

## THE KUSHANS

The Kushans ruled in two dynasties—Kadaphises and Kanishkas, Kadaphises ruled from AD 50 to 78 and Kanishka's rule started from AD 78 onwards. The Kushanas were patrons of Gandharan art—a synthesis of Greek literature. The Indian style and Sanskrit a new era called Shaka in AD 78, and their calendar, which was formally recognised by India for civil purposes, starting on 22 March 1957, is still in use. Purushapura was their first capital and Mathura was their second capital.

The Kushana Kingdom controlled parts of Afghanistan and Iran, and in India its realm stretched from Purushapura (modern Peshawar, Pakistan) in the north-west, to Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) in the east, and to Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh) in the south. For a short period, the kingdom reached still farther east to Pataliputra. The Kushana Kingdom was the crucible of trade among the Indian, Persian, Chinese and Roman Empires, and controlled a critical part of the legendary Silk Road.

The Kushans belonged to the Yu-chi tribe in central Asia, which later spread into the Kansu Province of Turkey. They were in constant fight with the Saka tribe in Tibet, on the Jaxartan River bank. The Sakas kept evading the Yu-chi rulers till they passed the northern passes and entered India.

The Yu-chi tribe consisted of five main sub-tribes with Ki-shung as the chief among them. The Ki-shung tribesmen later prospered and came to be called as Kushans.

### Kushana Rulers

#### KADAPHISES I (TILL AD 68)

The first ruler of the Kushans had great victories over the Greeks, Sakas and Parthians on the borders of India and captured the

important region of Hindukush Mountains. He is known to have fought a decisive battle with Parthians in AD 48 at Gandhara and established the Kushan Empire in that region. During his rule, Kushans used the Kharosthi script and Buddhism was their main religion.



#### Other Notable Events in the Post-Mauryan Era

- **St Thomas** visited India to propagate Christianity during the rule of Gondophares of the Parthian Dynasty.
- The Indo-Bactrian or Indo Greek series of wars was fought during 200 BC, which established two Greek dynasties at north-western India.
- **King Menander** (or Milinda) is the most famous among the Bactrian rulers, as we find respectful mention of him by **Kshemendra** (eleventh century AD) in his **Avadanakal-palata**. Milinda's dialogue between the king of Saka (Sialkot) and Nagasena (also known as Nagarjuna) is recorded in the Pali work **Milinda Panho** (Questions of Milinda). Eventually, Milinda was converted to Buddhism by Nagasena.
- The Indo-Greeks were the first rulers to issue gold coins in India and introduced features of Hellenistic art in the north-west frontier of India, which developed into the famous **Gandhara art**.
- The two schools of art that flourished during the Post-Mauryan era are—the **Gandhara School** (also known as the Greco-Buddhist School) and the Amravati school. The Gandhara School owed its origin to the Indo-Greek rulers and had patrons in the Sakas and the Kushanas (especially Kanishka)

between the first and fifth century in the Gandhara region. The Amravati school was established in the lower valley of Krishna and Godavari during the second century BC, in the later Satavaham period its main centres were Amravati, Nagarjunakonda and Jaggayyapeta. It became an important Buddhist centre and the artists here mainly used white marble.

### **KADAPHISES II (VIMA KADAPHISES) (AD 65-75)**

He succeeded his father and went on to capture Punjab, the Ganges plains and the Banaras regions. Unlike his father he was a worshipper of Lord Shiva. Coins of his era describe him as Maheshwara or Emperor of the entire world. The abundance of gold and silver coins denotes the prosperity during his rule. Indians started to trade heavily with the Chinese. Greeks and Persians in silk, spices, gems and many other items.

### **KANISHKA (AD 78-120)**

After the Kadaphises came Kanishka. Kanishka was their main ruler and well known for starting the Shaka era, which starts from AD 78. Inscriptions referring to him or to the Shaka (the era in which he supposedly began his reign in AD 78) are found over a vast area extending from the Oxus frontier of Afghanistan to Varanasi and Sanchi. He further captured Maghada and spread his empire in and beyond the western Himalayas, including Kashmir and Khotan in Sinkiang. Buddhist sources, to which we are indebted for much of this information, hail him as another Menander or Ashoka; he showered the sangha (the monastic community)

with patronage, presided over the Fourth Buddhist Council and encouraged a new wave of missionary activity. He popularised Buddhism in China, Tibet, central Asia and other parts of the world. However, his coins had inscriptions of Greek, Persian and Hindu gods also, which showed that he respected other religions too. **Purushapura** (or Peshawar), his capital, still boasts the foundations of a truly colossal stupa. With a diameter of nearly 100 m and a reported height of 200 m, it must have been ranked as one of the wonders of the world at that time, Mathura by the Jamuna served as his subsidiary capital as massive statues of Kadaphises and Kanishka were found in this region. He died while campaigning in Sinkiang, Kanishka's successors, many with names also ending in 'ishka' continued the Kushana rule for another century or more which later shrunk to become one of the many petty kingdoms in the north-west.



#### **The Stupa at Sanchi**

To honour Buddha, Ashoka had stupas (large hemispherical domes) built in Sanchi which is a village 46 km from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. Stupas are Buddhist religious monuments believed to shelter the relics of Buddha. The gateways or forams, to these stupas contain highly depicted scenes from the life of Buddha. In the second century BC, the Great Stupa was vandalised, possibly by Pushyamitra Sunga. But it has continuously been rebuilt and decorated since, then. Sir John Marshall led the restoration of the stupa architecture from 1912 to 1919.

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