

## Kushana in Central Asia

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### Abstract

The emergence of Kushana in Central Asia not only put an end to several local dynasties, but also prepared the grounds to play an important role in the trade routes. After occupying the territory of Greco Bactrian and adopting Iranian culture, they put an end to the Indo Scythian and Indo Parthian dynasties, becoming the sole ruler in the region and neighbors Parthian. Parthian in a protected war with Romans, concreted their power in Mesopotamia and made a suitable situation for the Kushana to control economic activities in northwest Iran and change the trade routes via their realm. In this paper we are going to investigate the appearance of Kushana in Central Asia and the changes made in the political situation of the regions.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Parthian, Kushana, Art, Economy

### Introduction

Probably Central Asia was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism and later became the center of Buddhism. After the defeat of Achaemenid by the Alexander, Bactria, separated from Persian Empire, and were segregated from Persian territory. In the time of Seleucids, Bactria was part of their kingdom and by the time of Antiochus III, they became independent. Their Parthian neighbors established political identity and Bactria was in the hand of Greek in Bactria. Bactria was in the middle of the trade routes in connection with Salukis of Syria,

after their fall, Kushana changed the trade route (Figure 1) from Parthian territory to interior India, and introduced Buddhism to Transoxiana and China.

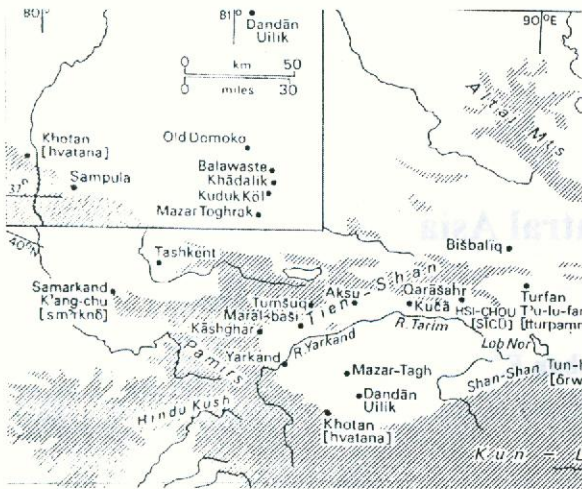
### Geographical Background

Central Asia was among the sixteen lands created by the Ahura Mazda and was under Iranian domination; and later on it became part of the Achaemenian Empire (Rapson, 1968, p.297). According to Muslim geographers; Ferghana, Ray, Merv, Samarkand, Khojand and

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Soghd were main cities in there.



**Figure 1** Parthian in Central Asia

**Historical Background**

The Greek of Ionia were brought by Xerxes (Naraian, 1957, p.2) to the interior Asia and settled between Balkh and Samarkand. There are historical evidences to show that the Persian settled exile Greek in various cities from Asia Minor to Far Eastern parts of the Achaemenian Empire.

The appearance of Greek colonies in Central Asia was the combination and fusion of Central Asian (Narain, 1957, p.144) culture and Hellenism, as it was not suppressed by the Iranian political power. It seems that their civilization was a combination of several complexities and interests. Certainly the Greek deities were the sources of the other local religious perception and later dynasties.

When the Greek of Bactria, conquered north India, Buddhism was introduced to them. But certainly after the Greek left north Afghanistan, Buddhism must have been introduced in Central Asia. And, the Greek of Bactria enjoyed the support of Saka in this region. The nomads of northern border assisted Eythedmus I. King of Bactria, in the war with Antiochus king of Seleucia. There is the possibility that the Greek population (Rostoaatseff, 1922, p.168) gradually mixed with Iranian

and Saka in cultural discourse with each other.

The traces of Scythian civilization in the Central Asia needs deep studies, but the excavation carried out by the Russian Archaeologists have increased our knowledge about them in Central Asia (Rostoaatseff, p.144). This region was a part of the Achaemenid satrapies in the time of Cyrus and Darius I. After the downfall of Achaemenian, till the Alexander’s invasion and emergence of Kushana, urbanization had developed well.

The Greek writer Quintus Curtius (VIII.viii, 13) as cited in (Bivar, 1993, p.183) informed us that the Greek population in the regions was anti Macedonian and unhappy with Alexander. It is not surprising that some of the Greek who adapted Iranian culture rebelled against Alexander and its satraps by extending assist to the northern nomads.

Most of the Greeco-Bactrian cities remained in the hands of Saka in Central Asia. Probably it was so even after Alexander’s invasion of Central Asia and his battles against the Scythian. Since the Scythian in Alexander era invaded their cities, they became independent states by the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Consequently, they declared their independence from Bactrian while the latter got more involved in south of Oxus, valley of Kabul and Indus. It created an opportunity for the native Greek of the Bacteria to attack Central Asia, but the occupation of the Central Asia and the adjacent settlement of Greeks in Asia began after Alexander or concurrent with Greeco-Bactrian, which needs more careful and in-detailed studies. Among the excavated sites, the inhabitants of Ai-Khanum, (Herman, 1997, p. 33) a genuine Greek settlement among the native Greeco-Bactrian ones, do not call themselves Greek citizens, possibly Bactrian.

Historical documents show that even during the time of Phraates IV, who sought the assistance of Scythian against Tirdates, Scythian was the sole power in the



north west of Iran. Possibly the Greek who migrated and then settled in Transoxiana and Bactria in the course of time were different races, because the local population knows them Greek and various branches of Greek origin and Greek. There was not any attempt to distinguish the Greek who settled among them. We know that the Greco-Bactrian were not a united population. It seems after Greco-Bactrian settled in Central Asia, they gradually became the local population of the area. When they encountered with the new wave of migration from China, they were pushed deep into the India and they established new settlements within the region similar to those nomadic immigrants who occupied north India during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium. Herman (1977, p. 35) thinks that Ai-Khanum was established when Alexander was in east where non-Bactrian people were living.

### Emergence of Kushana

When the Kushana started to shape their political integrity, they were settling in Central Asia. In the beginning, they settled in Bactria, instead of receiving the land from Saka. It is not possible to speak exactly about the end of Greco-Bactrian in the Central Asia. Many sites which were part of the Greek kingdom were transferred to the Kushana, whether the successor of the Greek were Kushana, or the conflict among the Greek had weakened them is unknown to us.

The occupation of several cities by Kushana from Bactrian was the main case of disappearance of Greek in the Central Asia. Kushana ruled on territories, where different ethnic communities used to live. They had different native arts. Some Soviet scholars (Gregoire, p.87) maintain that the Kushana territory westwards did not go beyond Margiana. Accordingly, Masson (Gregoire, p.87) believes that the extension of Kushana Empire might be extolled.

The native elements of the Kushana Empire underwent some changes during the reign of Wima

Kadphises, through unification of power. Kushana culture and civilization became imperial in character (Konow, 1929, p.III.) and unified classes of arts and culture to be created in different parts of the empire. Local Khroshthi script does not appear from the time of Kanishka. The Greek legends can be observed on a comparatively small number of artistic objects. After Huvishka period, Bactrian legends in cursive Greek characters were engraved on the coins where the king image was on the obverse and deities on the reverse.

The script of an area on the coins meant for circulation throughout the kingdom may indicate that Bactria was the most important Kushana city among the territories held by them.

It seems that the Bactrian deities were more prominent than the other deities of Kushana. Mukharjee (1978, p.11) truly found out that different pantheons appear on the reverse of coins of Kanishka I and Huvishka. He mentions that a careful study of these deities on the Kushana coins can be inspiring the cradle of Bactrian civilization.

The state policies of emphasis on deities allude to the right and might of the Kushana Empire and religious idea prevailing Bactria.

During the rule of the Scytho-Parthian, the Hellenistic Bactrian school of art played a vital role. The Parthian (Iranian) influence on the art became manifest in certain features of the style showing the objects. Male and female figures on many Scytho-Parthian coins (and even in the later Indo-Greek pieces) have Iranian almond eyes.

The bust of king with a diadem on his head on the obverse and an standing image & Zeus, holding a scepter and thunderbolt on the reverse of the Soter-Megas' coins were taken after the copied coins of the Indo-Greek king named Heliocles. It seems that the coins of Sote-Megas circulated in that area which Heliocles' coins were used in trade. Possibly the Soter-Megas occupied an area in which Heliocles coins were in circulation.



The native influence of the art of the Hellenistic coinage of Transoxiana on the coins of Miao who minted his coins for Bactria is quite clear. They were copied of the early Bactrian. It seems the treatment of hair and hair band of Miao, as shown on his tetradrachms (Figure 2) is comparable with similar features in certain statues from Khachayan (Figure 3) school of art. The available material from eastern and northern Afghanistan and also Transoxiana and western Gandhara suggest certain stylistic features of this art during the Kushana period.

### **Roman Roots of Kushana Art**

After the defeat of Antiochus VII by the Phraates II, the captured Seleucid soldiers were transferred to the east. These soldiers who have been moved to the east, took the side of Saka and killed the Phraates and Artabanus as well. We do not have enough information available in hand about them in the written documents. During the reign of Orodes II and his war with the Roman proconsul, Cruses, the Roman troops were moved to the east when they were defeated by the Parthians. These people were settled in Margiana and the region around Transoxiana, where they established a cultural colony. These Romans who were transferred and settled in the north-east frontiers of Kushana, could finally established a Roman colony.

The gradual transformation of the small Kushana kingdom of Bactria into the Kushana imperial power during the time of Kujulu Kadphises created new socio economic condition for interaction within the Kushana territory.

Many Indian scholars maintain that the Romans were in touch with Kushana through the sea routes, and due to religious and social affairs of traders they had issued coins with Roman deities and Roman king. This motion seems to be unacceptable. The Roman deities must have been part of the religious life and naturally traders must



**Figure 2** Obverse of silver coins maois (Kushana king)



**Figure 3** Two Kalachyan sculpture (Kushana period)



have been familiar with religion and the fact that the figure of their god and goddess which have been on the Kushana currency were in circulation.

The captured Roman soldiers, deployed on the east with the passage of time intermingled with the local people and adjusted themselves with the social environment, and become local people in Indian continent.

But it is needed to conduct more investigation about the traces of these people, the deities worshipped and accepted by the local people. They had religious relations with them when the Parthian had exiled them. With the passage of time, the same people became partners in commerce (Figure 4) and trade in the Kushana period.

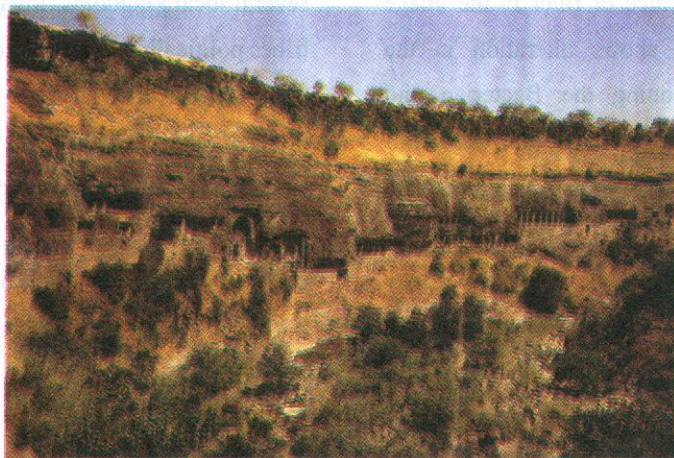


**Figure 4** Budha in Gandhara

### **Kushana Religion**

Saka were deeply influenced by the Iranian belief (Marshal, 1951, p.226) and the temple found in Taxila excavation (Jaindal temple) might be regarded as the Zoroastrian or Magian temple. These coins found in monasteries show that the Buddhist monks in the Kushana period probably owned some currency and

jewelry. This donation to the monks shows that it was not from land properties, rather they obtained the wealth from the merchant donation or even participating in well commercial activities and trades in the great Kushana period. They patronized Buddhism (Figure 5) just as they did for other religions.



**Figure 5** Persian Ambassador in Chalukyan court (Ajanta caves)



### **Economic Condition of Kushana**

The Yueh-Chih tribes needed the monetary system (Senior, 1990, p.345). Hence the Yueh-Chih kings imitated already established Greek economic system. A few of these were issued by the Scythian, for a short time before they migrated to south east of Iran, but the bulk of these barbaric imitations certainly belonged to the Yueh-Chih kings such as Hyrcodes and Sapadbizes, when they established five Yabgus. Even according to Gupta (1974, pp.25-53) need for the currency to meet their needs in the Gupta period did not cause the continuation of the Kushana copper coins.

### **Kushana Art**

Persian influence on the Kushana art was strong. Kushana art in Central Asia evolved as an organic blend of the ancient traditions going back as far as the Achaemenian empire and exerting an important impact on the art of Central Asia for many centuries (Gaforov, 1979, p. 52).

The stone image of Wima Kadphises and Kanishka (Agrawal, 1965, p.249) Confirm the cloth characteristics of northern dress worn by the Scythian. The figure of Mat Devakula shows a young prince wearing treasures and a long coat and a beautiful belt of square and round plaques adorned with Scythian horseman. Another representation of Kushana prince or ruler in the image of Varuna (Bashem, p.50) shows alteration in the fashion of dressing, abandoning the Bactrian and Central Asian fashion or more similar to the fashion of the Iranian or adjacent areas who were under the Parthian influence, such as Palmary.

In the early Kushana art (Agrawal, 1965, p. 258) we see the sun god, wearing coat and treasure which was brought to India by Scythian. The Parthian and also Kushana honored sun god. His image was represented like a Kushana emperor wearing northern dress consisting of a turban, coat fashion with a belt, trousers

and boots.

The fire altar occurs on a few earlier Kushana coins of Wima Kadphises, showing the Iranian tradition sun god worshipping influencing the coin device of 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Mukharjee (Bashem, 1978, pp. 201 ff.) mentions that on the reverse of the coins of GotarzesII, there is the image of a king sacrificing in front of an altar which is the same pieces of prototyped on the coins of Wilma Kadphises.

Kushana first called themselves sons of Heaven. They built shrines of Devakula (family of gods) where the images of Kushana king and princes were installed. They called themselves divine probably as a means for Kushana king to claim the legitimacy of their kingdom. According to Sharma (Ratna-Chandrika, 1987, p.80). "Matura and the Oxus region were in bilateral contact from the early periods". Some artifacts of Matura have been found in Oxus region and some Oxus artifact bear impact of Matura style, supporting the motion of their interaction.

### **Decline of Kushana**

After Huvishka (Konow, 1929, p. LXXXII) Greek script was eliminated and sanskritization strongly prevailed, which bears witness to the new development that began with Kanishka. Kushana kingdom was divided to several local kingdoms. Invasion of Sassanian and other tribes politically put an end to this dynasty.

By the end of Vasudeva reign, Kushana power was divided between local kings and restricted to the Indian territories. Sassanian captured northern parts of their kingdom and new dynasties of Kushano-Sassanian were established in Balkh. Invasion of Heptalite of Central Asia forced Kushana to migrate inside India.

### **Conclusion**

Several tribes, which entered Central Asia, adopted the local religion, which was a combination of local Iranian



culture, and their ancestral religion. Yueh Chih, which was among these migrating tribes divided themselves in five Yabghus and one of them, Kue Shang, became supreme. They established Kushana power and established imperial power in the time of the Kanishka and Huvishka. Vasudeva was the last powerful king of Kushana and after him several small kings, ascended the Kushana throne.

During the second century AD, in Bacteria, when Parthian concentrated their power on the western side of territory, the Han dynasty in China was dealing with internal problems and left the Kushana in Central Asia on its own fate. They were already familiar with the Iranian culture in Central Asia and when they established political power they were partly Iranian. They modified Greek script for their local communication and spread it across their territories. Afterwards they were divided into small kingdoms and other political and social disturbances devastated irrigation and cities in central Asia and other places.

The Russian archaeologist believe that during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, there were several uprisings in Central Asia. As a result of long-lasting drought many farming lands became deserted. Central Asia due to the migration of new tribes from north of Russia and China and pressure of Sassanian from south led to the decline of the Kushana power and they lost their independence and became weak and migrated inside India.

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