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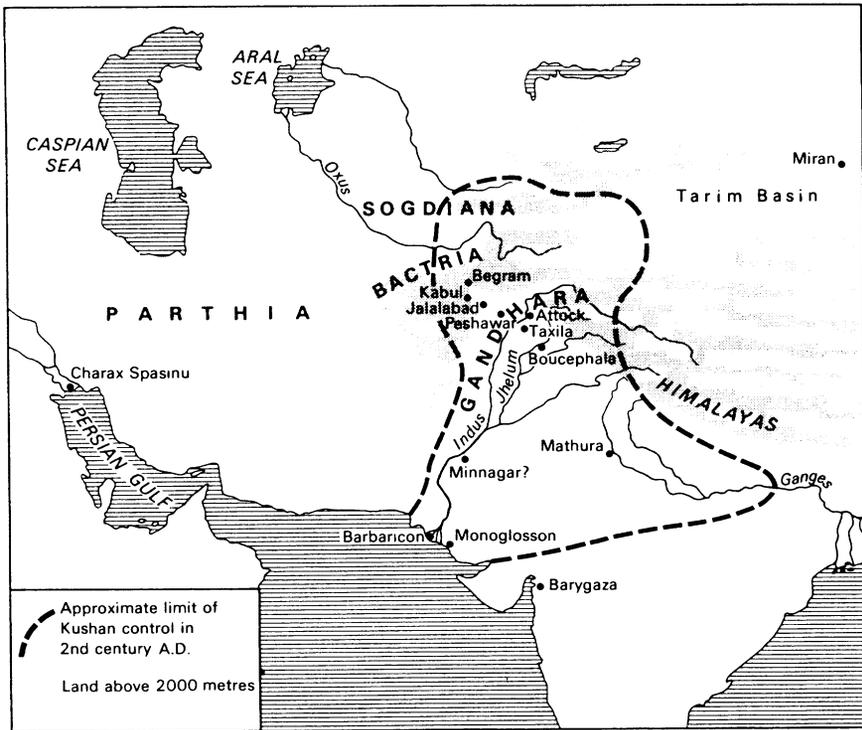
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THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE KUSHANS

By JOHN THORLEY

It may seem strange to link the Roman Empire with a Himalayan kingdom which hardly gets a mention in most standard works on Roman history, but in fact during the second and early third centuries A.D. these two powers enjoyed a cordial and mutually profitable relationship which was of considerable economic importance to both. From the end of the first century A.D. to the middle of the third century the Kushans controlled what is now Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, parts of Soviet and Chinese Central Asia, and much of the Ganges plain. Their history has proved difficult to reconstruct, since they left no historical writing, and even the chronology of their kings is still disputed, but enough is now known for us to begin to piece together, though still somewhat tentatively, the strange and exotic relationship between this distant state and the Roman world, and perhaps in the process to contribute from Roman history to the problems of Kushan dating.

The rise to prominence of the Kushans is in itself an intriguing saga. We know from Chinese sources¹ that the Kushans were connected with a group of people called the Yüeh-chi, who settled on the shores of the Aral Sea *c.* 150 B.C., having been driven westwards across the steppes of Central Asia by a union of nomadic tribes called the Hsiung Nu. Around 100–70 B.C. the Yüeh-chi moved southwards into Sogdiana and Bactria. According to the Chinese sources, for over a hundred years the Yüeh-chi settled in Bactria and divided the territory among their five constituent tribes. But then, at some time during the first half of the first century A.D., the Kushan tribe (Kuei-shang in Chinese) under their king Kujula Kadphises (K'iu-tsiu-k'io) gained ascendancy over the other Yüeh-chi tribes and expanded their territory southwards into the Kabul valley. About A.D. 64 the Kushan forces occupied Taxila. From this point on there is much dispute about the chronology of the Kushan rulers, but from the large number of coins of Kujula found in the excavations at Sirkap (Taxila) it seems fairly certain that Kujula was still king at the time of the capture of the city. Indeed, he may have lived on for some time after this, possible into the eighties A.D., since the Chinese annals record that he was over eighty when he died. He was succeeded, let us suppose *c.* A.D. 85, by his son Vima Kadphises, who it seems had to reconquer much of northern India. Vima may possibly have had some powers as regent before his father's death, and the coins of the unnamed ΣΩΤΗΡ ΜΕΓΑΣ, found widespread from Afghanistan



to the middle Ganges valley, may be those minted by Vima as regent, or perhaps those of an elder brother who predeceased Vima.² Most Kushan kings, incidentally, used Greek titles on their coinage, a legacy of the Greek state in Bactria founded in Alexander's time.

From the quantity of his coins which has come to light Vima appears to have had a fairly lengthy reign, probably from the eighties to *c.* A.D. 120, despite the fact that he is not likely to have been young when his father died. During his reign the Kushan power was extended into the lower Ganges valley, to the Indus delta, and into the Pamirs to the north. But the most significant development of Vima's reign in considering Kushan relations with Rome was the introduction in considerable quantities of an entirely new gold coinage, with portraits of fine workmanship. Most interestingly, the weight of these coins is very close indeed to the weight of the Roman *aureus* (the Kushan coins are marginally heavier), and the style of portraiture on many of the coins is quite clearly of Roman inspiration.³ There was evidently under Vima Kadphises some kind of development in relations with the Roman world, and we must now turn to other sources to see how this development may have come about.

Our first piece of evidence simply confirms what we know from excavations at Taxila, but even this reassurance is welcome. It comes from the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a fascinating work which describes in about twenty pages of a modern printed text the sea trade between Egypt and ports in the Red Sea, East Africa, Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and India. It was written by an anonymous merchant captain or pilot about A.D. 70, possibly as a report on Vespasian's instructions for the imperial government on the whole of Egypt's eastern trade.⁴ In his description of the Indus region (§38) the author mentions the market town of Barbaricon on the Indus delta, then 'behind it lies Minnagar, the inland capital of Scythia. It is ruled by Parthians who are constantly driving one another out.' Minnagar (Sanskrit for 'town of the Scythians') cannot be identified with certainty, but was probably somewhere in the Sukkur region, about 300 miles up the Indus. The situation described here must refer to the confused period between the death of Gondophares, the Parthian king of Taxila, at some time after A.D. 46, probably in the fifties, and the complete Kushan conquest of the area which began after the fall of Taxila c. A.D. 64. A little later in the text the author of the *Periplus* gives us more precise details of the Kushans' position about the time he was writing. After describing the trade of Barygaza he mentions the inland regions 'behind' the port (47): 'Inland behind Barygaza there are several tribes, such as the Aratrioi, the Arachousioi, the Gandaraioi, and the people of Proclais, in whose territory lies the town of Boucephalos Alexandria. To the north of these is the warlike nation of the Bactrians, who have their own king.' Proclais (presumably Ptolemy's Poclais 'in the Gandara region', 7. 1. 44), was near the modern Peshawar (probably Pekheli), and Boucephalos Alexandria is presumably Ptolemy's Boucephala on the Jhelum. Taxila lies between these two places, so it seems that at the time the author of the *Periplus* obtained his latest information (quite possibly a few years before he wrote his report) the Kushans had not yet reached Taxila, but were uttering threatening noises not far to the north. At the least these two passages provide a check on the oriental sources and on archaeological evidence for the dating of the Kushan advance. Unfortunately the author of the *Periplus* does not seem to have known the name of the Kushan (Bactrian) king at the time, which is a pity, because if he had given his name it might have saved a lot of scholarly toil.

Within thirty years of the date of the *Periplus* the Kushans had occupied, or at least accepted as vassal states, the whole of the Indus valley, and had encountered at the Indus mouth Roman merchants who, like the author of the *Periplus*, were trading between the Egyptian ports and the coast of India. We cannot be precise about the date at

which the Kushans gained control of the Indus delta, where they seem to have ruled through the local Saka 'satraps', but it must have been between A.D. 70 and 100, most probably in the first half of Vima's reign, *c.* A.D. 85-100. The Kushans were already familiar enough with the trade in silk which came over the Pamirs and down the Indus, and they could doubtless see clear advantages in controlling it themselves at the Indus delta. Roman merchants were keen to buy this silk, and also the turquoise, lapis lazuli, and animal furs which came from Afghanistan and Central Asia, and in exchange they brought a range of products from the Roman Empire. In the past these had included gold and silver coinage, never in the vast quantities which went as bullion to the Tamil states of south India, but sufficient to circulate as small change in the area. But since Vespasian's accession in A.D. 69 the quantities of coinage exported from the Empire had been very severely curtailed.⁵ The Kushans were nevertheless familiar with the high quality of Roman currency both metallurgically (at least before Nero's debasement of the silver coinage in A.D. 63) and artistically, and indeed Kujula Kadphises had already issued a copper coin which had on the reverse, where a deity was normally depicted, a copy of the head of a Roman emperor, probably Augustus.⁶ Vima Kadphises, therefore, doubtless saw in the trade with the Roman Empire not only a lucrative commerce, but also a possible source of coinage metal, if he could persuade the Roman traders to renew their export of gold currency; for there was no local supply of gold within the whole Kushan domain.

In A.D. 107, Dio Cassius records (68. 15), embassies 'from the Indians' visited Trajan. Dio does not say that the Kushans (or Bactrians) were included, though the date soon after direct contact had been established with Roman traders, and the fact that the Kushans were now the closest 'Indian' nation and by far the most powerful, make it almost certain that they were included in the term, and indeed may have been the sole visitors from India. Certainly the time could not have been more propitious for the Kushans. Trajan had just brought the Second Dacian War to a most successful conclusion, and in the process had captured, according to Dio (68. 14), 5,000,000 lb. weight of gold and 10,000,000 lb. of silver.⁷ Now if this figure is even remotely correct the result of this capture must have been a new buoyancy in the Roman economy, from which, incidentally, the building programme of Trajan almost certainly derived its impetus. It was just as the full implications of this windfall were being recognized in Rome that we are supposing that an embassy arrived from the Kushans, seeking closer trade relations with Rome. One of their requests was for gold, which they knew the Roman Empire possessed, though had for some time been loath to part with. But the newly rich Roman govern-

ment was able to offer what the Kushans wanted, in return for a regular supply of silk and other luxury commodities on which Rome's eastern trade flourished, and good relations were firmly established. The Kushan ambassadors returned with a trade treaty including in its terms the export of Roman gold to the Kushan kingdom.

Such an embassy remains conjectural. Yet whether a Kushan embassy visited Trajan or not, the results of Roman contact with the Kushans, in trade if not in diplomacy, are clearly evident in the archaeological record of north-west India. Kujula Kadphises' coinage had consisted almost entirely of copper issues, mostly of mediocre quality, with a very few issues of silver,⁸ but Vima, while continuing to issue copper coins, was now able to introduce his new gold coinage, based as we have seen on the Roman weight standard. The Kushan coins were presumably minted from melted-down Roman *aurei* and struck to a Kushan weight measure which approximated most closely to the weight of the Roman coins. There is certainly evidence that Roman coins were entering the Kushan kingdom from this time on: four hoards of second-century coins have been found in the Gandhara region in the upper Indus valley. These finds in themselves, of course, are indicative of a reversal by Trajan of Vespasian's policy, but the pattern of second-century Roman coins across the Indian subcontinent is even more revealing. In the Tamil kingdoms of the south, which had received so much coinage in the period from Augustus to Nero, there are very few coins of the second century; Wheeler recorded only one hoard and one single find. The second-century finds are concentrated in Kushan territory and in east-central India, which we know from Ptolemy was another area of development in the second century for Roman merchants trading with south-east Asia. There was clearly no *carte blanche* given by Trajan for the renewed export of currency, but a deliberately planned policy to export coinage where it was considered to be commercially advisable.⁹

Thus began a close commercial tie which was to last for the rest of the second century and beyond, through the reigns of several Kushan monarchs. It is difficult to judge from the evidence currently available how long Vima Kadphises continued to rule after the introduction of his Roman-based gold currency. There are, however, strong reasons for placing the accession of his successor, Kanishka, the most eminent of all the Kushan kings, no later than A. D. 128, and possibly a few years earlier. Kanishka reigned for twenty-three years, and was succeeded by his son Vasishka, who had a brief reign of some four or five years. After Vasishka came Huvishka, who appears to have ruled for as long as forty-six years, though some of this period may have been as regent for Vasishka's son Kanishka II, who seems to have ruled only briefly

around A.D. 165, being succeeded as sole ruler by Huvishka. Huvishka was finally replaced by Vasudeva (c. 202–26), the last of the major Kushan kings, who towards the end of his reign saw his kingdom dwindle considerably. Under his successors in the third century the kingdom disintegrated, largely under pressure from the rising power of the Sassanian kings of Persia.¹⁰

During this period of a century or so from Kanishka's accession to the decline of the Kushan power under Vasudeva there has so far been only one discovery which gives any real help in correlating other events in Roman and Kushan history, but this is an important discovery which goes some way to confirm the chronology of the Kushan monarchs assumed in this paper. Excavations at the Ahin Posh Tope at Jalalabad revealed a deposit of Roman and Kushan coins. These consisted of three Roman *aurei*, one of Domitian, one of Trajan, and one issue of Sabina, wife of Hadrian, datable to A.D. 137, all well worn; together with ten dinars of Vima Kadphises, six of Kanishka, all well used, and one coin of Huvishka in mint condition. This deposit can hardly have been made before A.D. 160 when one considers the condition of the *aureus* of Sabina, and more probably around A.D. 170 or even later. This fits in well with the dates for Huvishka given above; in fact there is reason to believe that he minted coins only after the death of Kanishka II (apparently in year 41 after the accession of Kanishka I). This deposit certainly does not provide precise synchronous dating, but it does undoubtedly present a difficulty for those who would put Kanishka's accession in A.D. 78, a date which has formerly carried considerable authority.¹¹

There are in addition ample signs that relations between the Roman Empire and the Kushans flourished during the second and early third centuries. Both Hadrian and Antoninus Pius received ambassadors from the 'Bactrians', who must surely have been the Kushans. We do not know the precise dates of these embassies, but on the dating accepted here it is likely that one if not both came from the great Kanishka, who was responsible for developing the Kushan kingdom to its greatest extent, including the Tarim basin in Central Asia, and whose name was long revered in India as a great benefactor of Buddhism. Huvishka, whose coins depict a range of deities, minted a coin with the image of the goddess Roma in Minerva pose, complete with the title RIOM, though we do not know what event, if any, occasioned this mark of friendship, if such it was. Kanishka II described himself as KAISAR, among other titles, on an inscription found on the Indus near Attock, more out of self-glorification than any conscious fellowship with the contemporary Roman emperor, but at least both he and his readers must have been well aware of what the title meant.¹²

In Ptolemy's *Geography*, the information for which was mostly gathered c. A.D. 120–50, we find a quite startling advance in the geographical knowledge of north-west India over all previous western geographers. The commercial port for the Indus trade by Ptolemy's time was Monoglosson, some distance to the east of the Indus delta; Barbaricon was now no more than a settlement on an island in the delta (7. 1. 59), its channels having silted up since A.D. 70, as the author of the *Periplus* implied they were already doing in his day (*Periplus* 38). Inland the author of the *Periplus* could name only three towns (Minnagar, Proclais, and Boucephalos Alexandria) and these he could not locate. Ptolemy can name numerous rivers, tributaries of the Indus and the Ganges, and can locate over eighty towns, all within the Kushan kingdom; and from those which we can identify, such as Mathura, Proclais, and Taxila, his information was reasonably accurate. Such detailed information about the inland regions of north-west India, most of which was clearly not available to Strabo, Pliny, or the author of the *Periplus*, can only have come from Roman subjects, presumably merchants from Alexandria, who had actually visited, perhaps even lived in, the Kushan kingdom in the years following the development of commercial links in the time of Trajan and Vima Kadphises.¹³

Though we know that Greeks from the eastern Roman Empire did reside in south India, we have as yet no direct evidence of Roman subjects actually living within the Kushan kingdom, but we do have evidence which strongly suggests their presence in the area. When J. Hackin and R. Ghirshman excavated the 'New Royal Town' area of Begram, about 45 miles north of Kabul, between 1936 and 1942, they uncovered a palace whose construction they assigned to the reign of Kanishka. In two rooms of this palace was found the so-called Begram Hoard, a large collection of 'exotic things of beauty and worth', as Wheeler puts it, from China, India, and from the Roman Empire. The western objects include glass vessels from Syria or Egypt, bronze bowls, steelyard weights in the form of Minerva or Mars, bronze statuettes of classical figures, bronze feet for lampstands, and plaster medallions of the sort used as models for relief work by metal workers, all in styles dating from the late first to the early third centuries. Associated with these objects were found Kushan coins from Kanishka to Vasudeva. All these items, together with the Indian and Chinese works of art, were probably levied as customs dues on passing caravans. Begram is ideally situated to act as a customs station, for the Afghan Plateau to the west and the Himalayas to the east allow only a narrow passage into Central Asia through the passes of the Hindu Kush and along the tributaries of the Indus. This must have been the regular route linking the Silk Road with the coastal ports of north-west India. The Alexandrian ship-

owners were thus able to cut in on the trans-Asiatic silk trade, by-passing Parthia and thus ensuring that Parthian traders did not have a monopoly; hence the importance of smooth trade relations with the Kushans. It was doubtless the agents of these Alexandrian merchants who travelled from Monoglosson to the Silk Road through Begram, bringing gold coinage and works of art for the Kushans from Alexandria for the privilege of buying and transporting silk and 'Serice skins' from the Oxus valley down to their company's ships at Monoglosson. We do not have any details of how the trade was organized, though it is possible that the Kushans may actually have controlled the silk trade, perhaps at a centre such as Begram, as a government monopoly.¹⁴

Why did the Kushans levy customs dues at least partly in works of art? Quite simply because they liked them. Finds from other Kushan sites, for instance from Taxila, also reveal a taste for Roman glassware, silverware, gemstones, and figurines. This taste for Roman, or more strictly Hellenistic, art went far deeper than the collection of Alexandrian bric-a-brac, for the whole artistic output of the Gandhara area in the Kushan period, particularly its sculpture, shows a marked Hellenistic influence. A considerable literature has grown up on the art of the Gandhara Plain, the heartland of the Kushan kingdom, much of it concerned with assessing the precise contribution of Hellenistic and other influences on its development.¹⁵ The artistic details need not detain us here, but we might note that it is highly unlikely that such artistic influence, evident in techniques and in details of motifs as well as in overall style of composition, could have come about simply by the imitation of works of art imported to Gandhara from Alexandria, which in any case are not likely to have included large sculpted items. It seems certain that craftsmen from the eastern Mediterranean emigrated to the Kushan kingdom, and there taught their skills and techniques to local artists. The maker of the Kanishka Reliquary, found in a stupa near Peshawar, may have been such an immigrant; his name was Agesilas, which has a distinct Greek ring.¹⁶ And though we have no other records from north-west India, from Tamil poems of south India we know of 'Yavanas' (Greeks) employed as soldiers, bodyguards, and apparently as manufacturers of siege engines; and, of course, St. Thomas is said to have gone to Taxila as a carpenter or builder (though before the Kushans arrived), which indicates at least that early readers of the Acts of Thomas found nothing unbelievable in a craftsman going to north-west India. Even as far afield as Miran in Central Asia we find third-century frescos done in a style reminiscent of contemporary Roman painting and mosaic work, and signed by an artist called Titus, whom Sir Aurel Stein called 'a sort of Roman Eurasian by blood, brought up in the Hellenistic tradition . . . whom his calling had carried

no doubt through the regions of eastern Iran (i.e. Bactria and Gandhara), impregnated with Buddhism, to the confines of China'.¹⁷

The contacts between the Roman Empire and the Kushans were certainly fruitful, doubtless considerably more so for the Kushans both commercially and artistically than for the Roman world, although many Alexandrian merchants must have made fortunes for themselves out of their dealings with north-west India, and wealthy Romans got their silk, furs, and jewellery. It may be, however, that we are still not seeing the whole picture, and that there was another field in which the two states co-operated.

When Trajan reached Charax Spasinu near the mouth of the Tigris in A.D. 116 during his Parthian campaign he expressed regret, on seeing a vessel bound for India, that he was not young enough to visit that country himself. It has usually been assumed that he was dreaming of conquests such as Alexander's. But was he perhaps rather expressing a desire to meet the Kushan monarch with whom he had had communication through ambassadors, Vima Kadphises, now ageing like himself? And was this communication very much in his mind at that moment because it had been partly to do with the matter in hand, that is the war with Parthia? Trajan's confidence when he had met the Parthian embassy in Athens in the winter of A.D. 113-14 was perhaps greater than one might expect in the light of Rome's previous encounters with the Parthian forces. It is true that there was considerable unrest within Parthia at the time, but this was far from uncommon and not in itself an assurance of internal collapse. Had Trajan already come to some arrangement with Vima Kadphises whereby he could be sure that the Kushans would simultaneously harass Parthia from the east as he attacked from the west? Certainly the Kushans viewed Parthia with the same suspicion and hostility as did the Romans. In fact, we have no confirmatory evidence of a war at this time on the Kushan-Parthian frontier, but late in Kanishka's reign there was a war between the two countries, probably c. A.D. 150 when Vologeses III began to revive Parthia's fortunes; significantly it seems that the Parthians on this occasion were trying to recover territory they had previously lost to the Kushans.¹⁸ The evidence remains slender, and we may never know the truth of it; but it does make a good story.

NOTES

1. Mainly Hou-han-shu, p. 118; see K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A Comprehensive History of India* (Orient Longmans, 1957) ii 223 ff. for a discussion of the evidence.

2. The problem of ΣΩΤΗΡ ΜΕΓΑΣ, who also called himself ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ, has given rise to much speculation. See, e.g. Sastri, *op. cit.*, p. 233; J. Marshall, *Taxila* (Cambridge, 1951) i 68-9; J.M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Art of the Kushans* (Berkeley 1967), 18-19. Sastri has pointed out that the lay-out of the titles of ΣΩΤΗΡ ΜΕΓΑΣ is very similar to that used by Vima Kadphises.

3. Rosenfield, op. cit., pp. 19–23; B. Srivastava, *Trade and Commerce in Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1968), pp. 179 ff.

4. The date of the *Periplus* has in the past been as much disputed as the chronology of the Kushan kings, but there is now fairly general agreement that it was written around A.D. 60–70. For the arguments see A. Dihle, *Umstrittene Daten: Untersuchungen zum Auftreten der Griechen am Roten Meer* (Cologne, 1965).

5. *Periplus* 39 and 56. The pattern described in the *Periplus* is fully confirmed by coin finds in India. The most convenient summary of the finds of Roman coinage is still to be found in R.E.M. Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp. 164–73. New finds are frequently made (see, e.g., M. Seshadri, *Archaeology*, 1966, pp.244–7), but the pattern described by Wheeler remains largely unaltered. See also E.H. Warmington, *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India* (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 272 ff. The most obvious interpretation of the coin finds is that there was a drastic reduction in coinage exports from the Roman Empire after Nero's reign. This certainly accords well with the known stringent economic policy of Vespasian.

6. D.W. MacDowall in *Papers on the Date of Kanishka*, edited A.L. Basham (Leiden, 1968), pp. 144–5.

7. This was no mean figure, enough in fact to pay the whole Roman army for ninety years. We have no reason to doubt Dio's figures.

8. Marshall, op. cit., p. 68.

9. See Ptolemy 7. 1. 15 and 93; 7. 2 *passim* (description of south-east Asia). All authorities seem to agree that the source of Kushan gold was the Roman Empire. It remains possible that the gold may have gone overland through Parthia, though the sea route is far more likely both because of its greater safety and simply because it did by-pass Parthia.

10. The literature on the chronology of the Kushan kings is now considerable. See, e.g., Sastri, op. cit., pp. 227–48; Marshall, op. cit., pp. 66–74; Rosenfield, op. cit., especially pp. 257–8 (on Kanishka); G. Hambly, *Central Asia* (London, 1969), pp. 46 ff.; and particularly Basham, *Papers on the Date of Kanishka*, where the central problem is very fully aired.

11. MacDowall, op. cit., p. 143. For Huvishka's coinage see Marshall, op. cit., p. 71.

12. For Bactrian (and also Indian) ambassadors see *Hist. Aug. Hadr.* 21, and *Vict. Epit.* 15. 4. For RIOM see Rosenfield, op. cit., 1. 96–8 and coins 182–4 on Plate ix; Rosenfield has doubts as to whether RIOM = ROMA, but the fully armed female figure depicted surely makes this highly likely. For Kanishka II's use of KAISAR see Sastri, op. cit., pp. 245–6.

13. Ptolemy 7. 1. 2–4 (Indus mouth and coastal region); 7. 1. 43–61 (inland regions of the Kushan kingdom, covering Afghanistan, Gandhara, Indus valley, and upper Ganges); 7. 1. 64–7 (approximately the modern Rajasthan, probably partly under Kushan control).

14. For Roman subjects in south India see, e.g., Wheeler, op. cit., pp. 160 and 173 ff., and for a brief summary of the main finds Wheeler, op. cit., pp. 191–5. The trade through Kushan territory may have been organized on similar lines to the transit trade through Parthia, where routes were maintained and protected, and dues levied, by the Parthian government; see Ghirshman, *Iran* (Harmondsworth, 1954), p. 284, and M.A.R. Colledge, *The Parthians* (London, 1967), pp. 77–84. For an example of a state monopoly in frankincense in south Arabia see *Periplus* 27–32.

15. For a convenient summary of the subject, with a good bibliography, see B. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*³ (Harmondsworth, 1967), pp. 121–205.

16. See Rowland, op. cit., p. 135.

17. For Yavanas in Tamil poetry see R.K. Mookerji, *A History of Indian Shipping* (Calcutta, 1912 and 1957), pp. 128–9, and Warmington, op. cit., p. 60. For a full discussion of St. Thomas see M. Bussagli, *East and West* iii. (1952–3), 88–94. For Titus at Miran see Rowland, op. cit., p. 186; Stein, *Serindia* i. (London, 1921), 538.

18. See Ghirshman, op. cit., pp. 261–2, though the suggestion put forward here is not Ghirshman's.