



KUSHAN DYNASTY II. INSCRIPTIONS OF THE KUSHANS

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ii. Inscriptions of the Kushans

The inscriptions issued by the Kushan rulers or in areas under their rule include texts in [Bactrian](#), written in Greek script, and in Prakrit written in [Brāhmī](#) or Kharoṣṭhī script. Naturally enough, the Bactrian inscriptions are mostly found in [Bactria](#) and the Indian inscriptions in the Kushan territories to the south and east of the [Hindu Kush](#). The use of the Greek language in Kushan inscriptions is rare and probably ceased at about the same time that Greek was superseded by Bactrian on the coinage, early in the reign of Kanishka I (see iv. COINAGE OF THE KUSHANS). A few Kushan inscriptions are written in an undeciphered script; one can only speculate about the language which this conceals.

Bactrian inscriptions. The most important Bactrian inscription of the Kushan period is that of Rabātak (Sims-Williams, 1995-96; 1998; 2004), a record of the foundation of a temple housing the statues of Kanishka I and his ancestors as well as numerous gods and goddesses. The significance of the list of deities, its relationship to the pantheon attested on the Kushan coinage, and the nature of



the sanctuary have been much discussed (e.g., Cribb, pp. 107-10; Huyse; Carter; Gnoli; see also viii. RELIGION OF THE KUSHANS). The Rabatak inscription is also extremely rich in historical data, describing events of the first years of Kanishka and the extension of his power over northern India. It states plainly that Kanishka “inaugurated the year one,” evidently referring to the inception of the “Kushan era” or “era of Kanishka,” which H. Falk (2001; 2004a) has convincingly placed in 127/8 CE (see also iii. chronology OF THE Kushans). Much of the inscription is concerned with events of “year one,” which is referred to in terms reminiscent of those used by [Darius I](#) in his [Bisotun](#) inscription (Sims-Williams, 1995-96, p. 83), but the third and the sixth years also seem to be mentioned, in which case the inscription itself cannot have been inscribed earlier than 132 CE. One phrase, the exact translation of which is not quite clear, may allude to a policy of replacing Greek by Bactrian (referred to here as “Aryan”), a switch attested on the Kushan coinage very soon after the beginning of the reign of Kanishka (Cribb, pp. 110-11).

Another precious piece of information provided by the Rabatak inscription is the genealogy of Kanishka I, whose lineage is traced back via his father Vima (II) Kadphises and his grandfather Vima (I) Taktu to his great-grandfather [Kujula Kadphises](#). Vima Taktu (*ooēmo taktoo*) is also mentioned, probably as the ruling monarch, in a Bactrian inscription at [Dašt-e Nāwur](#), where his titulature is given in almost the same words as that of Kanishka at Rabatak. This is one of a group of five poorly preserved inscriptions in Bactrian, Kharoṣṭhī, and the undeciphered script, all of which are inscribed on a single boulder near the peak of Mt. Qarabāy ([Ghazni](#) Province, Afghanistan). Both the Bactrian inscription DN 1 (Fussman, 1974, pp. 2-50 and Pl. I-XXVII; Davary and Humbach, 1976; Sims-Williams, 1995-96, pp. 95-96 and fig. 9) and the Kharoṣṭhī inscription DN 4 are dated in the year 279 of an unnamed era; another Bactrian text, the so-called “unfinished inscription” of Surk Kotal (SK 2), of which nothing can be read apart from its date, seems to be dated in the same year (Bivar, 1963; 1976). This date is probably to be attributed to a *yavana* era or “era of the Greeks,” which is attested in a Buddhist reliquary inscription with a synchronism indicating that it began 128 years earlier than the era of [Azes](#) (Salomon). In view of strong evidence that the era of Azes began in 47/6 BCE (rather than in 58 BCE, as often assumed), the beginning of the “era of the Greeks” can now be placed in 175/4 BCE (Falk and Bennett, 2009), in which case its year 279 will be 104/5 CE. Since Vima Taktu is now known to have been the grandfather of Kanishka I, this solution is easily compatible with the hypothesis that Kanishka came to the throne in, or possibly just before, 127/8



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The first line of DN 1, containing the date “(Year) 279, (day) 15 of (the Macedonian month) Gorpaios,” is written in Greek, though the rest of the inscription is in Bactrian. Another inscription combining these two languages is the fragmentary “Palamedes inscription” (SK 3) from Surk Kotal (Curiel, pp. 194-97; Henning, 1956; Benveniste, pp. 150-51; Humbach, 1966, p. 102), the Bactrian part of which refers to the construction of a temple by an official whose name is not preserved. The inscription ends with two words in Greek: “(Written[?]) by Palamedes.” The inscription is not dated but is unlikely to be earlier than the period of Kanishka I, who (according to SK 4, described below) was the founder of the temple at Surk Kotal, while the fact that it is “signed” in Greek tends to suggest a date in the early years of his reign. Yet another Bactrian inscription which probably belongs to the time of Kanishka is the so-called “Inscription pariétale” (SK 1), an inscription in a single long line which formerly adorned the façade of the Surk Kotal temple platform. The final phrase of this inscription (Benveniste, pp. 146-50)—the only part which survives intact—seems to indicate that it was “written” (i.e., composed or carved?) by a certain Yölesagōg (see now Sims-Williams, 2010, p. 72).

The best-preserved Bactrian inscription is the great inscription of Surk Kotal (SK 4), which is known in three versions (M, A, and B) with minor variants. Version M was first published by [A. Maricq](#), and versions A and B by [É. Benveniste](#) (pp. 114-40). The most convenient synoptic edition is that of G. Davary (pp. 53-64, without translation); the most reliable editions with translation are those of I. Gershevitch (pp. 64-65) and G. Lazard (in Lazard, Grenet, and de Lamberterie, pp. 226-30). As was first recognized by [W. B. Henning](#) (1960), the inscription records restoration and building works initiated by an official named Nokonzoko in the year 31 (no doubt of the era of Kanishka, i.e., in 158/9 CE, early in the reign of [Huvishka](#)); it was presumably erected in that year or soon afterwards. The inscription contains an interesting series of royal titles and epithets as well as information regarding the temple cult at Surk Kotal.

Although this inscription is easily legible, the fact that it is written in a language which was virtually unknown at the time of its discovery meant that it was not immediately comprehensible, allowing H. Humbach (1966) to develop a fantastic interpretation of the text as a Mithraic hymn (disowned in Humbach, 2003). Rather different problems have arisen with more recently discovered Bactrian inscriptions, most of which are much less legible than SK



4, so that there is a risk that an editor may over-interpret ambiguous traces of letters. In particular, the translation of the Dašt-e Nāwūr inscription by Davary and Humbach is subject to caution, since it depends on readings which are ingenious but often highly adventurous. Much the same applies to J. Harmatta's interpretation of the inscription of Ayrtam, a text of six lines carved on the pedestal of a statue. On the basis of photographs of this poorly preserved text, Harmatta reads the name of Huvishka and the date "year 30," but it must be stressed that neither the name of the king nor the date is visible on the stone itself. B. N. Mukherjee's edition of the Rabātak inscription is equally worthless from the epigraphic point of view, since his new readings, e.g., of the city-name Ujjain and the royal name Saddashkana, are incompatible with what can be seen on the stone and are evidently based on preconceptions rather than epigraphic considerations. In this connection it is only fair to note that G. Fussman (1998) regards N. Sims-Williams' readings of the Rabātak and Dašt-e Nāwūr inscriptions as unduly speculative. It can be argued that Fussman's attitude is excessively sceptical (thus Sims-Williams, 2004, pp. 58-59), but there is clearly room for some difference of opinion.

One other Bactrian inscription of the Kushan period is worth a brief mention. Several fragments of a monumental inscription from [Dil'berdzhin](#) have been published by Livshits and Kruglikova. The largest fragment includes parts of 14 lines, several of which appear to be almost complete and in which a number of words and phrases are comprehensible; nevertheless, the text as a whole remains enigmatic.

Indian inscriptions. A good collection of Kushan inscriptions in Brāhmī script is found in H. Lüders, 1961, while all older ones written in Kharoṣṭhī are in [S. Konow](#), 1929. Restricted to Kushan texts dated in the Kushan era is Satya Shrava, 1993, but this work should be used with utmost care, as it is full of misprints and misreadings. A volume in the series of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* is still a desideratum and would require intensive research in the museums and collections concerned. The texts written in Kharoṣṭhī can now easily be accessed online (see "Catalogue of Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions" [CKI]). References to its entries are given below through their "CKI" numbers, where full references can be found.

The name of the Kushans can come in various forms. In Brāhmī it occurs as *kuṣāṇa* in the term *kuṣāṇaputra* on the Māṭ figure (Lüders, 1961, p. 135) and in the compounded name *vaskuṣāṇa* (van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, 1949, p. 313; Satya Shrava, 1993, p. 51, no. 58). The Yavanajātaka (Falk, 2001) uses *koṣāṇa* instead.



Only the Māt figure calls a Kushan king “*kuṣāṇa*” in a text written in Brāhmī; this term is never used in the usual date formulae. In the Kharoṣṭhī documents from the North-West, things are different. The king is often called “kushan,” the spellings found being *guṣaṇa* (Panjtar: Konow, 1929, pp. 67-70, CKI 59; Manikiala: Konow, 1929, pp. 145-50, CKI 149; Kamra: Falk, 2009a, pp. 27-28, CKI 230), *khuṣaṇa* (Taxila silver scroll: Konow, 1929, pp. 70-77, CKI 60) and *kuṣaṇa* (Spinwam: Falk, 2009a, p. 29, CKI 244).

The foundation of the Kuṣāṇa empire was not an ad hoc affair. As the coinage shows, the first Kushan Kujula Kadphises slowly changed names and titles until he finally issued coins in his own name, where formerly those of Hermaios (see [INDO-GREEK DYNASTY](#)) had prevailed in the [Kabul](#) area, and those of the Kharahostes family in the Jammu area. No text from the Brāhmī-writing region mentions Kujula Kadphises, and no text from his own office has been found so far. He occurs as the reigning king on the Senavarma gold plate reliquary inscription, receiving salutations together with his son Sadaṣkaṇa (von Hinüber, 2003, p. 29, CKI 249), of whom no other testimony exists. A nameless *maharaya guṣaṇa* occurs in the Panjtar inscription (Konow, 1929, pp. 67-70; CKI 59) dated [Azes] 122, i.e., ca. 75 CE, a nameless *yabgu mahārāja (yaua maharaya)* on a stone cist (Fussman, 1985, pp. 47-51; for the latest reading, cf. Sadakata, 2000) dated [Azes] 126, i.e., ca. 79 CE. On the Taxila silver scroll (Konow, 1929, pp. 70-77, CKI 60) we find the *maharaja rajatiraja devaputra khuṣaṇa* in the year Azes 136, i.e., ca. 89 CE, connected with the wish for his health (*arogadakṣiṇae*), possibly indicative of a precarious health situation.

There are a number of texts which mention a “Kushan” king, without specifying his personal name. There are two phases for this habit. The first one is at the beginning of the dynasty, when naming the new dynastic affiliation was sufficient to distinguish the new ruler from the toppled one. The second phase is found at the end, when some governors or warlords may not even have known which of the family was ruling.

The second king was Vima Taktu, son of Kujula Kadphises. The Dašt-e Nāwūr trilingual inscription has been referred to above. Its Kharoṣṭhī part has the same year number 279 as the Bactrian part (Fussman, 1974, p. 20). While in Bactrian the king’s name is spelled out as *ooēmo taktoo*, the Kharoṣṭhī version has only *vh(e)ma kuśa*. There is an inscription in Brāhmī from Giridharpur Ṭilā at Mathura (Lüders, 1961, pp. 162 f., no. 123) which uses the same *yavana* era and speaks of a the ruling king simply as a *mahārāja*, not mentioning his



name. It dates from year 270, which is ca. 95 CE. If we consider that the Chinese general and chronicler Pan Ch'ao (see [CH' IEN HAN SHU](#)) knew of just two Kushan kings while in office in the “Western region” from 91 to 101 CE (Fussman, 1998, p. 635), then this date of 95 CE should belong to Kujula's son, rather than to Kujula himself. This gives us life dates of at least 270-279 *yavana*, ca. 95-104 CE for Vima Taktu. The next attested date of 287/112 already belongs to his son.

Of utmost importance is the beheaded statue of Vima Taktu from the family sanctuary at Māt, beyond the Yamuna at Mathura. In the triangle between the felt shoes of the sitting statue, an inscription records the installation of a park with sanctuary. It stands to reason that the royal portrait is that of Vima Taktu, here called Vema Takṣu(ma) (Falk, 2009b). The park was installed by a supervisor for the gods (*bakanapati*) by order of the king referred to as *kuṣāṇaputra*. There seems to be a seal made for external use in the name of Vima Taktu (Falk, 2009b, p. 110). We also have Vima's name on his coins, but otherwise he occurs so rarely that until the work of J. Cribb (1995/6) his name did not even play a role in discussions on Kushan history.

A relatively long reign is in conflict with the few coins found issued in the name of Vima Taktu. However, Vima Taktu has been linked by Cribb (1995/6) to the unified copper currency which is found in masses from Bactria to northern India, where the king refers to the god and to himself in Greek as *sōtēr megas*, the “great savior.” Fussman (1998, p. 621) lists four possible ways of explaining this currency, either as issued by Kujula in a late phase of his rule, or by Vima Kadphises in an early phase, or by Vima Taktu, or by an otherwise unknown usurper. O. Bopearachchi (2008, p. 45, n. 131) upholds the usurper theory, citing (n. 131) Fussman as a supporter of this attribution, but Fussman himself describes the attribution to Vima Taktu as a “simpler solution.”

The next king, Vima Kadphises, spells his name *víma kalpiśa* in Kharoṣṭhī on his coinage, which can be found misread as *hima* or *kathphiśa* in the literature. There is only one epigraph mentioning him by name, a rock at a junction in the mountains beyond those of Kashmir at Khalatse (Konow, 1929, pp. 79 ff., CKI 62), which now survives only in photographs, as the rock seems to have been blasted away for the construction of a road. It shows the king in his usual attitude with left fist akimbo and a text reading *deva[pu?]da / maharajasa uvemo kav[?]usasa / sa 2-100-20-20-20-4-1-1-1*, probably amounting to “the *devaputra mahārāja* Vema Kav[?]usa, in the year 287.” Spelling and writing are



unique, not displaying a thorough knowledge of the language. Thus the only clear information found in Kharoṣṭhī epigraphs is that Vima Kadphises was venerated in the year 287 of the *yavana* era, i.e., in ca. 112 CE.

There is another inscription in Brāhmī which uses this era. As in the case of Vima Taktu at Giridharpur Ṭilā (see above), the king is referred to simply as *mahārāja rājātirāja*, his name being left unmentioned. It is found on the pedestal of a Jina from Kaṅkalī Ṭilā at Mathura (Lüders, 1940; Satya Shrava, 1993, p. 132, no. 167) and contains a year number 290 (in fact 200-90, then *he* in Kharoṣṭhī, and 2 *hemantamāse* 2 in Brāhmī; the unexpected Kharoṣṭhī *he* has led to a series of misreadings, so that the year number can occur in the literature as 292 or 299). The *yavana*-era was re-introduced by Vima Taktu and continued by Vima Kadphises.

Vima Kadphises always sports a club on his coinage, hinting at the “Herculean” tasks he was to accomplish. There is a famous statue at the Mathura Museum, beheaded, with an inscription saying *mahārājā rājātirājā devāputro kaniṣko*, which has been assumed to unmistakably name the person depicted. However, *rājātirājā* has been written on top of an earlier “*kaniṣka*,” showing that the inscription went through several stages. In fact, it seems strange to have just one figure labeled, to have it inscribed twice, and the letters placed in a very low position. The sanctuary was destroyed in or shortly before the time of Huvishka (see below), and it seems that when it was rebuilt, a decapitated statue of Vima Kadphises with his typical club was given a new head (in plaster?) and inscribed to affirm the new attribution.

Kanishka I follows his father Vima Kadphises. He changes from the *yavana* era to one of his own. It can be questioned whether year 1 of this era marks the beginning of his rule, as there is good reason to assume that Kaniṣka’s era is a deliberate shift to the [Arsacid era](#), which also started a new (third) century that very year (Falk and Bennett, 2009). There is no text in Brāhmī or Kharoṣṭhī from the office of this king. (His name on a beheaded statue at Māt has been discussed above.) With him and the era introduced by him we find ca. 15 dated inscriptions mentioning him with the simple formula *mahārājasya kaniṣkasya saṃvatsare* “in the year x of the Mahārāja Kanishka.” This form seems to have been made compulsory by the royal offices for civilians as well. On his coinage he first uses Greek *basileus basileōn kanēškou* “of the king of kings Kanishka,” only to change to the Bactrian equivalent *šaonano šao kanēški* after a very short time, to judge from the rarity of the pieces of the first series.



A monastery at or near Peshawar was founded by Kanishka and carried his name, as known from a perfume casket (Errington, 2002; Falk, 2002) and a painting on a rock at Kala Tassa near Mansehra (Nasim Khan, 2000, p. 34, fig. 28).

Huvishka follows his father Kanishka, and he seems to have faced great difficulties with uprisings in his realm as well as attacks from outside. The Giridharpur inscription (Konow, 1929; Satya Shrava, 1993, p. 57, no. 64) transfers all merits from a pious donation to the king and “to those who like the king” (*yeṣāṃ ca devaputro priyaḥ*); the Wardak vase reliquary (Konow, 1929, pp. 165 ff.; Falk, 2008, p. 70; CKI 159) likewise has this king profit from the foundation of a stūpa. The headless statue of a Kushan ruler or prince bears an inscription (Lüders, 1961, pp. 138-45, no. 99; Satya Shrava, 1993, pp. 59 ff., no. 66) which speaks of a family sanctuary (*devakula*) set up by Huvishka’s grandfather, that is, Vima Kadphises, which in his time was “broken, fallen down, and in a ruinous state” (*bhagnapatitaviśīrṇa*). The repair work was also aimed at the “increase of the life and strength of *mahārāja-rājātirāja devaputra* Huvishka.”

There is a series of copper coins with unique and highly artistic reverse sides, all of them reading *yodhavade*. Most of these pieces can be traced back to the mountain sanctuary called Kashmir Smast, in the foothills of the Himalayas just above Mardan. If related to Skt. *yodhapati*, the coinage would go back to a “warlord,” or better “warrior-lord.”

On the said *devakula* statue from Māt, a king is given titles, and it is most likely Huvishka, and not his grandfather, who is called “steadfast in the true law” (*satyadharmasthita*). The next term was often misread to make Huvishka an adherent of Śarva, a form of Śiva, but the correct reading is *nanay(o)tsave ścandavīrātisṛṣṭarāja* and makes Huvishka a king “to whom was handed over royalty by the resplendent heroine at the festival of Nanaya.” This event refers to the same procedure by which his father Kanishka was installed by Nana/Nanaya.

Around the year 30 of the Kushan era, Huvishka must have told people to enlarge a reference to him from *mahārāja huviṣka* to *mahārāja devaputra huviṣka*. The titles *rājātirāja* and *śāhi* are very rare in his time and are only used on non-Buddhist pieces. A pillar base was donated to a monastery carrying the name of Huvishka, probably as its founder, in (Vāsudeva’s) year 77 (Lüders, 1961, p. 68, no. 31).



We have no independent evidence that the next ruler, Vāsudeva, is the son of Huvishka, but also no reason to doubt it. No document from his office has survived. There are many Buddhist and Jaina statues where the current date is linked to his name. The titles *rājātirāja* and *śāhi* are becoming more frequent, but apart from that very little can be gleaned from inscriptions of his time.

Again, no evidence as to paternity is preserved, but in any case another ruler called Kanishka follows Vāsudeva, as is clear from the sequence of the coinage. The dedicatory texts of the time of Kanishka II, in contrast to those of Kanishka I, refer to him as a *śāhi*. The so far singular titles *muroḍa* and *marzaka* occur on the Zeda well inscription, dated year 11 (Konow, 1929, pp. 142 ff.; Falk, 2009a, p. 26; CKI 148). There is the possibility that this text was written in the third Kushan century, referring not to a Kushan ruler at all but to one of their successors (Falk, 2010, pp. 79, 80). No personal information is available on Kanishka II, apart from ruling dates ranging from 4 to 17, i.e., 104 to 117 in the second Kushan century. One seal (Satya Shrava, 1993, p. 4, no. 3) referring to the present ruler as *mahārāja-rājātirāja-devaputra kaniṣka* and used by his officials, is probably his.

The next king appears as Vāsishka and as Vaskuṣāṇa (Rosenfield, 1967, pl. 34) with dates ranging from 22 to 30. The Kamra well inscription (Falk 2009a, p. 27; CKI 230) is our best witness so far, listing in Kharoṣṭhī script a series of titles, some of them enigmatic or rare (*detriata*, *svayabala*, *śpalasakarita*), others standard (*maharaja*, *rajatiraja*, *mahata*, *tratara*, *dhramathida*, *devaputra*, *guṣaṇa*), one known but not common to Kuṣāṇas (*jayata*), possibly also referring to a deified human (*debamanuśa*) Kanishka (I) or to his own son Kanishka (III).

The inflationary use of titles continues in the only text from the time of Vāsishka's son Kanishka III, the Ārā well inscription in Kharoṣṭhī (Konow, 1929, pp. 162-5; Falk, 2009a, p. 28; CKI 158). The king is called *maharaja*, *rajatiraja*, *devaputra*, *kaīsara* and *vazeṣkaputra*; the year is 41. At Mathura, no date after Vāsishka comes with the name of a king; Kanishka III remains unmentioned there.

There are some late inscriptions from the western border where the name of the ruler is not given, issued by a local governor or warlord. They could date from the phase when the last three kings had lost their power, i.e., after Kanishka III, but they could as well date from the phase of the last three kings, i.e., from Kanishka II to Kanishka III, when leaders of mercenaries acted on



their own, possibly not even knowing who the present “Kushan” ruler was. One is the Spinwam well inscription (Falk, 2009a, p. 29; CKI 244), written in Kharoṣṭhī in a year 39, referring to a Kṣatrapa Anacapahaka, who was general (*daḍaṇayaga*) to an unnamed Bhaṭṭāraka Svāmi (?) Kuṣāṇa. Another one is a large cooking vessel, *deg*, inscribed in Brāhmī (Falk, 2004b, p. 143), given to a Buddhist monastery by Devadāsa, general (*daṇḍanāyaka*) of an unnamed *mahārāja-devaputra*.

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