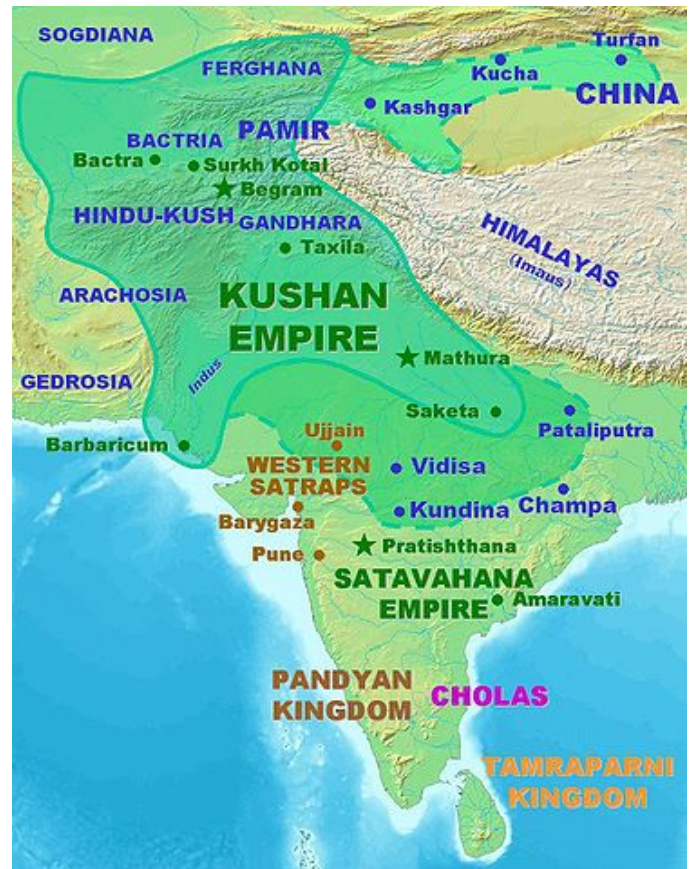


EXPANSION AND DECLINE OF THE KUSHAN EMPIRE

The Kushan Empire was an empire in South Asia originally formed in the early 1st century CE in the territories of ancient Bactria around the Oxus River. The Kushans spread from the Kabul River Valley to defeat other Central Asian tribes that had previously conquered parts of the northern central Iranian Plateau once ruled by the Parthians, and reached their peak under the Buddhist emperor Kanishka (127–151 CE), whose realm stretched from Turfan in the Tarim Basin to Pataliputra on the Gangetic Plain.



Origins of the Kushan Empire (30–375 CE)

The Kushans were one of five branches of the Yuezhi confederation, an Indo-European nomadic people. The Yuezhi had been living in the arid grasslands of eastern Central Asia's Tarim Basin, in modern-day Xinjiang, China, possibly speaking varieties of Indo-European languages, until they were driven west by the Xiongnu in 176–160 BCE. The Yuezhi reached the Greco-Bactrian kingdom (in northern Afghanistan and Uzbekistan) around 135 BCE. The displaced Greek dynasties resettled to the southeast in areas of the Hindu Kush and the Indus basin (in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan), occupying the western part of the Indo-Greek Kingdom. The Kushans spread from Bactria to defeat other Central Asian tribes.



Expansion of the Kushan Empire

As they wrested territories from the Scythian tribes, the Kushans expanded south into the region traditionally known as Gandhara and established the twin capitals Kapisa and Pushklavati near modern-day Kabul and Peshawar, respectively. During the 1st and early 2nd centuries CE, the Kushans expanded across the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent. Around 152 CE, the emperor Kanishka sent his armies north of the Karakoram mountains to capture territories as far as Kashgar, Khotan and Yarkant, in the Tarim Basin of modern-day Xinjiang, China. A direct road from Gandhara to China was opened which remained under Kushan control for more than 100 years. The security offered by the Kushans encouraged travel across the Khunjerab Pass and facilitated the spread of Mahayana Buddhism to China.

Trade and commerce with other empires

The Kushan dynasty had diplomatic contacts with the Roman Empire, Sassanid Persia, Aksumite Empire, and Han China. Although philosophy, art, and science was created within its borders, the

only textual record we have of the empire's history today comes from inscriptions and accounts in other languages, particularly Chinese. The stability offered by the Kushan Empire linked the seagoing trade of the Indian Ocean with the commerce of the Silk Road via the Indus Valley. At the height of the dynasty, the Kushans loosely ruled a territory that extended to the Aral Sea through present-day Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into northern India.

Religion

The Kushans are believed to have been predominantly Zoroastrian, but adopted aspects of Buddhist culture. Like the Egyptians, they absorbed the strong remnants of the Greek Culture of the Hellenistic Kingdoms. Kushan emperors represented a wide variety of faiths including Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and possibly Saivism, a sect of Hinduism.

Decline of the Kushan Empire

After the death of the emperor Vasudeva I in 225, the Kushan empire split into western and eastern halves.

The Western Kushans (in Afghanistan) were soon conquered by the Persian Sassanid Empire. In 248 CE they were defeated again by the Persians, who deposed the Western dynasty and replaced them with Persian vassals known as the Indo-Sassanids (or Kushanshas).

The Eastern Kushan kingdom was based in the Punjab. Around 270 CE, their 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 Samudragupta. The last of the Kushan and Sassanian kingdoms were eventually overwhelmed by the Hephthalites, another Indo-European people from the north.



Source: Bounless.com (adapted)

QUESTIONS: Answer the following questions based on the reading and on your prior knowledge on loose leaf in full sentences

1. What is the origin of the Kushans? What events prompted them to create a South Asian empire?
2. The reading mentions the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. From what you have learned in class, how did Greeks from Europe wind up in Bactria?
3. Examine the Buddhist religious image (third). How can you tell there is Greek influence?
4. How did the Kushans help the Mahayana form of Buddhism to spread to China?
5. With whom did the Kushans trade, and what crucial role did they play in facilitating trade?
6. While the Kushans were predominantly Zoroastrian, they absorbed aspects of many different states and cultures. Do you think that this cultural and religious diversity was helpful or harmful to their empire? Explain your view.
7. What events led to the decline of the Kushan Empire?