

How to read the legends on coins of the Western Kshatrapas: *A Beginner's Guide*

Pankaj Tandon¹

The coins of the Western Kshatrapas are one of the most collectible series of ancient Indian coins. The coins are in a precious metal (silver) but are nevertheless quite inexpensive, the designs are attractive, and the series is quite long, stretching for well over 300 years. New types, including new kings and new dates for known kings, are still being discovered, making the process exciting for the treasure-hunter in all of us. In many ways, therefore, it is an ideal series for collectors. But there is a barrier to collecting these coins: since the portraits on the coins are not realistic, the issues of the different kings must be distinguished from one another by the reading of the coin legends, which are inscribed in the Brahmi script. If a collector cannot read Brahmi letters, he or she might think that collecting these coins is out of reach. The purpose of this article is to show how someone can easily learn to read the legends on these coins, thereby making it possible to collect them and even to make new discoveries.

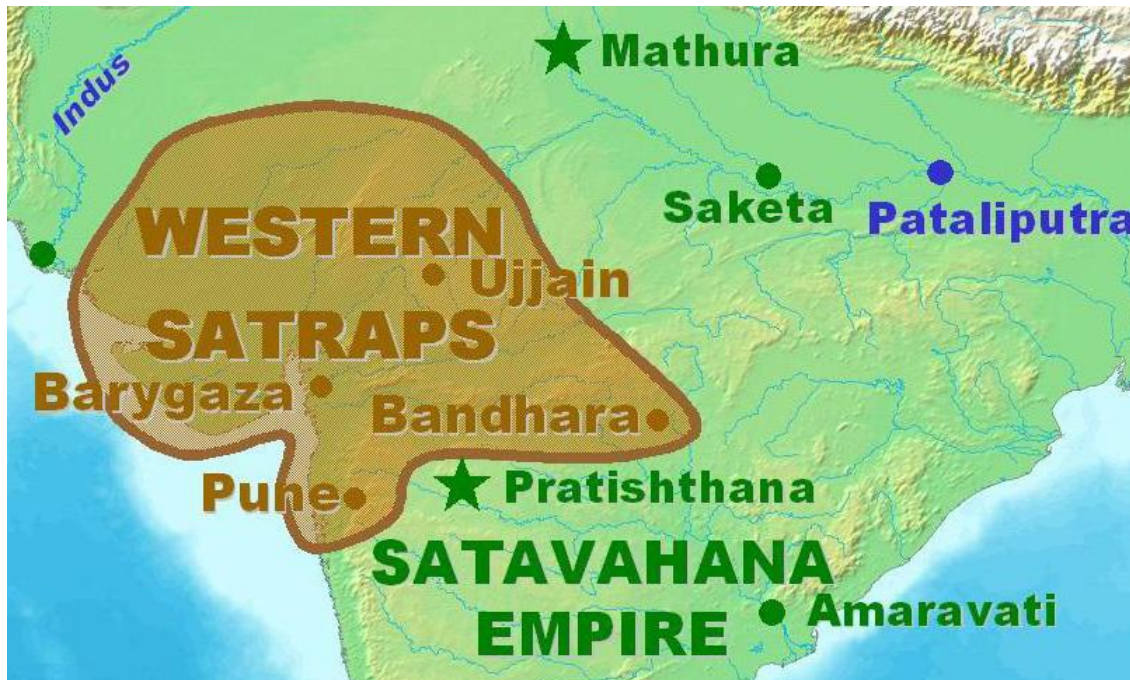


Figure 1: Map showing approximate location of Western Kshatrapa territory
(map adapted from Wikipedia)

¹ Boston University. In learning to read the legends on Western Kshatrapa coins, I was greatly aided by two excellent catalogues of these coins: Amiteshwar Jha and Dilip Rajgor: *Studies in the Coinage of the Western Kshatrapas*, Nashik: Indian Institute of Research in Numismatic Studies, 1992, and R. C. Senior: *Indo-Scythian Coins and History*, Volume II, London and Lancaster, PA: Classical Numismatic Group, 2001.

The Western Kshatrapas were Scythian (Saka) people who ruled a substantial kingdom that encompassed much of modern-day Gujarat and Maharashtra and some adjacent areas (see map in Figure 1). Although we might think of them as a “foreign” tribe, they were in fact assimilated into the Indian population and so are, in a sense, the ancestors of many Indians who live today in these states. Indeed, the portraits on the Western Kshatrapa coins often resemble faces we see today in Maharashtra. So it would be more accurate to say that the Western Kshatrapas were outsiders when they came into India in the first century, but then became part of the Indian population. The period of their rule was c. 35-415, but in this article I will leave out the early period, when the kings belonged to the Kshaharata dynasty. The coins of the Kshaharatas can be distinguished because they have a different reverse design. This article will instead focus on the coins of the Kardamaka dynasty and later followers, all of which had the same design. The Kardamaka dynasty was founded by the king Chastana, who also started the dating system known as the Saka era in the year 78. Later rulers maintained the coin design of the Kardamakas and are included here.

The coins of the Kardamakas all have the king’s portrait on the front and a reverse design featuring a *chaitya* (a three-arched hill or stupa topped by a crescent moon) in the centre, with a crescent moon above it to one side and a sun (consisting of a number of dots arranged in a circular pattern) above it on the other side, a wavy line below thought to represent a river, and a circular legend in Brahmi letters all around. The typical reverse can be seen on the accompanying photograph of the silver coin of Vijayasena in Figure 2. Since the portraits of the kings are not individualized, it is impossible to definitively attribute the coins on the basis of the portraits. Thus the legends must be read. How to read these is explained next.



Figure 2: Silver coin of Vijayasena (ruled 239-250)

Reading the Legends

We could take the coin of Vijayasena in Figure 2 as our starting point. This is a beautiful specimen with stunning calligraphy, making all the letters very legible. The legend starts at around 2 o'clock of the coin and reads:



rajno mahakshatrapasa damasenasaputrasa rajno mahakshatrapasa vijayasenasa
(of King Vijayasena, mahakshatrapa, son of King Damasena, mahakshatrapa)

Almost all silver Kardamaka coins follow this formula, so the reading of the legends on all the coins can be illustrated by reading this coin.

The first thing to note about the legend is that it consists of two parts: the patronymic part and the king's part, and they differ only slightly from one another. Here is the legend again, broken down by word:



rajno mahakshatrapasa damasenasaputrasa rajno mahakshatrapasa vijayasenasa

Notice how the first and fourth words are the same (*rajno*), as are the second and the fifth words (*mahakshatrapasa*). This repetitiveness in the legends makes reading them a lot easier.

The patronymic consists of the first half of the legend (the first three words): *rajno mahakshatrapasa damasenasaputrasa*, and refers to the king's father. It starts with two titles: *rajno* and *mahakshatrapasa*, and then follows with the actual patronymic: *damasenasaputrasa* (son of Damasena). The *sa* at the end of the words converts them to the genitive case, so that the whole legend is telling us this is (a coin) *of* so-and-so. The king's part consists of the last half of the legend and starts here with the same two titles: *rajno* and *mahakshatrapasa*, followed by the king's name in the genitive case: *vijayasenasa*.

The second thing to notice about the legend is that most of the letters are small, while a few letters are bigger and "hang down" further than the others. Because of this lengthening of the letters, they are easy to identify in the legend. We can pick out the long letters of *rajno* quite easily, and also the letters *kshatra* in the word *mahakshatrapasa*. Each of these pairs of long letters appears twice in the legend. One pair of long letters appears only once, the *putra* of the patronymic, and it is important to identify this, because, once we have done so, we know that the father's name precedes these two letters. So now the only task is to read the father's and the king's names. For this, it is useful to refer to a list of the king's names, provided in Figure 3.

One slight complication is that sometimes the first word *rajno* is replaced by *rajna* or *rajnah*. The three words look like this:



rajno rajna rajnah

Another complication is that sometimes the title of the king or of his father might be *kshatrapa* rather than *mahakshatrapa*, which can also easily be distinguished by the presence or absence of the first two letters:



mahakshatrapasa *kshatrapasa*

Finally, some of the late Kshatrapa rulers add the word *swami* before their names. That word can be seen in the table of names.

Table 1 shows the names of each of the kings, along with the name of his father. Once the titles *rajno* or *rajna* and *kshatrapa* or *mahakshatrapa* have been identified, all that remains is to identify the names of the kings and their fathers. This can be achieved by referring to the table. One king who has been left out of the table is Isvaradatta, who was a usurper and whose legend did not follow the usual pattern. Rather, his typical legend read:



rajno mahakshatrapasa isvaradattasa varshe prathame (dvitiye).

The last two words *varshe prathame* mean “first year,” and there are some very rare coins that also read *varshe dvitiye*, or “second year,” which is shown in the parentheses above. Coins of all kings, along with their detailed legends and variations, can be seen on the CoinIndia website: <http://coinindia.com/>. In the table, the column marked K/M is to indicate the title of the king. “K” means coins of that king are known with title *kshatrapa* only, “M” means coins are known with title *mahakshatrapa* only, and “K,M” means some coins are known with the *kshatrapa* title and others with the *mahakshatrapa* title for that ruler. Also, for two rulers, Damazada II and Jivadaman, two different spellings of their names are seen on the coins, so they have been listed twice in the table.

Table 1: Names of kings and their fathers, in chronological order

King		K/M	Father	
Chastana		K	Zamotika	
Damazada I		K	Zamotika	
Jayadaman		K	Unknown	
Rudradaman		M	Jayadaman	
Damazada II (A)		K,M	Rudradaman	
Damazada II (B)		K,M	Rudradaman	
Rudrasimha I		K,M	Rudradaman	
Jivadaman (A)		M	Damazada II (A)	

Jivadaman (B)	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Damazada II (B)	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Rudrasena I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K,M	Rudrasimha I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Satyadaman	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Damazada II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Isvaradeva	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Rudrasimha I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Prithvisena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Rudrasena I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Damasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K,M	Rudrasimha I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Samghadaman	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Rudrasimha I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Damajadasri II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Rudrasena I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Viradaman	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Damasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Yasodaman I	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K,M	Damasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Vijayasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K,M	Damasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Damajadasri III	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Damasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Rudrasena II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Viradaman	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Visvasimha	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Rudrasena II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Bhartrdaman	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K,M	Rudrasena II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Visvasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Bhartrdama	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Rudrasimha II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Jivadaman	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Yasodaman II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	K	Rudrasimha II	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Rudrasena III	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Swami Rudradaman	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Swami Simhasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Swami Rudrasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Rudrasena IV	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Swami Simhasena	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ
Rudrasimha III	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ	M	Swami Satyasimha	ᱫᱷᱟᱱ

Dates

There is one more item that must be dealt with: the reading of dates. Coins from Rudrasimha I onwards were dated in Brahmi numerals behind the head of the king on the obverse. For the collector, identifying the dates is an exciting task as it adds to the complexity of the series. The dates are also important for the historian attempting to establish a firm chronology for the rulers. And since the dates are not always present on the flan, finding a dated coin adds to the collector's pleasure.

The dates are in the Saka era, probably dating to the first year of Chastana's rule as year 1, corresponding to year 78 of the common calendar. The earliest dated coins known are dated 100, so there are normally three numerals in a date: a digit for the hundreds, a digit for the tens, and a digit for the units. In the case of a number like 105, there would be no tens digit and so there would only be two numerals, the one for 100 and the one for 5. The numerals used on Kshatrapa coins are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Brahmi Numerals used to date Kshatrapa coins

𑀓	𑀔	𑀕						
100	200	300						
𑀘	𑀙	𑀚	𑀛	𑀜	𑀝	𑀞	𑀟	𑀠
10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
𑀡	𑀢	𑀣	𑀤	𑀥	𑀦	𑀧	𑀨	𑀩
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

We can illustrate the use of the numerals by reading the date on the Vijayasena coin from Figure 2. A detail of the date part, seen at the back of the king's head, is shown in Figure 3. The first numeral is clearly the symbol for 100. The second numeral might be read as the number 50, but no coins are known for Vijayasena that have dates in the 150's, so we know that the digit must stand for 60, with the top part of the digit off the flan of the coin. The illustration draws in the extra part that is missing. Finally, the third digit could be a 2 or a 3. The third stroke could be a completion for the numeral 3, or it could be the bottom of the next "blundered" letter. Surrounding the date, there is normally a meaningless series of "Greek" letters carried over from the Indo-Greek coins on which the Kshatrapa coins are based. So that third stroke could belong to one of those letters. In any case, this coin was made in Saka year 162 or 163, equivalent to years 240-



Figure 3: Date on Vijayasena coin

241 of the common calendar. Sometimes we just can't be absolutely sure what the date says, especially when parts of the numerals are off the flan.

Nevertheless, with these numerals and the ability to read legends, a collector can safely indulge in the pleasure of collecting Kshatrapa coins and share in the excitement of attributing coins themselves and perhaps making some new discoveries!