

Immigration, Settlement and Cultural Transformation in Kushan Kashmir

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Abstract

The history of ancient Kashmir was shaped by successive movements of people, cultures and political formations entering the Valley from the surrounding regions. The Kushan period represents an especially significant phase in this long history of mobility. Archaeological explorations have identified more than sixty Kushan-period sites across the Kashmir Valley, although only a limited number have been systematically excavated. The distribution of these sites, together with architectural remains, terracotta art, pottery, coins, literary references and evidence of urban foundations, points to an intensified process of settlement and cultural interaction during the Kushan period. This article examines the nature and consequences of these movements, arguing that Kushan expansion in Kashmir involved more than the extension of political authority. It was accompanied by the settlement of administrators, military groups, religious specialists, artisans, craftsmen and other social groups who contributed to the formation of new centres of political, economic and cultural activity. The article further examines the relationship between settlement and cultural transformation, with particular attention to the archaeological evidence from Harwan, Kanispor, Semthan, Ushkur, Hutmur, Hoinar, Kutbal and other sites. It argues that the Kushan presence generated new patterns of cultural interaction without simply displacing earlier traditions. Rather, the Valley became a zone of negotiation in which Central Asian, Iranian, Gandharan and Indian cultural elements were incorporated into an evolving Kashmiri social landscape.

Keywords: Kashmir; Kushans; immigration; settlement; Central Asia; archaeology; Harwan; Kanispor; Semthan; cultural interaction

Introduction

The history of Kashmir cannot be understood solely in terms of successive dynasties and political conquests. Equally significant was the movement of people who entered the Valley from different geographical and cultural zones and subsequently became part of its social and cultural landscape. From the prehistoric period onwards, Kashmir witnessed successive episodes of population movement, cultural interaction and settlement.¹ The archaeological record suggests that changes in material culture were often associated with the arrival, interaction or assimilation of new cultural groups². The Kushan period represents one of the most important phases in this long history of mobility and settlement.

¹B. M. Pande, "The Neolithic in Kashmir: New Discoveries," *The Anthropologist* 17, no. 1-2 (1970): 25–41, Archaeological Survey of India, *Excavations at Burzahom (1961-1971)*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, no. 104, ed. A. K. Sharma (New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, 2014), 12–18.

² Abdul Rashid Lone, *Archaeological History of Kashmir: From Prehistory to the Early Medieval Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 45

The evidence available for the Kushan period is particularly significant because settlements and material remains occur across widely separated parts of the Valley³. The archaeological record has revealed more than sixty Kushan-period sites, although systematic excavation remains limited.⁴ Harwan, Semthan, Ushkur and Kanispor constitute the principal excavated sites, while a larger number of sites—including Hutmur, Hoinar, Doen Pather, Kutbal, Ahan and others—have yielded Kushan-period material through exploration or limited excavation.⁵

The distribution of these sites raises an important historical question: **what processes produced such a substantial expansion of Kushan material culture and settlement across the Valley?** Was the phenomenon simply the result of military conquest and administrative incorporation, or did it involve the movement and settlement of diverse groups whose presence transformed Kashmir's social and cultural environment?

This article argues that the Kushan incorporation of Kashmir should be understood as a process of **political expansion accompanied by population mobility, institutional settlement and cultural interaction**. The evidence suggests the presence not merely of rulers and soldiers but also of administrators, religious specialists, artisans, craftsmen and other groups associated with the functioning of an expanding imperial order.⁶ The resulting settlements became sites of interaction between incoming traditions and pre-existing Kashmiri cultural practices.⁷

Archaeological material does not always permit us to identify the ethnic identity of the people who produced or used it. Nor can every instance of cultural resemblance be interpreted automatically as evidence of migration. The argument presented here therefore distinguishes between direct evidence for settlement and broader indications of cultural interaction.

1. Kashmir as a Zone of Mobility and Settlement

Kashmir's geographical position helps explain its recurring role as a meeting ground between different cultural regions. Situated between the north-western subcontinent, Gandhara, Central Asia and the Himalayan regions, the Valley was connected to wider networks of movement and exchange. The historical record prior to the Kushans already indicates the presence and interaction of different cultural traditions.⁸

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B. R. Mani, *The Kushan Civilization: Studies in Urban Development and Material Culture* (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1987), 88–94. A. K. Sharma, *Early Historic Archaeology of Kashmir* (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2012), 45–51. R. C. Agrawal, "Archaeological Remains of the Kushan Period in the Kashmir Valley," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2002): 104–112.

⁴ Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 65–71.

⁵ Abdul Rashid Lone and Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Kushan Settlement Complexes in the Kashmir Valley," *Archaeological Research in South Asia* 42, no. 2 (2026): 112–118.

⁶ Bhaskar Chattopadhyay, *Kushana State and Indian Society: A Study in Post-Mauryan Polity & Society* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1975), 112–118. B. R. Mani, *The Kushan Civilization: Studies in Urban Development and Material Culture* (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1987), 142–149.

⁷ Abdul Rashid Lone, "Revisiting the Archaeology of an Early Historic City: A Case Study of Semthan, Kashmir," *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology* 15–16 (2023): 122–129.

⁸ Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 45–52.

According to the evidence assembled in the present study, the period preceding Kushan rule witnessed successive cultural and political formations associated with Indo-Greek, Śaka and Indo-Parthian influences, alongside indigenous traditions.⁹

The significance of this background is that Kushan settlement did not occur in an empty cultural landscape. The Kushans entered a Valley that already possessed established communities, agricultural systems, political structures and religious traditions. Their arrival therefore produced a process of **interaction and reorganisation rather than simple replacement**.

Recent archaeological scholarship likewise emphasizes that the Kushan-period distribution of sites is closely related to ancient communication routes.¹⁰ In particular, the concentration of sites around the Jhelum basin and the routes connecting Kashmir with Gandhara and Taxila indicates the importance of connectivity in the expansion of Kushan material culture.¹¹

2. The Expansion of Kushan Settlement

The archaeological evidence indicates that the Kushan period witnessed a substantial expansion of settlements in Kashmir. The geographical distribution of these sites is particularly revealing. A considerable concentration occurs in northern Kashmir, especially in the Baramulla region and along the Jhelum corridor¹². Other sites occur in central and southern Kashmir, including Harwan, Semthan and sites along the Lidder and Jhelum systems.¹³ Archaeological research suggests that these routes connected the Valley with important centres in Gandhara and the north-western subcontinent.

This distribution makes it possible to view the Kushan settlement process in terms of **corridors of movement** rather than isolated settlements. The Jhelum valley constituted an especially important axis because it facilitated movement between the north-western approaches to Kashmir and the interior of the Valley. The concentration of Kushan remains along these routes therefore reflects both the economic and strategic importance of communications.¹⁴

The archaeological sequence at Semthan is particularly useful in this context.¹⁵ Excavations have demonstrated a continuous cultural sequence extending from earlier periods through the Indo-Greek and

⁹ R. S. Bisht, "Excavations at Semthan, District Anantnag," in *Indian Archaeology 1980-81: A Review*, ed. Debala Mitra (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1983), 21–23. Osmund Bopearachchi, *Monnaies gréco-bactriennes et indo-grecques: Catalogue raisonné [Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek Coins: Systematic Catalogue]* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1991), 74–82. Joe Cribb, "The Early Kushan Kings: New Evidence for Chronology," in *Coins, Art and Chronology: Essays on the Pre-Islamic History of the Indo-Iranian Borderlands*, ed. Michael Alram and Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), 177–205.

¹⁰ Mumtaz A. Yatoo, "Archaeology as Practiced in Kashmir: A Review of Regional Surveys and Communication Networks," *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 315–319.

¹¹ Jason Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange Within and Beyond the Northwest of India* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 188–195.

¹² Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 66–69. Abdul Rashid Lone, *Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 145–152. Abdul Rashid Lone and Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Kushan Settlement Complexes in the Kashmir Valley," *Archaeological Research in South Asia* 42, no. 2 (May 2026): 114–117.

¹³ Mohammad Ajmal Shah and B. R. Mani, "Early Historic Archaeology in Kashmir: An Appraisal of the Kushan Period," *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology* 9-10 (2013–2014): 88–95.

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Ibid.

¹⁵ R. S. Bisht, "Excavations at Semthan, District Anantnag," in *Indian Archaeology 1980-81: A Review*, ed. Debala Mitra (New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, 1983), 21–25.

Kushan phases. The Kushan level contains distinctive pottery, architectural remains and terracotta objects, indicating substantial activity during this period¹⁶.

The evidence from Harwan, Kanispur and Ushkur similarly demonstrates the development of substantial architectural complexes. Harwan, for example, preserves structural remains associated with Buddhist establishments and distinctive diaper-pebble construction.¹⁷ Similar constructional techniques have been reported from other Kushan-period sites, suggesting shared architectural practices across different parts of the Valley¹⁸.

The pattern therefore suggests that Kushan rule produced not merely scattered military installations but a network of settlements integrated into wider economic, political and cultural systems.

3. State Formation and the Settlement of Political Elites

One important dimension of Kushan settlement was the movement of groups associated with the political and administrative apparatus of the empire.¹⁹ The imperial rulers required a supporting structure in conquered territories and therefore settled loyal groups who could contribute to political stability and military security.

Kushan political expansion created conditions favourable to the establishment of **new elite settlements and administrative centres**. The empire's satrapal administrative system required provincial officials and other functionaries. The Kushans strengthened their administrative control through the appointment of satraps and other senior officials, who were often drawn from groups closely aligned with the imperial establishment.²⁰

Archaeology provides indirect support for the existence of such institutional centres. Sites such as Kutbal, for instance, have yielded evidence of a relatively developed material culture despite their geographically remote locations.²¹ Such sites are difficult to explain exclusively as isolated rural settlements and may indicate the existence of centres connected with administrative or economic activity.

The emergence of these centres should therefore be understood within the broader process of imperial integration. Settlement provided the Kushans with a means of consolidating authority, while the

¹⁶ S. L. Shali, *History and Archaeology of Kashmir Through the Ages* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993), 145–158. R. C. Kak, *A Handbook of Archaeological and Numismatic Sections of the S.P.S. Museum* (Calcutta: Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 1923), 42–51. Aman Ashraf Wani, "Exogenous Influences in Kashmir from the Neolithic Times to the Advent of the Christian Era" (unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, University of Kashmir, 2012), chapter 4.

¹⁷ R. C. Kak, *A Handbook of Archaeological and Numismatic Sections of the S.P.S. Museum* (Calcutta: Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 1923), 42–51.

¹⁸ S. L. Shali, *History and Archaeology of Kashmir Through the Ages* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993), 146–152. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods*, 5th ed. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1965), 184–188. R. C. Kak, *A Handbook of Archaeological and Numismatic Sections of the S.P.S. Museum* (Calcutta: Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 1923), 14–22.

¹⁹ J. Harmatta, ed., *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2, *The Development of Sedentary and Nomadic Civilizations: 700 B.C. to A.D. 250* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1994), 312–318.

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Ibid

²¹ Jawahar Lal Bhan, *Kashmir Terracottas* (New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 2010), 43–51. Sabzar Ahmad, "A Case Study of Ancient Archaeological Sites in Kashmir Valley," *Journal of Historical and Archaeological Archaeology* 11, no. 1 (2025): 14–17, Abdul Rashid Lone, "Terracotta Art of Kashmir: An Overview," *Sahapedia*, last modified May 14, 2018.

establishment of administrative and economic nodes facilitated the circulation of goods, people and ideas.²²

4. Religious Specialists and Cultural Institutions

Political consolidation alone could not account for the cultural transformation visible in Kushan Kashmir. Imperial expansion was accompanied by the establishment and patronage of religious and cultural institutions.

The settlement of religious specialists—including priests, preachers, and Buddhist scholars—appears to have been an important dimension of the Kushan presence in Kashmir, while a number of place-names may preserve traces of the Iranian, Greek, and Indian religious traditions that became embedded in the Valley's cultural landscape.²³

The Buddhist evidence is considerably stronger. Literary traditions associate Kashmir with major developments in Buddhist intellectual history during the Kushan period.²⁴ The tradition of a Buddhist council under Kanishka, although transmitted through later sources and surrounded by historiographical questions, is consistent with the broader archaeological evidence for the importance of Buddhist establishments in Kushan Kashmir²⁵. According to the literary tradition, the council brought a large number of Buddhist scholars to Kashmir, some of whom are believed to have subsequently settled in the Valley. Whatever the precise historical details of the council tradition, the archaeological record confirms that Kashmir became an important centre of Buddhist institutional activity. Harwan, for example, preserves substantial remains of Buddhist architecture, while Kushan-period Buddhist material has been identified at several other sites.²⁶

Thus, the movement of religious specialists should be considered part of a wider process in which imperial patronage, pilgrimage, intellectual exchange and institutional settlement reinforced one another.

5. Artisans, Craftsmen and the Movement of Material Culture

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for population mobility comes from material culture. The Kushan period witnessed the development and dissemination of distinctive architectural techniques, terracotta art, pottery forms and artistic motifs across Kashmir²⁷. Particularly significant in this context are the Harwan tiles, whose human figures exhibit distinctive Central Asian physiognomic and sartorial features.²⁸ The

²² Abdul Rashid Lone, *Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 184–192. Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 68–71.

²³ Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 74–85.

²⁴ Samuel Beal, trans., *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, vol. 1 (London: Trübner & Co., 1884), 150–156.

²⁵ S. L. Shali, *History and Archaeology of Kashmir Through the Ages* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993), 160–166.

²⁶ Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 105–118.

²⁷ Aijaz A. Bandey, *Early Terracotta Art of Kashmir: 1st–3rd Century A.D.* (Srinagar: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, 1992), 9–15.

²⁸ Aijaz A. Bandey, *Early Terracotta Art of Kashmir: 1st–3rd Century A.D.* (Srinagar: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, 1992), 24–38. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 106–112. Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 78–82.

tile-making techniques and decorative motifs also display parallels with artistic traditions of Central Asia and China.²⁹

While these similarities point to sustained cultural interaction and the circulation of artistic practices, they should not, in themselves, be taken as conclusive evidence for the physical migration of artisans. Artistic techniques and styles could have travelled through imitation, apprenticeship, trade, or the circulation of finished objects, as well as through the movement of craftsmen themselves. Nevertheless, the density and variety of the evidence make cultural interaction unmistakable. Harwan, Semthan, Kanispur and other sites have yielded terracotta tiles and figurines displaying a wide range of human, animal, floral and abstract motifs. Archaeological scholarship identifies the Kushan period as an important phase in the development of Kashmir's terracotta artistic tradition.^{30,35}

The architectural evidence is equally significant. The diaper-pebble and related masonry traditions found at Harwan and other Kushan sites demonstrate the existence of shared constructional practices across the Valley.³¹ Harwan's apsidal structures, stupas and monastic complex also display connections with architectural traditions of Gandhara and the wider north-western region.³²

The evidence therefore supports a more nuanced formulation: **Kushan Kashmir was a major zone of technological and artistic transmission in which the movement of people and the circulation of cultural practices reinforced one another.**

6. Urban Foundations and the Creation of New Centres

The literary tradition associates the Kushan rulers Huvishka, Jushka and Kanishka with the foundation of cities named Hushkapura, Jushkapura and Kanishkapura. Kalhaṇa preserves this tradition in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*.³³

²⁹ Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods*, 5th ed. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1965), 184–188. János Harmatta, ed., *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2, *The Development of Sedentary and Nomadic Civilizations: 700 B.C. to A.D. 250* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1994), 417–440. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 106–114. Aijaz A. Bandey, *Early Terracotta Art of Kashmir: 1st–3rd Century A.D.* (Srinagar: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, 1992), 34–45.

³⁰ Aijaz A. Bandey, *Early Terracotta Art of Kashmir: 1st–3rd Century A.D.* (Srinagar: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, 1992), 48–56. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 108–115.

³¹ Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 105–112. Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 66–69. Abdul Rashid Lone and Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Kushan Settlement Complexes in the Kashmir Valley," *Archaeological Research in South Asia* 42, no. 2 (May 2026): 114–117. R. S. Bisht, "Excavations at Semthan, District Anantnag," in *Indian Archaeology 1980–81: A Review*, ed. Debala Mitra (New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, 1983), 21–24.

³² Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods*, 5th ed. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1965), 182–188. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 105–114. Robert E. Fisher, "The Art of Kashmir," in *The Heritage of Kashmiri Art*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1989), 23–34. Kurt A. Behrendt, *The Buddhist Architecture of Gandhāra* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 165–178.

³³ Kalhaṇa, *Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, trans. M. A. Stein, vol. 1 (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1900), 30–31 (Book I, verses 168–173). Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 74–77.

The identification of these settlements with archaeological sites has been discussed by earlier scholarship, although individual identifications remain subject to debate.³⁴ Huvishkapura is generally associated with Ushkur, while Kanishkapura has been associated with Kanispur³⁵. Modern scholarship likewise recognises the importance of these sites within the Kushan settlement landscape.³⁶

The significance of these urban foundations lies not simply in the names of the settlements but in what they reveal about the political geography of Kushan Kashmir. The establishment or expansion of urban centres created spaces in which administrators, soldiers, religious specialists, artisans, merchants and agricultural populations interacted.³⁷

The material evidence from Kanispur and other sites supports the existence of substantial settlement activity. Recent archaeological work also suggests that Kanispur preserves an early phase of Kushan cultural development, while Harwan and some southern sites represent later developments.³⁸

Urbanisation therefore appears to have been an important component of the Kushan transformation of Kashmir. Rather than treating cities simply as royal foundations, they should be viewed as **nodes within networks of administration, commerce, religious activity and cultural exchange**.

7. Immigration and Social Reorganisation

The movement and settlement of new groups in Kashmir had important implications for the existing social order. Immigration appears to have contributed to the diversification of the Valley's social composition and may have prompted attempts to accommodate influential newcomers within established social hierarchies³⁹. The *Nīlamatapūrāṇa* and later genealogical traditions provide useful, though chronologically and contextually complex, evidence for examining processes of social incorporation and the negotiation of status within Brahmanical frameworks.⁴⁰

This hypothesis, however, requires careful chronological consideration. Later textual traditions cannot be treated as straightforward accounts of social arrangements in Kushan-period Kashmir; rather, they may

³⁴ M. A. Stein, trans., *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, vol. 2 (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1900), 290–304. B. R. Mani, "Excavations at Kanispur: 1998–1999," *Prāgdhāra: Journal of the U.P. State Archaeology Department* 10 (2000): 1–7.

³⁵ M. A. Stein, trans., *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, vol. 2 (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1900), 290–294. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 152–155.

³⁶ Abdul Rashid Lone, *Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 115–128. Abdul Rashid Lone and Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Kushan Settlement Complexes in the Kashmir Valley," *Archaeological Research in South Asia* 42, no. 2 (May 2026): 112–115, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386755242_Kushan_Settlement_Complexes_in_the_Kashmir_Valley. Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 65–68, uok.edu.in.

³⁷ B. R. Mani, *The Kushan Civilization: Studies in Urban Development and Material Culture* (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1987), 112–126.

³⁸ B. R. Mani, "Excavations at Kanispur: 1998–1999," *Prāgdhāra: Journal of the U.P. State Archaeology Department* 10 (2000): 7–14.

³⁹ Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 68–82. Bhaskar Chattopadhyay, *Kushana State and Indian Society: A Study in Post-Mauryan Polity & Society* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1975), 114–126. Abdul Rashid Lone, *Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 168–175.

⁴⁰ Ved Kumari, *The Nīlamata Purāṇa*, vol. 1, *A Cultural and Literary Study of a Kaśmīrī Purāṇa* (Srinagar: J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1968), 74–89. Ved Kumari, *The Nīlamata Purāṇa*, vol. 2, *Critical Edition with English Translation* (Srinagar: J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1973), 112–125.

preserve traces of longer-term processes of social classification, incorporation, and legitimation. Nevertheless, the recurrent arrival and settlement of new populations would have necessitated mechanisms through which these groups could be accommodated within the existing social order. Such incorporation may have involved the adoption of local religious practices, the construction or acquisition of prestigious genealogies, participation in established institutions, and the gradual negotiation of new social identities. From this perspective, the significance of migration lies less in identifying the precise ethnic origins of individual communities than in understanding how the arrival of new groups contributed to the reconfiguration of Kashmiri society. The immigrant populations did not remain culturally or socially isolated; rather, their interaction with established communities generated processes of adaptation, accommodation, and social integration. Migration was therefore not merely a demographic phenomenon but a significant agent of social transformation.⁴¹

8. Cultural Interaction and the Formation of a Composite Society

The consequences of immigration extended beyond political and demographic change. The most enduring result may have been the creation of a cultural environment in which different traditions interacted with one another. The archaeological record of Kushan Kashmir displays precisely this kind of interaction^{42,49} Central Asian, Iranian, Gandharan, Greek and Indian elements appear within the same broader cultural horizon.⁴³ This does not mean that Kashmir became culturally uniform. On the contrary, the evidence points towards a process of **selective appropriation and adaptation**.⁴⁴

The terracotta tradition provides a particularly useful example. Human figures represented in Central Asian dress occur alongside motifs and artistic conventions derived from other cultural traditions.⁴⁵ Similarly, architectural forms display relationships with Gandharan and north-western traditions while being constructed with locally available materials and techniques.⁴⁶ This pattern is better described as cultural interaction than cultural replacement.

⁴¹ Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 64–82. Bhaskar Chattopadhyay, *Kushana State and Indian Society: A Study in Post-Mauryan Polity & Society* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1975), 112–126. Abdul Rashid Lone, *Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 164–178. B. R. Mani, *The Kushan Civilization: Studies in Urban Development and Material Culture* (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1987), 142–155.

⁴² Abdul Rashid Lone and Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Kushan Settlement Complexes in the Kashmir Valley," *Archaeological Research in South Asia* 42, no. 2 (May 2026): 112–116. Aijaz A. Bandey, *Early Terracotta Art of Kashmir: 1st–3rd Century A.D.* (Srinagar: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, 1992), 48–58. Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 74–85. Jason Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange Within and Beyond the Northwest of India* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 214–226.

⁴³ Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods*, 5th ed. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1965), 184–188.

⁴⁴ Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 64–74. Abdul Rashid Lone, *Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 182–195. Shonaleeka Kaul, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Landscape and Identity in the Rajatarangini* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 135–144.

⁴⁵ Aijaz A. Bandey, *Early Terracotta Art of Kashmir: 1st–3rd Century A.D.* (Srinagar: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, 1992), 24–41. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 106–112. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods*, 5th ed. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1965), 184–188. Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 78–82.

⁴⁶ Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods*, 5th ed. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1965), 184–188. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir* (London: India Society, 1933), 105–112. Abdul Rashid Lone,

The Kushan state itself was a cosmopolitan formation, extending across regions characterised by considerable linguistic, religious and artistic diversity. Kashmir's incorporation into this wider political world consequently exposed the Valley to new cultural influences while simultaneously providing a setting in which those influences were adapted to local circumstances. The result was not a simple transplantation of Central Asian culture into Kashmir. Rather, incoming traditions were **localized**, while existing Kashmiri traditions were themselves transformed through interaction with new cultural forms.⁴⁷

9. Settlement, Economy and the Expansion of Cultivated Space

Immigration also had an important economic dimension. The settlement of newcomers in areas requiring cultivation appears to have contributed to the expansion of the settled and agrarian landscape of the Valley.⁴⁸ The immigrant population was not, however, confined to political and social elites; it also included sections of the labouring population whose presence would have supported agricultural production and the development of newly established settlements.⁴⁹

The archaeological evidence from Semthan provides useful context for considering changes in agricultural and settlement organisation during the early historic period.⁵⁰ Archaeobotanical research indicates changes in agricultural practices, including the use of rice, millet and South Asian pulses.⁵¹

It would nevertheless be premature to attribute all changes in agricultural production directly to Kushan immigration. Demographic expansion, the growth of markets, political reorganisation, and the adaptation of existing agricultural practices may all have contributed to these developments. A more cautious interpretation is that Kushan political integration created conditions conducive to intensified settlement and economic activity. The expansion of settlements along major river systems and established communication routes would, in turn, have generated greater demand for agricultural production, craft activities, and exchange.

The relationship between immigration and economic change was therefore reciprocal: political expansion encouraged settlement, settlement stimulated economic activity, and economic growth strengthened the institutional structures of the expanding political order.⁵²

Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 184–192. Kurt A. Behrendt, *The Buddhist Architecture of Gandhāra* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 168–175.

⁴⁷ Muhammad Ashraf Wani and Aman Ashraf Wani, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Intercultural Networks and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2023), 64–72. János Harmatta, ed., *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2, *The Development of Sedentary and Nomadic Civilizations: 700 B.C. to A.D. 250* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1994), 312–325.

⁴⁸ Abdul Rashid Lone, *Early Historic Kashmir: Archaeological Perspectives on Settlement and Cultural Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 124–138. Mohammad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 65–68.

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⁵⁰ R. S. Bisht, "Excavations at Semthan, District Anantnag," in *Indian Archaeology 1980-81: A Review*, ed. Debala Mitra (New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, 1983), 21–25.

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10. Rethinking the Meaning of “Kushan” Culture in Kashmir

One of the principal difficulties in studying Kushan Kashmir is the temptation to treat every archaeological object found in a Kushan-period context as evidence of the physical presence of Kushans.

Such an approach can obscure the complexity of cultural interaction. The archaeological evidence demonstrates the presence of what may reasonably be called a **Kushan cultural horizon**, but this horizon should not be equated mechanically with a single ethnic population. The same cultural horizon could encompass local inhabitants, migrants from Central Asia and the north-west, artisans trained in Gandharan traditions, religious communities and groups already resident in Kashmir.⁵³

This distinction is important because the Kushan empire itself was culturally diverse. The material culture of Kashmir reflects this cosmopolitan character. Recent archaeological studies emphasise the concentration of Kushan sites along routes connecting Kashmir with Gandhara and other regions and identify architectural and artistic parallels across these areas. Consequently, the term “Kushan settlement” should be understood primarily as a **historical and archaeological designation**, not automatically as an ethnic label.

This allows us to move beyond a binary opposition between “Kushans” and “Kashmiris”. The historical reality was more complicated: local populations and incoming groups interacted, intermarried, exchanged technologies and participated in shared economic and religious institutions⁵⁴.

Conclusion

The Kushan period represents a decisive phase in the history of population mobility and settlement in Kashmir. The evidence does not support viewing Kushan expansion merely as a military conquest followed by administrative incorporation. Rather, the period witnessed the development of a complex settlement system involving political elites, administrators, military groups, religious specialists, scholars, artisans, craftsmen and other populations.⁵⁵

The archaeological distribution of Kushan sites provides the strongest foundation for this argument. More than sixty sites have now been identified, although systematic excavation remains limited. The concentration of settlements along the Jhelum and other major communication routes demonstrates the importance of mobility, connectivity and economic integration in the Kushan transformation of the Valley.⁵⁶

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Aijaz Ahmad Banday, "Early Historic Archaeology in Kashmir: An Appraisal of the Kushan Period," *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute* 72–73 (2012–2013): 215–220. G. L. Pokharia et al., "Early Neolithic Agriculture (2700–2000 BC) and Kushan Period Developments (AD 100–300): Macrobotanical Evidence from Kanisapur in Kashmir, India," *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 26, no. 4 (2017): 427–444. Mohamad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23 (2016): 131–144.

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⁵⁶ Mohamad Ajmal Shah, "Central Asian Migrations and Kushan Material Culture in Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 23 (2016): 134–139. Aijaz Ahmad Banday, "Early Historic Archaeology in Kashmir: An Appraisal of the Kushan

Harwan, Semthan, Kanispur and Ushkur provide particularly important evidence for this process. Their architectural remains, terracotta traditions, pottery and other material finds demonstrate that Kashmir was integrated into wider cultural networks extending towards Gandhara, Central Asia and the north-western subcontinent.⁵⁷

The movement of people and the circulation of cultural forms were inseparable. Administrators required settlements; religious institutions required specialists; urban centres required craftsmen and labour; and expanding economic networks required agricultural and commercial communities. The resulting social landscape was consequently more complex than a simple distinction between indigenous and immigrant populations would suggest.⁵⁸

At the same time, the evidence cautions against assuming that cultural similarity necessarily proves migration. Material culture can circulate independently of people, and later literary traditions cannot always be used as direct evidence for the period in which the events they describe supposedly occurred. The strongest historical interpretation therefore emerges when archaeological, literary, architectural and numismatic evidence are considered together and their respective limitations are acknowledged.

The central significance of Kushan immigration in Kashmir lies ultimately in its **transformative rather than merely demographic character**. The newcomers did not simply add themselves to an existing population. Their presence contributed to the creation of new settlements, institutional structures, artistic traditions and patterns of cultural interaction. At the same time, the incoming groups themselves were transformed by their encounter with the Valley.⁵⁹

Kushan Kashmir was thus neither an isolated provincial space nor a passive recipient of external influence. It was an active **contact zone**, in which Central Asian, Iranian, Gandharan and Indian traditions encountered established Kashmiri practices and were selectively incorporated into a new cultural configuration. The history of Kushan settlement is consequently also a history of cultural negotiation—of movement, adaptation, assimilation and the gradual formation of a more complex social world.

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