

APPSC GROUP-I MAINS — STUDY NOTES

THE KUSHANS

Kushan Empire | Kanishka • Gandhara Art • Silk Road • 4th Buddhist Council

Paper II — History, Culture & Geography | Day 11 (10 Apr 2026)

SECTION 1: SUMMARISED NOTES

1.1 Origin & Rise

The Kushans were a branch of the Yuezhi (Chinese: Yueh-chi) nomadic people from Central Asia, originally from the borders of China. Displaced by the Xiongnu (Huns), the Yuezhi migrated westward to Bactria (Afghanistan). One of their five clans — the Kushan (Guishuang) — unified the others and established the Kushan Empire, which became one of the four great empires of the ancient world (alongside Rome, Parthia, and Han China).

- **Kujula Kadphises (c. 30–80 CE):** Founded the Kushan dynasty. Overthrew the Parthians in NW India. United the 5 Yuezhi clans. Extended control over Kabul, Gandhara, and parts of NW India. Issued copper coins imitating Roman and Greek designs.
- **Vima Kadphises (c. 80–105 CE):** Kujula's successor. Extended empire into NW India. Issued India's FIRST gold coins on a large scale (inspired by Roman aurei). Promoted Shaivism (Shiva images on coins with trident and bull Nandi). Connected India to the Silk Road gold economy.

1.2 Kanishka I (c. 127–150 CE) — The Greatest Kushan

Kanishka is the most celebrated Kushan ruler and one of ancient India's greatest kings. His empire stretched from Central Asia (Khotan, Yarkand) through Afghanistan to the Gangetic plain (Pataliputra), with the capital at Purushapura (modern Peshawar). Second capital: Mathura. He controlled the crucial Silk Road trade routes connecting Rome, Persia, Central Asia, China, and India.

- **4th Buddhist Council:** Held at Kundalvana, Kashmir. Presided by Vasumitra (Ashvaghosha as deputy). Compiled commentaries on the Tripitaka in Sanskrit. Formal split of Buddhism into Mahayana and Hinayana. Kanishka patronised Mahayana Buddhism — the school that deified Buddha and introduced the Bodhisattva ideal.
- **Religious Tolerance:** Like Ashoka, Kanishka was ecumenical. His coins depict: Buddha, Greek gods (Helios, Selene), Iranian gods (Mithra, Atar), and Hindu gods (Shiva, Uma). This syncretism reflects the Kushan Empire's cosmopolitan character.
- **Gandhara Art:** Flourished under Kanishka. Greco-Buddhist sculptural tradition reached its peak. Kanishka built a massive stupa at Peshawar (reportedly 400 feet tall). The Bamiyan Buddhas (Afghanistan, destroyed 2001) were Gandhara-tradition descendants of this period.
- **Shaka Era:** The Shaka Era (78 CE) is traditionally attributed to Kanishka's accession. This calendar is the basis of India's NATIONAL CALENDAR (adopted 1957). The Shaka Era runs parallel to the Gregorian calendar in official Indian publications.
- **Scholars at Court:** Ashvaghosha (wrote Buddhacharita — poetic biography of Buddha, and Sariputraprakarana — first known Sanskrit drama). Nagarjuna (Madhyamika/Shunyavada

school of Mahayana Buddhism — 'everything is void/empty'). Charaka (Charaka Samhita — Ayurvedic medicine, revised under Kanishka's patronage). Vasumitra (presided over 4th Buddhist Council).

1.3 Kushan Economy & Trade

The Kushans controlled the Silk Road — the ancient trade highway connecting China, Central Asia, India, Persia, and Rome. This made them enormously wealthy.

- **Gold Coins:** Vima Kadphises and Kanishka issued abundant gold coins (dinars). Modelled on Roman aurei but with Indian/Iranian iconography. These coins circulated across Asia and are found in archaeological sites from Central Asia to South India.
- **Silk Road Trade:** Exported: spices, textiles (cotton, muslin, silk), precious stones, ivory, perfumes. Imported: gold, horses, wine. Pliny lamented that Rome spent 50 million sesterces annually on Indian goods.
- **Maritime Trade:** Kushans controlled both overland (Silk Road) and maritime (Indian Ocean) trade. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (1st century CE Greek text) describes Indian ports trading with Rome.
- **Urban Growth:** Mathura, Taxila, Peshawar, Begram (Afghanistan) flourished as trade centres. Mathura was a major religious and artistic centre (Mathura school of art).

1.4 Kushan Art — Two Schools

- **Gandhara School (NW India):** Greek/Hellenistic influence. Materials: grey schist stone. Features: realistic anatomy, curly hair, draped robes (toga-like), Greco-Roman facial features. Subject: Buddha in human form. Major sites: Taxila, Peshawar, Bamiyan. Patronised by Kanishka.
- **Mathura School (UP):** Indigenous Indian style. Materials: spotted red sandstone. Features: robust body, transparent clothing, halo behind head, seated/standing postures. Subjects: Buddha, Jain Tirthankaras, Hindu deities, yaksha-yakshi, secular figures. More Indian in character than Gandhara.

Both schools produced the first anthropomorphic images of Buddha. Gandhara showed Greek influence; Mathura was purely Indian. Both traditions merged later in the Gupta period (Sarnath school = synthesis).

1.5 Decline

After Kanishka, Kushan power declined due to: weak successors (Huvishka, Vasudeva), pressure from the Sasanian Empire (Persia) in the west, the rise of local Indian dynasties (Nagas, Yaudheyas), and eventually the Gupta Empire (4th century CE) absorbed Kushan territories. The last Kushan rulers survived as petty chiefs in the northwest until the 5th century.

SECTION 2: KEY DIMENSIONS TO COVER

Examiner angles.

1. **Origin:** Yuezhi nomads from China borders. Displaced by Xiongnu. Migrated to Bactria. Kushan clan unified others. Kujula Kadphises founded dynasty.
2. **Kanishka:** Greatest Kushan. c.127–150 CE. Capital Purushapura (Peshawar). Empire: Central Asia to Gangetic plain. 4th Buddhist Council. Shaka Era (78 CE). Gandhara art peak.
3. **4th Buddhist Council:** Kashmir. Vasumitra presided (Ashvaghosha deputy). Sanskrit commentaries on Tripitaka. Mahayana-Hinayana formal split. Kanishka patronised Mahayana.
4. **Two Art Schools:** Gandhara (Greek influence, grey schist, realistic) vs Mathura (indigenous, red sandstone, robust). Both = first anthropomorphic Buddha. Know differences.
5. **Gold Coins:** Vima Kadphises = first Indian gold coins (large scale). Kanishka's coins show Buddha + Greek + Iranian + Hindu gods = syncretism.
6. **Silk Road:** Kushans controlled key trade routes. China–Central Asia–India–Rome. Enormous wealth. Pliny: Rome drained by India.
7. **Scholars:** Ashvaghosha (Buddhacharita), Nagarjuna (Shunyavada/Madhyamika), Charaka (Charaka Samhita), Vasumitra (Council).
8. **Shaka Era:** 78 CE. India's NATIONAL CALENDAR. Adopted 1957. Runs parallel to Gregorian. Most important calendar for Prelims.

SECTION 3: PRELIMS MUST-REMEMBER FACTS

Crisp.

1. Kushans: Branch of Yuezhi nomads from Central Asia. Displaced by Xiongnu (Huns). Migrated to Bactria. Kushan clan unified 5 clans.
2. Kujula Kadphises: c. 30–80 CE. Founded dynasty. Overthrew Parthians. Copper coins imitating Roman/Greek.
3. Vima Kadphises: c. 80–105 CE. First large-scale GOLD COINS in India (modelled on Roman aurei). Shaivite (Shiva + Nandi on coins).
4. Kanishka I: c. 127–150 CE. Greatest Kushan. Capital: Purushapura (Peshawar). 2nd capital: Mathura. Empire: Central Asia to Gangetic plain.
5. 4th Buddhist Council: Kundalvana, Kashmir. Kanishka. Vasumitra presided. Ashvaghosha deputy. Sanskrit commentaries. Mahayana-Hinayana split.
6. Shaka Era: 78 CE. Attributed to Kanishka's accession. India's NATIONAL CALENDAR (adopted 1957). Used in official govt publications.
7. Kanishka's coins: Show Buddha, Greek gods (Helios, Selene), Iranian gods (Mithra), Hindu gods (Shiva). = Religious syncretism/tolerance.
8. Ashvaghosha: Buddhacharita (biography of Buddha in verse). Sariputraprakarana (1st Sanskrit drama). At Kanishka's court.
9. Nagarjuna: Madhyamika/Shunyavada school of Mahayana. 'Everything is void/empty.' Mulamadhyamakakarika. Nagarjunakonda (AP) named after him.
10. Charaka: Charaka Samhita = Ayurvedic medicine foundation. Revised under Kanishka's patronage. 600+ herbal drugs. Tridosha.
11. Gandhara School: NW India. Greek influence. Grey schist. Realistic anatomy. Toga-like robes. Apollo-like Buddha. Sites: Taxila, Peshawar, Bamian.
12. Mathura School: UP. Indigenous. Red sandstone. Robust body. Transparent clothes. Halo. Buddha + Jain + Hindu + secular subjects.
13. Both schools: First anthropomorphic Buddha images (before: only symbols). Gandhara = Greek-influenced; Mathura = purely Indian. Merged in Gupta Sarnath school.
14. Silk Road: Kushans controlled China–Central Asia–India–Rome trade. Gold coins circulated across Asia. Pliny: Rome spent 50 million sesterces on India annually.
15. Periplus of Erythraean Sea: 1st century CE Greek text. Describes Indian Ocean trade. Lists Indian ports and goods.
16. Decline: Weak successors (Huvishka, Vasudeva). Sasanian (Persian) pressure. Gupta absorption (4th century CE).
17. AP Connection: Nagarjunakonda (Guntur) named after philosopher Nagarjuna (Kanishka's era). Mahayana Buddhism spread to Deccan via Kushan influence.
18. 4 great empires (contemporary): Rome, Parthia, Kushan, Han China. Kushans connected all via Silk Road.

SECTION 4: MAINS MUST-WRITE POINTS

Each = paragraph.

- The Silk Road Empire:** The Kushans' greatest contribution was controlling the Silk Road — the ancient world's most important trade highway. Their empire sat at the crossroads of China, Central Asia, India, Persia, and Rome. Gold, silk, horses, spices, textiles, and ideas flowed through Kushan territories. This made them one of the four great empires of the era (alongside Rome, Parthia, and Han China). Kanishka's gold coins circulated from Central Asia to South India. The wealth generated funded Gandhara art, Buddhist monasteries, and urban growth at Mathura, Taxila, and Peshawar. India's ancient prosperity was built on Silk Road trade, and the Kushans were its managers.
- Kanishka — Ashoka's Buddhist Successor:** If Ashoka was Buddhism's political founder (3rd century BCE), Kanishka was its theological transformer (2nd century CE). The 4th Buddhist Council under Kanishka formalised the Mahayana-Hinayana split. Mahayana deified Buddha (making him a god, not just a teacher), introduced the Bodhisattva ideal (enlightened beings who delay Nirvana to help others), and adopted Sanskrit (making Buddhism accessible to elite audiences). This transformation enabled Buddhism's spread to China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet — where Mahayana dominates today. Without Kanishka's patronage of Mahayana, Buddhism might have remained a South/SE Asian religion.
- Two Art Schools — Greek vs Indian:** The Gandhara and Mathura schools represent two responses to the same artistic challenge: how to depict the Buddha. Gandhara used Greek techniques (realistic anatomy, classical drapery, Apollo-like features) because it was in the Hellenistic cultural zone. Mathura used indigenous Indian techniques (robust body, transparent clothing, halo, meditative serenity) because it drew from the yaksha-yakshi sculptural tradition. Both independently created the first anthropomorphic Buddha images — ending the aniconism of Ashokan art. The Gupta-period Sarnath school later synthesised both, creating the 'ideal' Buddha image that spread across Asia.
- Syncretism — When All Gods Shared a Coin:** Kanishka's coins are the most syncretic in ancient numismatics: they show Buddha alongside Greek gods (Helios, Selene), Iranian gods (Mithra, Atar), and Hindu gods (Shiva, Uma). This wasn't confusion but policy — the Kushan Empire spanned multiple cultural zones (Greek, Iranian, Indian, Buddhist) and needed to legitimise rule across all of them. This syncretism reflects a cosmopolitan civilisation comfortable with diversity. Ashoka's Dhamma promoted tolerance through edicts; Kanishka's coins literally put all gods together. Both approaches demonstrate ancient India's capacity for religious pluralism.
- AP Connection — Nagarjuna and the Deccan:** While the Kushan Empire's political centre was NW India, its intellectual influence reached the Deccan. Nagarjuna — the greatest Mahayana philosopher (Shunyata/‘everything is void’) and a contemporary of Kanishka — is traditionally associated with the Deccan. Nagarjunakonda (Guntur district, AP) is named after him. The site's extensive Buddhist remains (Ikshvaku period, 3rd-4th century CE) show Mahayana influence reaching AP within a century of Kanishka's 4th Council. The Kushan-era spread of Mahayana Buddhism is directly relevant to AP's Buddhist heritage.

SECTION 5: VALUE ADDITION

4 dimensions.

Interlinkages

- **Foreign Invasions (Day 10) → Kushans:** Greeks → Shakas → Parthians → Kushans. Continuous sequence. Each displaced/succeeded the previous. Coinage evolved: punch-marked → Greek bilingual → Shaka bilingual → Kushan gold.
- **Buddhism (Day 5) → 4th Council:** 1st Council (Rajagriha) → 2nd (Vaishali) → 3rd (Pataliputra, Ashoka) → 4th (Kashmir, Kanishka). Each Council marked a doctrinal milestone. 4th = Mahayana-Hinayana formal split.
- **Gandhara → Global Buddhist Art:** Gandhara's anthropomorphic Buddha → Central Asian Buddhist caves (Bamiyan) → Chinese Buddhist sculpture (Longmen, Yungang) → Japanese Buddha images. One artistic innovation in NW India transformed Asian art.
- **Kushans → Guptas:** Kushan decline → Gupta rise (4th century CE). Guptas absorbed Kushan territories. Gupta art (Sarnath school) synthesised Gandhara + Mathura. Kushan gold coin tradition continued in Gupta gold dinara.

Comparative

- **Kushan vs Roman Empire:** Contemporary. Both used gold coinage. Both controlled vast trade networks. Both patronised art and religion. Rome fell to Germanic tribes (476 CE); Kushans fell to Sasanians + Guptas.

AP Connection

- **Nagarjunakonda:** Guntur district. Named after Nagarjuna. Ikshvaku dynasty Buddhist centre (3rd-4th CE). Extensive remains: stupas, monasteries, chaityas, university. Now island museum (partially submerged under Nagarjuna Sagar dam). Mahayana influence from Kushan era.
- **Amaravati:** While primarily Satavahana-era, the stupa's later phases show Mahayana influence from Kushan-era doctrinal developments. Amaravati school of sculpture is distinct from both Gandhara and Mathura.

Way Forward

- **Silk Road Revival:** China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) is a modern Silk Road. India's alternative: INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) and Chabahar Port. Ancient Kushan trade routes find modern echoes.

SECTION 6: QUICK REVISION BOX

Glance.

▶ Kushans: Yuezhi nomads; Bactria; Kushan clan	▶ Kujula Kadphises: Founded dynasty; copper coins
▶ Vima Kadphises: 1st large-scale GOLD coins; Shaivite	▶ Kanishka: c.127–150 CE; Peshawar; greatest Kushan
▶ 4th Council: Kashmir; Vasumitra; Mahayana-Hinayana split	▶ Shaka Era 78 CE = India's NATIONAL CALENDAR
▶ Ashvaghosha: Buddhacharita; 1st Sanskrit drama	▶ Nagarjuna: Shunyavada/Madhyamika; AP: Nagarjunakonda
▶ Gandhara: Greek influence; grey schist; Apollo-like Buddha	▶ Mathura: Indigenous; red sandstone; robust; halo
▶ Silk Road: China–Central Asia–India–Rome; enormous wealth	▶ Kanishka coins: Buddha + Greek + Iranian + Hindu gods
▶ Charaka Samhita: Ayurveda; revised under Kanishka	▶ 4 great empires: Rome, Parthia, Kushan, Han China
▶ Decline: Weak successors; Sasanian + Gupta pressure	▶ Periplus: Greek text; Indian Ocean trade; Indian ports

SECTION 7: RECOMMENDED SOURCES

Refer.

Source	What to Read	Why
R.S. Sharma — India's Ancient Past	Ch. 25–27: Kushans, Gandhara, trade	Exam-oriented; ruler details + art schools
NCERT Class XII — Themes in Indian History	Ch. 2 & 4: Political + Cultural developments	Trade routes, coins, sculptural traditions
NCERT Class XI — Indian Art	Gandhara and Mathura schools	Comparative art analysis with images
Upinder Singh — Ancient & Early Medieval India	Ch. 14–16: Post-Mauryan, Kushans	Academic depth; numismatic evidence