

THE WARS OF PUNJAB

PART ONE OF SIXTEEN

The First Recorded War

How a river was turned into a weapon, why ten kings lost to one, and what happened in the land of five rivers before anybody thought to write it down.

C. 2600 BCE — 500 BCE

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Lovepreet Singh

EVERY WAR FOUGHT ON THE SOIL OF PUNJAB

Told in plain words, from the very beginning

What “Punjab” Means, and Why Everybody Fought Over It

Punjab is not really a place. It is a doorway. And for four thousand years, everybody who wanted to get into India had to kick that door down first.

The word *Punjab* is Persian. **Panj** means five. **Aab** means water. So Punjab simply means “**Five Waters**” — the land held between five rivers: the **Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas** and **Sutlej**. All five eventually pour into the Indus.

But that name is younger than the land it describes. It turns up in writing from the **1300s** — in Ibn Battuta’s travels and in Persian chronicles of the Delhi Sultanate — and it became the everyday name under the Mughals. Long before that, the same land had a Sanskrit name: **Sapta Sindhu**, “Seven Rivers,” because the old counters added the Indus itself and one more — usually reckoned as the Kabul, sometimes as the now-dried-up Saraswati. So when you read very old texts, remember: the Punjab of 1500 BCE was *bigger* than the Punjab on a modern map. It stretched from the edge of Afghanistan in the west to somewhere around Delhi in the east.

Through this book, “Punjab” means whatever Punjab meant *at that time*. In the ancient chapters it includes Peshawar, Taxila, Multan and Lahore. After 1947, when the land was cut in two, we will follow only **Indian Punjab**.

Why this one patch of land has more battlefields than almost anywhere on earth

Look at a map of India. The whole subcontinent is walled off: the Himalayas to the north, ocean on two sides, jungle and desert elsewhere. There is essentially **one easy way in by land** — through the mountain passes of the north-west, and then straight across the plains of Punjab.

So Punjab is the corridor. And it has three qualities that make it a permanent war zone:

- **It is flat.** No mountains to hide behind, no cliffs to defend. Armies can march anywhere. Cavalry can charge anywhere.
- **It is rich.** Five rivers means brilliant farmland, fat cattle, and full granaries. An invading army can feed itself here — and can also loot enough to pay for the whole campaign.
- **It is the toll booth.** Every trade route from Central Asia to the Ganges passes through it. Whoever holds Punjab taxes everybody.

Put simply: **Punjab is a flat, rich hallway with no door.** That is the whole reason for the next 3,500 years of bloodshed.



How sure are we? A quick honesty label

Ancient history is not like modern history. Some of what follows is written in stone, and some of it is a story passed down for a thousand years before anyone wrote it. So every war in this part carries a small tag, and here is what the tags mean:

TAG	WHAT IT MEANS
CERTAIN	Written down at the time, or close to it, and backed by inscriptions or digging in the ground. We know it happened.
LIKELY	Recorded in very old religious or scholarly texts that were passed down carefully. Almost certainly based on real events, but we cannot date it to a year.
STORY	From the great epics — the Mahabharata and Ramayana. There may be a real war buried underneath, but the version we have is literature, not a report.

This is not a way of dodging. It is the opposite: it is the only honest way to tell you what really happened without pretending to know more than anyone actually does.

The 700 Years With No Wars At All

CERTAIN

c. 2600 – 1900 BCE — the Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilisation

Before any war was ever recorded in Punjab, Punjab already had cities. Enormous ones. **Harappa** sits on the old bed of the Ravi in today's Pakistani Punjab. **Mohenjo-daro** lies further down the Indus. These were among the largest cities on earth at the time — with brick sewers, public baths, standard weights, and street grids so neat they look designed by a modern town planner.

And here is the strange thing. In roughly a century of digging, archaeologists have found **no clear evidence of organised warfare** in this civilisation. No mass graves of soldiers. No burned-out war levels. No palace, no throne room, no carvings of a king trampling his enemies — the sort of thing every other ancient civilisation produced by the cartload.

Be careful with that, though, because it is argued about. The archaeologist **Edward Cork** showed in 2005 that if you actually count the objects, the share of tools-and-weapons at Indus sites is often *higher* than at comparable sites in the Middle East — we just do not find them in graves and temple offerings, because the Indus people did not put them there. So the honest statement is not “the Harappans were peaceful.” It is: **we have not found the war, and we cannot yet read the writing that might tell us about it.**

So the first thing to say about war in Punjab is that for the first 700 years of its recorded existence, **there does not seem to have been much of it.**

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Massacre That Never Happened

In the 1940s, the most famous archaeologist in British India was **Sir Mortimer Wheeler**. He found some scattered human skeletons in the lower streets of Mohenjo-daro. He also knew the Rigveda, which is full of a war god called **Indra** smashing enemy forts. Wheeler put two and two together, made about fifty, and wrote a line that became famous: “*Indra stands accused.*”

The picture he painted was dramatic — invading Aryan war-bands storming in and butchering the peaceful city-dwellers in the streets. It went into schoolbooks all over the world. Millions of children learned it as fact.

Then people actually checked. Across **nine years** of excavation, the total number of skeletons found was about **thirty-seven** — for an entire city. They were not killed at the same time. They were not lying where fighters would fall. Crucially, **not one of them was found in the fortified citadel**, which is exactly where defenders would have made a last stand. There were no weapons with them, no armour, no burnt destruction layer over the final city.

The archaeologist **George Dales** took the claim apart piece by piece and gave it the title it has kept ever since: *the mythical massacre*. The cities were not stormed. They were slowly abandoned — as rivers shifted, water tables rose and salt crept into the soil.

The lesson, and it matters for this whole book: a good story about a battle can survive for eighty years without a single fact holding it up.

SO WHY DOES RECORDED WAR START WHERE IT STARTS?

The Harappans wrote — we have thousands of little inscribed seals. But **nobody can read their script**. Until someone cracks it, we have their plumbing but not their politics. Real recorded war in Punjab therefore begins with the next people, who did not build in brick but did compose poetry — and whose poetry was memorised, word for word, for three thousand years.

The War of the Ninety-Nine Forts

LIKELY

WON BY King Divodasa and the Bharata tribe

WHEN Roughly 1500–1450 BCE. Fought, the hymns say, over “forty autumns.”	WHERE The hill country on the north-western rim of Punjab, where the plains meet the mountains.
WHO King Divodasa of the Bharatas against Shambara, a hill chieftain of the Dasa people.	RECORDED IN The Rigveda — the oldest surviving book in any Indo-European language.

Why it happened

Around 1500 BCE a group of cattle-herding, chariot-driving, hymn-singing tribes were spreading across the Punjab plains. They called themselves **Arya**. Their wealth was not land — it was **cows**. Cows were money, food, dowry and status all in one animal.

The people already living in the hills at the edge of the plains had something the newcomers did not: **forts**. Stone and mud strongholds up in the folds of the mountains, where a chief could sit on the loot of the plains and be almost impossible to dig out.

The chief in question was **Shambara**. The Rigveda credits him with an absurd number of strongholds — *ninety-nine*, and then a hundredth. Whether he really had ninety-nine forts or whether that is just poetry for “a great many,” the meaning is the same: **this man controlled the high ground, and the high ground controlled the passes**.

What happened

This was not one battle. It was a grinding, generation-long campaign — the hymns say it took **forty autumns**, and that in the fortieth year Shambara was finally found “dwelling in the mountains” (Rigveda 2.12.11). That is not a poetic flourish. That is a manhunt.

The Rigveda describes the end of it in the voice of the god Indra:

“I, in my exhilaration, broke apart all at once the nine and ninety fortresses of Shambara — and the hundredth.”
Rigveda 4.26.3, on behalf of King Divodasa

Strip the god out of it and what you have is a long war of attrition in which a mobile, chariot-borne people slowly took apart a network of static hill forts, one after another, until there was nothing left to run to.

WHY DIVODASA WON

- **Mobility beats masonry.** Chariots and horses let the Bharatas choose where and when to fight. Shambara's forts could only sit and wait.
- **He was patient.** Forty years is a strategy, not an accident. He was not trying to win a battle; he was trying to exhaust an enemy.
- **He cut off supply.** A hill fort eats the plains below it. Control the plains and the fort starves on its own.
- **One leader, one plan,** passed down inside one family across decades.

WHY SHAMBARA LOST

- **Ninety-nine forts is a weakness, not a strength.** Split your men between a hundred places and you are strong nowhere.
- **Forts cannot chase.** He could never destroy the enemy army, only survive it — which means he could never actually win.
- **No allies.** The record shows him fighting alone. There was nobody to relieve a besieged fort.
- **Time was on the other side.** The attackers were growing in numbers each generation; he was not.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Hundredth Fort

The Rigveda does not say “he destroyed all Shambara's forts.” It says he destroyed **ninety-nine — and then the hundredth**. That little extra clause is one of the oldest pieces of storytelling in the world, and it is doing exactly what a good storyteller does today: building suspense.

Ninety-nine is the long grind. The hundredth is the last hiding place. Somewhere in the hills above Punjab, around 1460 BCE, a man who had held out for forty years ran out of forts. The poets who sang about it were still singing about it centuries later, and their listeners still knew exactly what that number meant.

WORTH KNOWING

The most famous warrior-king of the entire Vedic age comes directly out of this family, one or two generations later. His name was **Sudas** — usually called Divodasa's son, though the Rigveda's habit of calling him *Paijavana*, “son of Pijavana,” leaves room for a generation in between. He is next.

The Battle of the Ten Kings

LIKELY

Ten kings against one. One river. And the single oldest battlefield trick in Indian history.

WON BY

King Sudas of the Bharatas — outnumbered, and decisively

WHEN Somewhere between 1450 and 1300 BCE. This is the oldest datable battle fought on Indian soil.	WHERE On the banks of the Parushni — the river we now call the Ravi — near a village remembered as Manusa, west of Kurukshetra.
WHO WON Sudas Paijavana, king of the Bharatas, with his sub-klan the Tritsus and his priest Vasishtha.	WHO LOST A coalition of ten kings and their tribes — the biggest alliance the Rigveda ever describes.
RECORDED IN Rigveda, Book 7, Hymn 18, verses 5–21 — composed by Vasishtha, who was <i>there</i>.	SANSKRIT NAME Dasharajna — literally “Ten Kings” (<i>dasha</i> = ten, <i>rajan</i> = king).

Who exactly was on the other side

The Rigveda names them. Read this list slowly, because you are looking at the ancestors of half of Punjab, Pakistan and Afghanistan:

TRIBE	WHO THEY BECAME, OR WHERE THEY WERE
Puru	The biggest tribe of the region. Later merged with the winners to form the Kuru kingdom.
Anu	Settled along the Ravi and Chenab. Ancestors of the later Madra, Kekaya and Sivi peoples of central Punjab.
Druhyu	Pushed north-west. Associated with the founding of Gandhara — the Peshawar–Taxila country.
Yadu & Turvasha	Two allied tribes who later spread south and east; the Yadus loom large in later Indian legend.

Paktha	Widely thought to be the ancestors of the Pakhtuns / Pashtuns . The name has barely changed in 3,400 years.
Bhalanas	Possibly from the Bolan Pass country in Balochistan.
Alina	Probably from the far north-west, around Nuristan in eastern Afghanistan.
Shiva	Ancestors of the later Sivi of the Jhang district — a tribe Greek writers would meet 1,100 years later.
Vishanin	“The horned ones.” Possibly a helmet or headdress marking, not a place.
Vaikarna	Two tribes of this name are mentioned together — “twenty-one peoples” of the Vaikarnas.

Also named in the fighting: the Simyu, the Bhrigu, the Matsya, and the Kikata.

Why it happened — three reasons stacked on top of each other

1. The sacked priest

This is the human reason, and it is the most quoted. Sudas had a chief priest called **Vishvamitra**, who had served him well and had helped him win earlier campaigns. Then Sudas replaced him with a rival called **Vasishtha**.

To modern ears, sacking a chaplain sounds trivial. In 1400 BCE it was not. The chief priest ran the rituals that were believed to *make* the king’s victories happen. He was part general, part chancellor, part spiritual insurance policy. Removing him was a public statement that his family’s power was over.

Vishvamitra had connections. He went to the Purus — the tribe with the biggest grievance against Sudas — and, by every reading of the hymns, he is the man who wired the coalition together. The rivalry between Vishvamitra and Vasishtha became so famous that Indian literature was still writing about it two thousand years later.

2. Cattle and water

The practical reason. Sudas’s people held the good land on the eastern bank of the Ravi. That meant **the best grazing and the water rights** — and in a cattle economy, that is the whole ballgame. The tribes on the far side wanted the herds, and they wanted the river.

3. He had simply grown too big

Sudas had inherited a strong kingdom from Divodasa and expanded it hard. Every neighbour he had was a neighbour he had squeezed. Eventually ten of them worked out that separately they were snacks, and together they might be a meal.

What actually happened, step by step

The hymn does not tell the story in neat order — it is a victory song, not a battle report, and it jumps around. But when you line the verses up, this is the shape of it.

1. **The coalition assembles on the far bank.** Ten kings, from as far away as Afghanistan and Balochistan, converge on the Ravi. On paper this should be over in an afternoon. Sudas is badly outnumbered.

2. **The enemy engineers the river.** This is the decisive act, and it comes from the losers, not the winners. Verse 8 says the enemy tried to “*waste her waters*” — they cut into the Parushni. The most likely reading: they tried to dam or divert the river, either to make a dry crossing for their own army or to cut the water off from Sudas’s herds and fields. Verse 6 says they went at it “*like fishes urged by hunger*.” They were in a rush.
3. **The river turns on them.** Whatever they built, it did not hold. Verse 5 says that though the floods had spread widely, they were made “*shallow and easy for Sudas to traverse*” — and verses 8 and 9 then name the river directly. Sudas got across on a suddenly fordable river. Then the water came back.
4. **The rout.** Verse 9 says the enemy fled towards the Parushni and “*e’en the swift returned not*.” Verse 10 describes them scattering “*like cattle unherded from the pasture*.” Two named leaders, **Kavasha** and the king of the **Druhyus**, are described in verse 12 as being “*overwhelmed in the waters*.” They drowned.
5. **The mopping up.** Verse 11 has the Vaikarna tribes cut down “as the priest clips grass” — which is a very calm way of describing a massacre. Verse 13 says Sudas broke the enemy’s strongholds and “seven castles,” and handed the loot to his own people.
6. **The bill.** Verse 14 gives a number, and it is the oldest casualty figure in Indian history: “*sixty hundred, yea, six thousand, and six-and-sixty heroes*.” Scholars argue about how to add that up — anywhere from 6,666 to 66,666. Nobody thinks it is an accurate headcount. Everybody agrees it means **a catastrophe**.

A FAIR WARNING

The hymn is a hymn. Almost every action in it is credited to the god **Indra**, not to a human commander. When we say “Sudas breached a dyke,” what the text literally says is that Indra made the waters shallow and then swallowed the enemy. Serious scholars — the Sanskritist **Stephanie Jamison** among them — warn that the description is “anything but clear,” and that we should be careful about reconstructing tactics from a religious poem. The version above is the mainstream reading, and it is a reading, not a transcript.

WHY SUDAS WON

- **He knew the ground.** It was his river. He had lived on it. He knew where it could be crossed and what it did when it rose. The coalition was mostly made of people from hundreds of miles away.
- **He let the enemy's own plan kill them.** The single most valuable thing a commander can do is turn the opponent's clever idea into the thing that destroys him. That is exactly what happened on the Parushni.
- **One commander.** One man decided everything, instantly. On the other side, ten kings had to agree.
- **Morale and belief.** Do not dismiss this. Vasishtha's job was to make an outnumbered army certain that a god was standing beside it. Armies that believe they cannot lose fight very differently from armies that hope they might win.
- **He fought with his back to home.** His supplies, his people and his herds were behind him. Every man knew what was at stake if he broke.

WHY THE TEN KINGS LOST

- **Ten commanders is no commander.** The most reliable rule in military history: a committee cannot fight. Somebody has to be able to say "now," and nobody could.
- **They attacked across a river with the river behind them.** If it goes wrong, there is nowhere to run. It went wrong.
- **They gambled everything on one piece of engineering.** Rivers in Punjab are not reliable. Betting the whole battle on a hastily-cut channel in flood season was reckless.
- **They were fighting for loot, not survival.** Verse 7 says the tribes joined "for love of spoil." Men who came for cattle go home when the cattle stop looking free. Men defending their homes do not.
- **No shared language, no shared drill.** Tribes from Nuristan, Balochistan and the Punjab plains had never trained together and could barely coordinate.
- **They underestimated him because the maths looked easy.** Ten to one flatters everybody involved into thinking they need not try very hard.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Battle That Was Really a Fight Between Two Poets

Strip away the chariots and the drowning, and the Battle of the Ten Kings has a very odd centre: **it was set off by an argument between two priests, and it was recorded by the winner of that argument.**

Vishvamitra composed Book 3 of the Rigveda. **Vasishtha** composed Book 7. They are two of the ten "family books" that form the oldest core of the text. In other words, both men were great poets, both men have their work preserved in the same scripture, and they hated each other.

Vishvamitra was Sudas's priest first. He is credited in his own hymns with getting Sudas's army safely across the Beas and Sutlej on an earlier campaign — the rivers, he says, lowered themselves for him. Then he was replaced. And the man who replaced him then wrote the official account of the war that Vishvamitra's new friends lost.

So everything we know about the biggest battle of the Vedic age comes from the pen of the man who took Vishvamitra's job. Verse 21 of the hymn even names the poets who "pledged eternal gratitude" — a victory lap in verse.

The point is not that Vasishtha lied. It is that the oldest war report in India was written by a participant with a grudge, and we have no second opinion. That is a problem you will meet again in this book — with Mughal court historians, with British officers, and with everyone else who ever wrote up a battle they had a stake in.

The Second Front: Sudas Against Bheda on the Yamuna

LIKELY

WON BY King Sudas — again, and immediately

WHEN Immediately after the Battle of the Ten Kings — probably the same season or the next.	WHERE On the Yamuna, at the eastern edge of Sudas’s territory — the opposite end of his kingdom from the Ravi.
WHO Sudas and the Tritsus against King Bheda. Three tribes — the Ajas, Sigrus and Yakshus — end up paying tribute to the winner.	RECORDED IN Rigveda 7.18, verses 18–19 — the tail end of the same victory hymn.

Why it happened

This is the oldest example in Indian history of a lesson every commander learns the hard way: **when you are busy fighting on one border, somebody will come at the other one.**

Sudas had just spent everything he had on the Ravi, at the western end of his lands. Two hundred and fifty miles east, on the Yamuna, a king called **Bheda** saw the opportunity — a kingdom whose army was far away and exhausted, and whose herds were sitting unguarded. He pulled together three tribes and moved in.

What happened

Very little detail survives, which itself tells you something — it was short. Verse 18 says Indra “subdued fierce Bheda.” Verse 19 is more specific and more interesting: with the Yamuna and the Tritsus helping, Indra “*stripped Bheda bare of all his treasures,*” and the surrounding peoples then brought tribute.

So: Bheda was not merely defeated. He was stripped. His wealth was taken, and his neighbours immediately started paying protection money to the winner.

WHY SUDAS WON

- **Speed.** He turned a whole army around and hit the second threat before it had time to consolidate what it had grabbed.
- **Reputation.** He arrived carrying the news of what he had just done to ten kings. Half of Bheda's alliance was probably beaten before the fighting started.
- **Veteran troops.** His men had just fought the biggest battle of the age and survived it. Bheda's had not fought anything.
- **He made an example.** Stripping Bheda "bare of all his treasures" was not greed. It was advertising — a message to every other neighbour about the cost of trying this.

WHY BHEDA LOST

- **He mistimed it.** He moved after the western battle was decided instead of during it. A month earlier and Sudas would have been trapped between two armies.
- **He believed the odds instead of checking them.** He assumed a man fighting ten kings must be finished. He was not.
- **No plan for failure.** Opportunists rarely have one. When the opportunity closed, he had nothing left.
- **Small allies, small stakes.** The Ajas, Sigrus and Yakshus were minor tribes with no reason to die for Bheda's ambition.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Map of Punjab Is a List of Who Lost

Here is the most extraordinary thing about these two battles, and almost nobody points it out.

After Dasharajna, the beaten tribes scattered — and where they went became the political map of the north-west for the next two thousand years.

The **Druhyus** went north-west and are linked to the founding of **Gandhara**, the country of Taxila and Peshawar. The **Anus** settled the central Punjab rivers and became the **Madras of Sialkot**, the **Kekayas** of the Jhelum, and the **Sivis** of Jhang. The **Pakthas** are almost certainly the **Pashtuns**. And the **Purus** — the largest tribe in the losing coalition — did something cleverer than all of them: they made peace with the winners and merged.

That merger of **Bharata and Puru** produced the **Kuru** kingdom: the first proper state in South Asian history, the place where the Vedas were finally organised into the form we still have, and the setting of the Mahabharata.

And the country itself may be named after the winners. **Bharat** — the official name of India in its own constitution — is widely traced back to the **Bharata** tribe, of which Sudas was one king among several. It is not the only explanation on offer (later tradition ties the name to a legendary emperor Bharata instead), but the tribal derivation is the one most historians lead with. If it is right, the name of a nation of 1.4 billion people goes back to a cattle war on the banks of the Ravi.

The Salva Invasion — The War That Killed India’s First State

LIKELY

The most important war in this chapter that you have never heard of.

WON BY

The Salvass — a tribe nobody now remembers

WHEN Late Vedic period — usually given as around 900 BCE, though that figure is a modern estimate, not a date any text supplies.	WHERE Kurukshetra itself — the Kuru heartland, in what is now Haryana.
WHO The Salva tribe — a non-Vedic western people linked to the Trigarta country of Punjab — against the Kuru kingdom.	RECORDED IN <i>Jaiminiya Brahmana</i> 2.206 and <i>Shankhayana Shrautasutra</i> 15.16 — dry ritual texts, which is exactly why they are trustworthy.

What was the Kuru kingdom, and why did it matter?

Remember the merger at the end of the last section — Bharata plus Puru. That fusion, somewhere around 1200–1000 BCE, produced the **Kurus**, and the Kurus produced something genuinely new in South Asia: **a state**.

Not a tribe. Not a chief with a war-band. A state — with a capital (Asandivat, modern Assandh in Haryana), a settlement hierarchy that archaeologists can still see in the ground, a standardised religion, and taxation. Their king **Parikshit** is praised in the Atharvaveda as ruling a “thriving, prosperous realm.” His son **Janamejaya** performed the horse sacrifice and is called a great conqueror.

For roughly two centuries, the Kuru country was the political and cultural centre of the subcontinent. The Vedas were arranged there. This was the peak of Punjab’s importance in Indian history — and it would never be the centre again.

What happened

And then a western tribe called the **Salvas** came over the border, beat the Kurus in their own heartland, and **scattered them out of Kurukshetra**.

That is nearly all we know. There is no battle narrative, no named general, no casualty figure. What we have are two ritual manuals mentioning the Salvayas as outsiders who broke Kuru dominance, and a scholarly reconstruction — chiefly by the Harvard Sanskritist **Michael Witzel** — putting the pieces together.

But the consequences are enormous and completely visible:

- The Kuru state **never recovered**. It limped on, split into two, and by around 500 BCE had dissolved into small republics. Kautilya, writing his manual of statecraft centuries later, lists “Kuru” not as a kingdom but as one of the corporations “living by the title of king” — an oligarchy of men who all called themselves royal.
- The centre of Indian civilisation **shifted east**, to Panchala, then Kosala, then Videha, and finally to **Magadha** in Bihar, which would go on to produce the Mauryan empire.
- Punjab stopped being the heart of India and became its frontier. **Every war in the rest of this book flows from that change.**

DO NOT CONFUSE THESE TWO EVENTS

Around 875 BCE — a generation or so after the Salva war — the Kuru capital at **Hastinapura** was wrecked by a flood. The archaeologist **B. B. Lal** dug the site and found the settlement layer ending in exactly that: a great flood that “washed away a considerable portion of the settlement.” Later tradition says a king named **Nichakshu** abandoned the ruined city and refounded his capital far away at Kaushambi.

These are **two separate disasters** — one a war recorded in Vedic texts, one a flood found in the soil. Popular accounts often mash them into a single story. They should not be.

WHY THE SALVAS WON

- **They hit the head, not the limbs.** They went straight for Kurukshetra — the political and ritual centre. Break that and the whole structure loses its meaning.
- **They were outside the system.** Vedic texts call them non-Vedic. They were not bound by the alliances, marriage ties or ritual obligations that restrained everybody inside the Kuru world.
- **They came at a succession crisis.** The last Kuru king, Uchchishravas, appears to have **died without an heir**. There was no obvious person to rally behind.

WHY THE KURUS LOST

- **Over-centralised.** A tribe that loses its capital moves on. A state that loses its capital loses everything — the treasury, the records, the rituals, the legitimacy.
- **Complacent frontier.** Two hundred years of dominance had turned the west from a war zone into an assumption.
- **No heir.** The single most common way ancient kingdoms die.
- **Successful states get soft, and successful states get resented.** Both were true here.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Tribe That Broke India's First State and Got No Statue

Think about the scale of this for a moment. The **Kuru kingdom** is the setting of the **Mahabharata** — the longest poem ever composed, a text a billion people still know by heart in pieces. Kurukshetra is the most famous battlefield in Indian literature. The Bhagavad Gita is spoken there.

And the people who actually, historically brought that kingdom down were the **Salvas** — and there is not one epic about them, not one temple, not one hero's name that survives. We do not know who their king was. We do not know what happened on the day. We know only that they came, they won, and Indian civilisation packed up and moved east.

The Salvas themselves eventually gave up, adopted Vedic culture, married into their neighbours and vanished into the population around Alwar. They beat the greatest kingdom of their age and were absorbed by the losers within a few generations.

History does not remember the winner. It remembers whoever hired the better poet. The Kurus had the Mahabharata. The Salvas had nobody.

The Kurukshetra War

STORY

The most famous battle ever fought on the Punjab plain — and the one we can say least about.

WON BY

The Pandavas and their Panchala allies — at ruinous cost

READ THIS FIRST

The Kurukshetra war belongs in this book because it is set on Punjab soil, because nearly every Punjabi kingdom of the ancient world fights in it, and because it is the war most people picture when they picture ancient India. But it must be labelled honestly. The **Mahabharata** was composed between roughly 400 BCE and 400 CE — many centuries after any war it might be based on. No archaeology confirms the events. What we probably have is a real conflict whose details are now unrecoverable — a battle that was, in the words of the historian **A. L. Basham**, “magnified to titanic proportions” and so “formed the basis of the story of the greatest of India’s epics.” Basham himself guessed it happened around the beginning of the 9th century BCE.

When was it? Nobody agrees

The range of serious and semi-serious proposals is enormous, and it is worth seeing them side by side just to understand how open the question is:

PROPOSED DATE	WHO PROPOSED IT, AND ON WHAT BASIS
3102 BCE	Traditional Hindu dating — the start of the Kali Yuga.
3067 BCE	B. N. Achar, using planetarium software on the astronomical descriptions in the text.
c. 1000 BCE	Argued by a number of historians and archaeologists. Often quoted as the mainstream figure — but there is <i>no</i> real consensus.
c. 900 BCE	A. L. Basham — “around the beginning of the ninth century.”
c. 950 BCE	The historian John Keay, and V. S. Dubey.
836 BCE	B. B. Lal, matching it to the Painted Grey Ware archaeological layer.
c. 750–350 BCE	Asko Parpola, placing it much later in the same pottery sequence.

Note: Michael Witzel’s often-quoted “1200–800 BCE” is not a proposed date for the battle. It is his dating of the period when the Kuru kingdom held power — the world the epic is set in.

Why it matters here: almost every Punjab kingdom is in it

Whatever its historical basis, the epic preserves something priceless — **a memory of who the powers of the Punjab were and whose side they took.** And the pattern is striking: the north-west lined up almost solidly on the losing side.

PUNJAB POWER	LED BY	SIDE AND FATE
Madra Sialkot	Shalya	Kaurava. Became the last Kaurava commander-in-chief. Killed by Yudhishtira.
Gandhara Taxila / Peshawar	Shakuni	Kaurava. The dice-player who starts the whole quarrel. Beheaded by Sahadeva on the last day.
Trigarta Jalandhar / Kangra	Susharma	Kaurava. Supplied an entire army corps of suicide troops. Killed by Arjuna.
Sindhu-Sauvira	Jayadratha	Kaurava. Held four Pandavas off for one day — the day Abhimanyu died.
Kamboja Horse country of the north-west	Sudakshina	Kaurava. Beaten by Arjuna on day 14.
Kekaya Jhelum country	Six royal brothers	Split — five on one side, one on the other. A civil war inside a civil war.
Kshudraka & Malava	—	Kaurava. The same republics Alexander would fight 700 years later.
Sivi, Ambashtha, Bahlika	—	Kaurava, with the Ambashthas switching sides mid-war.

Why one side won, if we take the story on its own terms

WHY THE PANDAVAS WON

- **Unity of purpose.** Seven armies, one aim, one supreme commander (Dhrishtadyumna) and one strategist (Krishna) whose authority nobody questioned.
- **They targeted commanders, not soldiers.** Every one of the war's turning points is the removal of an enemy general — Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Shalya, in that order. Kill the head and the eleven armies below it stop working together.
- **They were willing to be ruthless.** Every single one of those four kills involved a trick, a technicality or an outright deception. It is the moral wound at the centre of the epic — and it is also why they won.
- **Smaller and tighter.** Seven divisions that trusted each other beat eleven that did not.

WHY THE KAURAVAS LOST

- **Too many allies, too little loyalty.** Eleven armies, assembled by obligation, debt and trickery. Several of their best men openly wanted the other side to win.
- **Divided command.** Four commanders-in-chief in eighteen days, each with private grudges against the others — Karna refused to fight at all while Bhishma led.
- **They fought as champions, not as an army.** Their whole strategy rested on individual heroes. When the heroes fell, there was no system underneath.
- **Rigid formations.** The great wheel-formation that trapped Abhimanyu was a masterpiece — and a trap for its own side, because it needed everyone to hold position exactly.
- **Duryodhana would not stop.** Every offer of settlement was refused. A war you cannot end except by winning is a war you will probably lose.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING — BRAVERY

The Sworn Ones of Trigarta, Who Attended Their Own Funerals

Trigarta — the country around Jalandhar and Kangra — sent a full army corps to Kurukshetra. They were called the **Samshaptakas**, “the sworn ones.”

Their oath was simple: **kill Arjuna, or die**. No third option, no retreat, no surrender. And they did something before the battle that is hard to read even now — they **performed their own funeral rites in advance**. Each man carried out the ceremonies for his own death, so that whatever happened to his body on the field, the rituals would already have been done properly.

Their commander, King **Susharma**, knew perfectly well he could not beat Arjuna. That was never the plan. His job was to *occupy* him — to drag the best warrior on the enemy side to the far end of the battlefield and keep him there. And on day thirteen it worked exactly as designed: while the Samshaptakas held Arjuna away, Drona formed the wheel-trap on the other side of the field and the boy **Abhimanyu** was killed inside it.

Arjuna eventually destroyed them to the last man. But they had already done their job — and they had already buried themselves.

How the King of Sialkot Was Tricked by a Road Full of Free Hotels

Shalya, king of Madra — that is Sialkot, in the heart of Punjab — was the Pandavas' own uncle. Their mother Madri was his sister. He set out with his army to fight *for* them.

On the road east, he found the most wonderful thing. Every few miles there were rest-houses, feasts laid out, entertainers, cool water, fresh bedding — a royal welcome stretching the entire length of his march. Shalya assumed his nephew Yudhishtira had arranged it. Delighted, he sent for whoever was responsible and, in the grand manner, **offered them any boon they wished**.

Out stepped **Duryodhana**, leader of the other side. He had built the whole road of hospitality himself, for exactly this moment. His boon: *fight for me*.

Shalya was a king. A king's word given is a king's word kept. He had just promised his entire army to the enemy of his own nephews, and he could not take it back.

So he went to war on the wrong side — and then spent the entire war sabotaging it. He blessed Yudhishtira before the fighting. He agreed in advance to undermine Karna's confidence. Made Karna's charioteer on day seventeen, he spent the day praising Arjuna, mocking Karna with a parable about a crow that thought it was a swan, and quietly steering him away from killing Pandava princes he could easily have killed. Karna lost that duel partly because his own driver talked him out of believing he could win it.

The epic gives him a grim send-off. After the war, when Queen Gandhari walked the battlefield among the dead, she found Shalya's body with **the birds eating his tongue**.

The Great Cattle Raid: Trigarta Against Matsya

STORY

Forget the epics for a moment. This is what a real war in Iron Age Punjab actually looked like.

WON BY

Matsya — thanks to two disguised guests in the palace

WHEN

In the epic's timeline, the year before Kurukshetra. Deliberately timed for the seventh and eighth days of the dark fortnight.

WHERE

The Matsya kingdom, south-east of Punjab proper, raided from the Trigarta country (Jalandhar-Kangra).

WHO

King **Susharma of Trigarta**, backed by the Kauravas, against King **Virata of Matsya**.

WHAT WAS AT STAKE

Cows. Nothing else. In Sanskrit the episode is literally called the *Gograhana* — “the seizing of the cattle.”

Why it happened

Two reasons — one personal, one cold.

Personal: Susharma of Trigarta had been beaten in war, repeatedly and humiliatingly, by a man called **Kichaka** — the commander of Matsya's army and the king's brother-in-law. Then news came that Kichaka was dead, killed in murky circumstances. Susharma's reaction was immediate: *the man who beats me is gone, and the country he protected is now defenceless.*

Cold: He took the plan to **Duryodhana**, and argued the case in one line — Matsya is “abounding in corn” and has no protector. **Karna backed it.** But the Kauravas had a second motive Susharma did not much care about: the Pandavas were hiding somewhere in their thirteenth year of exile, and if they were found before the year was out, they owed another twelve years in the forest. A big loud raid was a good way to **flush them out.**

The plan — and it was a genuinely good plan

They designed a **two-pronged, two-day operation**:

1. **Day one, from the south:** Susharma and the Trigartas drive off the southern herds. Virata must respond — a king who lets his cattle be taken is finished.

2. Day two, from the north: with Virata's entire army chasing Susharma in the south, the Kaurava high command sweeps in from the opposite direction and takes the northern herds against no opposition at all.

This is a textbook diversion. Split the enemy's attention, force him to commit, then hit the space he has just vacated. On paper it should have worked perfectly.

What happened

Round one went almost exactly to plan. Virata marched south with his sons and — unknown to anyone — four disguised Pandavas among his staff. In the fighting, **Susharma captured King Virata alive.** That should have been the end of it.

Then a very large cook in the royal kitchens stopped pretending to be a cook. **Bhima** smashed through the Trigarta line, freed Virata, and took Susharma prisoner instead.

Round two went spectacularly wrong. The Kauravas swept in from the north on schedule — Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Kripa and Ashvatthaman, the finest soldiers of the age. And there was nobody home except the young prince **Uttara**, whose charioteer was a dance teacher named **Brihannala**.

Uttara, seeing the greatest army in India drawn up in front of him, panicked completely and tried to run: *"Let the cattle go anywhere, let my city be desolate."* His charioteer refused, told him that death in battle is better than flight, and then — having got the boy back into the chariot — swapped places with him.

Brihannala was Arjuna. He recovered his great bow from where it had been hidden in a tree, blew his war-conch, and fought the entire Kaurava high command by himself.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING — THE FUNNIEST SCENE IN ANCIENT INDIAN WARFARE

The Generals' Clothes That Became Dolls' Dresses

Arjuna could have killed them. He did not — several were his own teachers and his great-uncle. So instead of a slaughter he used a weapon called the **Sammohana astra**, which put the entire enemy command **to sleep** where they stood.

Bhishma. Drona. Karna. Kripa. Ashvatthaman. The most feared warriors on the subcontinent, laid out unconscious in a field.

And then Arjuna turned to the boy Uttara and told him to go and **collect their upper garments.**

Why? Because Uttara's little sister wanted new outfits for her dolls.

That is how the raid ended. Trigarta's king was a prisoner, the Kaurava high command woke up in an empty field half-undressed, and the finest cloth in India went home in a chariot to be cut up into clothes for a girl's toys. There is nothing else quite like it in the whole of ancient war literature.

WHY MATSYA WON

- **Hidden strength.** They had two of the greatest warriors alive working in the palace as a cook and a dance teacher. No intelligence report in the world was going to catch that.
- **They counter-attacked instead of negotiating.** Bhima's instinct — hit back now, hard — was right. Delay would have lost the king.
- **Mercy as strategy.** Putting the Kaurava generals to sleep instead of killing them avoided turning a cattle raid into a blood feud with all of Hastinapura.

WHY TRIGARTA LOST

- **An intelligence failure, not a planning failure.** The plan was excellent. It was built on one assumption — that Matsya had no great warriors left — and that assumption was wrong.
- **He attacked on emotion.** Susharma moved because his personal enemy had died, not because the strategic moment was right.
- **He captured the king and then relaxed.** Taking Virata should have been followed by an immediate withdrawal. Standing around on the field gave Bhima the opening.
- **Two allies, two agendas.** Trigarta wanted cattle; the Kauravas wanted to expose the Pandavas. Neither got what they came for.

WHY THIS RAID MATTERS MORE THAN THE EPIC BATTLE

Kurukshetra is a literary event. **The Gograhana is what actual warfare in the Punjab looked like for most of history:** a neighbour waits until your best soldier dies, comes over the border in the dark half of the month, drives off your cows, and goes home. No territory changes hands. No empire falls. Just cattle, pride and a score to settle. That pattern ran in this land for three thousand years — you will see it again in the Sikh *misl* period in Part 12, almost unchanged.

Gandhara Against Avanti: Punjab's First Named Victory

LIKELY

WON BY

King Pukkusati of Gandhara

WHEN Middle of the 6th century BCE — around 550–520 BCE.	WHERE Not recorded. Gandhara's capital was Taxila; Avanti's was Ujjain — about 1,500 km apart.
WHO Pukkusati (Sanskrit: Pushkarasarin) of Gandhara against Chanda Pajjota — “Pradyota the Cruel” — of Avanti.	RECORDED IN The Buddhist commentarial tradition — chiefly Buddhaghosa's <i>Papanchasudani</i> on the Dhatuvibhanga Sutta. Pali texts often call him king of Takkasila (Taxila) rather than “Gandhara.”

Why it happened, and what happened

By the 6th century BCE the old tribal world was consolidating into sixteen big powers, the **Mahajanapadas**. Two of them were expanding fast in opposite directions: **Gandhara** in the far north-west, and **Avanti** in central India under a king whose own people nicknamed him “the Cruel.”

Gandhara at this moment was probably the strongest state in the north-west. Kashmir was under its control, and modern scholars think the Punjab kingdoms — **Kekaya, Madra, Ushinara and Sivi** — were its vassals. When Pukkusati pushed outward, he ran into Pradyota.

The commentary records the outcome in a single flat sentence: Pukkusati “*waged war against Chanda Pajjota of Avanti and defeated him.*” **Punjab beat central India.**

And then he could not finish the job — because a Punjab tribe called the **Pandavas** (a real historical people, nothing to do with the epic’s five brothers) rose up behind him, threatened by his own expansion. Pradyota was saved not by his own army but by a rebellion in his enemy’s rear.

WHY GANDHARA WON

- **A deep manpower base.** Vassal kingdoms across Punjab and Kashmir meant Pukkusati could raise soldiers from a very wide area.
- **North-western cavalry.** Gandhara and its neighbour Kamboja were the horse-breeding heartland of ancient India. Everyone else bought their war-horses from this region.
- **A secure eastern flank — bought, not fought.** Pukkusati had an active friendship with Bimbisara of Magadha, the other rising power. He never had to worry about the east.

WHY AVANTI LOST, AND WHY GANDHARA COULD NOT FOLLOW THROUGH

- **Avanti fought far from home** against a horse-army on ground that suited it.
- **Pradyota's reputation worked against him.** A king called "the Cruel" by his own tradition does not attract willing allies.
- **Gandhara's own empire was its weakness.** Vassals held down by force revolt the moment the army marches away — and that is precisely what the Pandava tribe did.
- **No plan for a two-front war.** The same mistake Sudas had avoided nine centuries earlier.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The King Who Beat an Empire and Was Killed by a Cow

Pukkusati and **Bimbisara** of Magadha never met, but they became friends through the merchants who travelled between their kingdoms. Bimbisara treated Gandharan traders so well — housed and fed at royal expense, no tariffs at all — that word got back.

Pukkusati opened the friendship properly, sending **eight priceless muslin garments in lacquered sandalwood caskets**. Bimbisara answered with something stranger: a **sheet of gold, roughly two and a half metres long**, engraved with the teachings of the Buddha, sent all the way to the Gandharan frontier on the back of the state elephant with full ceremonial honours.

Pukkusati read it alone. Then he shaved his head, put on saffron robes, and **walked away from his throne**.

He travelled on foot most of the way across northern India looking for the Buddha, taking a wrong turn on the way, and one night took shelter in a potter's hut. Another traveller came in and asked to share the shelter. The two men talked through the night, and the stranger taught him a discourse on the six elements. Only towards the end did Pukkusati realise who he was sitting with.

He went out at dawn to find a robe and a begging bowl so he could be ordained properly. On the way, a stray cow — running after her wandering calf — **gored him to death in the street**.

The most powerful king in the north-west, the man who beat Avanti, killed by a loose cow in a Magadhan lane while shopping for a bowl.

The Whole Chapter on One Page

c. 2600–1900 BCE	The Indus cities. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. No evidence of war. No readable records. <i>The famous “massacre” was invented in the 1940s.</i>
c. 1500–1450 BCE	The War of the Ninety-Nine Forts. Divodasa vs Shambara. Forty years of siege warfare in the hills. Won by Divodasa.
c. 1450–1300 BCE	The Battle of the Ten Kings. On the Ravi. Ten tribes against one king. The river became the weapon. Won by Sudas.
immediately after	The Yamuna campaign. Sudas turns east and strips King Bheda of everything. Won by Sudas.
c. 1200–1000 BCE	Bharatas and Purus merge. The Kuru kingdom is born — the first true state in South Asia.
c. 900 BCE	The Salva invasion. The Kurus are beaten and scattered from Kurukshetra. Indian civilisation shifts east forever. Won by the Salvas.
c. 875 BCE	A flood destroys Hastinapura. The capital is abandoned. (<i>Not a war — and not the same event as the Salva invasion.</i>)
date unknown	The Kurukshetra war and the Trigarta cattle raid — the great epic traditions, set on this soil. Both won by the Pandava side.
c. 550–520 BCE	Gandhara defeats Avanti. Punjab's first victory recorded under a king's own name. Won by Pukkusati.
c. 535 BCE	The Persians arrive. <i>Part Two begins here.</i>

Four patterns that will repeat for the next three thousand years

- 1. In Punjab, water is a weapon.** The very first battle we can name was decided by a river. It will happen again and again — Sikh armies fighting with their backs to the Sutlej, British engineers at Sobraon, tanks bogged in flooded sugarcane fields near Khem Karan in 1965. Five rivers cut this land into compartments, and every commander who ever fought here had to answer the same question: *what do I do about the water?*
- 2. A coalition loses to a single command.** Ten kings lost to one on the Ravi. Eleven armies lost to seven at Kurukshetra. You will watch this happen to the Malloi and Oxydracae against Alexander, to the Rajput confederacy against Babur, to the Marathas at Panipat, and to the Sikh army in 1846 — every time, a bigger force that could not agree fast enough.
- 3. Punjab's tribes were built for war and left almost no records.** The grammarian Panini, writing around 500 BCE, describes the peoples of the five rivers with a special term — *ayudhajivin sangha*, “corporations that live by weapons.” These were republics of armed men. And yet before Alexander we cannot name a single battle any of them fought. **The silence is missing paperwork, not peace.**

4. **The winner is whoever gets written about.** Vasishtha wrote up the Battle of the Ten Kings and we have no other account. The Salvas destroyed India's first state and left no name behind. Throughout this book, ask of every battle: *who wrote this, and what did they want you to think?*

COMING NEXT — PART TWO

Persians and Alexander, 535–325 BCE. Cyrus and Darius take the north-west and put Punjabi soldiers into the Persian army — men from Taxila fight the Greeks at Thermopylae and Plataea. Then Alexander comes the other way: the elephant battle against Porus on the Jhelum, the wagon-fort of the Kathaioi at Sangala, the mutiny on the Beas where his own soldiers finally beat him, and the wall at Multan where the greatest conqueror in the world jumped alone into an enemy city and took an arrow through the lung.

Words Used in This Part

Sapta Sindhu

“Seven Rivers.” The oldest name for the Punjab region, from the Rigveda. Bigger than modern Punjab.

Panj-aab (Punjab)

Persian for “Five Waters” — the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej.

Rigveda

The oldest Indian text, roughly 1500–1200 BCE. A collection of over a thousand hymns, memorised word-perfect for about 3,000 years before being written down. Our only source for the earliest wars.

Parushni

The Rigvedic name for the river **Ravi**.

Dasharajna

“Ten Kings.” The Sanskrit name for the Battle of the Ten Kings.

Bharata

Sudas’s tribe. The winners of Dasharajna — and the origin of India’s own name for itself.

Tritsu

The ruling sub-clan of the Bharatas, the group Sudas personally led.

Dasa / Dasyu

Terms used in the Rigveda for enemy peoples, often fort-dwellers like Shambara. Later the word *dasa* came to mean “servant” or “slave.”

Purohit

Chief priest of a king. Far more than a chaplain — closer to a chancellor with religious authority. Losing the job, as Vishvamitra did, was a political earthquake.

Janapada / Mahajanapada

“Foothold of a people” — a tribal territory. By 600 BCE sixteen big ones (Mahajanapadas) dominated northern India; Gandhara and Kamboja were the two in the north-west.

Gana-sangha

A republic or oligarchy — a state run by an assembly of many “kings” rather than one. The Punjab was full of these.

Ayudhajivin sangha

Panini’s term (c. 500 BCE) for a “corporation living by the profession of arms” — a republic of professional fighters. He applies it to the Trigartas, Yaudheyas, Kshudrakas, Malavas and others of the five rivers.

Gograhana

“The seizing of the cattle” — the name of the Trigarta raid on Matsya, and the standard form of warfare in the Punjab for most of history.

Akshauhini

The epic unit of army size — in theory 21,870 chariots, 21,870 elephants, 65,610 cavalry and 109,350 infantry. Almost certainly a poetic number rather than a real establishment.

Samshaptaka

“Sworn one.” A soldier under an oath to kill a specific enemy or die trying. Trigarta supplied an entire corps of them.

Ashvamedha

The horse sacrifice — a ritual a king performed to claim supremacy over his neighbours. Sudas performed one after Dasharajna.

Painted Grey Ware

A distinctive pottery style found across Punjab and the upper Ganges, roughly 1200–600 BCE. It is the main archaeological fingerprint of the late Vedic and Kuru world.

Sources used for this part

- Rigveda, Book 7, Hymn 18 (Griffith translation) — sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv07018.htm
- “Battle of the Ten Kings” — en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Ten_Kings
- “Sudas” — en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudas; “Divodasa” — en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divodasa
- “Battle of the Ten Kings: Rigveda 7.18 Explained” — rigveda.live
- “Dasarajna: Battle of the Ten Kings from Rig Veda” — sanskritimagazine.com
- “Sudasa: India’s First War Hero” — openthemagazine.com
- George F. Dales, “The Mythical Massacre at Mohenjo-Daro,” *Expedition Magazine*, Penn Museum
- Edward Cork, “Peaceful Harappans? Reviewing the evidence for the absence of warfare in the Indus Civilisation,” *Antiquity* 79 (2005)
- A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (1954)
- “Kuru Kingdom,” “Salva (India),” “Keshin Dalbhya,” “Nichakshu” — en.wikipedia.org
- Michael Witzel, “Early Sanskritization: Origins and Development of the Kuru State,” *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 1.4 (1995)
- “Kurukshetra War,” “Shalya,” “Susharma,” “Virata Parva,” “Jayadratha” — en.wikipedia.org
- “Trigarta Kingdom,” “Madra kingdom,” “Kekaya,” “Gandhara Empire,” “Kambojas” — en.wikipedia.org
- Buddhaghosa’s *Papanchasudani* on MN 140, translated and studied by Piya Tan — themindingcentre.org
- B. C. Law, *Geography of Early Buddhism* — ancient-buddhist-texts.net
- Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, Book XI (“The Conduct of Corporations”), Shamasastri translation
- V. S. Agrawala, *India as Known to Panini* (on the *ayudhajivin* republics)

A NOTE ON DISAGREEMENT

Where scholars differ, this part follows the mainstream reading and says so. The main open questions in this chapter are: whether the Battle of the Ten Kings can be reconstructed tactically at all (Jamison says no); whether it was the model for the Kurukshetra story (Witzel says yes, Hiltebeitel calls that “baffling fancy”); when — or whether — the Kurukshetra war happened; and whether Pukkusati was a real, datable king at all.