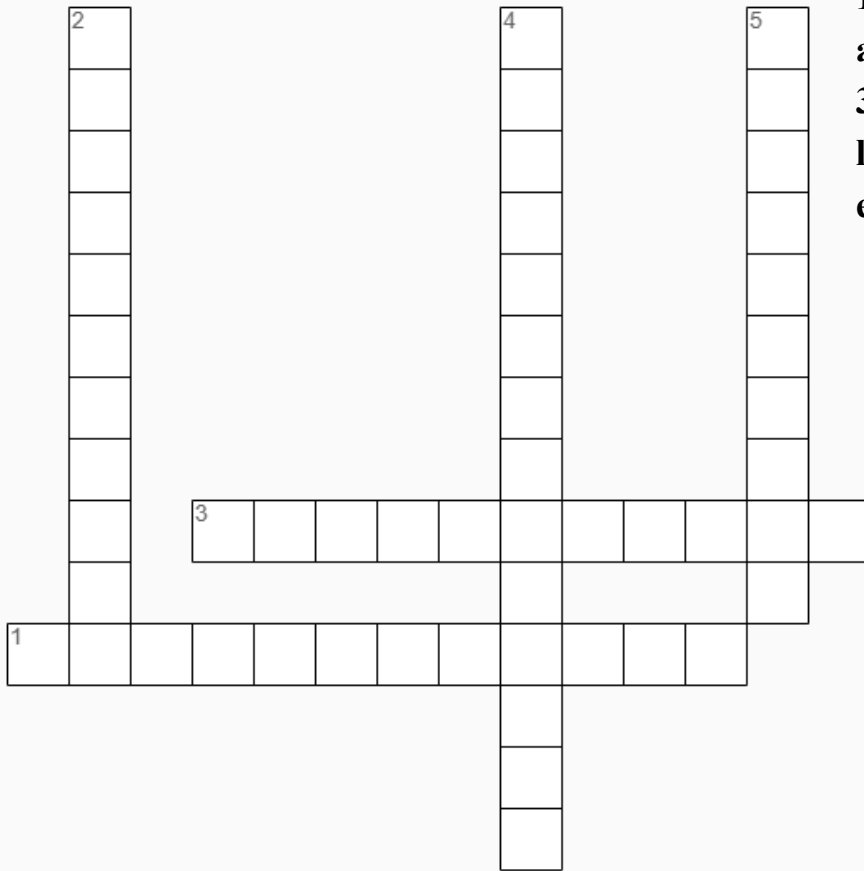
Each cave cell is small. The stone bench along the back wall served as a bed. A small canal cut into the rock floor channelled rainwater in for use. The veranda outside gave shelter from the worst of the monsoon while allowing air through. Jain monks practiced extreme non-violence, they swept the path ahead of them to avoid stepping on insects. They lived with almost no possessions. The elaborate carvings outside the rooms were not decoration for the monks. They were, most likely, for the visitors who came to see the monks: the donors, the royal court, the ordinary people who considered the monks holy.



Not all the caves at Udayagiri and Khandagiri are man-made from scratch. Some are natural recesses in the sandstone that were enlarged and shaped. Others are fully excavated, cut entirely by hand into solid rock. The distinction matters because it tells us about the skill of the craftsmen: fully excavated caves with two storeys and decorated surfaces, like Rani Gumpha and Ananta Gumpha, represent an enormous amount of technical work. Sandstone is relatively soft, which made the carving easier, but also means the caves are more vulnerable to weathering and damage.

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## THE CAVE NAME QUIZ



### ACROSS

- Two carved birds sit above the entrance arch. What is the cave name?
- Carved elephants at the gate, and 17 lines of Brahmi inscription above the entrance. Name?

### DOWN

- You walk into a cave entrance shaped like an open animal's mouth. What is this cave called?
- You see nine carved figures of enlightened Jain teachers in a row. What is this cave?
- This is the biggest, most carved cave on the entire site. Two storeys. Side wings. A queen's name. Which cave?

Q- IF YOU SAW SOMEONE WRITING THEIR NAME ON AN ANCIENT CAVE WALL, WHAT WOULD YOU DO? WHAT VALUES WOULD GUIDE YOUR ACTION?




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### REFERENCES -

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- IMI BHUBANESWAR
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ANSWER

