

The Kushāṇas

Origin

- According to traditional scholarship, based on the combined testimony of the *Sse-ki*, the *T'ien Han-shu*, and the *Hou Han-shu*, about 165 BC, there was much political upheaval in central Asia.
- As a result of the, the Hiung-nu (Hūṇa) tribe was displaced from its original homeland.
- This tribe, in its turn, forced the Yüeh-chih tribe out of its original habitat in Tocharistan in Central Asia.
- While one branch, Little Yüeh-chih, moved towards Tibet and settled there, the other one, the Greater Yüeh-chih, reached northwestern India by way of Seistan and Bactria.
- Chinese sources inform that, in Bactria, the Yüeh-chih had five small principalities.
- Four of these were subjugated by Kieou-t'sieou-k'io (Kujula Kadphises), the chief of the fifth one, the Kouei-chouang.
- However, according to some recent writers, the Kushāṇas were a branch of the K'ang-chü race, which was of Skythian descent.
- It originally belonged to the lower Jaxartes region.
- This branch allied itself with the Yüeh-chih, and settled in Ferghana.
- The capital of Ferghana was called Erh-shih around 101 BC.
- But, by 36 BC, it was called Kuei-shan, perhaps after its founder who belonged to Kuei-shang branch of the K'ang-chü.

Chronology

- The date of the accession of Kanishka I is the sheet anchor for the chronology of the Kushāṇas, as his predecessors and successors can be dated accordingly.
- There is no unanimity among scholars regarding the date of the accession of Kanishka I.
- The inscriptions issued by him, and his successors, show that he founded an era which, however, is not named in these epigraphs.
- Consequently, the name of Kanishka I is associated with the various eras—Vikrama, Traikūṭaka-Kalachuri-Chedi, etc, and his accession is placed in the respective initial years of these various eras.
- Fleet, Cunningham, Dowson, Franke, and Kennedy, identify the era founded by Kanishka I as the Vikrama era, and place his accession in 58/57 BC.
- But the gold coins of Kanishka I are influenced by Roman coins of the first century AD.
- Allan thinks that Kanishka I can hardly be placed before Titus (78-81 AD).
- Epigraphic, numismatic, as well as the account of Hiuen-tsang, prove that Gandhāra comprised a part of the dominions of Kanishka I.
- But, according to the Chinese sources, in the second half of the first century BC, Yin-mo-fu, and not the Kushāṇas, were ruling over Ki-pin (Kāpiśa-Gandhāra).
- Scholars, like Marshall, Sten Konow, and Smith, regard 125 AD as the date of his accession.
- Roman Ghirshman would place the event in 144 AD.
- But, no Indian era is known to have begun in the first half of the second century AD.
- The Suivihar inscription of Kanishka I, year 11, shows that his dominions included, at least, a part of the lower Indus valley.

- The Junagarh inscription of Rudradāman I, year 72 (150 AD) reports that he conquests extended up to Sindhu and Sauvīra (lower Indus valley).
- Rudradāman I did not owe his position as a *mahākshatrapa*, to anybody (*svayamadhigata mahākshatrapa nāma*).
- In this condition, it is difficult to reconcile the mastery of Ksnishka I over the lower Indus valley, with the contemporary sovereignty of Rudradāman I.
- R C Majumdar identifies the era founded by Kanishka I as the Traikūṭaka-Kalachuri-Chedi *saṁvat*, beginning 248 AD.
- R G Bhandarkar would place the accession of Kanishka I in 278 AD.
- However, this would make Vāsudeva I, who is known to have ruled over Mathurā about a hundred years after the accession of Kanishka I, a contemporary of the Imperial Gupta rulers, Samudragupta and Chandragupta II.
- Also, the catalogue of the Chinese *Tripitaka* state that An-Shih-Kao (148-170 AD) translated the *Mārgabhūmisūtra* of Saṅgharaksha, who was a chaplain of Kanishka I.
- This shows that Saṅgharaksha, and his contemporary Kanishka I, would have flourished before 170 AD, the terminal date for An-Shih-Kao.
- A vast majority of scholars agrees with Fergusson, who regards him as the founder of the Śaka era, beginning 78 AD with his accession.
- Jouveau-Dubreuil questions the validity of this view, on several grounds.
- According to him, if Kujula Kadphises was a contemporary of Hermaios, whose reign ended *c* 50 AD, it would leave a very short period of just 28 years, for the rule of the predecessors of Kanishka I.
- However, it is now known that Hermaios was not a contemporary of Kujula Kadphises, and that his rule ended *c* 50 BC.
- Jouveau-Dubreuil points out that the Taxila silver scroll inscription of [Vikrama] year 136 (= 79 AD) refers to Kujula Kadphises, in which case, Kanishka I cannot be placed in 78 AD.
- However, the identity of the *Devaputra-Khushaṇa*, mentioned in that inscription is not certain, and he might be Kanishka I himself, on the basis of the title, *devaputra*.
- Jouveau-Dubreuil says that, on the basis of Tibetan and Chinese documents, Sten Konow has shown that Kanishka I ruled in the second century AD.
- But Raychaudhuri would identify this Kanishka with Kanishka II of the Ara inscription of year 41 (=119 AD), who is mentioned in that inscription as a son of Vāsishka.
- Some scholars argue that, as Sten Konow has shown, the inscription of the Kanishka era, and those of the Śaka era, are not dated in the same fashion.
- Hence, the two eras should not be taken as identical.
- However, Sten Konow has also shown that all the inscriptions of the Kanishka era, too, are not dated in the same fashion.
- Kanishka and his successors seem to have followed the custom of dating, current in a particular region, for their inscriptions of that regions.
- It is also argued that if Kanishka I ruled from 78 AD to 101 AD, he should be identified with the India ruler, defeated by the Chinese general, Pan-chao.

- But there is no reference to this defeat of Kanishka I, at the hands of Pan-chao, in any source.
- However, according to Hiuen-tsang, Kanishka wanted to extend his dominions towards the north, but was not successful.
- This may have construed by the Chinese chroniclers as the defeat of the Indian ruler, at the hands of the Chinese general.
- Finally, some scholars question the naming of the era, commencing 78 AD, as Śaka era, if it was founded by Kanishka I, a Kushāṇa king.
- But, neither Kanishka I, nor any of his successors, uses any name for the era, founded by Kanishka I.
- The era, commencing 78 AD, came to be known as *Śaka-ṅṛipa-kāla*, as late as the fifth century AD.
- This was, perhaps, because, by that time, its use had come to be exclusive to the Śaka Kshatrapas.
- Under the circumstances, it seems difficult to pass judgment, in favour of any one of these theories.
- However, the theory, propounded by Fergusson, seems to be the least open to objections.

Kujula Kadphises

- The *Hou Han-shu* informs us that K'ieou-tsieou-k'io, the chief of Kouei-chouang, one of the five Yüeh-chih principalities in Bactria, conquered the other four principalities, and adopted the title of *wang* (king).
- The Kouei-chouang of this account is identified as Kushāṇa, and K'ieou-tsieou-k'io as Kujula Kadphises.
- The same source also reveals that Kujula Kadphises later led an expedition against the Arsakids of Parthia, conquered the Kabul valley, and overran Po-ta near Kabul, as also Ki-pin (Kafiristan and the adjoining areas), before he died at the age of over 80 years.
- The date of Kujula Kadphises is not certain, although attempts have been made to place him between *c* 25 BC and 25 AD.

V'ima Takshuma

- Earlier, it was believed that among the Kushāṇas, there was only one ruler with V'ima as his forename, namely V'ima Kadphises, and he was regarded as the son and successor of Kujula Kadphises.
- However, the recently discovered Rabatak (Baghlan) inscription, from northern Afghanistan, refers to the construction of certain divine images for the *devakula*, for the merit of four generations of Kushāṇa kings—Kanishka [I], and his father, V'ima Kadphises (*Oemo Kadphiso*), grandfather, V'ima Takshuma, and great-grandfather Kujula Kadphises (*Kozoulo Kadphiso*), who are all mentioned by name, followed by the title of *shao* in each case.
- There are certain coins known from the region, extending from Peshawar and into the Russian Turkestan to Mathurā, and even as far east as Varanasi and Ghazipur in eastern Uttar Pradesh.
- They bear the legend, *Basileos basileon soter megas*, without mentioning the name of the issuer.
- It has been suggested that this 'nameless king' should be identified with V'ima Takshuma, the son of Kujula Kadphises.

- The vast number of the coins of V'ima Takshuma, and the extensive area from which they are reported, 'testify to a long and powerful reign'.

V'ima Kadphises

- V'ima Kadphises, the son and successor of V'ima Takshuma, occupies an important place in Kushāṇa numismatics, as he was, perhaps, the first ruler of his dynasty to issue profusely in gold.
- The obverse of the silver and copper coins of V'ima Kadphises has the figure of the king sacrificing at an altar, a device which seems to be imitated from the Arsakid coins of Parthia.
- On this basis, as also on the basis of the information supplied by the *Shahnamah* of Firdausi, B N Mukherjee has concluded that he occupied some Arsakid provinces.
- The reverse always bears the representation of Śiva, usually with his mount, the bull; however, in some cases, the presence of Śiva is shown symbolically through the *triśūla-paraśu* only.
- The appearance of Śiva or Śaiva symbol on the reverse of all his coins, together with the use of the title *mahiśvara* (= *māheśvara*, great devotee of Śiva), shows that V'ima Kadphises had adopted Śaivism.