

Kushan Empire

[UPSC History Notes]

Go through the highlighted points about the Kushan Empire and Kushan Dynasty for the UPSC Exam.

Kushan Empire & Kushan Dynasty	Details
Founder of Kushan Dynasty	Kujula Kadphises
Kushan Period	1st century CE–3rd century CE
Kushan Empire Religion	Majorly Greek and Buddhism.
Kushan Dynasty Kings	Kujula Kadphises or Kadphises, Vima Kadphises, Kanishka, Huvishka, Vasudeva I
Kushan Coins	Majorly made of gold; more than 30 different gods appear ranging from different religions.
Who was the Last Kushan Ruler	Vasudeva I

Founder of Kushan Dynasty

The founders of the Kushana empire were the Hsi-hou (Yuvaga or leaders) of Kuei-Shuang (Kushana), perhaps a clan which was a part of Ta Yueh-chin or the Great Hueh-chin people. The Chinese chronicles, the Ch'ien Han-Shu and the Hon Han-Shu mention the Ta-hsia was divided among five Hsi-hou (Yuvaga or leaders) of Ta-Yueh-chin. One of these Hsi-hou was of Kuei- Shuang (Kushana).

- The first known Kushana ruler was Miaos (Eraos), who was independent. Kujula Kadphises succeeded Miaos, either immediately or sometime later.
- Kujula captured the Kabul area from Arsacids (the imperial Parthians) and Chi-pin from the Indo Parthians.
- The Hon Han-Shu further says that Kujula died at the ripened age of more than eighty, and he was succeeded by his son Vima Kadphises (known in Chinese chronicles as Yen-Kao-Chen).

The Founder of the Kushan Dynasty should be covered thoroughly for both the UPSC Prelims and the UPSC Mains as questions are asked from this topic specifically.



Kushan Dynasty Kings

The significance of the Kushana realm in the political history of the subcontinent and its north-western borderlands is enormous. Due to the political integration of the region and massive empire, the Kushana Empire is sometimes also called the Central Asian Empire.

The list of Kushan Dynasty Kings important for the UPSC Exam is as follows:

Kujula Kadphises or Kadphises

- The foundation of the Kushan Empire in India was laid by the first Yuezhi chief Kujula Kadphises.
- His reign stretched over Kandahar, Kabul, and Afghanistan.
- Vima Taktu or Sadashkana, Kadphises's son succeeded him (80 C.E. -95 C.E.). Vima Taktu expanded the Kushan Empire to the northwest of India.

Vima Kadphises

- Vima Kadphises (113 CE to 127 CE) was one of the Kushan Dynasty Kings. According to the Rabatak inscription, he was the son of Vima Takto and the father of the great ruler, Kanishka.

- Vima Kadphises was the first ruler to issue gold coins extensively, due to the favourable trade conditions between Rome and the Indian subcontinent at the time.
- He was a devotee of Shiva, which can be seen from the coins he issued.
- The king's name is engraved in both Greek and Kharoshti on the Kadphises series of coins. The coins show bi-scriptalism
- The coins issued by Vima Kadphises throw light upon the state, polity, administration, religious ties, and the trade processes of the Kushan Empire during his reign.

Kushan Dynasty Kings - Kanishka

- Kanishka (127 CE – 150 CE) was the son of Vima Kadphises and is considered the greatest Kushana Dynasty king.
- According to the Rabatak inscription, upon his accession, Kanishka ruled over a huge territory of all of northern India, south to Ujjain and Kundina, and east beyond Pataliputra.
- Under him, the Kushan empire included Peshawar, Gandhara, Pataliputra, Oudh, Kashmir, and Mathura. The Kushan kingdom also comprised parts of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
- Kanishka administered his territory from two capitals, Purushapura (now Pakistan) and Mathura, in northern India. Though the main capital was Purushapura.
- It was at Purushapura where Kanishka adopted Buddhism and became its zealous patron. He is claimed to have taken the Buddhist monk Ashvaghosha to Purushapura after capturing Pataliputra.
- Kanishka patronized Buddhism, which is evident through his coins, which contain a mix of Indian, Greek, and Zoroastrian deities. He was tolerant of all religions.
- He summoned the fourth Buddhist Council at Kundalvana in Kashmir. The fourth Buddhist council was held in Sanskrit.
- He patronized the Greek engineer Agesilaus, and scholars in his court included Parsva, Ashvaghosha, Vasumitra, Nagarjuna, Charaka, and Mathara.
- The Gandhara School of Art flourished under Kanishka and he propagated the Mahayana form of Buddhism.

Huvishka

- Huvishka (150 CE – 180 CE) was the emperor of the Kushan Empire from the death of Kanishka until the succession of Vasudeva I.
- His rule was a period of consolidation for the Empire.
- The Kushan reign under him seems to have been peaceful, consolidating Kushan power in northern India, and moving the center of the Kushan Empire to the southern capital city of Mathura.

Vasudeva I

- Vasudeva I (190 CE- 230 CE) was the last of the Great Kushans.
- He was the last great Kushan emperor, and the end of his rule coincided with the invasion of the Sasanians as far as northwestern India.

- The decline of the Kushana Empire started during his reign.

Kushan Empire Religion

The Kushan Dynasty was influenced by the Hellenistic kingdoms and maintained a wide variety of faiths, including Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

- The Kushans are thought to have mostly followed Zoroastrianism, one of the world's earliest monotheistic religions founded by the Prophet Zoroaster.
- But after Kanishka, they turned towards Buddhism.
- Kanishka, under his reign, founded a number of monasteries, erected many Stupas and Buddhist temples, and encouraged the missionary activities of Buddhist monks.
- It was under his rule that Buddhism began to spread widely in Central Asia and China.

The reign of Huvishka corresponds to the first known epigraphic evidence of the Buddha Amitabha, on the bottom part of a 2nd-century statue found in Govindo-Nagar, and now at the Mathura Museum.

Kushan Dynasty Decline

After the death of Vasudeva I in 225 CE, the Kushan Empire was divided into western and eastern halves. The western Kushans in Afghanistan was conquered by the Persian Sassanid Empire. The eastern Kushan Empire was based in Punjab, and the territories on the Gangetic Plain became independent under local dynasties, such as the Yaudheyas. In the mid-4th century, they were subjugated by the Gupta Empire under its leader, Samudragupta.