



# KUSHAN DYNASTY III. CHRONOLOGY OF THE KUSHANS

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Dates in South Asia usually lack precision. Only in post-Kushan times do we meet with dates which are verifiably precise up to the day. The reason is that years can start in spring, the Indian way, or in the autumn, the Macedonian way. Years start with a certain month, but months can start with the full moon or with the new moon. Even where all these points are clear, we must be aware that year numbers can refer to a “current” or to an “expired” year.

The most frequent way to define time is the regnal year. Each king starts his reign with year 1, and, once the succession of kings is known, at least an approximate chronology can be established. In some cases the year count starting with one king continues after his demise, leading to a dynastic reckoning. One example in the area concerned is the so-called [Azēs](#) era, which starts with low numbers in the lifetime of Azēs and which is used for a long time after his demise, sometimes with reference to the “era of Azēs (of by-gone times),” sometimes without. Another example is the era starting with some western foreigners, summarily called “Greeks,” or more literally “Ionians,” i.e.,



*yavana* in Sanskrit, *yona* in Gāndhārī and other vernaculars.

In general, such dynastic schemes have had to be linked to absolute year numbers on a trial basis using circumstantial evidence. Until only a few decades ago, the era of Azes was customarily equated with the Vikrama *saṃvat* era, starting 58/57 BCE, and the starting-point of the *yavana* era was placed somewhere in the middle of the second century BCE. However, this identity was questioned occasionally, particularly, since Vikrama *saṃvat* is not attested until the middle of the first millennium CE, when the Azes era had since long gone out of use.

Texts referring to two or more eras allow a co-ordination, but such texts were very rare until recently. The *yavana* and the Azes era were linked through a dedicatory text (CKI 405) inside the lid of a Buddhist reliquary, published by R. Salomon, where a regnal year of King Vijayamitra is combined with a *yavana* year 201 and a year 73 “in the era they call the era of Azes.” From this it arises that the two eras are 128 years apart. If the Azes era was identical with the Vikrama *saṃvat* era, then the *yavana* era started in 185 BCE. However, H. Falk and C. Bennett have shown that this is incompatible with the mention of a Macedonian intercalary month Gorpiaios in another reliquary text (CKI 328), which requires rather that the Azes era should begin in 48/7 (starting in autumn) or 47/6 (starting in spring) BCE. Counting 128 years back produces a start of the *yavana* era in ca. 175/4 BCE.

So far, this model has only been contested by H. Loeschner, who based himself on the so-called “unfinished inscription” of Surkh Kotal in the reading of J. Harmatta, who misread the year number 279 as 299 and found a reference to a king Vima “Takpiso,” of which no trace exists on the stone.

Although it is tempting to have the Azes era start with the first year of Azes’ rule, there are hints which point to another explanation. One is the vagueness of the reference to an “era which they call the one of Azes,” which may be due to the fact that a year 1 in 47/6 BCE would be year 201 of the [Arsacid era](#), with its start in the spring of 247 BCE. Thus the “Azes era” may be merely the third century of the Arsacid era, which happened to fall within the reign of Azes. If so, others could use and name the era as they liked, and in fact we have another reliquary text where a Mahākṣatrapa uses this era with his own name (Falk, 2007, p. 140). In addition it seems that the Maues era, known only from one reliquary text (CKI 46), is just the same as the Azes era (Falk, 2007, p. 137).



If, on the basis of these considerations, we place the beginning of the Azes era in 47/6 BCE, the *yavana* era must have begun in 175/4 BCE. This raises the question: what event fell in that year that was important enough to start an era? Different answers are possible; Rapin has linked it to the Indo-Greek king Antimachus I (see [INDO-GREEK DYNASTY](#)), who, after forming an alliance with Apollodotus I, overthrew Agathokles in Bactria, thus combining the areas north and south of the [Hindu Kush](#). The date would thus commemorate the installation of a rule for the first time encompassing two formerly separate areas.

After these necessary preliminaries we can have a look at how dates were used in the time of the Kushans.

The above-mentioned reliquary text which gives a date according to three reckonings does not mention a Kushan king, but the manufacture of the reliquary should fall into the period when [Kujula Kadphises](#) was expanding his influence. In addition to its dating to Azes 73, it is the first text to mention the *yavana* era in its year 201. It is remarkable that we have no dates from the first two centuries of this reckoning, apart from, maybe, a few numerical letters on the coinage of Platon and Heliocles I (Widemann).

The Azes reckoning continues: the Panjtar Śiva sanctuary inscription (Konow, 1929, pp. 67-70; CKI 59) speaks of the *guṣāṇa* king, Azes year 122, ca. 75 CE; a stone box inscription (Fussman, 1985; CKI 331) of the Azes year 126, ca. 79 CE, mentions an unnamed *maharaja* and *yavuga* (*yabgu*); the Taxila silver scroll inscription (Konow, 1929, pp. 70-77; CKI 60) of the year Azes 136, ca. 89 CE, speaks of an unnamed *maharaja rajatiraja devaputra khuṣaṇa*. All these unnamed references seem to follow a certain model: the king's name is left unmentioned; he is called *guṣaṇa* or *khuṣaṇa*, as if the term "Kushan" was not yet spread in a uniform pronunciation; he is called *yavuga*, as Kujula, alone of the Kushans, is also referred to on his coinage, and in the end he is given glorious titles like *rajatijara* and *devaputra*. If all these texts refer to Kujula Kadphises and if he had any influence on the way he was referred to, then in [Gandhāra](#) he was following nothing but the Azes era and preferred to be unnamed. As a ruler, he appears on texts datable from 75 to 89 CE.

The next year numbers in Gandhāra follow the *yavana* scheme: the [Dašt-e Nāwūr](#) inscription of the year 279 was inscribed by order of Vima Taktu, introduced as *vh(e)ma kuśa* with the titles *rajatiraja*, *mahata*, and *dhramika*. If 175/4 BCE is taken as the starting point of the *yavana* era, year 279 equals our



104 CE. As mentioned above, the same date in Greek numerical letters, with no further legible text, is also found in the “unfinished inscription” of Surkh Kotal. There are texts from this period dated in Azes years, but they do not refer to a Kushan king. So we can state that the *yavana* era with a date of 201 was known in the time of Kujula, but not used by people mentioning him. Vima Taktu, however, personally mentions his name and dates in the *yavana* era in its year 279.

The next king, Vima Kadphises is mentioned with a date at Khalatse (CKI 62). The year number can be clearly read as 1-1-100-20-20-20-20-4-1-1-1, i.e., 287, equivalent to 112 CE. This reading was first recognized by J. Cribb (pp. 213-14) but still meets stern resistance by some who do not want to see the second 1-stroke at the beginning, although it is as clear as one could wish. The old reading by S. Konow—184 or 187—can only be made to give sense if the first Kushan year of Kanishka was identical with the first year of the Śaka era, 78 CE, an idea which lost its basis after the discovery of the conversion formula of Sphujiddhvaja, which allows us to convert Śaka into Koṣāṇa (Kushan) dates (see below).

There are more epigraphs in *yavana* years, from the years 303, 318, 349 and 384, that is, 128, 143, 174 and 209 CE, none of them mentioning a Kushan ruler.

Turning to the Brāhmī-writing area, in particular Mathura, we find only one text which seems to make use of the Azes era. This is a flat base with a convex front from Maghera near Mathura, dated in the year 116 “in the reign of the Yavana” (Fussman, 1993, p. 113). It was certainly tempting to equate this Yavana with the *yavana* era. However, year 116 *yavana* is ca. 59 BCE, while the writing can safely be dated to the late first century CE on paleographic grounds. So, the era could be Azes, and 116 Azes is 69 CE, when all the paleographic features which we recognize in this inscription were current. Who is “the Yavana”? 69 CE probably falls within the reign of Kujula, but Mathura most likely was not yet under Kushan control. Instead, the Kṣatrapas of the Rajuvula line, recent intruders from the Jammu area, held the town and minted coins, so it may well be one of them who is mentioned here. That other rulers from the north used the Azes era is known from an inscription of Gondophares from Takht-i Bāhī (Konow, 1929, pp. 57-62, CKI 53), where the author connects Gondophares’ 26th regnal year with year 103 of an unnamed era, generally taken to be that of Azes.

The same type of Brāhmī as at Maghera is also found on a slab from



Giridharpur (Lüders, 1961, pp. 162 f.), where a *mahārāja* is connected with a year 270. This should be the *yavana* era, equivalent to 95 CE. This is between the highest date of Kujula and the only one we have of Vima Taktu, so that either of the two can be meant. We are in a similar situation with one more text on the pedestal of a Jina figure. Here, the number 290 (Lüders, 1940; for the number, cf. Falk, 2012, p. 15, fn. 1) is connected with another nameless *mahārāja rājātirāja*. The date is equivalent to 115 CE, which is in between the only dates we have of Vima Taktu and Vima Kadphises, so that again either of these two can be meant.

Summing up, we can say that in Gandhāra both Azes and *yavana* eras are known at least in Azes 73 = *yavana* 201 = 26 CE. Azes dates prevail under Kujula, until Vima Taktu switches to the *yavana* era, while in Mathura, at a time before we can reckon with Vima Taktu, there is first one Azes date ascribed to a ruling “western foreigner,” perhaps a *kṣatrapa* of the Rajuvula line. This single Azes date is soon followed by two clear *yavana* dates, so that the change from the Azes to *yavana* era can also be found in Mathura taking place at the same time as in Gandhara.

Why did Vima Taktu shift to *yavana* dates? He was most influential in unifying the vast tracts governed by him, from Bactria down to Mathura and Benares. He introduced a uniform copper coinage under the sobriquet *Soter megas*, remaining himself nameless, as his father and later his son did on some epigraphs. Possibly, he wanted to profit from the prestige of those who had inaugurated the *yavana* era. If Rapin is right, the *yavana* era commemorates the unified rule of lands north and south of the Hindu Kush. The Kushans had again achieved just this; their rule extended from [Bactria](#) to Benares. Their taking up the *yavana* era showed that they saw themselves as legitimate successors of those Indo-Greeks of 175 BCE.

Although *yavana* dates continue up to 209 CE, they are never again connected with the mention of Kushan rulers. Instead, Kanishka introduced an era which started with 1 again. The absolute date of this year 1 was disputed for a century. An astronomical text called the *Yavanajātaka*, written by Sphujiddhvaja in the fourth century, contains a formula indicating that a Kushana year number plus 149 gives the number of years in the well-known Śaka era, which starts in 78 CE (Falk, 2001). The year 227 CE would thus be Śaka expired 149 and Kushan current 1. In 1949, J. E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw had given strength to the old impression that dates in the Kushan era instituted by Kanishka restarted with 1 after the first century, without



mentioning the hundreds when numbering the years of the second century. This impression is called “dropped hundreds” and was called a “theory.” At Mathura we find some dates after the downfall of the Kushans which come in pairs: one date is a Gupta date, never using dropped hundreds, while the other, which is called “continued reckoning” (*kālānuvartamāna*), does show dropped hundreds and started anew in the 27th year of two successive CE centuries (Falk, 2004). This fits well with the computation of Sphujiddhvaja, which indicates that 227 CE was the start of the Kushan century current in his time and from which we may calculate that the year 1 of the previous Kushan century was equivalent to 127 CE. On this basis, 127 CE could be proposed as the date for Kanishka’s introduction of the Kushan era.

Why did Kanishka need a new era at all, when his forefathers had reverted to the *yavana* era? As Bennett (in Falk and Bennett) could show, the year 1 of Kanishka coincided with year 301 of the *yavana* era; in other words, Kanishka simply took the new *yavana* century and restarted with year 1. If 301 is year 1, why should not 401, 501, etc. also be 1? The reduction of the ongoing *yavana* centuries to independent *saecula* explains why the Kushan era uses dropped hundreds; it owes its very existence to dropped hundreds.

There is one new feature in Kanishka’s construction; it combines regnal and dynastic expressions: “in the year 18 of Kanishka” sounds merely regnal, “in the year 33 of Huvishka” (Bloch), however, combines the ongoing year number with the name of the ruler. The fact that the second century again started with a king called Kanishka (II) led to numerous complications, because “in the year 18 of Kanishka” could mean year 18 of Kanishka I, or year 118 of Kanishka II. Art historical analysis, numismatic sequences, and paleography unite to clearly separate the two Kushan centuries, so that the sequence Kanishka (I), Huvishka, Vāsudeva, Kanishka (II), Vāsishka, Kanishka (III) is today more or less undisputed. With regard to the absolute dates of these kings, we have no fixed years. No Kushan year occurs with reference to more than one king, so that we could use it as a borderline, ending one rule and starting the next. There are always a number of unmentioned years between the last year of one king and the first of his successor. Because of these unmentioned years, the dates of all reigns are known only in part. Even 127 CE, year 1 of Kanishka I, need not be the first year of his reign, though it must be one of his first years.



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