



ASFĪJĀB

ASFĪJĀB (or ASBĪJĀB, ESBĪJĀB) a town and district of medieval Transoxania, essentially comprising the basin of the Syr Darya's right-bank affluent, the Ares (Russian Arys') river. The town of Asfījāb lay upstream from Čemkant and corresponds to the 19th-century Sayrām (in the territory of the present Soviet Kazakhstan). The district lay beyond the Iranian heartlands of Transoxania and, until the conquest of these steppe fringes by the Samanid Nūḥ b. Asad in 225/840, was controlled by the pagan Turks. In that year, Nūḥ built a wall around it to protect it from the Turks (Sam'ānī [Leiden], f. 286b, s.v. "al-Samānī"). By the time of the 4th/10th-century geographers, Asfījāb was a flourishing market center, by virtue of its position on the steppe fringes as an emporium for the nomads' products; and it was also the key point in an extensive protective zone of frontier defense-posts or *rebāṭs* against the infidels, numbered at 1,700 *rebāṭs* by Maqdesī/Moqaddasī (p. 273). Towards the end of the century, some of these Turks—who probably comprised Oğuz, Kimek, and Qarluq—were adopting Islam; for the *Ḥodūd al-ālam* (372/982) places the pasture-grounds of the "trucial Turks" (*Torkān-e āštī*), i.e., Muslim Turks, between Asfījāb and the Syr Darya (tr. Minorsky, p. 118). The geographers now describe the town as about one-third the size of Benkaṭ or Banākaṭ, the chief town of the neighboring district of Šāš and as lying on a plain below the hills. It had the common tripartite division of a *qohandez* (citadel), *madīna* (inner town), and *rabaṣ* (suburb), the latter two parts being walled round. All the houses were of mud brick. The government center (*dār al-emāra*), the prison, and the Friday mosque were all in the inner city; and there were four main gates, each guarded by a *rebāt*Āj. Of these, three were



manned by *gāzīs* (volunteer fighters for the faith) from Naḵšab, Bukhara, and Samarqand. The flourishing market included a bazaar of the cotton-cloth merchants, Sūq al-Karābīs; and the whole was a *waqf* for the poor and needy, yielding 7,000 dirhams per month (Maqdesī, pp. 272-73). As befitted a frontier town, the people of Asfījāb are described by Maqdesī as rough, bellicose, and self satisfied, like wild beasts. The district of Asfījāb was then still governed by a local dynasty (which Barthold suggested was a Turkish one), whose ruler sent only presents and a nominal tribute to the Samanid overlord and in effect paid no taxation; the ruler apparently also exercised some authority within the steppes, since Maqdesī mentions that the “king of the Turkmen” at the nearby place of Ordū habitually sent presents to Asfījāb. The Abū Maṣṣūr Moḥammad b. Ḥosayn Asfījābī who in 387/997-98 rebelled against the Samanid Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ and summoned aid from the Qarakhanid Ilig Naṣr was probably from this family. In the next century, however, Asfījāb was part of the eastern Qarakhanid khanate based on Asfījāb, Talas, and Farḡāna; and coins were minted there by the Qarakhanid rulers (O. Pritsak, “Die Karachaniden,” *Der Islam* 31, 1954, pp. 36-38). In the opening years of the 7th/13th century, the district seems to have been taken over by the Qipchaqs of the middle Syr Darya, for the K̲v̲ārazmšāh ‘Alā’-al-dīn Moḥammad devastated the area beyond the Syr Darya to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Mongol leader Kūčlūg.

By the opening of the Mongol Period, the name Asfījāb had yielded to that of Sayrām, which is still borne by that place; already, Maḥmūd Kāšḡārī (later 5th/11th century) noted their identity. He connected the name Asfījāb with Persian *sapīd* “white” (*Dīvān loḡāt al-tork*, Turk. tr. Besim Atalay, Ankara, 1939-43, III, p. 176). Sayrām flourished in the Mongol and Timurid periods and appears frequently in travelers’ narratives and in the accounts of campaigns by such authors as Šaraf al-dīn ‘Alī Yazdī (*Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. M. Moḥammad Elahdād, 2 vols., Calcutta, 1887-88) and Mīrzā Ḥaydar Doḡlāt (*Tārīk-eRašīdī*, tr. Elias and Ross, London, 1985, index).



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