Indian Journal of History of Science, 32(1), 1997

A NOTE ON THE VIKRAMA AND SAKA ERAS

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(Received 23 October 1996)

The so-called Vikrama Era of 58 BC is often considered to have been founded by a king called (or having the title of) Vikramāditya in the 1st century BC This theory has no solid basis, since the reckoning was not called Vikrama before the eighth century of its use. On the other hand, there are some indication that it evolved out of the counting of the regnal years of the Scytho-Parthian monarch Azes I, who ruled in the 2nd-3rd quarter of the 1st century BC Similarly, the foundation of the so-called Śaka Era of AD 78 has been sometimes wrongly attributed to the Satrapal ruler named Cāṣṭana, though there is no doubt that he used it. There are now enough data to suggest that the year 1 of the reign of the Kuṣāṇa king Kaniṣka I or rather the first year of the Kaniṣka Era was the same as that of the era of AD 78.

Key Words : *Andhau (kaccha), Azes I, Azes (Era), Chaṣṭana, Kaniṣka I, Kaniṣka (Era), Kṛta (Era), Kṣatrapa, Kuṣāṇa, Mahākṣatrapa, Malava (Era), Śaka Era, Rudradaman I, Shastri, A.M., Vikrama Era, Vikramāditya.*

INTRODUCTION

In two interesting papers published recently in the *Indian Journal of the History of Science* (vol. 31, no. 1, 1996). Prof. A.M. Shastri has tried to determine the origins of the Vikrama Era of 58 BC and the Śaka Era of AD 78[1]. The present paper intends to judge the problems from different angles.

Prof. AM Shastri believes that the era of 58 BC was founded by the traditional Vikramāditya of the 1st century BC[2] This credit is given to this so-called Vikramāditya by only later Jaina tradition, as it has been admitted by Prof. AM Shastri[3]. The *Kathā-sarit-sāgara*, even if it is based on the *Bṛhatkathā* of Guṇāḍhya of the Sātavāhana age, does not attribute an era to Vikramāditya.[4] The unrealiable nature of the tradition is further indicated by the statement of Al-Bīrūṇī in the 11th century attributing the era of 58 BC to one Vikramāditya and associating another Vikramāditya with the foundation of the Śaka era[5].

We must remember that in the epigraphic records the name of Vikramāditya was for the first time associated with the era of 58 BC in an inscription of the

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year 794 (AD 736-37)[6] and so nearly eight hundred years after the inception of the era of 58 BC This evidence singularly disproves the association of the name of one Vikramāditya with the reckoning since its commencement.[7]

On the other hand, the name of the Mālava tribe was associated with the era from its fifth to the eighth century in the area now in and near Rajasthan. In the Mandasor inscription of the year 461 the era is referred to as "the reckoning of the Mālava *gaṇa*, which has been eulogised by the name Kṛta".[8] In the Nagari inscription of the year 481, it is mentioned as the reckoning of Kṛta as well as the *pūrva* (*tithi* and so a date) of the Mālavas.[9] The reckoning of Kṛta is mentioned in the Nandsa inscriptions of the year 282, Badva inscriptions of the year 295, Bijaygarh inscription of the year 428, etc.[10] Thus from the third to the early fifth century of its use the era was known as Kṛta. Thus in the earliest known definite name of the era of 58 is "kṛta", even if the meaning of the term is not absolutely clear.

The historicity of another reckoning named after the Scytho-parthian ruler Azes I of the north-western section of the Indian subcontinent is now well established.[11] It is also known that Azes I ruled in about the second-third quarter of the 1st century BC[12] So the Azes Era must have originated about that time. Since the initial year of the era of 58 BC fell within that period, the identification of the Azes Era with the recknoning of 58 BC seems to be highly probable.

The Mālavas, the Malloi of Alexander's historians, originally lived on the Hydraotes river (Ravi).[13] They could have used and brought the era concerned to the area of Rajasthan, where they settled down.[14] The Nandsa inscriptions of the year 282, which are the earliest known records definitely using the era of 58 BC and which are recorded to been found at a site not very far away from the Bhilwara railway station, refers to the country of the *gaṇa* of the Mālavas *(Mālava-gaṇa-viṣaya)*[15]. So even in its third century the era was at least indirectly associated with the Mālavas. Since the Mālavas acquired the habit of using the era, which should have been considered as "good" or "proper" by them, the term *kṛta* may be explained as referring to an "acquired" or "good" or "proper" system of counting.[16]

Even if this line of argument is not accepted, there is no scope for associating a certain Vikramāditya with the inception of the era concerned.

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Prof. A.M.Shastri is emphatic in declaring Cāṣṭana, the Kṣatrapa ruler of

western India and parts of the Deccan, as the founder of the Śaka era of AD 78.[17] His known dates are surely to be referred to this era.[18]

It is interesting to note that Cāṣṭana is described in some of his coin legends as a Rājan Kṣatrapa and in some as a Rājan Mahākṣatrapa. But no title is attributed to his father Ysamotika, also referred to in these legends.[19] This shows that Ysamotika was probably a private individual and that his son was the first member of his family to assume political or administrative power. Though the term *rājan* literally denotes "a king", its appearance along with gubernatorial title of *Kṣatrapa* or *Mahākṣatrapa* in the coin-legends in question may suggest its use, like that of the title *Mahārāja* in the Gupta period, by a dependent ruler. Such a hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that Cāṣṭana, who could not have inherited the title of *Kṣatrapa* or *Mahākṣatrapa,* used the lower administrative designation in addition to or rather earlier than using the higher one. Had he been independent from the very beginning of his career and still wanted to use a strapal title, it would have been natural for him to assume only the higher ṣatrapal designation. This inference and also the claim made in the Junagarh inscription of the year 72 that Cāṣṭana's grandson Rudradāmaṇ acquired the title of Mahākṣatrapa by himself *(svayamadhigato mahākṣatrapanāma)*[21] may suggest that his family owed allegiance to a superior power at least up to the beginning of his rule as a *mahākṣatrapa.*

Cāṣṭana was likely to have utilised, as a subordinate ruler, the reckoning used by his overload or a well established era of the region ruled by him. His earliest known date-the year 11-indicates that he used a new reckoning.[22] So he did not employ any old system of counting current in his domain, but utilised the era of his overlord.[23]

Of the contemporary powers ruling in or near western India and the Deccan in the year 11 of the Śaka era, or AD 88-89, the Sātavahanas were arch enemies of Cāṣṭana, but not the Kuṣāṇas.[24] Again, of the Kuṣāṇas, Kaniṣka I, unlike his predecessors, commenced a new reckoning counted from his first regnal year.[25] In a newly noticed Bactrian inscription it is explicitly claimed that Kaniṣka I "has inaugurated the year one".[26] In course of time his regnal years, continued to be counted even after his death, developed into a regular era. It is known to scholars as the Kaniṣka era.[27]

It should be noted that the Andhau inscription of Cāṣṭana, dated in the year 11(see above), has been found in Kaccha[28], which is contiguous to the lower Indus region, which has yielded the Sui Vihar record of Kaniṣka I of the same year.[28a] So Cāṣṭana could have been initially engaged to extend Kuṣāṇa hegemony

to the south-east of the lower Indus country.

The absence of a reference to Kaniṣka from the Andhau inscription of Cāṣṭana cannot be held as an objection against the feasibility of the latter's subordination to the former. A few inscriptions found within the known limits of and datable to the age of the Kuṣāṇa empire refers to the years of the Kaniṣka era and to the ruling Kṣatrapas, but not to the reigning Kuṣāṇa monarchs.[29] Since the Andhau inscription of the year 11 was a private record, the issuer was not bound to be precise in naming the ruling heirarchy. It was enough for him to refer to the ruler of the land, with whom the administration of the area was immediately concerned, and to the reckoning used by that administration.

It follows from the above discussion that Cāṣṭana used the reckoning of Kaniṣka I. On the other hand, as it is universally admitted, the group of Chaṣṭana regularly used the era of AD 78. Hence the Kaniṣka era should be taken as the same as the era of AD 78. The name *Śaka* was tagged to the era concerned in a later period, probably because it was made popular in western India by the Śaka (or Śaka-Pahlava) satrapal rulers.[30]

References & Notes

1. Shastri, A.M. "Vikrama Era", *Indian Journal of History of Science* (hereafter *IJHS*), vol. 31, no. 2. pp. 35f; *"Śaka Era"*, ibid, pp. 67f.

2. *Ibid.*, p.51

3. *Ibid.*, In this connection see also B.N. Mukherjee, *An Agrippan Source-A Study in Indo-Parthian History*, Calcutta, 1970. (hereafter *ASSIPH*), pp.42-43.

4. Somadeva, *Kathāsarit-sāgara,* 18th Lambaka called Visamaśīla.

5. Sachau, E. *Alberuni's India*, vol. II, reprint, New Delhi, 1964; p.6. The Later Jaina tradition, recorded in some recensions, states that while the Vikrama era was founded by one Vikramāditya, the Śaka era was established later by a Śaka king. (N. Brown, *The Story of Kalāka,* pp. 43, vv. 65 and 68-70; *ASSIPH*, p.45).

6. Bhandarkar, D.R. *A List of Inscriptions of Northern India,* p.4, no. 17.

7. The Dhiniki inscription of the year 794 referred to *Vikrama-saṃvatsara.* The Dholpur inscription of the 898 mentioned *Kāla Vikram-ākhya.* The *Vikrama-Kāla* was cited in the Bijapur record of the year 973. The association of the name of Vikramāditya with the era was complete by the year 1131, when the Navsari epigraph attributed its foundation to Vikramāditya *(Śrī-Vikramāditya-otpadita-saṃvatsara)* (D.C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy,* Delhi, 1965, pp. 252-253; B.N. Mukherjee, *Central and South Asian Documents on the Old Śaka Era,* Varanasi, 1973, p.89.)

8. Sircar, D.C. *op.cit.*, pp. 251-252; D.R. Bhandarkar, *op.cit.*, p. 1, no. 3; *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. XII, p. 320.

9. Bhandarkar D.R. *op.cit.*, p. 2, no. 5; D.C. Sircar, *op.cit.*, p. 253.

10. Sircar, D.C. *op.cit.*, pp. 251-252.

11. *Indian Museum Bulletin*, vol. XX, 1985, pp. 3-4; H. Härtel (editor), *South Asian Archaeology*, 1979, Berlin, pp. 396f; etc.

12. The Indo-Parthian king Gondophares I imitated a coin-type of the Imperial Parthian ruler Artabanus III (displaying a male figure sitting on a horse and having Tyche standing in front of him). The type of Artabanus III appears only on coins dated in the year 338 (of the Seleucid Era) or AD 27-28. Hence at least a part of the rule of Gandophares must be placed in or after AD 27/28. And since there is no reason for either ascribing an unusually long reign to him or for believing that the coin-type of Artabanus III remained in circulation for a long time after the end of his rule in AD 38 or 40, the reign of Gondophares should be placed in about the second quarter of the 1st century AD Hence Azes II, who was ousted by Gondophares in the north-west, should have ruled there in the first quarter of the 1st century AD, and the latter's predecessor and for some time the senior co-ruler Azilises should have flourished in about the last quarter of the 1st century BC In that case, the predecessor and for some time the senior co-ruler of Azilises, i.e. Azes I, could have begun to rule sometime around the middle of the 1st century BC So Azes I probably reigned in about the second-third quarter of the 1st century BC (*ASSIPH*, pp. 183-184 and p. 191, n.9; *Indian Museum Bulletin*, vol. XVIII, 1985, pp. 9-10). For definite evidence about the historicity of the existence of two rulers called Azes and one names Azilises, see *ASSIPH*, pp. 85-87.

13. Raychaudhuri, H.C. *Political History of Ancient India* 8th edition (with a Commentary by B.N. Mukherjee), Delhi, 1996, p.225.

14. Majumdar R.C. (editor), *Age of the Imperial Unity*, Bombay, 1951, pp.163-165.

15. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. XXVII, pp. 252 and 263-64.

16. Monier-Williams M. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, reprint, Oxford, 1961, p. 301. The word *Kṛta* may also mean "done" "accomplished", "performed", etc. So when it is mentioned before a year the word may qualify the year concerned as a "completed" or "expired one". In that case, Kṛta year 282 may mean the year 282 expired (i.e. 283 current) (See J.F. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. III, Calcutta, 1888, p.73, n.). However, in one of the records the era has been given the name "Kṛta". (see above n.8). Nevertheless, it may be argued that such an appellation was acquired by the reckoning concerned for its dates had been counted in "expired" and not in "current" years. Another explanation may be found if the era had really been the same as the Azes Era. In the decades following the death of Azes I, his regnal years continued and developed as a regular era. For a certain period its years were marked as those of Azes of the "completed" or "expired" time. The adjective "completed" or "expired" could have been tagged to the era in course of time, just like the names of "Azes" was expressly associated with it for a great number of years.

17. *IJHS*, vol. 31, no. 2, p. 77.

18. The dates used on the coins and in most of the inscriptions of the group of Cāṣṭana must be referred to the era of AD 78 (E.J. Rapson, *Indian Coins*, Strassburg, 1907, pp; 22; B.N. Mukherjee, *The Rise and Fall of the Kushāṇa Empire*, Calcutta, 1988 pp.76-78.

19. Rapson, E.J. *A Catalogue of the Indian Coins in the British Museum, Catalogue of the Coins of the Andhra Dynasty, the Western Kshatrapas, the Traikūṭakas and the "Bodhi" Dynasty*, London, 1908, pp. 72-73.

20. Fleet, J.F. op.cit pp.97, 102, etc.

21. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. VIII, p. 44.

22. *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, vol. II, 1968-69, p. 102; *Journal of Indian History*, vol. XLVIII, 1970, p. 253; B.N. Mukherjee, *The Kushāṇas and the Deccan*, Calcutta, 1968, p. 102. An inscription has been wrongly attributed to the year 6 and to the rule of Cāṣṭana *(Journal of the Oriental Research Institute)*, vol. XXVIII 1978, p. 36).

23. A subordinate ruler might have used as well-established era current in his age and not his muster's reckoning, at least for the sake of convenience. Thus the Mandasor inscription of Bandhuvarman, acknowledging the supremacy of the Gupta emperor Kumāragupta I was dated in the so-called Mālava Era and not in the Gupta Era. But there was no well-used era in Kaccha when Cāṣṭana Andhau inscription was issued.

24. The family of Nahapāna's could have been another contemporary power in the early years of Cāṣṭana rule. But, since Nahapāna's known years (41-46) can never be referred to the era of AD 78, used by Cāṣṭana, the former cannot be considered as the latter's overlord (B.N. Mukherjee, *The Kushāṇas and the Deccan*, Calcutta, 1968, p. 104).

25. *Indian Museum Bulletin*, vol. XVIII, 1985, pp. 10-12.

26. This inscription, found in North Afghanistan, has been deciphered by N. Sims-Williams.

27. See above n. 25.

28. See above n. 22.

28a. Konow, S. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. II, pt. I, Calcutta, 1929, p. 141.

29. For an example see the *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*, vol. XIV, p. 1987, p. 36.

30. *Indian Museum Bulletin*, 1985, vol. XX, pp. 13-14. The name "Śaka" was tagged to the era in the *Yavanajātaka* of Sphujidhvaja, while referring to its year 191 (ch. 79, vv. 14, 61 and 72). An inscription from Wala is claimed to be dated in "Śaka year 322 current of the Saka-kings" (K.V. Ramesh, *Indian Epigraphy*, vol. I, Delhi, 1984, P.80). But see also the *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*, 1950-51, no. B 56, P.13. The Hisse-Borala inscription refers to the year 380 of the Sakas *(Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*, vol. VII, P. 4). The *Lokavigraha* of Simha-sūri associates the name Śaka with the era. It was composed in "Śaka 380" (D.C.Sircar, op.cit., p. 260, n).