

RELIGIONS IN THE KUSHAN EMPIRE*

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Religious life in Bactria before the Kushan conquest

On the eve of the nomadic invasions of the second century B.C. religious life in Bactria and the adjacent territories was characterized by a number of religious beliefs and cults of different origin. Zoroastrianism played an important role among the Iranian-speaking population, and the teaching of Zoroaster had conquered the eastern Iranian territories before Alexander's conquest¹ even though many remains of pre-Zoroastrian religious ideas and cults probably survived. The traditions of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion, however, prevailed in the territories north of the Oxus and to a greater extent among the Iranian nomadic tribes of the steppes. The Zoroastrian calendar had already been adopted in Persia, Parthia, Bactria and Chorasmia,² while the Sogdian system of month names

* See Map 4

¹ Gnoli, 1980, pp. 215 et seq., pp. 227 et seq.

² Harmatta, 1969, pp. 369 et seq.

differs because the majority of pre-Zoroastrian month names were maintained in Sogdiana. In any case there seem to have been some major differences between original Zoroastrianism and later Zoroastrian orthodoxy. The latter, with its iconoclastic tendency which appeared at the end of the Arsacid age, never became firmly established on the territory of eastern Iran, though later, under the influence of Kartir (Kirdar), the *mobed*, great efforts were made to strengthen Zoroastrian ecclesiastical organization and orthodoxy – resulting in the persecution of Christianity, Buddhism and other religions.

At the time of the nomadic invasions, however, Zoroastrian orthodoxy did not yet exist in Bactria. On the contrary, a considerable number of Greek settlers living in the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom formed religious communities worshipping their own gods and practising their own cults. Archaeological finds and the coinage of the Graeco-Bactrian kings attest to worship of the major Greek divinities: Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Helios, Heracles, Dionysus, the Dioscuri, Athena, Artemis, Hecate and Nike. Greek and Iranian religious ideas and cults influenced each other, while Greek religious architecture and art influenced the building of sanctuaries and created the iconography for Iranian deities.

In eastern Iran, as everywhere, the Greeks attempted to understand local religious ideas and to identify local divinities with Greek ones (*interpretatio Graeca*). Zeus was identified with Ahura Mazda, Heracles with Verethragna, Apollo and Helios with Mithra, Artemis with Nana. The Greek interpretation of Iranian divinities to a great extent determined their iconography. Apparently Greek forms of religious worship even influenced Iranian cults. This can be seen in the Greek votive inscription from the sanctuary of the god Oxus at Takht-i Sangin. The inscription was incised on a little stone altar with the bronze figure of Marsyas playing a two-branched flute. The donor bears the Iranian name **Ātrosauka*³ and dedicated his votive present to the god Vaxšu (Oxus). Here, both the believer and the god are Iranian, but the form of worship (the votive altar with the bronze figure of Marsyas and the dedicatory inscription) is Greek, excellent evidence for Graeco-Iranian syncretism in the religious life of Graeco-Bactria.

The spread of Indian religions also began under Graeco-Bactrian rulers at this period. According to the testimony of the Greek and Aramaic versions of the rock edicts of Aśoka (see Chapter 16), the beginning of Buddhist missions to Bactria dates back to the third century B.C. The spread of Buddhism and Brahmanism was due to Indian merchants and craftsmen emigrating to the great centres of Graeco-Bactria (see Chapter 17 and the inscription of the potter Punyamitra from Begram). The Greeks were also open to Indian religious ideas as is attested by the pillar inscription of Heliodoros, the ambassador of King

³ Litvinsky and Sedov, 1984, p 61.

Antialcidas who became a worshipper of Vishnu and erected the Garuda pillar with an inscription in Brāhmī in honour of Vishnu at Besnagar.

Local cults like that of the Oxus played an important role among the Iranian, Indian, Dardic and Kafiri population. The Graeco-Bactrian kings were all aware of the importance of these local cults and sometimes represented an important local god or goddess on their coins. The 'City-Goddess of Kāpiśa' appears on the coins of a late Eucratides in the form of a female deity wearing a turreted crown and seated on a throne. The representation of this city-deity can be compared to that of Zeus seated on the throne (i.e. it is Greek in character), but the elephant to the left and the *caitya* to the right clearly refer to an Indian religious sphere. Thus, if the altar of Ātrosauka furnishes an excellent case for Graeco-Indian religious syncretism, then the figure of the city-deity of Kāpiśa provides first-class testimony for the amalgamation of Graeco-Indian religious ideas. Iranian, Greek and Indian religious cults existed side by side, influencing each other with their rich religious ideas and forms of worship and resulting in religious syncretism which continued to influence religious life after the establishment of Kushan rule in Bactria.

The ancient religion of the Sakas and Kushans

When the Saka and Yüeh-chih tribes arrived in Bactria, they must have had their own religious ideas and cults. For lack of relevant direct evidence, however, it is an arduous task to form an idea of their ancient religion. There can be hardly any doubt that the ancient religion of the Sakas and Kushans was not Zoroastrianism. In spite of some uncertainty in identifying the lands in the list of lands in the first chapter of the *Videvdāt*,⁴ it is clear that neither the former dwelling place of the Sakas nor the ancient home of the Yüeh-chih belonged to the territories where Zoroastrianism spread at an early date. Thus, Saka *urmaysde* (sun), going back to Old Iranian **Ahura-mazdāh-*, cannot be used as evidence for the Zoroastrianism of the Saka tribes. On the contrary, it shows that the name **Ahura-mazdāh-* is pre-Zoroastrian, and this is confirmed by the occurrence in Assyrian sources of the form *Asara Mazas* which reflects the Proto-Iranian form **Asura mazdās-* of the name *Ahura-mazdāh-*.

The Saka and the Assyrian evidence clearly supports the assumption that **Asuramazdās-* was a pre-Zoroastrian divinity of the Iranian tribes with a strong solar character which led to the semantic development *Ahura-mazdāh-* > *urmaysde* 'sun' in Saka.⁵ Consequently, there can hardly be any doubt that the Kushans already worshipped Ahura Mazda before

⁴ Gnoli, 1980, pp. 23 et seq.

⁵ Steblin-Kamenskiy, 1981, p. 238.

their acquaintance with Zoroastrianism in form of a god of heaven with strong solar features. Beside Ahura Mazda the pre-Zoroastrian worship of Mithra, Aryaman, Vayu, Aša, Yama, Verethragna, Spenta Ārmaitiš and the cult of Hauma are attested by linguistic evidence. It is questionable, however, whether the same religious ideas, gods and cults existed throughout all the extensive territory inhabited by the Iranian tribes in pre-Zoroastrian times. It seems, for example, that the worship of Mithra, Aryaman, Vayu and Yama was not known among the Iranian nomads of Central Asia and was consequently also unknown among the Sakas and Kushans, while the cult of Ahura Mazda and Spenta Ārmaitiš can probably be assumed on the basis of Saka *urmaysde* ‘sun’ and *śśandrāmata* ‘name of a goddess’.

Differences in religion between the Iranian nomadic peoples are clearly shown by Herodotus who attests the worship of Zeus, Ge, Apollo, Aphrodite Urania, Poseidon, Hercules and Ares (according to the *interpretatio Graeca*) among the Scythians (IV. 59), while he emphasizes (I.216) that the Massagetae of Central Asia only worship the sun. Consequently the pre-Zoroastrian religion, which we deduce from the evidence of common Indo-Iranian (Avestan and Rigvedic) religious terminology, probably flourished only in the eastern territories, adjacent to the area inhabited by the ancient Indian tribes, while the religion of the northern Iranian nomads living in eastern Europe and Central Asia may have had other peculiar features.

Thus, instead of the cult of Hauma, the cult of Hemp is attested among the Scythian tribes. On the basis of Pashto *ōmə*, ‘name of a plant’, Munji *yūmenä*, ‘name of a plant’ (< **haumana-*), Wakhī *yimik*, ‘Ephedra’ (< **haumaka-*, cf. *yīr* ‘sun’ < **hūr*) again we can perhaps count with the existence among the eastern Iranian tribes, Sakas and Kushans of the Hauma cult in pre-Zoroastrian times. Vayu is attested by Ossetian *vayuk*, ‘giant, devil’ (< **vayuka-*) and the Alanian personal name *Vayuk* (inscription of Ladánybene, fourth century A.D. in runic script) for the north-western Iranian nomads. On the other hand the north-eastern tribes preserved a rich pre-Zoroastrian religious terminology, surviving in Khotan Saka, Southern Saka and in the language of the Kushans (see Chapter 16). The most important are the following: Khotan Saka *vvuva-*, ‘god’ < *βaya-*, *gyays-*, *jays-*, ‘to sacrifice’, *gyasta-*, ‘god’; Southern Saka *jasta-*, ‘god’ < **yazata-*; Khotan Saka *dyū-*, ‘demon’ < **daiva-*, which also was known according to the testimony of Ossetic *äv-deu* ‘evil spirit’, among the north-western Iranian nomads.

Essentially the Sakas and Kushans who invaded Graeco-Bactria may have had similar religious ideas and cults to the population of Sogdiana and Bactria in pre-Zoroastrian times. They probably worshipped *Ahuramazdāh* as ‘God of Heaven’ with solar features and *Śvantā Ārmatī* as ‘Goddess of Earth’. They were acquainted with several categories

of divine beings such as *daivas*, *yazatas* and *bagas*; and used the verb *yaz-* as a term for sacrifice and worship, and the words *baga-spāsika-* and *bagana-pati-* to denote different categories of priests.

The epoch of the Kushan *yabghus*

When the Sakas and Kushans conquered the Graeco-Bactrian territories north of the Oxus, they found manifestations of Greek religious life, religious architecture, sculpture, ideas and worship. If the first centre of the Kushan *yabghu* can really be identified with Khalchayan in the Surkhan Darya valley, the finds discovered there will enable us to follow step by step the formation and development of the religious life and religious policy of the Kushan rulers. On the coins of the first-known Kushan *yabghu*, Sanab, the spelling *HIAOY*, previously read erroneously as *Heraïou* or *Miaïou*, is not the name, but the title of the ruler, and should be read as *hyau*, representing the most archaic form of the title *yau*, *yavu*, *yabgu*. Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, already appears. Apparently the Kushan aristocracy tried to adopt the royal ideology of the Graeco-Bactrian kings and its religious implications. It is therefore no accident that in the sculptural decoration of the Kushan manor-house at Khalchayan the enthroned ruler and his wife appear again with Nike.⁶ It is a remarkable fact that Nike is represented in the company of a bearded god with a radiate halo and the Hellenistic Mithra. Beside Nike and the bearded god, a sculpture of Athena was also discovered at Khalchayan. If the bearded god can be identified with Zeus, who also has a radiate halo on the local copies of coins of Heliocles, then we obtain an interesting insight into Graeco-Bactrian–Kushan religious syncretism. Zeus with a radiate halo was obviously interpreted as the pre-Zoroastrian Kushan–Saka Ahura Mazda of solar character, that is, the Greek sculptor created an iconography that expressed both Graeco-Bactrian and Kushan religious ideas. It is noteworthy that beside the Greek winged Nike and the Graeco-Kushan Zeus/Ahura Mazda, the Hellenistic Mithra represents a third type of Graeco-Iranian syncretism. The Kushans may already have been acquainted with the cult of Mithra in Sogdiana before they invaded Bactria proper, because the name of an Iranian noble (*Sisi-miθra-*, ‘devoted to Mithra’) provides evidence for the cult of Mithra on territory north of the Oxus in the time of Alexander the Great. The figure of Mithra wearing a Phrygian cap from Khalchayan recalls the representation of the Western Mithra – the Graeco-Roman Mithras – and was the result of Graeco-Iranian syncretism which the sculptor adapted to the Kushan Mithra. The presence of Nike on coins of Sanab, the first Kushan *yabghu*, and in his manor-house at Khalchayan is clear evidence for the existence

⁶ Pugachenkova, 1966, p. 187.

of a goddess of victory who was called either Nike or Vanindo in the royal ideology of the Kushan rulers before the rise of the Great Kushans.

The coinage of the next Kushan ruler, Kujula Kadphises, enables us to see how the religious horizon of the Kushans was enlarged. His first issue, which has the debased portrait and name of Hermaeus on the obverse, shows Heracles on the reverse, still following the Greek tradition, even though Heracles may be the *interpretatio Graeca* of the Iranian god Verethragna. On the reverse, however, the legend is already written in Kharoṣṭhī script: *Kujula Kasasa Kuṣana yavugasa dhramaṭhīdasa* ‘of Kujula Kasa, the Kushan *yabghu*, who is steadfast in the Law’. The epithet *dhramaṭhīda-* < *dharmasṭhita-* ‘steadfast in the Law’ of Kujula Kadphises occurs in fuller form in the legend of a later issue, namely *sacadhramathīṭa-* < *satyadharmasṭhita-* ‘steadfast in the true Law’. Contrary to earlier assumptions, which regarded Kujula Kadphises as Buddhist on the basis of this epithet, it is now clear from the wording of a Mathura inscription,⁷ in which Huvishka bears the same epithet *satyadharmasṭhita* that the kingdom was conferred upon him by Śarva and Ścaṃḍavira (*Caṇḍavīra*), that is, he was a devotee of Śiva. It is striking to see that Kujula Kadphises has already adopted the worship of Śiva and the use of Kharoṣṭhī script at such an early date. We must not, however, forget that the spread of Indian religious ideas and cults to the north-west as well as the use of Gāndhārī Prakrit and Kharoṣṭhī script had already begun under the Graeco-Bactrians. The Indo-Greeks from the time of Apollodotus I, Antimachus and Menander had regularly struck coins with Gāndhārī Prakrit legends and the later Eucratides had used the city-goddess of Kāpiśa as a reverse coin type.

The spread of Indian religions, scripts and languages to Bactria presupposes the migration there of Indian merchants and craftsmen. They were attracted by the quickly developing new Graeco-Bactrian cities and the favourable prospects of long-distance trade opened up by the Greek kingdom of Bactria and later by the Kushans. If the importance of trade between India and Pontus was already clear to Antiochus I, the decisive significance of trade between India and China through Central Asia must have been even clearer for the Graeco-Bactrian and Kushan rulers. This explains their ambition to acquire and control the Silk Route. According to the report of Aristobulos (quoted by Strabo XI.7.3), the Oxus river was navigable and many Indian goods were transported on it as far as the Hyrcanian Sea, and from there to Albania and the Pontic region. The importance of Indian trade down the Oxus river and the activity of Indian merchants and craftsmen along this important trading route gave the Kushan *yabghus* strong reason to prefer Indian religious worship and to use Indian scripts and languages. The share of Indian merchants was also important in the silk trade between India and China, which began to flourish from just this period.

⁷ Lüders, 1961, pp. 138 et seq.

From the first century B.C., corporations of Indian merchants were formed in Xumdān, the Chinese capital, clear evidence of the close trading relations between these two great and rich nations. When the Kushans conquered Transoxania they became masters of the initial section of the Silk Route, and it was almost a historical necessity that Kujula Kadphises, the founder of the Kushan Empire, began to prefer the cult of Śīva. None the less, Greek religious ideas and Greek religious iconography remained important for the Kushan dynasty. When, after his victories, Kujula Kadphises assumed the title *mahārāja rājatirāja* (Great King, King of Kings) in his coin legends, he used the winged Nike as the reverse type of the issue.

Religious life under Vima Kadphises

At the time when Vima Kadphises became Kushan emperor, religious life can be characterized by two interesting features. One is the adoption of the forms of Greek religious art and the Greek iconographic interpretation of Kushan divinities. It is very likely that the Kushan gods Ohromazdo, Vanindo, Mihro and Ořlagno lie behind the Greek iconographical garb of Zeus, Nike, Mithra and Heracles – further evidence for the strong influence of Greek religious ideas and forms before the rise of the Great Kushans. The other striking feature is the strong orientation towards Indian religions and the worship of Śīva in particular. It is, therefore, not surprising that the cult of Śīva became even more prominent under Vima Kadphises, who conquered considerable territories in India. His coinage gives clear evidence of this, as Śīva, or Śīva with Nandi, appears as the reverse type of all his issues.

In some coin legends Vima has the epithet *maheśvara* which, being a typical name of Śīva, can hardly be taken in the sense of ‘the great lord’ and refer to Vima himself; but as Kharoṣṭhī script did not indicate long vowels, it can more probably be interpreted as *māheśvara* ‘worshipper of Śīva’. Archaeological and epigraphic finds also attest the leaning of Vima towards the cult of Śīva. At Dil-berjin, the temple of the Dioscuri, built in Graeco-Bactrian times, was transformed by Vima Kadphises into a sanctuary of Śīva and decorated with a wall-painting representing Śīva and Parvatī (see Chapter 15, Fig. 9). According to the fragmentary Bactrian inscription D 1 (see Chapter 17), Vima Kadphises probably had the wall-painting of Oēšo (Śīva) prepared, and gave orders that the priest of the stronghold and the master of the hunt should take care of the sanctuary and cult. It is clear from the long Bactrian inscription D 2 (see Chapter 17) that Vima Kadphises probably had craftsmen brought from Ujjayinī (modern Ujjain) to construct a water conduit to the sanctuary of Śīva. According to the Bactrian inscription DN 1, Vima Kadphises again ordered the town Andēzo (Lrapho = Qunduz) to retain the tax

it collected and use it for the sanctuary and the warlike divinity (see Chapter 17). The fragmentary Brāhmī inscription on the pedestal of a statue from Tōkrī Tīlā, near Mat, speaks more precisely about the relation between the god Śiva and the Kushan king: ... *satyadharmasthitasyananayatsarvaścaṇḍavīrātisṛṣṭarājyasya* ... ‘who is steadfast in the true Law, on whom, on account of his devotion, the kingdom was conferred by Sarva and Ścaṇḍavira’.⁸ Thus, the Kushan king ascribed his rise to power to Sarva (= Śiva) and Caṇḍavīra (who may be the same god as Candīśvara, the god of the Mahākāla temple at Ujjain, probably a special form of Śiva). Because the circle of gods around Śiva have a warlike character, it is very likely that the phrase *iazado i karisaro* ‘the warlike divinity’ also denoted Śiva.

This devotion of Vima Kadphises to Śiva could have both personal and political reasons. The great commander and conqueror may himself have felt an attraction towards the warlike god Śiva and the war-gods in his ambience. It is noteworthy that Vima bears the epithet *mahozinigo* ‘protégé of the moon [god]’ in his inscription DN 1 (see Chapter 17), and it seems that originally the divine patron of the Kushan dynasty was the ancient Iranian moon god. In view of the close connection between Śiva and the moon, dynastic religious ideas may have also suggested to Vima the choice of Śiva as his divine patron. In political terms, both in the preparations for his Indian campaign and during the campaign itself Vima Kadphises may have received valuable support from groups of the Indian population who worshipped Śiva. A number of Indian settlements already existed on the territory of eastern Iran at the time, and the Parthian ostraca from Nisa show that there was an Indian settlement called Hindu-gān in the neighbourhood of the ancient Parthian capital. Consequently the support of the Indian population of his kingdom may have been important for Vima both before and during his Indian campaign. The emergence of Caṇḍavīra/Candīśvara, the god of the Mahākāla temple at Ujjain, among the divine patrons of Vima probably bears witness to the assistance he received from the priesthood of Śiva there. The mention of ‘Ujjayinī’ in his inscription D2 reflects the importance of relations with Ujjain and its cult of Śiva, maintained by Vima Kadphises even after his Indian campaign

A peculiar feature of the iconography of Śiva adopted for the reverse on coins of Vima Kadphises permits us to think of some local factors in the spread of the cult. On some of Vima’s coins Śiva is shown with tongues of flame rising from his head, a phenomenon otherwise unknown in Śiva iconography. The male figure with five-rayed head, on the reverse of the early issues of the Mithra kings of Pañcāla, is clearly different and cannot have been a model for the flaming-head Śiva on coins of Vima Kadphises. In Indian mythology, it is the god Yama who was imagined with flaming hair. Moreover, it should be remembered

⁸ Lüders, 1961, pp. 138 et scq.

that Yama (*Imrā* < *Yama rājā*) is the principal god of the Kafir tribes. We must therefore reckon with the possibility that the iconography of Śiva was also influenced by local religious ideas, belonging originally to Yama, worshipped by the local Kafirs, and that this syncretism also contributed to the spread of his cult.

The Kushan kings derived their royal power from divine patrons, and so they were charismatic kings, human incarnations of divine might and power. As a consequence of their charisma, they also became objects of divine worship in dynastic sanctuaries. Vima Kadphises began the construction of two such centres of the royal cult, one at Mat, near Mathura, the other in Surkh Kotal. The construction of the sanctuary⁹ at Mat was executed by Humaṣpala, the *baganapati* (curator of the temple), according to the record incised between the feet of a colossal seated figure of Vima Kadphises, whose name appears in the form Vema Takpisa (earlier reading, Vema Takṣuma). The same form of his name also occurs in the Bactrian inscription DH 1 (Ooēmo Takpiso). Beside the temple, a garden, a tank, a well, an assembly hall and a gateway were constructed. In Surkh Kotal, however, only the preparatory work began during the reign of Vima. According to the unfinished inscription (SK 2, see Chapter 17), he had a canal dug there to assure the water supply for building operations, which were probably continued and finished by his successor Kanishka.

The religious policy of Kanishka I

The accession of Kanishka marked essential changes in the religious life of the Kushan kingdom. While in the interest of his Indian conquest, Vima Kadphises had given preference to the worship of Śiva in his religious policy, his successor Kanishka put Bactria and its Iranian religious cults at the centre of his religious policy. He continued and finished building the dynastic sanctuary at Surkh Kotal. If the restoration of the fragmentary building inscription (monumental wall inscription SK 1) is correct, the construction of the stronghold and the great staircase as well as Temple A was finished in four years. The sanctuary bore the name ‘Kanishka Oanindo-sanctuary’ but according to the Bactrian inscriptions SK 4A, 4B, 4M this name was only given later, in Year 31, when the sanctuary was renovated and enlarged (see Chapter 17). So Temple A may originally have been used for the cult of the dynastic divinities on the reverse of his first coin issues, namely, Helios, Selene, Hephaistos and Nanaia.

⁹ Called *devakula* in the building inscription; see Lüders, 1961, p. 135.

While the first issues minted by Kanishka still bore Greek legends, they were subsequently replaced by Bactrian legends. Correspondingly, instead of the Greek gods the Iranian Mioro, Mao, Aθšo and Nana appeared.

In this phenomenon we do not have a change in the religious cult of the Kushan royal court, merely the omission of the Greek interpretation of their dynastic gods. The representation of Mioro, Mao, Aθšo and Nana is identical with the earlier forms of Helios, Selene, Hephaistos and Artemis Nanaia. The coincidence is particularly striking in the case of Selene, who appears as a male divinity, with the iconography of the Greek moon goddess applied to the male Iranian moon god. Obviously, the Kushan Helios, Selene, Hephaistos and Nanaia do not represent the Greek deities Helios, Selene, Hephaistos and Nanaia, but are the Iranian gods Mihro, Maho, Aθšo and Nana, divine patrons of the Kushan dynasty, who appeared according to the *interpretatio Graeca* bearing Greek divine names and in Greek iconography.

The first of them, Mihro, was already represented at Khalchayan as patron god of the first Kushan *yabghu*, Sanab. On the basis of the epithet *mahozinigo*, borne by Vima Kadphises in the Bactrian inscription DN 1 ‘protégé of the moon god’, Maho also belonged to the group of the Kushan dynastic deities. As concerns Aθšo-Hephaistos, probably the Kushans also had their dynastic fire as did the Arsacids and Sasanians, and this was placed on the platform of Temple A at Surkh Kotal. Possibly the dynastic fire cult was taken over by the Kushans from the Arsacids in the same manner as the title ‘King of Kings’.¹⁰

The origin of Nana worship points in the same direction. According to the evidence of the Parthian ostraca from Nisa, a Nana sanctuary also existed in the ancient Parthian capital and royal residence. Very probably the cult of Nana arrived from Parthia. The evidence for the Nana sanctuary at Nisa is scanty and does not throw any direct light on the relation of the Nana cult to the Arsacid dynasty, but the existence of a Nana sanctuary in the Parthian royal residence makes it likely that Nana was also one of the divine patrons of the Arsacid dynasty. West Iranian religious influence can be seen among the Saka tribes who borrowed some Zoroastrian terms from the Parthians (e.g. *den* ‘religion’, *arta* < Old Iranian *arθya-*, Avestan *ašya-* ‘pious’, *ādu-* < Old Iranian *artavan-*, Avestan *ašavan-*). The phonetic form of these terms clearly supports a borrowing from Parthian and excludes a local ‘Bactrian’ origin.

The emergence of the names, Mioro, Mao, Aθšo and Nana, instead of the corresponding Greek names, Helios, Selene, Hephaistos, Nanaia, on the reverse of the coins struck by Kanishka was made possible by the creation of the Bactrian writing system based on the Greek alphabet during the reign of Vima Kadphises. The possibility of writing

¹⁰ Harmatta, 1965, p. 171.

Bactrian enabled Kanishka to replace Greek with Bactrian legends on the coins, and to set up inscriptions written in Bactrian. As a consequence of this development, the Iranian gods removed the Greek-language disguise and appeared with their Iranian names. Even the names of the genuine Greek gods became slightly Bactrianized, the Greek word-ending being replaced by a Bactrian one.

While the development of a Bactrian script made it possible to replace Greek with Iranian names, it alone cannot explain the preference given by Kanishka and his successors to the Iranian divinities. Because the worship of the Iranian gods prevailed first in the territory of Bactria, the predominance of the Bactrian cults in the religious policy of Kanishka I also indicates the increased interest of the Kushan king in the western part of his empire – the home territory of Bactria. Behind this new orientation, we can note the strengthening of the Parthian kingdom during the second century A.D. when Parthia became a permanent threat to the Kushans.

None the less, the importance of India and the Indian religions, especially the worship of Śiva, remained unchanged. Kanishka has a reverse type representing Śiva with the name Oēṣo < Old Indian *Vṛṣa* > Prakrit *Veṣa* identifying the god by an inscription for the first time. If Mīro, Mao, Aθṣo and Nana were the ancient divine patrons of the Kushan dynasty, then Śiva had belonged to the same group of gods since the reign of Vima Kadphises. Consequently, reverse types of the coin issues of Kanishka represent primarily the dynastic pantheon of the Kushan king, to the worship of which the sanctuary of Surkh Kotal was dedicated.

Religious life under the 'triple' kingship

The successor of Kanishka seems to have been his son Vāsishka, who, according to the inscription of Kamra, was the great-grandson of Kujula Kadphises and ruled jointly together with his first-born son, Kanishka II. At the same time, on the basis of a fragmentary inscription from Mathura,¹¹ we can state that the grandfather of Huvishka was Vima Kadphises. If, therefore, Kanishka I was the son of Vima and grandson of Kujula Kadphises, Vāsishka and Huvishka must have been brothers. According to the inscription of Kamra, both Vāsishka and Kanishka II were ruling in Year 30 of the era.

The Bactrian inscription of Ayrtaṃ again attests the rule of Huvishka in Year 30, and on the basis of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* it could be argued that Huvishka, Jushka and Kanishka all ruled at the same time. It seems, therefore, that Kanishka I was followed by his son Vāsishka who took his first-born son, Kanishka II, and his brother Huvishka as co-rulers.

¹¹ Cf. Lüders, 1961, pp. 138 et seq.

Taking into consideration that no coin issue of Vāsishka is known so far in the dynasty of the Great Kushans, apparently it was Kanishka II who minted coins and not his father Vāsishka. The coin issues bearing the name of Kanishka can possibly be divided between Kanishka I and Kanishka II. In fact, we can observe some striking changes in the Kushan pantheon, ¹²represented on the coin reverses, which make it possible to attribute coins belonging to the third emission, from section A 2 on¹³ to Kanishka II, who, on his coins, wears a hat-like crown with a broad, richly decorated brim.

On the reverses of these coin issues ascribed to Kanishka II, there appear a series of divinities, who did not play any part earlier in the Kushan coinage. They are Pharro, Manaobago, *Ardoxšo* Boddo, Ořlagno/Ořlagno, Lroaspo, Mozdoano. Beside these deities, the ancient divine patrons of the Kushan dynasty such as Mioro, Mao, Nana and Oēšo are also represented. There must have been some reason for the emergence of new gods in the pantheon of the Kushan coins. Kanishka II, the son of Vāsishka, bearing the titles *mahārāja rājātirāja devaputra kaisara* (Great King, King of Kings, Son of God, Caesar) in the Ara inscription, is an enigmatic figure. His personality, however, appears in a new light if we recognize him as Chen-t'an Ki-ni-ch'a (*Candana Kanishka) of the Buddhist work *Śrīdharmapiṭakanidānasūtra*, according to which King Candana Kanishka won a great victory over the King of Pāṭaliputra and the Parthian king. Candana Kanishka is also mentioned by the name of Sandancs in the *Periplus* (Chapter 52) as a mighty ruler who conquered the most important harbours on the western shore of India south of Barygaza (Broach). It follows that the Buddhist legends woven around the figure of Kanishka belong not to Kanishka I but to his grandson, Kanishka II.

Kanishka II clearly recognized the importance of Buddhism in his kingdom. There were some important Buddhist centres in Bactria, at Termcz and Ayrtam, where missionary work of both the Mahāsāṅghika and the Sarvāstivāda schools was active. Kanishka II was, without doubt, a great protector of Buddhism and founded monasteries and built stupas according to the Buddhist tradition. From the viewpoint of the history of Buddhism, however, his most important action was to convene the Buddhist synod in Kashmir, a decisive turning-point in the life of the Buddhist schools. According to tradition, this synod of the Sarvāstivāda school compiled the *Jñānaprasthānam* and entrusted Aśvaghōṣa, the famous poet, with providing for the correct language form of the commentary written by Kātyāyana. Essentially, his charge was to rewrite the Buddhist works in Sanskrit. Earlier both the Mahāsāṅghika and the Sarvāstivāda schools equally used Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī to write Gāndhārī Prakrit. After the synod of Kashmir, however, as a consequence of the

¹² 'Zone of actuality'; see Göbl, 1983, pp. 85, 94.

¹³ According to the system elaborated by Göbl; *ibid.*, pp. 85–7.

literary activity of Aśvaghōṣa, the Sarvāstivāda preferred Sanskrit and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit written in Brāhmī script to Gāndhārī Prakrit written in Kharoṣṭhī script. So the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit became the literary language of Buddhism, and in this development the role of Kanishka II was decisive. It was not by chance that around his figure a cycle of Buddhist legends came into being.

None the less, he did not neglect other religions and cults. On the reverse types of coins beside Boddo (Buddha) we find other Iranian divinities both Zoroastrian and local. Among them Manao Bago probably represents the Bactrian name for Avestan Vohu Manah (Good Mind, Wisdom) which was in the possession of *xšaθra-* 'might, kingdom'; he bestows *xšaθra-* for the righteousness of man; and increased it to triumph over the Druj and enlarge the realm of Ahura Mazda. Thus the religious ideas belonging to the figure of Vohu Manah/Manao Bago excellently fitted Kushan royal ideology in the context of Kanishka's victories and conquests. The function of Vohu Manah among the Amesha Spentas, and his relationship to Ahura Mazda, helped to introduce the principal god of Zoroastrianism himself into the ambience of the divine patrons of the Kushan king. *Mazdāh vana* represents 'the victorious [Ahura] Mazda' who triumphs over the Druj, like the Kushan king over his enemies. Of the local divinities Ardoxšo, *Ořlagno* and Lroaspo were represented on the coin reverses of Kanishka II. Lroaspo was an ancient pre-Zoroastrian god ensuring the health of the horses of the Iranian equestrian nomads. He was also worshipped among the north-western Iranian equestrian nomadic tribes and his name was preserved in the form of the hydronym Dyrapses, reflecting the Alanian outcome **Druvāfsa-* of Old Iranian **Druvāspa-*. *Lruvāspa* occurring on the Kushan coins may represent the Bactriandevlopment of *Druvāspa*. Obviously, the Bactrians, who had an excellent cavalry and a famous race of horses, worshipped **Druvāspa-* > *Lruvāspa-* since their immigration to Bactria.

Ořlagno/Ořlagno was an ancient Indo-Iranian divinity, a warrior god whose worship was broadly spread among both the western and the eastern Iranians. The name Ořlagno represents a local, Eastern Iranian development of Old Iranian **Vrθrayna-*, namely, the consonant cluster *-rθ-* developed into *-ř-* or *-s-*. Thus, even though this warrior god is well known in the *Avesta*, he was included in the Kushan pantheon not as a Zoroastrian but as a local deity, who was popular among the eastern Iranian warriors with the bird Vāragna on his helmet, armed with a spear and long sword.

Ardoxšo was also a local divinity, as is clearly shown by the Manichaean Persian text M 2, which relates the encounter of the Apostle Mār Ammo with *bg'rd w'xš* (*Bay Ard* spirit) who is named *wymndb'n 'y hwr's'n* 'Khorasan's frontier guard'. The local character of Ardoxšo is confirmed by the place-name Bagarda, mentioned by Ptolemy (VI. 18.5) in the description of the Paropamisadae. Ardoxšo can be identified with the Avestan goddess

Ardvi¹⁴ who, according to the *Ardvīsūr Yašt*, bestows the highest royal power over all lands to her worshippers. Thus the figure of Ardoxšo also fitted the Kushan royal ideology and enjoyed great popularity among the eastern Iranian population. From the iconographic view-point Ardoxšo was identified with the Hellenistic Tyche, holding a cornucopia.

Lastly, Pharro, god of the royal splendour and glory, was probably of Parthian origin. Old Persian *farnah-*, corresponding to Avestan *hvarənah-* 'royal splendour', was borrowed from Median *farnah-* which may perhaps go back to a Scythian **farnah-* < **hvarnah-*.¹⁵ In any case **farnah-* > *farr* became a firm element of Arsacid royal ideology. The adoption of Pharro in the Kushan pantheon may have been connected with the idea seen in the *Kārnamak-i Artaxšīr-i Pāpakān* according to which *farr* 'royal glory' always abandoned the defeated king and went over to the triumphant one. On the basis of this idea it was a natural step on the part of Kanishka II to introduce the cult of the royal glory into the religious life of the court, because it left the Parthian king Vologases, who was defeated by Kanishka and went over to the conqueror.

An important moment in the religious activity of Kanishka II was the restoration of the dynastic sanctuary at Surkh Kotal. The renewal or introduction of the cult of the goddess Oanindo (Victory) was obviously connected with his great victory over the Parthian king. He sent an officer, Nokonzoko by name, to the sanctuary in Year 31 (A.D. 165). By digging a well, Nokonzoko ensured the water supply of the stronghold and the sanctuary, and leading back the statues of the gods, renewed the cult of the dynastic divinities there.

The coinage of Huvishka also provides rich evidence for the religions and cults of the kingdom. The question must be raised, however: What chronological relationship can be established between the coinage of Kanishka II and that of Huvishka? On the basis of the epigraphic sources it is clear that the religious activity of the two kings, being co-rulers for at least a decade, continued in parallel. The religious activity of Huvishka was particularly intensive. According to the Bactrian inscription of Ayrtaṃ (see Chapter 17), in Year 30 (A.D. 164), he sent his officer Šodila as treasurer to the sanctuary there and had a Pharro-Ardoxšo image prepared and set up in the stronghold. Later, when the river changed its course and the sanctuary became waterless, he had the divinities and their cult transferred to another place. Then, by his officer Šodila, he had a well and a water-conduit dug, and having ensured the water supply, he resettled the cult of Pharro and Ardoxšo into the sanctuary of Ayrtaṃ. These events may be dated between Years 30 and 40 (i.e. A.D. 164 to 174).

¹⁴ Harmatta, 1960, pp. 198 et seq.

¹⁵ Lecoq, 1987, p. 678.

Similar activity by Huvishka can be seen at Mathura. The dynastic sanctuary of the Kushan kings built by Vima Kadphises was in a ruinous state when Huvishka sent a great general (*mahādaṇḍanāyaka*), who had the sanctuary restored and set up a statue of Huvishka in the *devakula*, ensuring regular hospitality for the Brahmans in the assembly hall belonging to the sanctuary. Even though the date of the inscription is not preserved or it was not dated, the restoration work can be dated to a later period, perhaps after Year 40, when Huvishka was already bearing the title *rājatirāja* (King of Kings).

The parallel rule of Kanishka II and Huvishka also raises the question of whether they minted coins in parallel. If this was the case, it would be easy to explain why Huvishka used the device of Kanishka II on his first issues. Being the brother of Vāsishka, Huvishka may have been substantially older than Kanishka II, and even though he apparently outlived him, it is improbable that he would have still been alive up to around Year 60. We probably have to reckon with two Huvishkas, father and son, and to divide the coinage between them. One possibility for the division lies in the remarkable change in the Kushan pantheon represented in Huvishka's reverse types.¹⁶

It is very likely that the minting of Huvishka I began in parallel with that of Kanishka II. At that time, the mints of Huvishka employed the device of Kanishka II and used as reverse types the same divine patrons of the dynasty, namely, Miuro, Pharro, Mao, Nanaṣao and Oēṣo with Manao Bago and Ardoxṣo who also occur. Mozdoano is missing from the divinities represented on the coin reverses. Instead of him, we find Serapis, the supreme deity of the Alexandrian pantheon whose name appears in the Bactrianized form of Sarapo. His emergence seems to indicate the orientation of Huvishka towards Roman Egypt, an important market for the wares imported from or through the Kushan Empire. Also omitted is the ancient Iranian war god Oḥlagno, whose place and function are occupied by a group of Indian war gods, Skando (Old Indian Skanda), Komaro (Old Indian Kumāra), Maaseno (Old Indian Mahāscna), Bizago (Old Indian Viśākha), and even Ommo (Old Indian Umā), the consort of Śiva. Their use as reverse types of Huvishka I is clear evidence for the new trends in religious policy of the Kushan king, which was possibly influenced by enlisting Indian warriors into the Kushan army during the campaign against Pāṭaliputra.

Also interesting is the omission of Buddha from the reverse types of Huvishka. This is surprising because according to the *Rājataranḡiṇī*, Huvishka supported Buddhism, and the existence at Mathura of 'the monastery of the Great King, the King of Kings, the Son of God, Huvishka'¹⁷ proves beyond doubt that the literary evidence corresponded with reality. The omission of Buddha from the coin types showing the divine helpers of the

¹⁶ Göbl, 1983, p. 87.

¹⁷ Lüders, 1961, p. 68.

Kushan king requires an explanation. The problem is closely connected with the function and meaning of the gods portrayed on the coins. They could indicate worship by the kings of the divinities represented, or protection by the gods that the king worshipped. Sometimes they may refer to pious gifts, or represent statues set up in a sanctuary, like the statue of Ardoxšo in Huvishka's issue¹⁸ which had been set up in a Buddhist sanctuary. This indicates the king's favour to Buddhism, and the tendency of Buddhism to absorb local cults. The omission of Buddha from his pantheon of reverse types did not in itself mean that Huvishka neglected Buddhism, because his royal favour is seen in support of the local cults absorbed by Buddhism.

New trends in the second phase of Huvishka

The second period of the coinage of Huvishka (perhaps Huvishka II) reveals some remarkable new trends. Beside the ancient divine patrons of the dynasty – Miuro, Mao, Nana, Oēšo, Aθšo 'the royal fire' and Pharro 'the royal splendour' – further Zoroastrian and local deities appeared. Among the Zoroastrian divinities, the emergence of Oromozdo, the supreme god, is important. While *Mazdo oano* 'Mazda the victorious' represented the Bactrian form of the supreme god of Zoroastrianism in the effigy of a Kushan horseman, the phonetic form of the name Ohromozdo clearly points to western Zoroastrianism. The other Zoroastrian deities – Šaorēoro 'best royal power', Ašaeixšo 'best righteousness' (= Avestan *Xšaθrəm vairīm* and Avestan *Aša vahišta*), *Rišto/Rišti* 'uprightness' (= Avestan *Aršti/Arštāt*)¹⁹ – represent important aspects of royal ideology. Among them Šaorēoro seems to be again of west Iranian origin, that is, he was adopted into the Kushan pantheon from western Zoroastrianism. On the contrary, Ašaeixšo and Rišti are apparently local developments of Avestan *Aša Vahišta* and *Aršti*. Probably, the enigmatic legend *Auabod* also belongs to the ambience of Ohromozdo. In view of the fact that the name ends with a consonant while in Bactrian each word has a final vowel, the spelling '*Auabod*' must represent an abridged form. Very likely the full form of the name can be restored as **Ahu budano* 'supreme lord of the creatures' (< Old Iranian **Ahu bütānām*), being a Bactrian name for Mithra, parallel to his Avestan designation *ahu ratušča gaēθanam* 'supreme lord and judge of the living being'. Together with the legend *Ahubud (ano)* the effigy of Mithra appears on the coin, i.e. iconography and legend are in harmony with each other.

The other remarkable tendency is the emergence of the local divinities on coin reverses. Beside Lroaspo, already introduced by Kanishka II, Oaxšo and lamšo now appear. Oaxšo

¹⁸ Harmatta, 1986, p. 136.

¹⁹ Grenet, 1987, p. 42.

was the well-known eastern Iranian god of waters and rivers, in particular the deity of the Oxus river. His sanctuary was discovered at Takht-i Sangin, on the northern bank of the Amu Darya. His popularity and importance are best illustrated by the inscription on a seal: *Oaxšo i iogo bayo* 'Oaxšo is the only god'. *Iamšo* may again be identified with *Imrā* (< *Yama rājā*), the supreme god of the Kafiri (or Nuristani) tribes.²⁰ The form possibly reflects a popular dialect variant of the Bactrian **Iamo šao*. The emergence of the goddess Oanindo (Victory) on the coins of Huvishka II may have completed the group of divine patrons of the dynasty and can perhaps be brought into connection with the renewal of the Oanindo sanctuary at Surkh Kotal.

In religious policy, as reflected in his coinage, the efforts of Huvishka were obviously intended to enlarge the social basis of his rule by religious ideology, that supported all the local cults and Bactrian Zoroastrianism among the population of eastern Iran. The divine figures on Kushan coin reverses reflect the religious ideas and policy of the Kushan kings, but indirectly they also mirror the general trends of religious life – a very complex phenomenon under the Great Kushans, as we see at Mathura.

In the Kushan period there were numerous sanctuaries of different cults in the environs of Mathura. The Buddhists had about fifteen monasteries, three sanctuaries and numerous stupas; the Jains had three temples, and several stupas, there were three nāga shrines, the sanctuary of the yakṣa Mānibhadra and the royal dynastic sanctuary of the Great Kushans. From the inscriptions, we can follow the fortunes of particular sanctuaries and monasteries. Different Buddhist schools, the Sarvāstivādins, the Mahāsāṅghikas, the Samitiyas and the Mahopadeśakas, proclaimed their teaching at the same time. The golden age of Mathura seems to have been the time of Huvishka, from which the greatest number of dedicatory inscriptions are preserved. Religious life in Mathura was characterized by the co-existence of the great religions and their cults, mutually influencing and enriching each other.

Syncretism and absorption

In spite of the scanty evidence, fragmentary in many respects, we can draw some general conclusions about religious life throughout the territory of the Kushans. It was highly developed and differentiated. The religious movements of India – Śivaism, Vishnuism, Jainism and Buddhism with their different schools – penetrated Central Asia, as did Indian merchants when Kushan rule facilitated long-distance international trade. In eastern Iran the Indian religions met the Greek divinities, Zoroastrianism and many local pre-Zoroastrian forms of worship, and encountered the ancient Iranian religious ideas of the northern

²⁰ Grenet, 1984, p. 260.

Iranian equestrian nomads. The Kushan kings selected for themselves from this immense variety those religious elements, ideas and forms of cults which fitted their ancient religious traditions and strengthened the religious ideology of their royal power. So the 'Kushan pantheon' appearing on the coins represents only a selection of the religious cults of their empire.

None the less, the Kushan kings were well aware of the current trends in religious life and followed them. The most important was syncretism. The great religions influenced one another and began slowly to absorb the local cults. In Bactria the syncretic cult of Śiva achieved great success; and on the coins of Bazodeo (Vāsudcva), the last Great Kushan king, Śiva was the sole divinity used, a figure that apparently combined Greek, Iranian and non-Śivaite Indian elements.

In eastern Bactria and Gandhāra the worship of Ardoxšo became predominant, absorbing some features of the local yakṣī cults, of the worship of Lakṣmī and other minor Indian female divinities with elements of the Hellenistic Tyche. She became identified together with Pharro with the Indian couple Kubera and Hāritī, King and Queen of the yakṣas and yakṣīs. Consequently after the Sasanian conquest of Kushanshahr (the western part of the Kushan kingdom), the independent eastern Kushan kings made use of Ardoxšo for the reverse of their coins. The syncretic character of the goddess is clearly shown by the legend *yakṣī* on the coins of Gadahara.²¹ But while these two divinities, Śiva and Ardoxšo, became predominant as divine patrons, their figures had absorbed many features of other divinities and had a syncretic character. Syncretism and absorption had finally prevailed in the 'Kushan pantheon'.

²¹ Cunningham, 1971, No. 10.