
FORMATION OF ANCIENT KUSHANA EMPIRE OF CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT: *Kushana was a subtribe (gotr) of great Yuezhi tribe of ancient central Asia. The Yuezhi or Tocharian were an ancient Indo-European people who were first reported living in Traim Besin, an arid grassland area spanning the modern Xinjiang and Gansu provinces of China, before the 2nd century BCE. After a major defeat by the Xiongnu Chanu Modun, the Yuezhi divided, during the 2nd Century BCE, into groups that migrated in two directions. The Greater Yuezhi or Great Yuezhi (Known as Da Yuezhi by Chinese) migrated west through the Tarim Basin into the Ili Valley (on the modern borders of China and Kazakhstan), where they displaced another Indo European tribe, called Sakas (Scythians). Most members of this tribe known as the lesser or little Yuezhi (known as Xiao Yuezhi by Chinese) reportedly moved south, towards the mountain region of Tibetan Plateau. The Greater Yuezhi were driven from the Ili Valley by the Wusun with the help of Xiongnu and migrated further southward to Sogdia and, later, Bactria (today Afghanistan), where they displaced the Greek Kingdom of Bactrian Region.*

KEYWORDS: Yuezhi, Kushana Empire, Aryan, Gurjar, Kanishka, Ancient India, Ancient central Asia

INTRODUCTION

The Yuezhi under the leadership of the Kushana came down from Central Asia and swept away all earlier dynasties of the Northwest in a great campaign of conquest. They established an empire which extended from Central Asia right down to the eastern Gangetic basin. The history of the further development of this kingdom is recorded in the chronicles of the contemporary Han dynasty of China which were compiled in the fifth century AD. As Kushan (Kushana) Kingdom was established by the Da Yuezhi and united all five states under single Kingdom either for surviving during that time or by ego of Kushan leader. The record of the Weilue would be tantamount to saying that the Da Yuezhis were both the conqueror and the conquered –It may indicate that Kushan conquered other four States. Also it could be possible that, Kushan gained prominence over the other Yuezhi tribes, and welded them into a tight confederation under yabgu (Commander) Kujula Kadphises. The name Kushan was adopted in the West and modified into Kushana to designate the confederation, although the Chinese continued to call them Yuezhi. Gradually wresting control of the area from the Scythian tribes, the Kushans expanded south into the region traditionally known as Gandhara, an area lying primarily in Ancient India's Pothowar, and Northwest Frontier Provinces region but going in an arc to include Kabul valley and part of Qandahar in Afghanistan, and established twin capitals near

present-day Kabul and Peshawar then known as Kapisa and Pushklavati respectively. The Kushans adopted elements of the Hellenistic culture of Bactria. They adapted the Greek alphabet, often corrupted, to suit their own language, using the additional development of the letter P "sh," as in "Kushan," and soon began minting coinage on the Greek model. On their coins they used Greek language legends combined with Pali legends (in the Kharoshthi script), until the first few years of the reign of Kanishka. After that date, they used Kushan language legends (in an adapted Greek script), combined with legends in Greek (Greek script) and legends in Pali (Kharoshthi script). Before the arrival of the Tuharans, north Afghanistan kept frequent contacts with West Asia and the Mediterranean. Though this region was once under the rule of Achaemenid Persia, when the Yuezhi-Kushan arrived in the second century BCE, the dominant cultural influence was probably Hellenistic. Actually, Hellenistic influence stretched to a much larger area than Bactria-- south down to Gandhara region in modern Pakistan and east to Samarkand in modern Uzbekistan. The beautiful city goddess excavated from Charsada, the site of ancient Purushapura, one of the Kushan capitals near modern Peshawar in Pakistan, demonstrates that Hellenistic influence persisted even under the Kushan rule ;Not only the artistic style of the sculpture but also the city-wall crown of the goddess, the symbol of the patron deity of a city, provide evidences of Hellenistic nature of the city. Excavations at Ai-Khanoum, the site on the southern side of the Amu Darya or the Oxus River in Greek, demonstrate a comprehensive picture of Greek life--a theater, a gymnasium, temples, and a palace. The palace was not only the residence of the ruler, but also the administration center and treasuries. The very presence of a palace meant the city was the capital of a sovereign state. According to the Chinese records of the political structure of the region, this should be one of the many city-states in Daxia. The rule in Afghanistan and later on in South Asia facilitated further transformation of the Kushans. After the Kushan army crossed the Hindu Kush and occupied north Indian plain, their territory included parts of both Central Asia and South Asia, thus controlled the crucial sector of the Silk Road, and benefited tremendously from the trade traffic. The excavation at Begram, the site of the ancient city Kapisa, revealed an even more diverse variety of wealth. Begram, not far from modern Kabul city, was probably a summer palace of the Kushan Empire after the court moved into India. The palace treasury with 150 years occupation from the first century CE held artistic works from the Mediterranean, South Asia and East Asia. The trading skill of Yuezhi-Kushan people since the days of their wandering on the steppe had now been well paid.

In addition to horses, wine was a symbol of high culture under the early Kushan regime. When selling Chinese silk, Indian precious stones, Himalaya fragrances and other rarities to Roman traders, Kushans imported wine from the Mediterranean. Shards of amphora with residue of wine have been found at sites associated with Roman trade. Supply to the Kushan territory mostly came through Red Sea trade of the Roman Empire. The manual of navigation on the Red Sea by Periplus recorded Roman marketing wine to the port of Barygaza, a port on the mouth of the Indus River, and Barbaricum, a port in the Gulf of Cambay. Amphora shards have been found at the Saka-Parthian level of Sirkap, the second site of Taxila, and under the level of the Red Polished Ware, and Kshatrapa coins at Elephanta, an island off shore of Mumbai. The

Mediterranean Grape wine, used to be the major export of Greek states, now in the hands of Roman traders. But it was the Greeks who brought viticulture and the taste for grape wine to all their colonies a few centuries ago created the market in India, at least in the northwest region. While Tuharans or Yuezhi-Kushans accepted wine drinking as a high culture, the Bactrians and Indians accepted horse riding as a high culture. There are numerous bacchanalian scenes appearing on Gandhara Buddhist artworks. It is difficult to understand why that Buddhism as a religion denouncing desires for material things could tolerate, or admire, the joy of intoxication. Leaving aside the theological interpretations of the drinking scenes, the background of a prosperous viticulture and prestige associated with wine drinking may be helpful in understanding this topic of Buddhist art. That the nomadic Yuezhi who transformed into the Kushans happened to choose the routes passing Hellenistic countries to enter South Asia did enriched their cultures from that direction.

Persian cultural influence also presented in Bactria. Though the Achaemenid rule in Daxia finished by the invasion of Alexander, Persian religious traditions survived or even flourished under the Hellenistic period. In the typical Hellenistic site of Ai Khanoum, while the official deities on coins were Greek, all three temples in the vicinity were not for Greek gods but perhaps altars for fire worship. Greek religion was not monotheist thus Hellenistic cities might have tolerated other deities in their pantheon while maintaining Greek art style. Therefore, when the Yuezhi-Kushan or other nomadic people came in, Zoroastrian cult did not disappear in Hellenistic Bactria. The Kushans were very willing to embrace cults and religious practices of the conquered peoples. Religious tolerance and diversity of the region itself also made the Kushans adopt various cults available to them.

The Kushans built one of the most intriguing political powers in world history. Contemporary to the Roman Empire and the Han Empire, across millenniums around the Common Era, this regime lasted more than three hundred years counting from its dominance at Bactria around the beginning of the first century BCE to the its submission to the Sassanian Empire in the third century CE. At the apex of imperial expansion, the Kushan Empire encompassed a large territory from Central Asia to South Asia. Yet the Kushan regime was probably among the least understood ancient empires in world history. Scholars who study various aspects of the Kushan culture have encountered many insurmountable difficulties to set up a historical frame, chronologically and geographically, for the empire. Either, when arriving at Bactria from the steppe, Yuezhi people had not developed a written language to record their history yet or they were too busy in various wars. When ruling a large agricultural empire, the Kushans managed to hold many different peoples with different languages, religions, and cultures under its power for several centuries, but never established a unified official language to record its history. Though the multiple cultures under the Kushan Empire make the study of Kushan history difficult, this very cosmopolitanism of the regime should invite more discussions and interpretations of the political experiment by a people from the steppe

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