



SUYĀB

SUYĀB, now called Ak-Beshim, the site of an important city on the Silk Road, located 60 km to the east of the city of Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan. The city was founded most probably by the Sogdians in the 6th century C.E. Located on the eastern frontier of a region culturally dominated by them, it became the point where Sogdian and local Turkish cultures were integrated with that of China. It flourished as a main center on the Silk Road in the 6th–11th centuries. Its history and culture have been revealed by a series of four archeological excavations: 1939-1940, directed by A. N. Bernshtam; 1953-1954, led by L. R. Kyzlasov; 1955-1958, under L.P. Zyablin; and 1996-1998, conducted by a joint expedition of the State Hermitage Museum and of the Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic). They have uncovered a number of cult structures, including two Buddhist shrines, a Zoroastrian cemetery and two Nestorian churches. Initially the site was thought to be the Karakhanid capital [Balasagun](#). G. Clauson was the first to identify it (in 1961) as the famous Suyāb mentioned in Chinese and Arabic sources. His hypothesis was confirmed in 1982 by the discovery near the site of a fragmentary stone slab, probably from the base of a statue, which bears a Chinese inscription, in 11 lines mentioning the garrison of the Chinese fortress Su-ye and naming a certain Tu Huaipao as the governor of the Western lands. It states that the statue was dedicated to Tu Huaipao, at that time (between 682 and 709) the commander of the fortress of Suyāb. In the spring of 1997, a stone slab bearing a Chinese inscription was found south of the Ak-Beshim walls. It records the military exploits of a Chinese military leader, either a votive stele left by him or a gravestone intended for him.



Suyāb and other important centers of the Chu valley are often mentioned in the dynastic annals of the Tang period. They describe its district as a densely populated area with numerous settlements subject to the Turks, and trading colonies founded by Sogdian merchants. Suyāb is first mentioned in 629 by Xuanzang in his *The Journey to the West*. According to the Chinese annals, in the middle of the 7th century Suyāb belonged to the protectorate of “Four Garrisons” (one of the principal Chinese frontier strongholds), along with Kucha, Kashghar and Khotan. In the 8th century it became one of the “Four Garrisons.” The great Chinese poet Li Bo was born there in 701 to the family of a garrison officer. In 738, Suyāb became the capital of the Black Turgesh khaganate, but ten years later the Chinese general Wang Chze destroyed it. The Karluks took it in the 760s, and local Turkish dynasties held it in the 9th-10th centuries. In the 11th century the site was completely abandoned.

The excavations 1997-1998 have provided a better picture of Suyāb’s non-Chinese cultural elements. They revealed a monumental structure built of mud-bricks as a residential quarter (*pahsa*) measuring 60×46 meters. It included three or four distinct sections, each consisting of a long room (25 m) oriented along the E-W axis. In one case there was a courtyard with an adjacent eastern room square in shape (measuring 5×5 m), which was provided with niches and an altar. An additional row of rooms was situated along the eastern facade next to the room with an altar. The building was possibly surrounded by long corridors on three sides and divided into sections. The walls of the eastern part of the whole building survived to the height of 3.5 m, which gives some indication of the ceiling heights of most of the rooms. Long corridors had vaults of mud-bricks set in slanting sections. The square rooms had [the] dome roofs. In each of the sidewalls of the long hall, were discovered wooden supports set against each other, dividing the hall into four almost square sections. They most probably supported arches with [the] dome ceilings between them. Doorways and niches had arched vaults.

Most of the rooms had been decorated with wall paintings, of which only tiny fragments have been recovered, representing decorative patterns (perhaps parts of costumes also). One fragment bore traces of gold foil above the layer of paint. The finds included several clay impressions with Nestorian crosses, a jade cross, and a number of inscribed objects. Amongst the latter group were a Turkish-Sogdian inscription engraved on the back of a ceramic plaque with a cross, and several Turkish-Sogdian inscriptions on fragments of painted



stucco. On the floor of one of the rooms we discovered remains of a binding and several pages of a manuscript codex. The rim of one storage jar bore a Sogdian dedicatory inscription, which V.A. Livshits translates as follows: “This vessel along with tableware is presented to His Majesty Ālan the prosperous.” It is noteworthy that the term used for the storage jar is *tagara*, probably a loan word into Iranian languages from Turkish dialects. The identity of this Alan and his relations with the Nestorian Church are unknown.

The ground plan and the construction methods and techniques of the building are characteristic of the early medieval period. The foundation of the 8th century church excavated in Ak-Beshim by L.R. Kyzlasov is similar to the southern part of the building. The ‘Ain Sha’ia (Ša’iah) church in Iraq provides an even closer parallel. The combination of several churches in one block is reminiscent of the early medieval church in Geras (Jordan). Karakhanid coins and glazed pottery enables us to date the investigated structures to the 10th and early 11th centuries. The building had undergone successive reconstructions, and a winery and wine cellars have been built in its northeastern section.

The discovery of a new 10th century church in Suyāb opens a fresh page in the history of Christianity in Semirechye. Previously, only one 8th century church, several finds of Christian objects dating to the 8th and 9th centuries, and gravestones with Christian inscriptions from the 13th and 14th centuries were known. These new finds enable us to suggest that Christianity flourished in Semirechye uninterruptedly from the 8th to the 14th century.

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