

Name:

Date:

# The Gupta Empire

**Instructions:** Read the article and answer the questions found throughout the text in your own words. Then complete the Main Idea and Details graphic organizer.

For more than two centuries, from about 320 CE to 540 CE, the Gupta dynasty governed the northern half and central parts of the Indian subcontinent. This territory included much of present-day India and some areas of what are now Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Gupta period holds a significant place in Indian history. It has often been called the “golden age of India.” This is because many important developments in literature, art, architecture, and various scientific fields are traditionally thought to have taken place during the time of the Gupta dynasty.

## History of the Guptas

The first ruler of the dynasty, Chandragupta I, ruled from 320 CE to about 330 CE. (He is not to be confused with Chandragupta, who founded the Mauryan dynasty about 321 BCE.) Chandragupta I began as a local chief in the kingdom of Magadha (parts of modern Bihar state). By marrying a princess of the family that controlled north Bihar, and perhaps Nepal, he increased his power and territory. By the time of his death, the kingdom was sufficiently large and powerful for his son and successor, Samudra Gupta, to begin the military conquests that established the Gupta Empire.



The Gupta dynasty ruled from the early 4th to the mid-6th century CE. The area colored orange shows the probable extent of the empire under Chandragupta II at the end of the 4th century.



A gold coin from the Gupta dynasty depicts the emperor Samudra Gupta.

Samudra ruled from about 330 to 380 CE. His conquests took him in many directions. Among the places he annexed, or added to the empire, was Pataliputra (now Patna, Bihar state), which was to become the Gupta capital. Not all the areas Samudra invaded were annexed, but the campaigns successfully demonstrated his military skill. In Indian legend he gained the reputation of the ideal king. He is depicted as a warrior, poet, and musician—a view supported by the great revival of art during the Gupta reigns. He was known as a devotee of the god Vishnu, indicating a revival of Hinduism as well.

**Reflect and Respond**

How did the leadership of Chandragupta I and Samudra Gupta help establish and strengthen the Gupta Empire?

The dynasty's third ruler was Samudra's son Chandragupta II, who ruled from Samudra's death in 380 CE until about 415 CE. Chandragupta II supposedly gained the throne by killing his older brother. He was a strong and vigorous king under whom India enjoyed peace and relative prosperity. The arts and learning continued to flourish, and many noted scholars were attracted to his court. Chandragupta II was a devout Hindu but tolerated Buddhism and Jainism within his realm.

The first hint of troubles for the dynasty came during the reign of the next king, Kumara Gupta (ruled from about 415 CE to 455 CE). This was the threat of invasion from the north by a nomadic, or wandering, people called White Huns (also known as Hephthalites or Hunas). Kumara held back the threat during his reign. However, under Skanda Gupta (ruled about 455 CE–467 CE) and his successors, there came a full-scale invasion that eventually ended the dynasty and put much of India under the domination of the White Huns. By the middle of the 6th century, the kingdom had dwindled to a small size.

**Reflect and Respond**

How did the Gupta Empire's power and stability change over time?

**Administration of the Empire**

The Gupta Empire had a highly organized administrative system. The empire was divided into provinces, and each province was split into smaller units called *pradeshas* or *vishayas*. High-ranking imperial officials or members of the royal family governed the provinces.

The Gupta period also saw the rise of municipal boards, which showed that some power was given to local areas. These boards typically consisted of a guild president, a chief merchant, and representatives of artisans and scribes, or people who copied documents by hand. The term *samanta*, which originally meant “neighbor,” started to be used for people who were given grants of land or for conquered rulers who became loyal to the Gupta Empire. The empire did not always retain firm control over the areas it conquered, however. Some areas tried to become independent again. This prompted repeated military action by the empire, which may have strained its resources.

### Reflect and Respond

How was the Gupta Empire organized and governed?

### Cultural Life

The political stability of Gupta rule and the presence of a wealthy class of patrons (people who give financial support for artistic or other activities) allowed literature, painting, sculpture, and architecture to flourish. Progress was also made in a number of scientific fields. The following list provides brief descriptions of some major achievements of the Gupta period:

- **Literature:** The period saw a flowering of Sanskrit literature, notably the poems and plays of Kalidasa. Among his most celebrated works are the epic poem *Raghuvamsha* (“Dynasty of Raghu”) and the drama *Abhijnanashakuntala* (“The Recognition of Shakuntala”).
- **Painting and sculpture:** The wall murals at the Ajanta Caves are outstanding examples of Indian art from the period. Another notable achievement was the standardization in sculptures of the Buddha. The Gupta image of the Buddha—with a serene, inward-looking expression and large halo behind the head—influenced depictions of the Buddha for many centuries.
- **Architecture:** Elaborate temples were constructed. Earlier structures were mainly wood, but during the Gupta era stone and brick became the primary materials for temples and other buildings.



A reclining Buddha statue is part of the rock-cut Ajanta Caves in north-central Maharashtra state, India.

- **Astronomy and mathematics:** Indian astronomer Aryabhata calculated the length of the solar year (or year of the seasons on Earth) with impressive accuracy. He also stated that Earth was spherical and rotated on its axis. Mathematics was probably more advanced in India than anywhere else in the world at the time, with mathematicians using the decimal system.
- **Metallurgy:** There were significant advances in metallurgy—the science of separating metals from ore and modifying the metals for use. A prime example is the 6-ton iron pillar at the Qutb Minar complex in Delhi, India. The pillar is famous for its resistance to rust, a testament to the advanced techniques in iron production during the era.

### Reflect and Respond

Describe some major cultural and scientific accomplishments during the Gupta period.

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## Main Idea and Details

Detail 1

Detail 1

Main Idea

Detail 3

Detail 4

Detail 5