

## THE KUSHANS

The Kushans period between the first and third centuries was a time that witnessed immense cultural, economic, political and geographical growth. It was an era marked with extensive wealth and growth of arts. Their rise to power marks an important period in the history of central Asia. They enjoyed close ties with countries such as China and

faith. Hinduism, Iranian religious beliefs and Zoroastrianism also prospered.

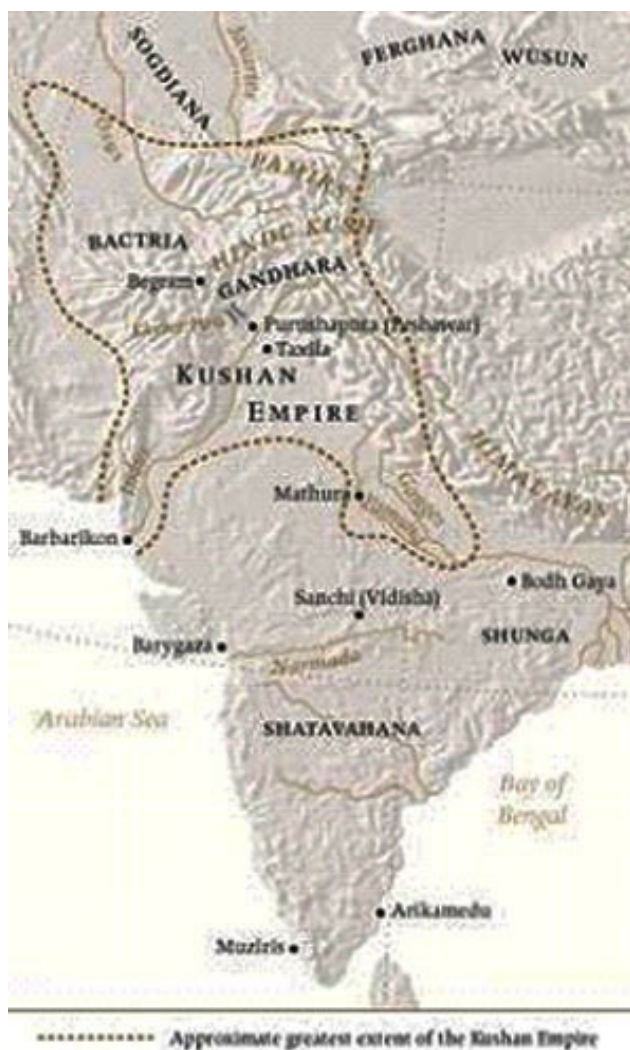
When excavations were carried out at Taxila, they showed that the Kadphises preceded the Kanishka group of kings as coins of the Kadphises group, but not of Kanishka, Huvishka, etc. Early Kushan coins were decorated with inscriptions like 'the Great King, the King of Kings, the Son of Heaven, the Kushan'.

### The Kanishka Era

Historians have been unable to define the exact chronology of the period when Kanishka ruled but his existence and strength cannot be disputed. A famous and powerful Buddhist Kushan King, Kanishka held one of the largest second council. He was known for creating a series of coins. Many of these coins have been found in the excavations at Chorasmia, Khotan and eastern Iran. While the accounts of Kanishka's interest in Buddhism have been verified by numerous archaeological finds, he was also a devotee and patron of other local religions. Kushan coinage includes representations of the Buddha as well as a wide pantheon of gods and goddesses, deities of Greek, Persian and Hindu origin. Kanishka's reliquary casket, for example, features cast representations of Buddha as well as Hindu deities Brahma and Indra, Persian sun and moon gods on the sides of the container and a garland, supported by cherubs in typical Hellenistic style.

Dated to the first year of Kanishka's reign in 127 CE, the casket was discovered in a deposit chamber under Kanishka's stupa, during the archeological excavations in 1908-1909 at Shah-j-i-Dheri on the outskirts of Peshawar. The original is today at the Peshawar Museum; and old replica is in the British Museum. Rarities inside the casket are said to have included three bone fragments of the Buddha.

The inscription on the casket is signed by the maker, a Greek artist named Agesilas, who oversaw work at



#### Extent of the Kushan Empire

Image Source: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hg/hg\\_d\\_kush\\_d2map.jpg](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hg/hg_d_kush_d2map.jpg)

Greece. Trade between various countries also brought forth a lot of changes in their lives. Religious changes included the expansion of the Buddhist

Kanishka's stupas (caitya), confirming the direct involvement of Greeks with Buddhist artworks [the inscription reads in part, "The servant Agisalaos, the superintendent of works at the vihara of Kanishka ..."].

The attribution of the casket to Kanishka has been recently disputed, on stylistic grounds [the casket may instead be attributable to Kanishka's successor Huvishka].



The "Kanishka casket", dated 127 AD, with the Buddha surrounded by Brahma and Indra on the lid, and Kanishka standing at the center of the lower part. Discovered at Peshawar, Pakistan. Collection: British Museum.

### The Kanishka Casket

Image Source: <http://www.cemml.colostate.edu/cultural/09476/images/afgh02-08-08-800w.jpg>

## The Great Kushans

The Kushan era helped in defining the chronological framework of the Kushan dynasty through its inscriptions. These inscriptions date from years 1-23 of Kanishka, years 24 and 28 of Vasishka, years 28-60

of Huvishka and years 67-98 of Vasudeva. The beginning of the Kanishka era can be dated back to A.D. 134, which is a century before the second Kushan era.

**The chronology of the rulers was as follows**

TABLE I. Chronological framework of rulers

Rulers	Era dates			
	Græco-Bactrian	Azes	Kanishka	Later Kushans
<i>Sakas</i>				
Jihopika the satrap	191			
<i>Early Kushans</i>				
Kujula Kadphises		103		
Nameless king		122 and 136		
Vima Kadphises	279 <sup>1</sup>	184(7)		
<i>Great Kushans</i>				
Kanishka			1-23	
Huvishka			28-60	
Vāsudeva			67-99	
<i>Later Kushans</i>				
Kanishka II				14
Vasishka				20, 22, 24, 28
Kanishka III				31, 41

The date is read as 285 by Marien and 299 by Harmatta.

### Chronology of Rulers

## Relations of the Kushans with countries

### Iran

Buddhist texts have mentions of a war between the Kushans and Parthians but at the peak of their rule under Kanishka, Kushans did not seem thirsty for territorial gains. They exercised control over many provinces in Iran but the founder of Sasanian dynasty attacked the Kushans to conquer Margiana, Carmania and Sistan. When the sistian ruler Hormizd II died, Shahpur II became the ruler on the Sasanian throne. Taking advantage of his minor status, the Kushans conquered their lost territories back. But when Shahpur II gained majority, he was successful in defeating the Kushans.

### China

The Kushans and Chinese rulers rivalry continued up to the time of Vasudeva, due to various reasons such as political aspirations. However, the Chinese work of Chen Shou (A.D. 233-97) records that the King of Great Yueh-chih, Po-t'iao (Vasudeva) had sent an envoy to China with a tribute. He was given the hon

orary title of “King of Yueh-Chih who shows affection towards the Wei.”



**A Kushan Archer**

Image Source: <http://www.kushan.org/pictures/archer.jpg>

## Rome

Indians had given many gifts to the Romans that they had never seen before. For example, the tigers whom they had never seen before. There was a lot of silk and spices trade between the countries and embas-

sies were sent in order to maintain political relations. Some copper coins of the Kujula Kadphises seem to have the same obverse head copied from the Roman coins of Claudius. It could have been a gift as well. Roman aurei and denarii were also used in the sea trade with India. Graeco-roman art in Gandhara also shows how heavily influenced the Kushan empire and Roman world were with each other.

## North-East India

Kanishka was successful in extending his empire to the northern regions of India. His inscriptions have been found at Mathura, Kausambi and Sarnath. Kushan copper coins were distributed to places as far as Patna and Gaya in eastern India. After the ruler Huvishka died, the Kushans lost a lot of their territories in the east of India. Huvishka and Vasudeva both enjoyed a lot of political power and economic security.

## Relations with Saka Satraps

Many scholars have suggested that the Kushans were very close or a part of the Saka clan. They could possibly be the descendants of the sakas mentioned by Herodotus. Sakas ruled the Indus region. The Kushans seemed to have ruled over the lower Indus



Left: Bronze reliquary and Kushan coins it contained, part of a Buddhist relic deposit, dated the year 51 of the reign of King Kanishka I, late 2nd century AD, discovered at Wardak, south-east Afghanistan. Right: Proof of the Kushans' extensive contacts in Rome includes this gold coin of the Roman emperor Trajan (ruled: 98-117 AD), found in the Ahinposh Buddhist monastery in Afghanistan, together with coins of Kanishka. Such coinage may have been common among affluent people in Central Asia. Collection: British Museum, London

## Roman and Kushan coins found in Afghanistan proving trade links

Image Source: <http://www.cemml.colostate.edu/cultural/09476/images/afgh02-08-12-800w.jpg>



valley as their coins have been found at MohenJa-Daro and Jhukar.

## Political System

The Kushan kings were given the titles of Son of God and Son of heaven. Even after death, they were defied and their statues were erected in a devakula or God house. These statues have been found at Mat near Mathura and Surkh Khotal in Afghanistan. The Kushan rulers were secularists and allowed they depicted divinities from various pantheons on their coins. Religion and politics were connected in many ways. Although it has been suggested that they had a system of joint rule, no Kushan coin has ever depicted two rulers.

## Coinage

A lot of information about the Kushans has been derived from their coins. Their main coins issued by Kushans were in gold weighing 7.9 gms approx. Base metals coins were also issued with weights ranging from 1.5 gms to 12 gms. The design of the coins resembled the Hellenistic and Greco-Bactrian styles. They featured the Kings as a profile head or standing figure. Some coins showcase tamga symbols that served as a monogram for a ruler. The inscriptions on the coins were in Bactrian language that comes from Greek. Their coins also showed several deities from the Iranian, Hellenistic and even Indian world.

Here are some of the examples of their coins



**Gold coin of Kanishka I**

Image Source: [http://www.icollector.com/INDIAN-COINS-KUSHAN-Kanishka-I-c-130-158-AD-Dinar-AV-1-98-g-King-standing-facing-his-he\\_i8745044](http://www.icollector.com/INDIAN-COINS-KUSHAN-Kanishka-I-c-130-158-AD-Dinar-AV-1-98-g-King-standing-facing-his-he_i8745044)



**Vima Kadphises c 120-127**

Image Source: [http://www.icollector.com/INDIAN-COINS-KUSHAN-Vima-Kadphises-c-120-127-AD-Double-Dinar-AV-15-69-g-Diademed-and-crown\\_i8745043](http://www.icollector.com/INDIAN-COINS-KUSHAN-Vima-Kadphises-c-120-127-AD-Double-Dinar-AV-15-69-g-Diademed-and-crown_i8745043)



**A Kushan coin depicting Shiva**

Image Source: <http://www.2-clicks-coins.com/article/ancient-coins-of-india.html>



**Coins showing half-length bust of Vima Kadphises**

Image Source: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/83/Ancient\\_Coins\\_India.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/83/Ancient_Coins_India.jpg)

## Administration

The expansive Kushan empire comprised of people from different nationalities, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds and religions. All of this did not deter them and they had an organized administrative system divided into three tiers: central, provincial and local. The king unquestionably had the supreme power but they did appoint Kshatrapas or Mahakshatrapas for managing different units of their empire. Foreigners were placed at higher levels in their political system to ensure efficiency and minimize internal dissension.

Thus, we can say that the Kushans were formidable rulers during whose reign there was a lot of political security, cultural and economic development.

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## Bibliography

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2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kushan\\_coinage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kushan_coinage)
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