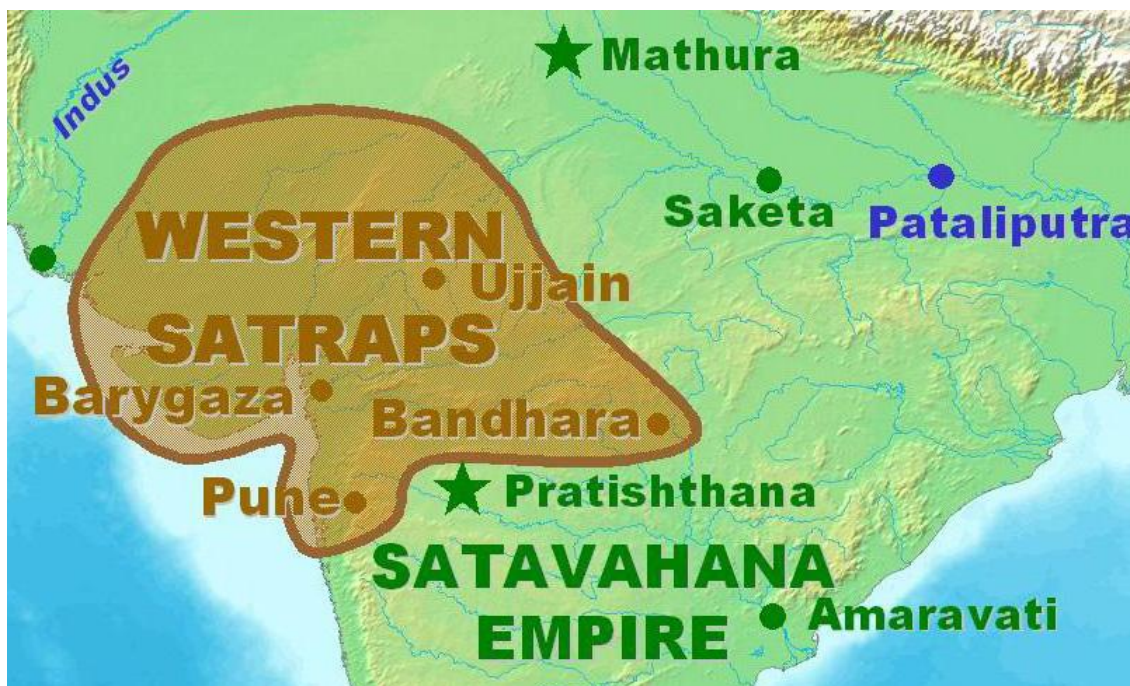


# How to read the legends on coins of the Western Kshatrapas: *A Beginner's Guide*

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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.

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



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



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*





Prithvisena	𑀧𑀸𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭	K	Rudrasena I	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Damasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺	K,M	Rudrasimha I	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭
Samghadaman	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭:	M	Rudrasimha I	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭
Damajadasri II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺:	K	Rudrasena I	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Viradaman	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭:	K	Damasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Yasodaman I	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺:	K,M	Damasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Vijayasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺	K,M	Damasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Damajadasri III	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺:	M	Damasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Rudrasena II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺	M	Viradaman	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭
Visvasimha	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺	K	Rudrasena II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Bhartrdaman	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺:	K,M	Rudrasena II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Visvasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺	K	Rudrasena II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺
Rudrasimha II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺	K	Jivadaman	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺
Yasodaman II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺:	K	Rudrasimha II	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺
Rudrasena III	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺	M	Swami Rudradaman	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺
Swami Simhasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺	M	Swami Rudrasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺
Rudrasena IV	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺	M	Swami Simhasena	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺
Rudrasimha III	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺	M	Swami Satyasimha	𑀲𑀺𑀓𑀲𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀭𑀺

### 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 240-241 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.



**Figure 3: Date on Vijayasena coin**

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!