



KUSHANSHAHS I. HISTORY

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i. History

“Kushanshah” (*Kušanšāh*) was the title of the rulers, known between the 3rd-century [Sasanian](#) conquests and 4th/5th-century [Hunnic](#) invasions, in parts of eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and [Gandhāra](#).

This title is not characteristic of the main [Kushan dynasty](#), whose members called themselves both *Šaonano Šao* “king of kings” and *Kushan*, but did not combine these epithets in a single title. For instance Kaniška, in the [Rabatak inscription](#), is entitled “Kaniška the Kushan” in line 1, and later “king of kings” in line 14. The very first surely dated occurrence of the title Kushanshah seems to be in the [Paikuli](#) inscription of the Sasanian [Narseh](#) ca. 293 CE. It would show a reduction in status of the kings of the former Kushan territory from “king of kings” to “king,” itself linked with a Sasanian overlordship. Kushanshah would be the title of the ruler of the parts of the former Kushan empire within the Sasanian federation.

The creation of Sasanian domination. The beginning of this Sasanian rule is disputed. The Arabic sources, especially [Ṭabarī](#), but also the *Nehāyat al-erab* (on this source, see Grignaschi), wrote that, early in his reign, after his victory against the last [Arsacid](#) king [Ardavān](#) and the submission of the western parts of the empire, [Ardašīr I](#) conquered Khorasan:



From there [Istakhr] he marched to Sijistān, then to Jurjān, then to Abaršahr, Marv, Balkh, and Khwārizm, to the frontiers of the countries of Khurasan. Then he returned to Marv. When he had killed a (great) number and sent their heads to the fire temple of Anāhīd he went (back) from Marv to Fārs and took his residence in Jūr. There arrived to him messengers from the king of Kūsān, from the king of Tūrān, and from that of Makrān with (messages of) their submission. (Ṭabari, I, pp. 819-20; tr., V, pp. 14-15)

According to the *Nehāyat al-erab*:

he penetrated into the country of Khorasan. He did not come to any land without its king coming to him, offering his submission to him, and paying landtax. He dwelt in the city of Marv for one year until all the kings of Khorasan had brought him their submission. (Widengren, p. 767)

These attacks must have diminished the power of Kushan emperors (Vasudeva? Kanishka II?) north of the Hindu Kush, but the information provided by these texts is not enough to demonstrate that the first raids of Ardašīr marked the end of Kushan rule in Bactria. Actually, the wording of the texts seems to suggest, rather, a mere formal submission, not the abdication of royal status and power. The fact that the Bactrian era might coincide with the period of Ardašīr's rule could have been adduced as a proof of an actual submission of Bactria, perhaps in a second attempt; but this cannot be certain, as Ardašīr's son, Šāpūr I (r. 240-70), also made use of this era. Moreover, the so-called Bactrian era might be simply the continuation of the second century of the Kushan era, with the 100s digit dropped. The fact that the coins of Kanishka II were only struck south of the Hindu Kush might support this hypothesis, but, since Kanishka II ruled some time after 229 CE, this might point to later raids of Ardašīr rather than to the first ones.

The discovery of the Rag-i Bibi (Rag-e bibi) stone relief, near Pol-e Kōmri on the road between Bactria and Kabul, displaying a Sasanian king, certainly Šāpūr I, hunting the rhinoceros, an Indian royal symbol, and receiving the submission of a Kushan prince, has confirmed Šāpūr's statement in the *Ka'ba-ye Zardošt* inscription at Naqš-e Rostam, dated 262, describing the limits of his empire as including "Kušānšahr as far as Peshawar" (Grenet, 2007; Huyse, I, p. 24). The northern part of the Kushan Empire had become a Sasanian dominion.



The question is whether the Kushano-Sasanian period began with the Sasanian conquest or not. Some scholars have proposed a very early dating for the Kushan-shahs, namely, beginning a few years after the conquest (Cribb, 1990, p. 171), others a very late chronology (Göbl), while a middle path, with some variations, has been proposed (Carter; Grenet, 2007, n. 16; see also below KUSHANSHAHS ii. KUSHANO-SASANIAN COINAGE), the one followed by the present author.

Some coins in the name of Ardašīr with the Bactrian legend *košano šao* “Kushan-shah,” which are very different from the later coinage of the Kushanshahs, were minted, perhaps in Marv, at various times in the 3rd century. This coinage cannot antedate Šāpūr I’s reign because of the hairstyle of the king (Carter, p. 222; Cribb, 1990, p. 170), and no Ardašīr Kushanshah is mentioned in the Ka’ba-ye Zardošt inscription of 262. That inscription does, however, mention a brother of Šāpūr I reigning over Marv and named Ardašīr (Henning, 1954 p. 49). It is possible that he was nominated Kushanshah after 262. It is also possible that the Kushanshah Ardašīr should be dated later, as the Sasanian [Bahrām I](#) (r. 273-76) issued coins in Balkh, which suggests that these territories were still under direct rule of the

Sasanians.

A Kushano-Sasanian dynasty. What might have modified this situation is the revolt of Hormozd, a brother of [Bahrām II](#) (r. 276-93), with the troops of all the submitted regions of eastern Iran, including the Kushan territories:

Ormies [Hormozd] with the Sacci (Sakastanians) and Rufii [Cusii, i.e., Kushans] and [Geli](#) as allies assaults the Persians themselves and the king himself [Bahrām II], and respects neither his king’s majesty nor his brother’s claims on his loyalty. (*Panegyrici Latini* XI-17, tr. Nixon and Rodgers p. 101; the text is dated 291)

This revolt might have taken place in 283, when the absence of the Persian troops from the western front enabled the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius [Carus](#) to capture [Ctesiphon](#) (“Life of Carus” 8 in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*). However, while it has been suggested that this Hormozd might be the Hormozd Kushanshah known from Marv coins (Bivar, 1956), this revolt may have originated from Sakastān rather than from the former Kushan lands, as the 6th-century [Agathias](#), in his excursus on Sasanian dynastic history, wrote that Bahrām II subdued the Saka and gave his son the title of Sakanshah



(*Sagestanōn basileus*, Agathias, 4.27). There is no link in the Sasanian inscriptions between the Kushans and Sakastān (Nikitin, 1999).

Agathias, author of a record of central significance concerning the idea of the Kushanshahs being a Kushano-Sasanian dynasty, states:

Bahrām III tasted sovereignty for a mere four months. He was given the title Saghanshah which he received not, I think, idly or without good reason but in accordance with an ancient ancestral custom. When in fact the Persian kings make war on some neighbouring people of considerable size and importance and reduce them to submission, they do not kill the vanquished inhabitants but impose a tribute on them all and allow them to dwell in and cultivate the conquered territory. However, they consign the former leaders of the nation to a most pitiful fate and assign the title of ruler to their own sons, presumably in order to preserve the proud memory of their victory. Now since the Segestani were subdued by his father Bahrām II it was only natural that the son should be given the title Saghanshah, which is Persian for ‘king of the Segestani.’ (Agathias, 4.24; tr., p. 127)

The onomastics of the Kushanshah as known from the coins is indeed purely Sasanian—Pērōz, Ardašīr, Šāpūr, Hormozd, Bahrām, Kawād—except for a Mēzē (the reading is not certain), who might have been a local governor in Gandhāra. A combination of the text of Agathias and an indication of the Ka’ba-ye Zardošt in the same direction reasonably leads to the idea that the Kushanshahs originated from a lateral branch of the Sasanians themselves.

The Kushanshahs. The Paikuli inscription of ca. 293, celebrating the victory of the rebellious Narseh, son of Šāpūr I, against his grandnephew **Bahrām III**, has a Kushan-shah (sec. 92, *kwšn MLKA*) at the head of the list of allies of Narseh, just after the mention of the peace with the Romans. This indicates that a period of direct rule of the conquered territories, under Ardašīr, Šāpūr, and perhaps up to **Bahrām II**, had ended. The existence under Bahrām II of a Sakanshah could possibly imply the parallel existence of an earlier Kushanshah, possibly the Ardašīr who is known only from his Bactrian copper coinage and one gold coin.

A powerful Pērōz I Kushanshah is known from the coins during this period: he minted coins in Balkh, **Herat**, and Gandhāra (see below), and in Gandhāra he overstruck coins on the coinage of Kanishka III. Pērōz’s coins were overstruck



by Kanishka III's successor, Vasudeva II (or III, according to Göbl, coins 555 and 569-70), Kushan ruler of the Indian part of the former Kushan empire. Kanishka III was reigning in 268, and the long-reigned Vasudeva II might have been active in the 280s and 290s (Grenet, 2007, n. 16). If Ardašīr Kushanshah is to be dated to an earlier period, Pērōz's attacks in Gandhāra might have been a Sasanian political and military answer to the Kushan's involvement in the ill-fated revolt of the Sasanian Hormozd in 283.

Pērōz I Kushanshah was succeeded by a Hormozd Kushanshah, who seems to have added Marv to his dominion and created there coins closely modeled on those of [Hormozd II](#) (r. 303-09); in turn, some characteristics of these coins were later copied by [Šāpūr II](#)'s (r. 309-79) Marv coinage. As coins of Hormozd II had been minted in Marv, Hormozd Kushanshah could not have expanded his power there before 305 at the earliest, and most probably during the minority of Šāpūr II. He was certainly a very important political rival to the Sasanians. Indeed, Arabic sources do mention attacks on the Sasanian empire during the minority of Šāpūr II (Carter, 1985, p. 273). Hormozd Kushanshah minted coins also in Balkh. His coins minted in Marv, which had never been within the Kushan empire, bear the title of "Kushan king of kings," indicating his power and independence from the Sasanians. Hormozd was succeeded by Pērōz II Kushanshah, ruling over the same territory.

The kingdom of the Kushanshahs. We do not have a global idea of the economy of the former Kushan territories during the Kushano-Sasanian period. Surveys of the archaeology and ceramics of eastern Bactria do not show any decline in settlement and irrigation during this period (Lyonnet, 1997, pp. 242-52). Similarly, the importance of the Kushano-Sasanian merchants in the trade with China does not seem to have declined (La Vaissière, 2005, chap. 3), while the quality of the Bactrian gold coins also remained high.

As regards religion, we do not know whether the strict orthodoxy promoted by [Kartir](#) was applied to the conquered territories. If Kartir's inscription at the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt, with its claim to have destroyed Buddhist and Brahmanic temples, is to be taken at face value, this should have been the case up to Bahrām II, especially in the Sasanians' eastern territories. Indeed, the Sasanian graffiti on the walls of the Kara Tepe monastery in Termez might be dated to Kartir's period of power, if the dates they give are in the Bactrian era (the first, in Bactrian, gives the date 35/257-58 CE, and the second, in Pahlavi, gives the date 61/283-84 CE; see Lukonin, 1969 and Livshits, 1975). However the idea that the Buddhist stupas of Marv might have been destroyed during



this period is no longer acceptable, as the Buddhist presence there has been re-dated to the 5th century CE (Callieri, 1996). In fact, some of the non-Zoroastrian Bactrian temples known from excavations, for instance, those of Takht-e Sangin or of [Delbarjin](#), continued well after the Kushan period. The Great goddess Ardwakhš (*Ardoxšo*, i.e., “the Good [Aši](#)”), who is very important on the late Kushan coinage, is still regarded as the frontier guard of the Kushan country according to a 3rd-century Manichean source of Kushano-Sasanian date (Sundermann, p. 72); she is also depicted on the coins of Pērōz, presenting him with the Kushan tiara. Although the Kushanshahs entitled themselves “Mazdean lord” (*mazdēsn bay*), they retain on their coins the depiction of [Vayu](#) (*Oēšo*) in the form of Shiva, naming him *burzāwand yazd* (the god who possesses the heights), which could be understood by both religions (Grenet, 2015, p. 30). More generally, a Sasanian influence is perceptible in the form of Pahlavi vocabulary that is attested in the Bactrian documents (listed in Sims-Williams, 2002, pp. 232-33).

Šāpūr II, the Kushanshahs, and the invaders. After the minority of Šāpūr II, that is, in the late 320s or 330s, the Sasanians took direct control of Gandhāra, as is proved by the coinage. There, the coinage of Pērōz II Kushanshah was directly followed by that of Šāpūr II. In Bactria and Marv, another Hormozd succeeded Pērōz, and then a ruler called Warahrān (Mid. Pers. form of Bahrām). Later in Šāpūr II’s reign, the Sasanians retook Marv. Warahrān must have reigned longer in Bactria, as some crowns are displayed on his coinage there which are unknown on the coins from the mint of Marv. This, however, might be a second Warahrān reigning in Bactria only. A ‘Warahrān the great Kushanshah’ is mentioned in an undated Bactrian document (doc. ba, Sims-Williams, 2007, p. 52), most likely from the first half of the 4th century.

The nomadic invasion which took place in the middle of the 4th century marked the end of the Kushanshahs (La Vaissière, 2005b, 2007). Indeed, it is possible that Šāpūr II’s attempts at control in Marv were an initial measure undertaken by the Sasanians to recentralize control of the northeastern frontier, which faced a mounting nomadic menace. The former buffer state of the Kushanshahs might have been simply too weak by this date.

[Ammianus Marcellinus](#) mentions some wars of the Sasanians on the eastern front. In 356, Šāpūr II had to winter in the country of the [Chionites](#) and the Euseni (read Kuseni), while by 359 an alliance had taken place between the Huns and the Sasanians (Amm. Marc., 16.9, 18.6). This alliance proved to be short-lived, and the Armenian sources next mention that, between 368 and the



death of Šāpūr II (379), the Sassanians were routed in the east on several occasions by a “king of the Kushans” reigning at Balkh (Faustus of Byzantium, V, vii and V, xxxvii, tr. Garsoïan, 1989, pp. 187-98 and 217-18). In this text “Kushan” simply means a power holding Bactria.

By then, the Sasanian Kushanshahs were no longer controlling Bactria. Their title was taken by others, as is demonstrated by the coinage, although there still might have been Kushano-Sasanian rulers in [Kapisa](#) and some parts of Gandhāra. Coins with the name Warahrān were minted well into the 5th century, up to the time of the Sasanian [Pērōz](#) (r. 459-84), by rulers described as Hunnic in the sources. The dynasty of the [Kidārites](#), which traced its origin to the great invasion of the middle of the 4th century, was especially prone to make use of the title of Kushanshah, as is attested both by the Chinese sources and by coins. A Kidarite seal recently published associates the title of King of the Huns with that of Kushanshah (Rahman et al., 2006). This dynasty was certainly characterized by a clear policy of urban planning and could claim a political link with the sedentary local past (Grenet, 1996). The Kidarite dynasty was the last to make use of the title of Kushanshah; it was avoided by the [Hephthalites](#), who thus distanced themselves politically from their defeated predecessors (Grenet, 2002; La Vaissière, 2003; for the vexed question of the Kidarite chronology, see Cribb, 2010, who reaffirms the traditional 4th-century date without taking any notice of the Byzantine and Chinese texts, which place the Kidarites in the 420s to 460s).

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