

Abhimanyu: a newly identified Hun king

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One of the barriers to the study of ancient coins is that they are often in poor condition. They can be worn or corroded, or critical pieces of their designs could be off the flan. Further, the letter forms used are frequently quite unusual, making it difficult to read them with confidence. We often have to wait until a coin in good condition turns up to make an attempt to adequately read the legend and, once we are able to do so, our understanding of previous coins can improve substantially. Such a coin came my way a few months ago. Now that its legend is read, we can confidently identify a new Hun king named Abhimanyu,² and we can reattribute some previously studied coins. I will first illustrate and describe the coin and then proceed to a discussion.



ΕΛΛΗΝΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ

Figure 1: AR drachm of Abhimanyu,³ with legend below

Obverse: Bust of king facing right, with elongated head and mustache, wearing round crown with crescent ornaments and a jeweled diadem which has two ribbon ends

¹ Boston University. I would like to acknowledge helpful discussions with Shailen Bhandare, Joe Cribb, and Harry Falk and to thank Klaus Vondrovec for furnishing me with some coin images. I would also like to take this opportunity to salute and express my appreciation to Stan Goron for his many years' service as Editor of this journal.

² The reading of the legend was a joint effort in which I received valuable suggestions from Shailen Bhandare, Joe Cribb, and Harry Falk. I think we all agreed with the final reading, but I take full responsibility in case of any errors.

³ Tandon collection, inventory number 675.31.

hanging behind, double drop pearl ear-ring and pearl necklace; flower-topped conch in right field; Brāhmī legend around (at 9 o'clock): *jaya / śahyabhi / manyu*.

Reverse: Fire altar flanked by armed attendants, mostly obliterated as is usual for these coins.

Details: Weight: 3.30 gm, diameter: 27 mm, die axis: 3 o'clock.

The coin is illustrated in Figure 1. Robert Göbl had published a similar coin as type 75 in his study of Hunnic coins.⁴ Göbl had at his disposal just one coin for study and he tentatively read the legend as *jaya (tu?) śāhi*, assigning the coin to Khiṅgila. How he read even that much on the coin is a testament to Göbl's skill, as it was quite worn and most of the legend appears to be off the flan. The coin in Figure 1, however, is in excellent condition, and the entire legend is visible on the flan. The reading of the legend is mostly straightforward and uncontroversial; the only problematic letters are the last two, *ma* and *nyu*. One is tempted to read the last letter as *tya*, given how many Hun names end in *āditya*, but clearly the previous letter is not *di* but *ma*, *pa*, or possibly *la*. The critical feature in the last letter though is the presence of the diacritic highlighted in Figure 2, which would force *tya* to *tyu*, thereby making it impossible to get a sensible reading. Rather, it should be read as *nyu*, which would make *ma* the logical reading for the previous letter. The letter *na* often looks like the letter *ta*; see for example, the letter at 11 o'clock on Figure 3, which is the letter *na* in the word *lakhāna* on a coin of Udayāditya. Thus the name of the issuing king is Abhimanyu.



Figure 2: Detail showing the diacritic on the letter *nyu*



Figure 3: Coin of Udayāditya, showing letter *na*⁵

⁴ Robert Göbl: *Dokumente zur Geschichte der Iranischen Hunnen in Baktrien und Indien*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967.

⁵ Tandon collection, inventory number 547.41.

Matthias Pfisterer, in his presentation of Göbl's type 75,⁶ assigned the coin to a king he named Avamazha, based on a reading of the legend on a very closely related type, his type 75C. That coin, from the collection of Jean-Pierre Righetti, is illustrated in Figure 4. The portrait is extremely similar to the one in Figure 1, but the Righetti coin features a humped bull in the right field. The Brāhmī legend begins at 8 o'clock, and the first two words, *jaya / ṣa / hya*, are quite clear so Pfisterer's reading of them is correct. However, the last three letters, illustrated in the detail in Figure 5, seem to be problematic. Pfisterer reads them as *vamazha*, while I believe the correct reading is *vhimanyu*, rendering the entire legend as *jaya / ṣa / hyavhimanyu*. The middle letter, *ma*, is clear and uncontroversial. Pfisterer does not explain how he arrived at his reading, but I don't see how the third letter could be *zha*. Rather, it seems to be *nyu*; note the diacritic in the same position as the letter *nyu* in Figures 1 and 2. The first letter starts clearly with the letter *va*, modified by a horizontal projection to the right which could perhaps be seen as the right-most part of a letter *ha*, with a diacritic above. To me, *vhi* seems to be the most plausible reading. Other Hun coins show an interchangeability between the letters *ba* and *va*; for example, the names *Baysira* and *Vaysira* seen on Göbl's types 108-111 are surely the same name, and many observers believe that the names *Javukha* (in Brāhmī) and *Zabocho* (in Bactrian) are alternative spellings of the same name.⁷ Brāhmī of course has no letter *vha*, although such a letter does exist in Kharoṣṭhī. The die cutter of the Righetti coin may well have been trying to render in Brāhmī a word he was used to seeing in Kharoṣṭhī. Especially in light of my coin, *Avhimanyu* is almost certainly an alternative spelling of *Abhimanyu*, and we can safely attribute the coins of "Avamazha" to the same king.



Figure 4: Type 75C of Pfisterer, assigned to Avamazha⁸

⁶ Matthias Pfisterer: *Hunnen in Indien*, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013.

⁷ See Göbl, *op. cit.*, types 49-51 and 96-107, and, particularly, types 117-118 and 105-106.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Righetti collection, number 903, in Pfisterer, *ibid.*, p. 261. Photograph kindly provided by Klaus Vondrovec.



Figure 5: Detail of coin in Figure 4

According to the source from whom I acquired the coin, it was found in Qandahar. Göbl does not record a findspot for his coin, but notes that it was probably from northern Pakistan. There is no indication of how he arrived at this conclusion. The style of the coin is quite distinct and not easily related to other known coins, although the thin spread flan and Brāhmī legend would indicate an origin in Gandhara.

As far as I can tell, this king Abhimanyu is not known from any other sources. The name of course is a familiar one, as it is the name of a son of the Pāṇḍava prince Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata*. It also appears twice in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. One reference is to a king of Kashmir who ruled c. 958-972 and whose coins are known to us.⁹ Clearly this king could not have issued the coins under discussion. However, the other reference in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is to an early king who is mentioned after the kings Huṣka, Juṣka and Kaniṣka (among whom the Kushan kings Kanishka and Huvishka are surely meant) and before the “Gonandīya” king Mihirakula.¹⁰ Our king Abhimanyu may well have been a Hun king sometime before Mihirakula and therefore it cannot be completely ruled out that he is the same king as the one mentioned early in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. Of course, the coin was almost certainly not minted in Kashmir, but Kashmir was not always an independent kingdom and was often ruled by kings in Gandhara. Mihirakula certainly held sway over a wide territory. If this Abhimanyu is the one mentioned in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, and he ruled before Mihirakula, he would have to be dated to sometime during the fourth century CE, which is not an implausible date given the style of the coin. Regardless, we can now add the name of Abhimanyu to the list of Hun kings who ruled in India sometime during the fourth and fifth centuries.

⁹ See Michael Mitchiner: *Oriental Coins and Their Values: Non-Islamic States & Western Colonies*, London: Hawkins Publications, 1979, type 173.

¹⁰ M.A. Stein: *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979 (reprint), pp. 76-78.