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Evidence for Cultural Influence and Trade in the Coinage of the Western Kshatrapas

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***Abstract:** Between the first and fourth centuries CE, the Western Ksatrapas cultivated an unusual, successful and remarkably homogenous coinage. The Kshatrapas, situated in what is now Indian Gujarat, inhabited a remarkable cultural crossroads in the ancient world. Closely linked to the Indo-Saka and Hellenistic cultures to the north, the Kshatrapas maintained relationships of contact and exchange with the Satavahana and Guptas to the south and east, and with the Roman world via the vibrant maritime trade route across the Indian Ocean.*

This paper argues that the success of the Ksatrapas coinage can be directly attributed to the way that its designers incorporated these influences in their designs. By blending a variety of cultural conceptions of coinage design and kingship, the coinage itself was able to transcend the borders of the Kshatrapas' own territory and become a widely accepted medium exchange across central India.

The Western Kshatrapas were a significant power in northwest India between the 1st and 4th centuries CE.¹ They existed alongside the great Satavahana, and later Gupta, empires of central India, as well as the Kushans to the north, but have been far less studied. They have been identified as a major centre for maritime trade with Rome. Unlike their contemporaries however, surviving evidence from the Western Kshatrapas is extremely limited. With little useful textual, epigraphic or archaeological evidence to go on, the territory's distinctive and extremely abundant coinage must necessarily provide the foundation for reconstructing the history of this important region.

This study will be the first to focus on the stylistic aspects of Western Kshatrapas' coinage and will examine external cultural influences on the region's coinage. These "cultural influences" take the form of the design, style and legends. Nevertheless, it is also important to take account of other characteristics of the coins as well as other source material where available. A traditional culture-historical approach would suggest that it is the significant presence of foreigners, and the circulation of their material culture, that explains these influences on the coinage. However, I will argue that this is certainly not the case. Instead, I will argue that these influences, which are numerous, were deliberately included in the coinage to achieve certain objectives which facilitated the spread and acceptance of the coinage over a wide area. These influences formed the backbone of the coinage's spread and longevity within the realm of the Kshatrapas and beyond.

In the first half of this paper, I will address the evidence for the presence of different cultural influences after briefly outlining the material available. In the second half, I will attempt to assess the causation of these influences: whether they reflect a multicultural society in the region or whether they result from deliberate symbolic manipulation.

Context

In recent years, study of the artistic attributes in coinage has been extremely unfashionable among scholars. When compared to easily quantifiable data, such as metal content and purity, conclusions drawn from artistic depiction appear dangerously subjective. In numismatic and archaeological texts, style is often remarked on in passing but never satisfactorily examined or explained. Certainly, many of those who have performed similar analyses in the past have allowed their judgement to be coloured by their personal taste. As recently as 1994, the renowned Indian historian S.R. Goyal dismissed the artistic style of the

Western Kshatrapas' coinage as "degenerate".¹ Such conclusions are both unhelpful and potentially dangerous, since they divert attention from the valid insights which can be gained from them. As the Western Kshatrapas have left few other artistic depictions, any attempt to study their visual culture has to rely on their coinage alone.

The unfashionable nature of stylistic analysis goes some way towards explaining why this particular area has been neglected in the study of the coinage. The first analysis of Western Kshatrapas coinage was made in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1890 only a few decades after the deciphering of Brahmi script.² It was followed in 1908 by E.J. Rapson's *Catalogue of Indian Coins* which included a full section dedicated to the history of the Kshatrapas as derived from coinage.³ Rapson's catalogue, which did include some important work on portrait styles, provided the grounding for much of the future study of the Western Kshatrapas and remained the standard reference until the publication of A. Jha and D. Rajgor's *Studies in the Coinage of the Western Kshatrapas* in 1994. Jha and Rajgor's work brought valuable modern numismatic techniques, like metallurgical analysis which was unavailable to Rapson, for the first time to the region's coinage. Their commentary focused on constructing a detailed chronology of types which had also occupied previous scholars. Whether by accident or design, the quality of photographs of each coin in their published volume was so poor that it made it virtually impossible to examine the coins themselves. Jha and Rajgor were clearly much more concerned with raw data on legends, dates and epigraphy. This piece hopes to redress the situation by focusing on different, chiefly stylistic, aspects and looking to them for insights.

Evidential types



FIG 1: AR Karsapana of Vijayasena (c.238-250 CE), typical of mid-period Kshatrapa coins. Obverse: Head of king, right. Brahmi date (240 CE) in Saka era behind. Corrupt Greek-script legend, largely off-flan. Reverse: "Chaitya" emblem, surrounded by Brahmi-script legend: *Rajno mahakshatrapasa damasenasaputrassa rajno mahakshatrapasa vijayasenasa*

The Kshatrapas minted coins for nearly 400 years in surprisingly large numbers. There is little stylistic variation over the period except a slight refinement in depiction and the design remains almost identical. Several types were minted, including coins in bronze, arsenical-copper and lead, but by far the most common is a silver denomination referred to as *Karsapana* in contemporary inscriptions.⁴ Their obverses feature the head of the Kshatrapa of the day, wearing a distinctive cap-like headdress, surrounded by a legend in corrupt Greek script. The reverse features a Prakrit legend in Brahmi Script and, in earlier coins, Kharosthi too. This surrounds a central 'dynastic emblem' which changes only occasionally during the period. The Brahmi legend gives the name of the ruler, his title ("Kshatrapa" or

¹ S. R. Goyal, *The Dynastic Coins of Ancient India* (Jodhpur: Kusumanjali Prakashan, 1995), 34.

² P. B. Indrajī, 'The Western Kshatrapas' in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Vol. 22, July 1890): 859-910.

³ E. J. Rapson, *Catalogue of Coins: Andhras &c.* (London: British Museum, 1908).

⁴ S. K. Chakraborty, *Indian Numismatics: From the Earliest Times to the Rise of the Imperial Guptas* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2004), 13-14.

“Mahaksatrapa”) and his parentage. All coins from the reign of Chastana carry a date on the obverse in the Saka era, allowing an unusually clear sequence of types to be built up for the mid and late periods. The purity of silver remained reasonably constant, starting at roughly 94% under Nahapana in the late-1st century and never falling below 80%.⁵

These coins were obviously popular as a means of exchange; apart from the sheer number produced, they also spawned a whole series of copies from other kingdoms, indicating that they enjoyed a better reputation than the coinages which died out rapidly.⁶ States which minted imitations included the Satavahanas and Guptas, as well as a number of small satrapies. The imitations, particularly later types, were very similar, with the same portrait style and legend types with only the dynastic emblem on the reverse changed. They were comparable in size, weights and purity with those minted by the Kshatrapas (where appropriate) and so appear not to have been created to deceive. These adaptations ensured the survival of the coinage’s legacy well beyond the fall of the Kshatrapas themselves, into the 6th century CE.

Unfortunately, almost all numismatic evidence of the Western Kshatrapas must be examined without the benefit of archaeological context. Most recorded and analysed Kshatrapa coins come from huge hoards discovered during the colonial period, but even many of these finds were never fully analysed and are now lost. It seems almost certain that the vast majority of coins sold by dealers today come from illegal and unrecorded excavations. There is also no recorded evidence of Western Kshatrapa coins found outside what is now India, though it seems likely that they reached at least as far as Pakistan if not beyond. The material we do have available does not exhibit any particularly surprising trends. The vast majority of the recorded finds come from the province of Gujarat, with more permeating into neighbouring states, but not a great deal further.

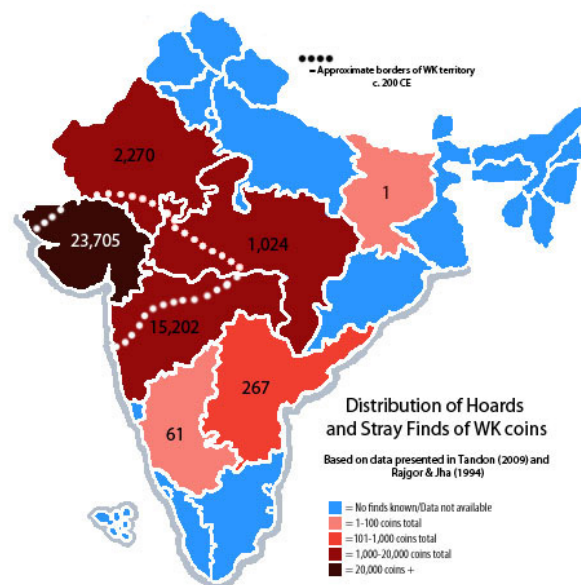


FIG 2: Recorded hoard and stray-finds of Western Kshatrapas coins in India, by modern province. Poor recording techniques mean that accurate plotting of finds is impossible. (BUD)

⁵ A. Jha & D. Rajgor, *Studies in the Coinage of the Western Kshatrapas* (Mumbai: Indian Institute of Research in Numismatic Studies, 1994), 62-64.

⁶ S. Bhandare, 'Political Transition in Early 5th Century Gujarat: A Numismatic Reappraisal based on silver issues of the Western Kshatrapas, the Guptas and their Contemporaries' in A. Jha & S. Garg (eds) *Numismatic Digest* (Vol. 29-30, 2005-6), 84.

The distribution of finds illustrated above shows that the coins circulated over a broad area, far beyond that ever controlled by the Western Kshatrapas themselves. The chief direction of circulation seems to be south and west, towards territory controlled by the Satavahanas and Gupta. However, the data is too vague and incomplete to be able to draw more detailed conclusions.

Other surviving evidence should not be neglected because they provide crucial context for the use of money in the region and time period we are studying. As for textual and epigraphic sources, the Western Kshatrapas never seem to have cultivated the literary tradition so abundant in the south of India at the time. They are however mentioned in a number of foreign texts, most notably in the Roman *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, whose anonymous author visited the port of Barygaza under the reign of the Kshatrapa Nahapana in the mid to late 1st century CE.⁷ There are also a handful of honorific inscriptions, mostly dating to a generation or so after the Periplus' description. Because they chiefly detail with benefactions, often to religious communities, they frequently discuss money in detail but reveal little more.

Greek, Hellenistic and Indo-Greek influence

Despite the decline of the Indo-Greek kingdom around a hundred years before the first silver coinage of the Kshatrapas was produced, there is a great deal of evidence which suggests that Greek coins were both well-known in the Kshatrapa territories and their style copied and adapted.

From the first silver issues the obverse of the Kshatrapas' coinage features a Greek-script legend, and scholars have been keen to highlight the resemblance between the size, weight and purity of early Kshatrapa coinage and the later Indo-Greek hemidrachms.⁸ Indeed, the earliest base metal coinage depicted a winged deity, which is probably the Greek goddess Nike, a common motif on Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian coinage. Even the inclusion of a head on the obverse, not found on Satavahana coins until at least the time of Kshatrapa Nahapana, may be imported from Roman or Indo-Greek coinage.

Of course, Kshatrapa exposure to Greek influences could come from secondary sources, such as Indo-Scythian coins, rather than Indo-Greek coinage itself. The *Periplus* mentions that "coins stamped with Greek letters – the inscriptions of Apollodotos and Menander who reigned after Alexander" circulated in the town of Barygaza, the principal regional port, at the time the work was written.⁹ What archaeological evidence we have supports the continued circulation of Indo-Greek coins in Gujarat well into the 1st century CE. The so-called Gogha Hoard, examined by J. Deyell, contained both Indo-Greek (mostly of Apollodotos II and Dionysios) and early Kshatrapa (Nahapana) silver coins.¹⁰ The correlates suggest that this was not just an anomaly and that Kshatrapa merchants were aware of, and exposed to, Indo-Greek coins on a regular basis and thus that the influence can be directly attributed to the Indo-Greeks.

Indo-Scythian vs. "Indian" influences

Though it might seem obvious that the Kshatrapas shared the same cultural background, generally termed "Indian", to their southern and eastern neighbours, this does not necessarily follow. The first Kshatrapa dynasty, the Kshaharata family, is generally

⁷ There has been much debate over the precise dating of the text which is far from clear. J. Cribb (1992) puts an estimate of ca. 60 CE.

⁸ E. J. Rapson, *Catalogue of Coins: Andhras &c.* (London: British Museum, 1908), cix.

⁹ Anon, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 47.

¹⁰ J. Deyell, 'Indo-Greek and Kshaharata coins from the Gujarat seacoast' in *Numismatic Chronicle* (Vol. 144, 1984).

accepted to have originated in Central Asia with Indo-Scythians, rather than as an indigenous dynasty in the Indian Subcontinent.¹¹ Of course, it certainly does not mean that the population likewise shared a Central Asian-nomadic cultural background but it is interesting to bear this divergence in mind when considering Indian influences on the coinage.

The only icon which appears on the reverse of the later *Karsapana* is the so-called “dynastic emblem”. The earliest example of this, a bow-and-lightning bolt, is clearly associated with designs that appear on certain Indo-Scythian types, yet the icon is replaced by the “Chaitya” icon under Chastana in the 130s.¹² Though exactly what this symbolises is disputed, it previously had appeared on early Indian “Punchmark” and earlier Satavahanan coins and seems to have been strongly tied to indigenous “Indian” religion, culture and mythology.¹³ From Chastana onwards, it appears on every Kshatrapa *Karsapana*, and also on numerous base metal issues, until the final issues of the 420s.



FIG 3 & 4: Kshatrapa "dynastic emblems": the early arrow-and-lightning bolt type and later "Chaitya" (hills-river-sun-moons). After specimens of Nahapana and Rudrasena II respectively. (BUD)

In a similar vein, designs on base-metal coinage are frequently difficult to distinguish from those of other Indian kingdoms. The image of a lion crouching, for instance, is portrayed in exactly the same pose and style on both potin issues of Nahapana and on certain Satavahana coins.¹⁴ Elephants, often seen on Satavahana coins, are also found on some Kshatrapa issues and surely represent a deliberate use of an indigenous design.

Roman influence

Potentially the most interesting aspect of the Western Kshatrapa coinage is the cultural influence of Roman coinage imports. Barygaza is mentioned by the *Periplus* as one of the most important ports in the maritime trade across the Indian Ocean.¹⁵

Unfortunately, it is not straightforward to establish whether Roman coinage accompanied the trade to Gujarat in the same quantities discovered in southern India. Certainly, the large hoards recorded in the south are noticeably absent from Gujarat. Of course, this does not necessarily indicate that none are found for the reasons discussed above; texts mention finds of Roman coinage in the area dating back as far as the 17th century.¹⁶ These were never recorded or analysed. There is, however, data on numerous small hoards and stray finds found during and after the colonial period. One Julio-Claudian hoard has been

¹¹ S. Bhandare, 'Political Transition in Early 5th Century Gujarat: A Numismatic Reappraisal based on silver issues of the Western Kshatrapas, the Guptas and their Contemporaries' in A Jha & S Garg (eds) *Numismatic Digest* (Vol. 29-30, 2005-6), 82.

¹² S. R. Goyal, *The Dynastic Coins of Ancient India*, 32.

¹³ B. Chattopadhyay, *Coins and Icons: A study of Myths and Symbols in Indian Numismatic Art* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1977), 34.

¹⁴ See specimens Nos. 191 and 192 in A. Jha & D. Rajgor, *Studies in the Coinage of the Western Kshatrapas*, 109; for a clearer illustration see Maudhar Arts (online catalogue), *Auction Nov"ember 4, 2012*: Lot 6014; See Marudhar Arts (online catalogue), *Auction August 26, 2011*: Lot 203.

¹⁵ Anon, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 41-9.

¹⁶ T. S. Sridhar, S. Suresh & N. Sundararajan, *Roman coins in the Government Museum, Chennai* (Chennai: Government Museum, 2011), 14.

unearthed inland from Gujarat at Nagpur in Maharashtra, but the overwhelming majority date to the reigns of the emperors Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus from the mid to late 2nd century.¹⁷ Despite evidence that Nahapana's coinage included silver from European mines – presumably from melted-down Julio-Claudian denarii – it seems that the most exposure to Roman coinage in the area was during the second century.¹⁸ This is a very different trend to the overwhelmingly Julio-Claudian finds from southern India. The contrast is particularly surprising, considering that by the reign of Lucius Verus the silver content in the denarius had been reduced to around 80% at a time when the average purity of Kshatrapa coinage was nearer 90%.¹⁹

This aside, Roman coins were clearly regarded with interest by the population. A recently published gold seal ring, said to have come from Gujarat, depicts two beautifully engraved portraits recognisable as Lucius Verus and Lucilla alongside a Brahmi script legend.²⁰ Both portraits are stylistically identical to those on Roman aureii and perhaps indicate that Roman coins were viewed as fashionable exotica. At the same time, the coinage of the Western Kshatrapas seems to illustrate a move towards a more serene and lifelike bust, like those present on early Roman imperial issues.²¹

“Passive” influences: coinage as a reflection of the cultural make-up of Gujarat?

It is very tempting to see the cultural influences on the coinage of the Western Kshatrapas as somehow representing the cultural make-up of the region during the period. The coins, after all, must have been used for local circulation and for that they would need to roughly conform to the local population's expectations of what coinage should look like.

Unfortunately, this argument is overly simplistic. It is unsafe, for example, even to assume that the scripts used on the coin were ones that were common, or even understood, in Gujarat at the time. Greek had appeared on the bilingual coinage of the Indo-Greeks, and later as a script on Indo-Scythian and early Kushan coinage. Though it starts as a valid script on the Kshatrapas' silver coinage, it rapidly degenerates until it becomes a meaningless series of “I”, “H” and “O” shapes by the 2nd century. It is also worth noting that, on most coins, the head of the Kshatrapa takes up almost the entire flan, meaning that any visible legend is confined to the edge and is usually present only when the strike is off-centre. This could indicate a decline in the use of Greek in India generally during the period. However its retention (unlike the Kharosthi, which disappeared under Chastana) indicates that, even in token-form, it served an important cultural role in tying the Kshatrapas' coinage to the well-established coinage of the Indo-Greeks. The legend was not, therefore, included for the benefit of the inhabitants of the region; rather, it was calculated to achieve economic or political aims, presumably top-down by the mint officials. As a result, the influences we see in the coinage were deliberately included for similar reasons that can be termed “active influences”.

“Active” influences

Once freed of the premise that material culture always reflects the ethnic or socio-cultural reality of its creators, we can examine the benefits that the Kshatrapas gained from

¹⁷ V. Begley & R. D. de Puma, *Rome and India: The Ancient Sea Trade* (London: University of Wisconsin, 1991), 40.

¹⁸ P. Turner, *An Investigation of Roman and Local Silver Coins in South India, First to Third Centuries AD* (London: University of London, 1984).

¹⁹ K. Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy 300 BC to AD 700* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1996), 95.; A. Jha & D. Rajgor, *Studies in the Coinage of the Western Kshatrapas*, 63.

²⁰ ‘Gold finger ring from Ancient India’ in Classical Numismatic Group Inc., *Triton XI*, Lot: 953.

²¹ S. R. Goyal, *The Dynastic Coins of Ancient India*, 32-3.

incorporating such diverse elements in their coinage that presented a very different reason for their inclusion.²²

Above all, their inclusion helped the coinage to spread beyond the relatively minor Kshatrapa kingdom and into the rest of India. For the reasons already discussed, we cannot track the wider movement of the coinage with precision; the evidence certainly suggests it circulated widely. The exceptionally large Jogalthembi hoard includes coins of Nahapana overstruck by the Satavahana king Gautamiputra Satakarni, presumably for circulation in Satavahana territory. Later in the period, the reputation of the Kshatrapa coinage is clear from the large number of imitative coinages produced by others, including the Satavahanas and Guptas. Considering the peripheral nature of Kshatrapa power, and the fact that other Indian kings seem to have considered them Saka barbarians,²³ this is particularly surprising and indicates that there must have been something attractive about the Kshatrapa coinage to traders in other parts of India.



FIG 5: Overstruck AR Karsapana of Nahapana from the Jogalthembi hoard.

Obverse: Bust of Nahapana, right, with Greek-script legend: PANNIO
ΞAHAPATAC NAHAIIANAC

One aspect deliberately included for the benefit of traders appears to be its choice of script. Brahmi is thought to have created at some point in the early 3rd century BCE²⁴ and is common to Satavahanan coins. It does not, however, seem to be a script with which the Kshatrapa die engravers were comfortable as there are numerous spelling,²⁵ grammatical²⁶ and other basic typographical errors²⁷ throughout the 3rd century alone. By the reign of Rudrasena III, the script has degenerated into a series of slash marks,²⁸ though it later improved. It seems to indicate that the die engravers were not fluent writers or readers of Brahmi script and that the legends were copied – sometimes incorrectly – from older coins. Given the script's importance to the overall design of their coins and its intricacy it can be assumed that efforts would have been made to recruit adequately skilled engravers. One therefore wonders if the script may have been less important to the Kshatrapas themselves than the royal portrait and was instead intended to encourage its use in trade over a wider area.

This idea also seems helpful if we consider what is known of the nature of the Western Kshatrapas' kingdom, particularly their role in trade with both the Romans and their

²² The idea of a material culture/popular culture split is explored in depth in H. Härke, 'Invisible Britons, Gallo-Romans and Russians: Perspectives on Culture Change' in N. J. Higham (ed.), *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007).

²³ Kshemendra, *Brihatkathāmanjari* 10.1.285-86.

²⁴ S. R. Goyal, *Ancient Indian Inscriptions: Recent finds and New Interpretations* (Jodhpur: Kusumanajali Book World, 2005), 6-7.

²⁵ For example, see specimen Nos.429, 553, 661 in A. Jha & D. Rajgor, *Studies in the Coinage of the Western Kshatrapas*.

²⁶ For example, see specimen No.437 in *ibid.*

²⁷ For example, see specimen No.497 in *ibid.*

²⁸ For examples, see specimen Nos. 816-835 in *ibid.*

own neighbours. From the *Periplus*, it is clear that Romans came into contact with the local currency. The text mentions that “[Roman] gold and silver money...can be changed with much profit for the local currency”.²⁹ This is corroborated by an exchange rate between (presumably Roman or Kushan) gold and local silver coinage in a local honorific inscription of 120/1 CE.³⁰ Of course, the principal attraction of the coinage for the Romans must have been its greater purity, over what must have seemed like an alien design. This cannot however be the full story. No comparable evidence exists for silver Satavahana or Gupta imitative coinage being used in long-distance trade in the same way, despite the fact that their levels of purity were roughly equal to those of contemporaneous Kshatrapas. In effect, the distinctive design and widespread acceptance of the Kshatrapas’ coinage in India itself must have served to distinguish it and to promote its use in trade even for Roman traders.

Conclusion

Clearly, the Western Kshatrapas constitute a potentially highly productive area of numismatic study. The extensive foreign influences present in the coinage do not simply reflect the nature of the society that produced it. It seems to have deliberately incorporated foreign influences to achieve greater acceptance over a wider area.

This incorporation of foreign influences allowed the Kshatrapas to create an easily recognisable and distinct coinage, yet one which would also be familiar and comprehensible to the merchants and traders outside their territory who handled it. If thought about in a wider context, this should not be that surprising. Increasing acceptability by incorporating foreign designs common to past coinage is, after all, what the Satavahana and Gupta imitations had tried to achieve by copying Western Kshatrapa designs in the first place. Cultivating a distinctive “look” also helps to explain why there is so little variation in the coinage over time; doing so would have harmed the reputation and distinctive appearance which the Kshatrapas were at pains to build. Because of this and the success which they achieved in doing it, the coinage of the Western Kshatrapas left a lasting mark on Indian numismatics and clearly influenced other silver coinage evolution during late antiquity.

There are many more aspects of study still unexplored in the Western Kshatrapas’ coinage to study. This paper has illustrated some of the variety of conclusions which can be drawn from looking at these coins from a new perspective. It has also illustrated that, even considering its limitations, stylistic analysis can still yield productive results. Aided by better archaeological data from India and improved techniques of analysis, renewed examination of the coinage will hopefully provide further insights on the culture and history of the Western Kshatrapas.

²⁹ Anon, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 49.

³⁰ Conversion at a rate of 1 gold coin to 35 *Karsapana* in ‘First Nasik Inscription of Rishabhadatta’ in V. V. Mirashi, *The history and inscriptions of the Satavahanas and the Western Kshatrapas* (Mumbai: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1981), 95-100.

ⁱ “Kshatrapa”, “Kṣatrapa” and “Kshatrap” are all used as English transliterations of the Sanskrit word “क्षत्रप” meaning “Satrap”. In the local language Prakrit, it can also be rendered “Chhatrapa”. Various rulers at different times took the title of “Kshatrapa” or “Mahaksatrapa” (“महाक्षत्रप”; literally “great satrap”) though in this essay the distinction is unnecessary.

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