

Kushan Empire – The Illustrious Kanishka King of Kings – A Study

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Abstract

The Kushans possibly used the Greek language initially for administrative purposes, but soon began to use the Bactrian language. Kanishka sent his armies north of the Karakoram mountains. A direct road from Gandhara to China remained under Kushan control for more than a century, encouraging travel across the Karakoram and facilitating the spread of Mahayana Buddhism to China. The Kushan dynasty had diplomatic contacts with the Roman Empire, Sasanian Persia, the Aksumite Empire and the Han dynasty of China. The Kushan Empire was at the center of trade relations between the Roman Empire and China: according to Alain Daniélou, "for a time, the Kushana Empire was the centerpoint of the major civilizations". While much philosophy, art, and science was created within its borders, the only textual record of the empire's history today comes from inscriptions and accounts in other languages, particularly Chinese. The Kushan Empire fragmented into semi-independent kingdoms in the 3rd century AD, which fell to the Sasanians invading from the west, establishing the Kushano-Sasanian Kingdom in the areas of Sogdiana, Bactria and Gandhara. In the 4th century, the Guptas, an Indian dynasty also pressed from the east. The last of the Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian kingdoms were eventually overwhelmed by invaders from the north, known as the Kidarites, and then the Hephthalites.

Key words: Kushan, Guptas, Kanishka, Gandhara, Buddhism, Kushano-Sasanian kingdoms.

Introduction

Some traces remain of the presence of the Kushans in the area of Bactria and Sogdiana in the 2nd-1st century BC, where they had displaced the Sakas, who moved further south. Archaeological structures are known in Takht-i Sangin, Surkh Kotal (a monumental temple), and in the palace of Khalchayan. On the ruins of ancient Hellenistic cities such as Ai-Khanoum, the Kushans are known to have built fortresses. Various sculptures and friezes from this period are known, representing horse-riding archers, and, significantly, men such as the Kushan prince of Khalchayan with artificially deformed skulls, a practice well attested in nomadic Central Asia. Some of the Khalchayan sculptural scenes are also thought to depict the Kushans fighting against the Sakas. In these portrayals, the Yuezhis are shown with a majestic demeanour, whereas the Sakas are typically represented with side-whiskers, and more or less grotesque facial expressions.

The Chinese first referred to these people as the Yuezhi and said they established the Kushan Empire, although the relationship between the Yuezhi and the Kushans is still unclear. Ban Gu's Book of Han tells us the Kushans (Kuei-shuang) divided up Bactria in 128 BC. Fan Ye's Book of Later Han "relates how the chief of the Kushans, Ch'iu-shiu-ch'ueh (the Kujula Kadphises of coins), founded by means of the submission of the other Yueh-chih clans the Kushan Empire."

The earliest documented ruler, and the first one to proclaim himself as a Kushan ruler, was Heraisos. He calls himself a "tyrant" in Greek on his coins, and also exhibits skull deformation. He may have been an ally of the Greeks, and he shared the same style of coinage. Heraisos may have been the father of the first Kushan emperor Kujula Kadphises.

The Chinese Book of Later Han chronicles then gives an account of the formation of the Kushan empire based on a report made by the Chinese general Ban Yong to the Chinese Emperor c. AD 125:

More than a hundred years later, the prince of Guishuang (Badakhshan) established himself as king, and his dynasty was called that of the Guishuang (Kushan) King. He invaded Anxi (Indo-Parthia), and took the Gaofu (Kabul) region. He also defeated the whole of the kingdoms of Puda (Paktiya) and Jibin (Kapisha and Gandhara). Qiujiuque (Kujula Kadphises) was more than eighty years old when he died. His son, Yangaozhen, became king in his place. He defeated Tianzhu and installed Generals to supervise and lead it. The Yuezhi then became extremely rich. All the kingdoms call the Guishuang king, but the Han call them by their original name, Da Yuezhi.

— Book of Later Han.

Chinese sources describe the Guishuang (貴霜), i.e. the Kushans, as one of the five aristocratic tribes of the Yuezhi. There is scholarly consensus that the Yuezhi were a people of Indo-European origin. A specifically Tocharian origin of the Yuezhi is often suggested. An Iranian, specifically Saka, origin, also has some support among scholars. Others suggest that the Yuezhi might have originally been a nomadic Iranian people, who were then partially assimilated by settled Tocharians, thus containing both Iranian and Tocharian elements.

The Yuezhi were described in the Records of the Great Historian and the Book of Han as living in the grasslands of eastern Xinjiang and northwestern part of Gansu, in the northwest of modern-day China, until their King was beheaded by the Xiongnu (匈奴) who were also at war with China, which eventually forced them to migrate west in 176–160 BC.

The five tribes constituting the Yuezhi are known in Chinese history as Xiūmì (休密), Guishuāng (貴霜), Shuāngmǐ (雙靡), Xidùn (肸頓), and Dūmì (都密).

The ethnonym "ΚΟΡΡΑΝΟΒ" (Koshshanoy, "Kushans") in Greek alphabet (with the addition of the letter Ρ, "Sh") on a coin of the first known Kushan ruler Heraisos (1st century AD).

The Yuezhi reached the Hellenic kingdom of Greco-Bactria (in northern Afghanistan and Uzbekistan) around 135 BC. The displaced Greek dynasties resettled to the southeast in areas of the Hindu Kush and the Indus basin (in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan), occupying the western part of the Indo-Greek Kingdom.

In India, Kushan emperors regularly used the dynastic name KOṢANO ("Koshano") on their coinage. Several inscriptions in Sanskrit in the Brahmi script, such as the Mathura inscription of the statue of Vima Kadphises, refer to the Kushan Emperor as Gupta allahabad ku.jpg Gupta gujarat ssaa.jpg Gupta ashoka nn.svg, Ku-ṣā-ṇa ("Kushana"). Some later Indian literary sources referred to the Kushans as Turushka, a name which in later Sanskrit sources was confused with Turk, "probably due to the fact that Tukharistan passed into the hands of the western Turks in the seventh century". According to John M. Rosenfield, Turushka, Tukhāra or Tukhāra are variations of the word Tokhari in Indian writings. Yet, according to Wink, "nowadays no historian considers them to be Turkish-Mongoloid or 'Hun', although there is no doubt about their Central-Asian origin."

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Kushan period (first to third centuries CE)**, political, economic, religious, and cultural contact between South Asia and Central Asia accelerated. Empire reached greatest extent during the reign of **Kaniska**, whose legacy as a powerful emperor is preserved in inscriptions, textual traditions, archaeological remains, and coins

The Kushan empire

In the 1st century BC, the Guishuang (Ch: 貴霜) gained prominence over the other Yuezhi tribes, and welded them into a tight confederation under commander Kujula Kadphises. The name Guishuang was adopted in the West and modified into Kushan to designate the confederation, although the Chinese continued to call them Yuezhi.

Gradually wresting control of the area from the Scythian tribes, the Kushans expanded south into the region traditionally known as Gandhara (an area primarily in Pakistan's Pothowar and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region) and established twin capitals in Begram. and Charsadda, then known as Kapisa and Pushklavati respectively.

The Kushans adopted elements of the Hellenistic culture of Bactria. They adopted the Greek alphabet to suit their own language (with the additional development of the letter Ṣ "sh", as in "Kushan") and soon began minting coinage on the Greek model. On their coins they used Greek language legends combined with Pali legends (in the Kharoshthi script), until the first few years of the reign of Kanishka. After the middle of Kanishka's reign, they used Kushan language legends (in an adapted Greek script), combined with legends in Greek (Greek script) and legends in Prakrit (Kharoshthi script). The Kushans "adopted many local beliefs and customs, including Zoroastrianism and the two rising religions in the region, the Greek cults and Buddhism". From the time of Vima Takto, many Kushans started adopting aspects of Buddhist culture, and like the Egyptians, they absorbed the strong remnants of the Greek culture of the Hellenistic Kingdoms, becoming at least partly Hellenised. The great Kushan emperor Vima Kadphises may have embraced Shaivism (a sect of Hinduism), as surmised by coins minted during the period. The following Kushan emperors represented a wide variety of faiths including Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Shaivism.

The rule of the Kushans linked the seagoing trade of the Indian Ocean with the commerce of the Silk Road through the long-civilized Indus Valley. At the height of the dynasty, the Kushans loosely ruled a territory that extended to the Aral Sea through present-day Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into northern India.

The loose unity and comparative peace of such a vast expanse encouraged long-distance trade, brought Chinese silks to Rome, and created strings of flourishing urban centers.

Kanishka

Kanishka I (Sanskrit: कनिष्क; Greco-Bactrian: KANHĪPKE Kanēške; Kharosthi: Ka-ṇi-ṣka, Kaṇiṣka; Brahmi: Gupta ashoka kaa.svgGupta ashoka nni.jpgGupta ashoka ssk.jpg Kā-ṇi-ṣka), or Kanishka the Great, an emperor of the Kushan dynasty in the second century (c. 127–150 CE), is famous for his military, political, and spiritual achievements. A descendant of Kujula Kadphises, founder of the Kushan empire, Kanishka came to rule an empire in Gandhara extending to Pataliputra on the Gangetic plain. The main capital of his empire was located at Puruṣapura (Peshawar) in Gandhara, with another major capital at Kapisa. Coins of Kanishka were found in Tripuri (present-day Jabalpur).

His conquests and patronage of Buddhism played an important role in the development of the Silk Road, and in the transmission of Mahayana Buddhism from Gandhara across the Karakoram range to China. Around 127 CE, he replaced Greek by Bactrian as the official language of administration in the empire.

Earlier scholars believed that Kanishka ascended the Kushan throne in 78 CE, and that this date was used as the beginning of the Saka calendar era. However, historians no longer regard this date as that of Kanishka's accession. Falk estimates that Kanishka came to the throne in 127 CE. Kanishka's empire was certainly vast. It extended from southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, north of the Amu Darya (Oxus) in the north west to Northern India, as far as Mathura in the south east (the Rabatak inscription even claims he held Pataliputra and Sri Champa), and his territory also included Kashmir, where there was a town Kanishkapur (modern day Kanispora), named after him not far from the Baramula Pass and which still contains the base of a large stupa.

Knowledge of his hold over Central Asia is less well established. The Book of the Later Han, *Hou Hanshu*, states that general Ban Chao fought battles near Khotan with a Kushan army of 70,000 men led by an otherwise unknown Kushan viceroy named Xie (Chinese: 謝) in 90 AD. Ban Chao claimed to be victorious, forcing the Kushans to retreat by use of a scorched-earth policy. The territories of Kashgar, Khotan and Yarkand were Chinese dependencies in the Tarim Basin, modern Xinjiang. Several coins of Kanishka have been found in the Tarim Basin.^[11]

Controlling both the land (the Silk Road) and sea trade routes between South Asia and Rome seems to have been one of Kanishka's chief imperial goals.

Diverse cultural influences

Kanishka's reputation in Buddhist tradition regarded with utmost importance as he not only believed in Buddhism but also encouraged its teachings as well. As a proof of it, he administered the 4th Buddhist Council in Kashmir as the head of the council. It was presided by Vasumitra and Ashwaghosha. Images of the Buddha based on 32 physical signs were made during his time.

He encouraged both Gandhara school of Greco-Buddhist Art and the Mathura school of art (an inescapable religious syncretism pervades Kushana rule). Kanishka personally seems to have embraced both Buddhism and the Persian attributes but he favored Buddhism more as it can be proven by his devotion to the Buddhist teachings and prayer styles depicted in various books related to Kushan empire. His greatest contribution to Buddhist architecture was the Kanishka stupa at Purushapura, modern day Peshawar. Archaeologists who rediscovered the base of it in 1908–1909 estimated that this stupa had a diameter of 286 feet (87 metres). Reports of Chinese pilgrims such as Xuanzang indicate that its height was 600 to 700 (Chinese) "feet" (= roughly 180–210 metres or 591–689 ft.) and was covered with jewels. Certainly this immense multi-storied building ranks among the wonders of the ancient world. Kanishka is said to have been particularly close to the Buddhist scholar Ashvaghosha, who became his religious advisor in his later years.

In Buddhist tradition, Kanishka is often described as an aggressive, hot tempered, rigid, strict, and a bit harsh kind of King before he got converted to Buddhism of which he was very fond, and after his conversion to Buddhism, he became an openhearted, benevolent, and faithful ruler. As in the Sri-dharma-pitaka-nidana sutra:

"At this time the King of Ngan-si (Pahlava) was very aggressive and of a violent nature....There was a bhikshu (monk) arhat who seeing the harsh deeds done by the king wished to make him repent. So by his supernatural force he caused the king to see the torments of hell. The king was terrified and repented and cried terribly and hence dissolved all his negatives within him and got self realised for the first time in life ." Śri-dharma-piṭaka-nidāna sūtra

Additionally, the arrival of Kanishka was reportedly foretold or was predicted by the Buddha, as well as the construction of his stupa:

". . . the Buddha, pointing to a small boy making a mud tope.... that on that spot Kaṇiṣka would erect a tope by his name." Vinaya sutra

The same story is repeated in a Khotanese scroll found at Dunhuang, which first described how Kanishka would arrive 400 years after the death of the Buddha. The account also describes how Kanishka came to raise his stupa:

"A desire thus arose inat that time the four world-regents learnt the mind of the king. So for his sake they took the form of young boys.... began a stūpa of mud....the boys said to 'We are making the Kaṇiṣka-stūpa.'....At that time the boys changed their form.... said to him, 'Great king, by you according to the Buddha's prophecy is a Saṅghārāma to be built wholly (?) with a large stūpa and hither relics must be invited which the meritorious good beings...will bring."

Chinese pilgrims to India, such as Xuanzang, who travelled there around 630 CE also relays the story:

"Kaṇiṣka became sovereign of all Jambudvīpa (Indian subcontinent) but he did not believe in Karma, but he treated Buddhism with honor and respect as he himself converted to Buddhism intrigued by the teachings and scriptures of it. When he was hunting in the wild country a white hare appeared; the king gave a chase and the hare suddenly disappeared

at the king lost his patience and took the matter in his own hands and started resurrecting the plans precisely, thus completing the stupas with utmost perfection and perseverance. These two stupas are still in existence and were resorted to for cures by people afflicted with diseases."

King Kanishka because of his deeds was highly respected, regarded, honored by all the people he ruled and governed and was regarded the greatest king who ever lived because of his kindness, humbleness and sense of equality and self-righteousness among all aspects. Thus such great deeds and character of the king Kanishka made his name immortal and thus he was regarded "THE KING OF KINGS"

Conclusion

Kusana, ruling line descended from the Yuezhi, a people that ruled over most of the northern Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia during the first three centuries of the Common Era. The Yuezhi conquered Bactria in the 2nd century BCE and divided the country into five chiefdoms, one of which was that of the Kushans (Guishuang). Under Kaniska I (flourished 1st century CE) and his successors, the Kushan kingdom reached its height. Our knowledge about Kaniska (Kanishka), the greatest ruler of the Kushan dynasty, comes almost exclusively from Chinese sources, who know him under his Chinese name Chia-ni-se-chia. They report that he reigned for 23 years and came to the throne between 78 and 144. As the year 78 marks the beginning of the Saka era in India, it can be assumed that Kaniska introduced this new year count on acceding the throne. Kaniska's empire covered northern and central India, Afghanistan, parts of what is today Uzbekistan and parts of today's Tajikistan. Scholars believe that his capital was in Purusapura (today's Peshawar in Pakistan). During Kaniska's rule India developed trading contact with many countries, particularly Egypt, Rome and China.

The contact with China was instrumental in spreading Buddhism towards the east. Kaniska convened the fourth great Buddhist council that established the "Greater Vehicle" or Mahayana Buddhism. The authorized proceedings of the council were engraved in copper plates and later translated into Chinese. Like all great Indian emperors Kaniska practiced tolerance towards all religions. He even accepted European ideas and influence. Coins minted during his reign show Buddhist and Brahmanic images as well as images of Greek and Zoroastrian deities. The Greek and Roman art style even influenced images of Buddha.

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