

**New Insights in the History of Chamba:**  
**A Study of the Copper-Plate Inscription of *rājā* Prithvi Singh, AD 1663**

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**Abstract**

In the western Himalayan region, there is a lot of epigraphical wealth, especially copper-plate inscriptions and many earlier scholars have found these inscriptions from various parts of this region, such as Chamba, Kulu, Rampur Bushaihar and Sirmaur. Among all these regions, Chamba is famous for its epigraphical heritage of copper-plate inscriptions. More than a hundred copper-plate inscriptions have been found in the western Himalaya. As I said, some earlier scholars have mentioned these epigraphical references in their respective works. However, two eminent scholars, J. Ph. Vogel (1911) and B. C. Chhabra (1957), have extensively studied Chamba's copper-plate inscriptions. Both scholars have documented and translated approximately one hundred fifty inscriptions. In their distinguished/iconic works on these inscriptions, they have also put these epigraph's historical and archaeological significance. Their studies have also helped build up the region's political, social, economic, and cultural history. At the same time, inscriptions also establish the authenticity of the *vaṃśāvalīs* collected long ago by earlier scholars.

There are many unpublished copper-plate inscriptions of the Chamba region of western Himalaya; some are in local collections, and some are in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba collection, which have yet to be deciphered and appropriately analysed. These undeciphered copper-plate inscriptions are a treasure trove of western Himalayan history. However, in the last decade of the twentieth century, some copper-plate inscriptions were procured by V. C. Ohri and are presently preserved in the Bhuri Singh Museum collection. Since then, these copper-plate inscriptions have remained almost unnoticed and not deciphered or commented upon by any scholar till date. One of the copper-plate inscription in the collection belongs to *rājā* Prithvi Singh. The present paper tries to decipher this copper-plate inscription of *rājā* Prithvi Singh of Chamba, and a detailed study is offered.

**Keywords**

Chamba –Śāstra – Saṃvat – Śāradā – Devāśeṣha –Ṭākārī

The value of the epigraphic records as India's most authentic and dependable source of history has long been recognised. Ancient India did not produce any Herodotus, Strabo or Pliny. Without genuine and authentic written history, epigraphic records were the chief source for studying the history and culture of India's glorious past. Their value was recognised by the sole historian worth the name of ancient India Kalhana, who, for writing his history of Kashmir, consulted the extant epigraphic records of all types and was thus able "to overcome many errors" arising from other sources.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient Indian scripts and inscriptions have been a subject of scholar's study for more than a hundred years, and many mysteries connected with the history and culture of India have been unravelled. But it is rather unfortunate that the Śāradā and Ṭākārī scripts and the inscriptions incised in this alphabet, hailing from an extensive area of the north-western part of the sub-continent, especially from ancient Gandhara (modern northwest Pakistan, Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, have not received the attention they deserve. G. Buhler has given a very brief account of the Śāradā alphabet in his *Indian Paleography* (English edition) p. 78 f.; by George Grierson in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1916 pp. 677 ff. and somewhat detailed treatment but based purely on the inscriptions of Chamba has been given by J. Ph. Vogel, he deciphered and documented earlier copper-plate inscriptions of Chamba in his *magnum opus*, *Antiquities of Chamba State*, pt: I, Calcutta, 1911. After a gap of five decades, B. Ch. Chhabra also pioneered work on the copper-plate inscriptions of Chamba.

As I have discussed, scholars and archaeologists such as J. Ph. Vogel, during his research, collected many copper-plate inscriptions, of which five belong to the pre-Muslim and others related to the medieval period.<sup>2</sup> He deciphered and translated some copper-plate inscriptions of Chamba in the *Antiquities of Chamba State*, Part I, in 1911. After a gap of five decades, B. C. Chhabra studied the remaining undeciphered copper-plate inscriptions of Chamba.<sup>3</sup> Chhabra also covered and deciphered eighty-two copper-plate inscriptions of the medieval and late medieval period, as the custom of issuing such documents was kept up in the Chamba state till the end of the last century. Several specimens of each of the later *rājās* are also known to exist; the total number of copper-plate inscriptions in Chamba may be safely estimated at nearly hundred and fifty. As imposing as this number may appear, many of them are kept in the museum's collection and await epigraphist's penetrating eye.

As we know, a significant source of Chamba's history lies in its numerous inscriptions, illuminating various aspects of life in the past. Earlier scholars have discussed the historical data provided by these records. The medieval and later medieval period inscriptions, numbering more than fifty, were edited by Chhabra. The earliest epigraph dates to AD 1330 (Vikramī *Samvat* 1387), and the latest is from AD 1858-1860 (Vikramī *Samvat* 1915-1917), covering a period of five hundred years. Eighty-two epigraphs are engraved on copper plates, twenty-one on stone slabs, and one on a massive bell.

The Chamba region of the western Himalaya also holds numerous unpublished copper-plate inscriptions, some in local collections and others in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. Many inscriptions remain undeciphered and unexamined, representing a rich resource for understanding the region's history. In the late twentieth century, some copper-plate inscriptions were acquired by V. C. Ohri and added to the museum's collection. However, these copper-plate inscriptions have gone largely unnoticed, with no scholar deciphering or analysing them till date. The present scholar examined and photographed some unpublished copper-plate inscriptions with the co-operation extended by the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. These inscriptions are also a part of my ongoing research project under the aegis of ICHR, New Delhi. Among these, some copper-plate inscriptions are attributed to *rājā* Prithvi Singh.<sup>4</sup> This paper seeks to decipher and provide a detailed study of this copper-plate of *rājā* Prithvi Singh inscription and shed light on the historical significance of the ruler's reign in Chamba. Further, I would like to present a reading of this plate with some remarks and analysis on their contents, text, and translation, as well as discuss the contents of the inscriptions and their implications for the history of medieval Chamba.

### **Unpublished copper-plate inscription of *rājā* Prithvi Singh of Chamba, AD 1663 (Pl. I)**

This plate of *rājā* Prithvi Singh of Chamba is kept in the Bhuri Singh Museum. I read its contents on September 10, 2022, with the great co-operation of the officials of the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. The plate, inscribed on a single side, is of landscape orientation; the copper-plate is about 15 cm in height by 19 cm in width, including the handle on its left. The inscribed area with inscription is about 13.8 cm in height by 18.5 cm in width. The largest letter of the inscription is *ch* (0.8 cm in line 5), and the smallest letter is *n* (0.4 cm in line 1). The weight of the copper-plate is 205 grams. It may be pointed out that the last line of the inscription mentions the engraver's name. The usual seal with the Nāgarī legend contains the ruler's name in its top left corner. The

inscription consists of 18 lines, with lines 14-15 appearing in the left margin and lines 16-18 running inversely in the top margin.

The language of the copper-plate is mostly Sanskrit and partly Chambyālī. Some numerals in the inscriptions, such as 0, 1, 2, 3, 7 and 9, are also mentioned. The record is dated in the Vikramī Saṁvat 1720, which may be equivalent to AD 1663. From the palaeographical point of view of later Śāradā and Devāśeṣha, it is the later development of the Śāradā along with Devāśeṣha script in the Chamba region. The important thing with this plate is that each letter is clearly visible.

The writers of Chamba copper-plate inscriptions usually follow the Śāstra *saṁvat* or Saptarṣi *saṁvat* in recording the dates. They record only the years and omit the century. In some instances, the inscribers have added the corresponding years of the Vikramī *saṁvat* or Śaka eras. A fairly accurate formula for calculating the dates given in Śāstra *saṁvat* or Saptarṣi *saṁvat* has been suggested by Kielhorn, who has pointed out:

Thus, a current Saptarshi era 36 would, disregarding the hundreds, correspond to an expired year  $(36+25=)$  61 of the Kaliyuga; to an expired Śaka year  $(36+46=)$  82; to an expired northern Vikram year  $(36+81=)$  117; and to a year  $36+24/25 = 60/61$  of our own era.<sup>5</sup>

In the Chamba region of western Himalaya, adding 24 to the Śāstra *saṁvat* provides an accurate date for the inscribed epigraphs. It is supported by many copper-plate and stone inscriptions of Chamba, dated in the Śāstra *saṁvat*; for example, the present copper-plate inscription of *rājā* Prithivī Singh of Chamba. This inscription is inscribed with dates in both Śāstra and Vikramī *saṁvat*. This method is evident in many other published epigraphs of Chamba. In the present copper-plate inscription, the first is dated in the Śāstra *saṁvat* 39, and Vikramī *saṁvat* 1720. Thus, adding  $39+24 = 63 =$  AD 1663, and Vikramī *saṁvat* would correspond to  $(1720-57 =)$  AD 1663. Alexander Cunningham has provided a comprehensive 69 pages of general tables of the corresponding dates in various eras, including the Saptarṣi *saṁvat* and Vikramī *saṁvat*,<sup>6</sup> along with conversion tables to the Gregorian calendar from 60 BC to AD 2000.

### Text<sup>7</sup>

1. *Om swasti || śrī Gaṇeśāya nam: || śrī śāstra saṁvata 39 śrī madvikramāditya saṁva*
2. *tsare 1720 kārtika māse śukla pakṣe titho dvada śrī śrī rāma rāma*

3. *rāma parākrama parākrama na śrī moyā rāmaṇa caraṇa śarala kyatama*
4. *takṣaka raṇa raṇa viśārada śārada tisa karana kāri vasa pūrta di*
5. *gaṇṭara param bhaṭṭāraka śrī maharajadhiraāja<sup>8</sup> śrī madra balabhadra singh varma*
6. *ṇa sinḥalā | dhyam lava lasa dhyata bhā diu nāma grāma sīmā pramā*
7. *ṇa: kāśya vagotraya gaṇḡadhara śaramaṇe vūmatu liya śrī haya thala pīta*
8. *ye samapradatta: | āṣa sīmā purva diśi vayā therī ghoḍī vyare vatate the*
9. *uparī ek nīpeheṭhe ktaṭa luri ghoḍī hañī | vrakanī diśa heī hāī*
10. *kau hala sameta || dhakerī ghoḍī pvage drosī līrī ghoḍī brahena | ceyaca*
11. *la ghoḍ taṇe | eha sīmā pramāṇa śrī gaṇḡādhara kī ditā ||*
12. *aeḥa śrī mahāraje ra dharama | gaṇḡādhare de putra potre ki pālana khala*
13. *sehe reku nueta sameta ca vere ghare sameta sabhahe dharī sameta*
14. *nā tapa ramodharama: pālana tapa ramoyaśa: | pālana tya rasa śu*
15. *gogarīya syena pāle yeta pa śubha samvata ||*
16. *jatāenu raṇgerīrama dī āte hāhaī śaśaṇa tisā kha*
17. *ṇa tisa uparaṇta śaśaṇa rāje gaṇḡādhara kī ditā*
18. *likhita midama paṇḍita madhupātinā || śubha satta*

## Translation

Seal: श्री सीतनाम जनित प्रताप पृथ्वी सिंह वर्मन

Om. Hail! Obeisance to the illustrious Gaṇeśa!

In the glorious Śāstra year 39 (corresponding to the year AD 1663) of the illustrious *rājā* Prithvi Singh, during the victorious reign of the *Śrī mahārājādhirāja* Śrī Prithvi Singh, son of *param bhaṭṭārak Śrī mahārājādhirāja* Balabhadra Singh Varmana in the residence of the splendid city of

Champaka, who is as adorable as an illustrious supreme deity, which is highly venerable, pre-eminent among men, worthy of all honour.

On the auspicious occasion, the ruler donated the land of the Sinhala village to the *brāhmana* Gangadhara (गंगाधर). The ruler certified the boundary and condition of the grant at the time of donation. The grant boundary was fixed and documented during the donation, and the donated land's north, south, east and west locations were also finalised. This grant is to be shared by the family of Gangadhara (गंगाधर) and to be enjoyed by his sons and grandsons.

Paṇḍit Madhupatti wrote the grant.

## Conclusion

The value of taking an archaeological approach to studying this copper-plate inscription not only extends to improving our understanding of this region, but it is equally important to investigate the archaeological and geographical settings of other unpublished epigraphic material in the museum's possession.<sup>9</sup> Nor should taking an archaeological approach to the study of inscriptions only extend as far as consideration of their contexts. Other factors, such as the materiality of inscriptions, also need to be considered, even if at the basic level of initiating conversations about the materials and objects used in their production. Doing so would add a valuable dimension to our understanding of the meanings, significance, and value of the inscriptions for the people who used them and enable us to make inferences about the ways they were used and how they worked as objects in the negotiation of social relations all, ultimately, bringing us closer to an understanding the people that used them.

The copper-plate inscriptions of Chamba are also historically significant as they provide detailed descriptions of contemporary rulers, exact dates either in Vikramī or Śāstra *Samvat*, their polities, rural settlements, and fiscal and economic details of their respective principalities. The copper-plate inscription covered in this study is also historically and archaeologically important, providing information about *rājā* Prithvi Singh and his reigns and mentioning various activities and donations of land to the beneficiaries, including *brāhmanas* and temples.

The present copper-plate inscription is also significant from a palaeographically as they predominantly feature later Śāradā and Devāśeṣha scripts. Thus, they represent some of the finest

examples of later Śāradā and Devāśeṣha palaeography from the early seventeenth century in the Chamba region. The copper-plate inscription of *rājā* Prithvi Singh is particularly noteworthy as it marks the final phase for the use of later Śāradā script in the region, after which Ṭākārī became the prominent script in the Western Himalaya, including Chamba and Bushaihar. Post sixteenth-century copper-plate inscriptions from the Chamba region were primarily inscribed in Ṭākārī and Devanāgarī scripts.

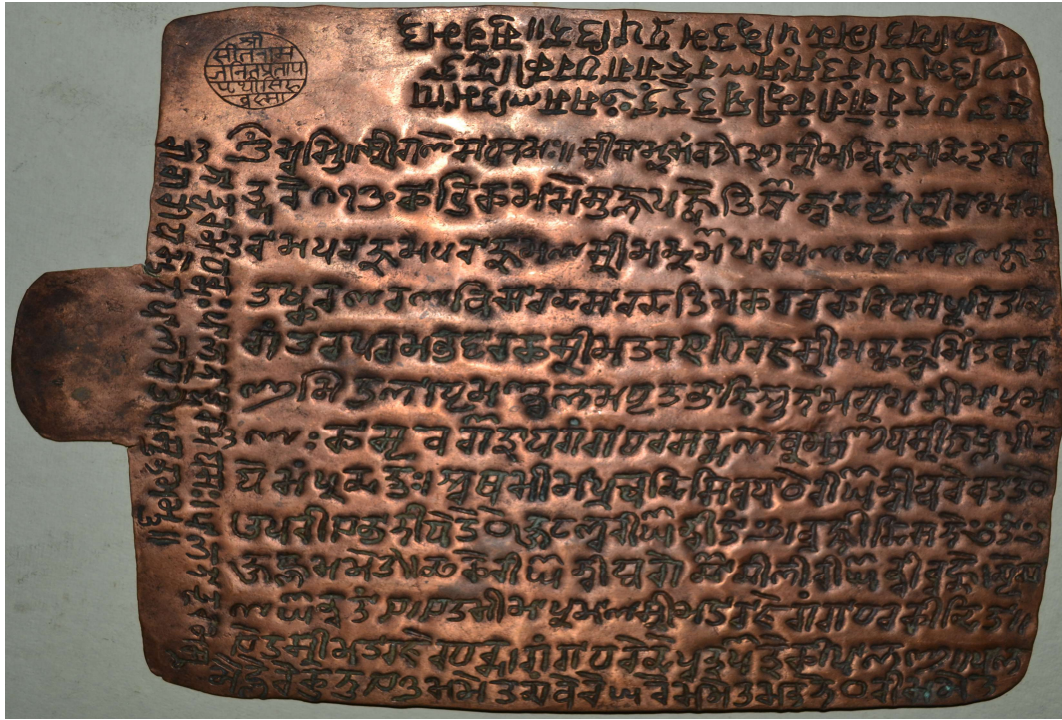
Politically, these inscriptions are important as they mention the names of rulers and provide definite dates for their reigns. A notable observation is that the ruling chief of medieval Chamba, *rājā* Prithvi Singh, used the epithet *param bhaṭṭāraka mahārājā dhirāj*, which was also used in other Indian rulers of ancient and medieval times. The inscriptions also reveal significant administrative terms used in the Chamba copper-plate inscriptions.

The present study attempts to comprehend the epigraphical records and their contribution to reconstructing the history of the Chamba region. It also aims to present translations of this copper-plate inscription, making them accessible to a larger audience. The present work provides a deeper understanding of Chamba's socio-religious and cultural aspects and highlights the centrality of local deities in the agrarian society of Himachal Pradesh.

The copper-plate inscription of *rājā* Prithvi Singh has significant implications for the medieval history of Chamba, particularly regarding the administration under the Singh, the economic conditions of the period, and the status of brāhmaṇas. These inscriptions reveal agricultural expansion patterns through land donations, showing that land plots were given to donees after being taken from previous enjoyers. The donations recorded in these documents reflect the transfer of enjoyment rights to religious institutions without indicating their impact on cultivators.

The inscriptions request consent from all addressees and ask future rulers to protect the donations, emphasising the merit of the donation and the fear of hell for those who steal it. Cultivators are also urged to obey the donee's orders and contribute revenue, tribute, and taxes as stipulated. This also reveals a lineage of artisans specialised in engraving copper-plate inscriptions for the Chamba rulers, serving them for generations.

The study intends to translate this unpublished copper-plate inscription from the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, providing a further source for modern researchers. That would certainly contribute to a better understanding of western Himalayan history in general and Chamba in particular.



**Pl. I Copper-plate inscription of *rājā* Prithvi Singh of Chamba, AD 1663**

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> B. K. Kaul Deambi, *History & Culture of Ancient Gandhāra and Western Himalayas*, New Delhi, 1990, p. i.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Ph. Vogel, *Antiquities of Chamba State*, pt. I, New Delhi, 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> B. C. Chhabra, *Antiquities of Chamba State*, pt. II, New Delhi, 1994.
- <sup>4</sup> Record Register at Bhuri Singh Museum Chamba, p. 26.
- <sup>5</sup> L. F. Keilhorn, 'A Note on Saptarshi Era,' *Indian Antiquary*, vol. XX, Bombay, pp. 149-54.
- <sup>6</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Book of Indian Eras: With Tables for Calculating Indian Dates*, Calcutta, 1883, pp. 6-17.
- <sup>7</sup> Documented by the present author *in situ* on September 10, 2022.
- <sup>8</sup> *Mahārājādhirāja*.
- <sup>9</sup> Jason D. Hawkes & Riza Abbas, 'Copperplates in Context: Preliminary Investigation of the Study and Archaeological Settings of Land Grant Inscriptions', *Apollo*, University of Cambridge, 2016, p. 66