

## The Kushāṇas Kanishka I

- Kanishka I was, perhaps, the greatest, and certainly the most famous, of the Kushāṇa kings.
- He is known, from the combined testimony of the literary, epigraphic, and numismatic sources, to have ruled over an extensive dominion extending from Bihar in the east to Khorasan in the west, and from Khotan in the north to, perhaps, Konkan in the south.
- The dates and findspots of some of the inscriptions of Kanishka I are interesting :
  - ✓ Kosam inscription dated year 2,
  - ✓ Sarnath inscription dated year 3,
  - ✓ Mathurā inscription dated year 4,
  - ✓ Suivihar inscription dated year 11, and
  - ✓ Manikiala inscription dated year 18.
- This has led scholars, like Fleet, to suggest that Kanishka I, who belonged to the Little Yüeh-chih branch settled in Tibet, entered India through Kashmir.
- He carved out a principality for himself somewhere in Uttar Pradesh, some time after the death of V'ima Kadphises.
- He then extended his sway towards the west and the northwest.
- However, the recently discovered Rabatak inscription shows that he was, in fact, the son and successor of V'ima Kadphises.
- The *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* of Kumāralāta reveals that Kanishka I attained several military successes in the east.
- According to the *Śrīdharmapīṭaka-sampradāyanidāna*, he invaded Pāṭaliputra.
- When he returned to his capital, Purushapura, from Magadha, he carried away with him, the begging bowl of the Buddha, a magical cock, and the Buddhist scholar, Aśvaghosha.
- The discovery of his coins in Bengal and Orissa should, however, not be taken as indicative of his sway over these territories, in the absence of any corroborative evidence.
- According to the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa, Kanishka I conquered Kashmir.
- Hiuen-tsang refers to his authority over Gandhāra, and to his capital at Purushapura (modern Peshawar).
- The *Śrīdharmapīṭaka* refers to his expedition against the Parthians, in which he is reported to have achieved success.
- The most notable achievement of Kanishka I was his subjugation of the central Asian provinces of Kashghar, Yarqand, and Khotan.
- These successes of the Kushāṇa ruler towards the north made the Chinese wary of his intentions.
- Pan-chao, the general of the Chinese emperor, Ho-ti (89-105 AD), started making preparations for an invasion of the Kushāṇa empire.
- Alerted by this, Kanishka I proclaimed his equality with the Chinese emperor by demanding his daughter in marriage, and assumed the title of *devaputra* (son of god), the Indian equivalent of *t'ien-tzu* (son of heaven), the title of the Chinese emperor.

- Pan-chao regarded this as a challenge to his emperor.
- Kanishka I dispatched his viceroy, Hsi, at the head of 70,000 horsemen, across the Taghdumbash Pamir to give battle to Pan-chao.
- This expedition was, however, unsuccessful due to the hardships of the mountainous terrain.
- According to a legend, Kanishka lamented this failure about the time of his death.
- Kanishka I appears to be a devout Buddhist, who, as per the testimony of Hiuen-tsang and Alberuni, got a grand monastery constructed at Purushapura.
- He is associated with the Fourth Buddhist Council, which he is said to have convoked on the advice of Pārśva.
- In this Council, Vasumitra acted as the president, and Pārśva, as vice-president.
- According to most of the traditions, the Council met at Kuṇḍalavanavihāra at Kashmir, but some sources would have us believe that it was held in Gandhāra, or at Jālandhara.
- The Council prepared the *Vibhāshāsāstra* commentary on the *Tripitaka*.
- Although Kanishka is generally regarded as a Buddhist, the deities, from varied pantheons, appearing on the reverse of his coins, seem to show ‘a sort of religious eclecticism’.

#### **Vāsishka**

- Vāsishka is generally believed to be a co-ruler, associated in administration by Kanishka I, towards the end of his own reign.
- He seems to have succeeded Kanishka I as an independent ruler, and appointed Huvishka as his junior co-ruler.
- He appears to be an ephemeral ruler.
- He is mentioned in two inscriptions from Sanchi, dated years 22 and 28, respectively, and in a *yūpa* pillar inscription from Isapur near Mathurā, dated year 24.
- The Ara inscription, of the year 41, mentions him as the father of Kanishka [II].
- He has been identified with Jushka of Kalhaṇa.
- Earlier, it was believed that he did not issue any coins.
- But some time back, two types of gold coins, bearing the name of Vāsishka, have been published by R Göbl.

#### **Huvishka**

- Huvishka seems to have started his career as a junior co-ruler of Vāsishka, and later succeeded him as an independent ruler.
- His inscriptions are dated between 106 and 138 AD.
- Kanishka II of the Ara inscription of 119 AD seems to have ruled as his junior co-ruler.
- However, there are suggestions that there were two Kushāṇa kings bearing the name of Huvishka.
- Of these, Huvishka I ruled before Kanishka II, and Huvishka II ruled after him.
- On the basis of the Mat *devakula* inscription, which seems to indicate that V’ima was the grandfather of Huvishka, A L Basham regards Huvishka I as the son of Kanishka I.
- There is a possibility that Huvishka II was the son and successor of Kanishka II.
- But the present state of our knowledge precludes any definite conclusions in this matter.

- Huvishka apparently ruled over most of the territories, brought under Kushāṇa sway by Kanishka I.
- His hold over Afghanistan is testified to by his inscription from Wardak near Kabul.
- He is identified with Hushka of Kalhaṇa.
- A Mathurā inscription seems to refer to the construction of a *vihāra* by Huvishka.
- But a seal-matrix apparently represents him as a Vaishṇava.

#### **Vāsudeva I**

- Vāsudeva I was the last great Kushāṇa ruler, who was reigning about a hundred years after Kanishka I.
- His dated inscriptions from Mathurā attest to a reign of over 20 years.
- There is evidence of disturbances in northwestern India, Afghanistan, and Russian central Asia during or after his reign.
- This was, perhaps, the consequence of the Sassanian onslaught, against which power he seems to have sought Chinese help and formed an alliance with the Armenians.

#### **The Decline of the Kushāṇas**

- The Kushāṇa empire started disintegrating after the reign of Vāsudeva I.
- The obverse of the gold coins, issued during the declining phase of Kushāṇa power, bears some Brāhmī letters in the right, central, and left fields.
- The letters in the right field are taken by most of the scholars to be abbreviations of the names of provincial governors.
- This shows that, during this period, the central authority had weakened, and the political influence of the provincial governors had increased, to such an extent that their names had to be mentioned on the obverse of the gold coins in order to satisfy them.
- The names of some of the Kushāṇa kings, who ruled during this declining phase, are known from coins.
- Of these, Kanishka III was one of the successors of Vāsudeva I.
- The reverse of one type of the coins of Kanishka III has the figure of *Ardochsho*, while that of the other bears the figure of Śiva.
- Cunningham and Altekar suggest that the reverse device of *Ardochsho* was popular in the eastern provinces of the Kushāṇa empire, while that of Śiva gained popularity in the western provinces.
- As Kanishka III issued coins bearing both these devices, he appears to have succeeded in retaining hold over the eastern as well as the western provinces.
- Vāsudeva II was among the last rulers of the Kushāṇa dynasty.
- His gold coins have the figure of Śiva, which device was popular in the western provinces of the Kushāṇa empire.
- As he did not issue coins with *Ardochsho* reverse, it has been suggested that he had lost the eastern provinces, where coins with *Ardochsho* reverse were popular.

#### **The Successors of the Kushāṇas**

- Taking advantage of the decline in the power of the Kushāṇas, and the disintegration of their empire, some powers, which were initially subordinate to the Kushāṇas, carved out principalities for themselves, and asserted their independence.
- Some of these powers were of indigenous origin.

- Others were of foreign origin, like the Kidāra-Kushāṇas, Gaḍaharas, Shākas, and Shilādas.

#### **The Kidāra-Kushāṇas**

- The *Wei-shu*, and Ma-twan-lin, inform us about Ki-to-lo, a king of the Kushāṇa stock.
- Finding himself threatened by some rival tribe (Juan-Juan or Hiung-nu), he led his people towards the west, crossed the Hindukush, subjugated Gandhāra, and established his capital at Fu-leu-cha (Peshawar).
- This Ki-to-lo is identified with *Kidāra Kushāṇa Shāh* of coins, found in large numbers from northwestern India.
- Around the middle of the fourth century AD, Kidāra Kushāṇa was forced to acknowledge the supremacy of the Sassanian ruler, Shapur II.
- But later, he asserted his independence, founded his line of kings known as the Kidāra Kushāṇas or Kidarites after his name, and issued his own coins.
- From the account of the Armenian historian, Faustos of Byzantium, he even appears to have inflicted at least two defeats on the Sassanians in 367-368 AD.
- There is a suggestion that, in view of the threats he had to face from the Sassanians and the ruling tribes in Bactria, Kidāra Kushāṇa might have maintained cordial relations with the Imperial Guptas.
- He might be the *Daivaputrashāhi-shāhānushāhi*, mentioned in the Allahabad pillar inscription, as acknowledging the political supremacy of Samudragupta.
- Kidāra Kushāṇa was succeeded by his son, Piro, who was forced by Shapur III to acknowledge Sassanian sovereignty.
- Piro's successor, Varahran, too, served under the Sassanians.
- There is also a suggestion that the Kidāra Kushāṇas may be identical with the *mlechchhas* defeated by Skandagupta, as per the testimony of the Junagarh rock inscription.
- However, most of the scholars tend to regard these *mlechchhas* as Hūṇas.

#### **The Gaḍaharas**

- The Gaḍahara tribe, which appears to be of foreign extraction, seems to have asserted its independence, and issued coins of its own, around the fourth century AD.
- Their coins, in gold, have been found in the Punjab and its adjoining regions.
- They bear legends, like *Peraya*, *Kirada*, and *Samudra*, along with the tribal name, *Gaḍahara*.
- The first, *Peraya*, is regarded as the name of the tribal chief.
- *Kirada* is believed by certain scholars to be a variant of the tribal name Kidāra Kushāṇa, and this variant actually occurs on some of the coins of the Kidāra Kushāṇas.
- On this basis, it has been suggested that at some stage, the Gaḍaharas might have been subject to the Kidāra Kushāṇas.
- *Samudra* on the Gaḍahara coins might be the name of a Gaḍahara chief.
- But, in view of the similarity between this coin type and the coins of the Imperial Gupta ruler, Samudragupta, it has been suggested by a number of scholars that this *Samudra* should be identified with Samudragupta, who might have imposed his authority over the Gaḍaharas.

- Interestingly, a coin bearing the tribal name, *Gaḍahara*, and a legend, tentatively read as *Chandra*, has been described by Smith.
- The Gaḍaharas could have continued under the authority of the Imperial Guptas during the reign of Chandragupta II, as well.

#### **The Shākas**

- Similarly, taking advantage of the weakening authority of the Kushāṇas, the Shāka tribe seems to have asserted its independence, and issued coins of its own, around the fourth century AD.
- They appear to be of some foreign stock, like the Kushāṇas.
- Their coins, in gold, have been found from the Punjab and its adjoining regions.
- They bear the names of chiefs, like Sya, Śayatha, Sita, and Sena, (or *Seṇa*), along with the name of the tribe.
- Some scholars, however, regard Shāka as the name of some chief.
- The reverse of their coins has the symbol of Vāsudeva I, in a slightly modified form.

#### **The Shilādas**

- The Shilāda tribe, which appears to be of some foreign stock, like the Kushāṇas, seems to have asserted its independence, and issued coins of its own, around the fourth century AD.
- Their coins, in gold, have been found from the Punjab and its adjoining regions.
- They bear the names of chiefs, like Bhadra, Bacharṇa, and Pāshaṇa, along with the name of the tribe.
- Some scholars, however, regard Shilāda as the name of a chief, and also propose to read it as Kshinātha.
- The reverse of their coins, too, has the symbol of Vāsudeva I, in a slightly modified form.