

IN PURSUIT OF THE TANG OUTPOST *SUYAB*: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION AT AK-BESHIM SITE, 2015 AUTUMN SEASON

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Keywords: Silk Roads, Ak-Beshim/Suyab, Tang dynasty

1. Introduction

The Kyrgyz-Japan Joint Expedition aims at cultural and historical reconstruction in the Chuy valley through excavation at Ak-Beshim site. In 2015 autumn, a new expedition was launched in the eastern part (*Rabat*) with the purpose of archaeological identification of *Suyab* established by the Tang dynasty. This long-standing theme since the first excavation by V. V. Bartol'd in mid of the 19th century AD has been challenged with not only results of the previous studies which had actually failed to prove the expansion of the Tang dynasty, but also high-precision measurement and excavation methods/techniques newly introduced. This presentation will yield results of the autumn season as well as its basic information.

2. Site Description

Ak-Beshim site is located in the eastern part of the Chuy valley, ca. 50 km East of Bishkek city, the capital of Kyrgyz Republic. Situated on the lower terrace of the southern bank and at the western edge of an alluvial fan formed by a mountain stream toward the Chuy river, the site occupies a strategic position on the Tian Shan route of the Silk Roads, controlling trade between East and West. At the present time, it is reasonable to identify the site with *Suyab* (碎葉城), based on historical sources from Islam and China and a newly found stone marker with Chinese inscription including a name of *Suyab*.

The site consists of four parts: the *Shakhristan*, *Rabat* (or the second *Shakhristan*), *Citadel* and outer settlement surrounded with perimeter wall. The mostly trapezoidal *Shakhristan* measures ca. 740 m E-W by ca. 530 m N-S, covering ca. 35 ha. Attached to eastern side of the *Shakhristan*, the distorted pentagonal *Rabat* is located, measuring ca. 720 m E-W by ca. 1200 m N-S, ca. 60 ha. The land is utilized for agricultural activities at the present time. The *Citadel* is situated at the southwestern corner of the fortification of the *Shakhristan*. Furthermore, its perimeter was surrounded by earthen walls, except for the eastern side, in which a natural ditch running almost north to south was useful for defensive purpose.

The history of the site would go back to the fifth century AD, when established by Sogdian immigrants as a trading post. While increasingly flourished in later centuries, the city was subordinated to the Onoq Western Turkic Khaganate founded after the beginning of the seventh century AD. The famous "*Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (大唐西域記)" referred to Xuanzang's visit to *Suyab* on the way to India in 630 AD, where a number of merchants from various regions and countries resided for international trade.

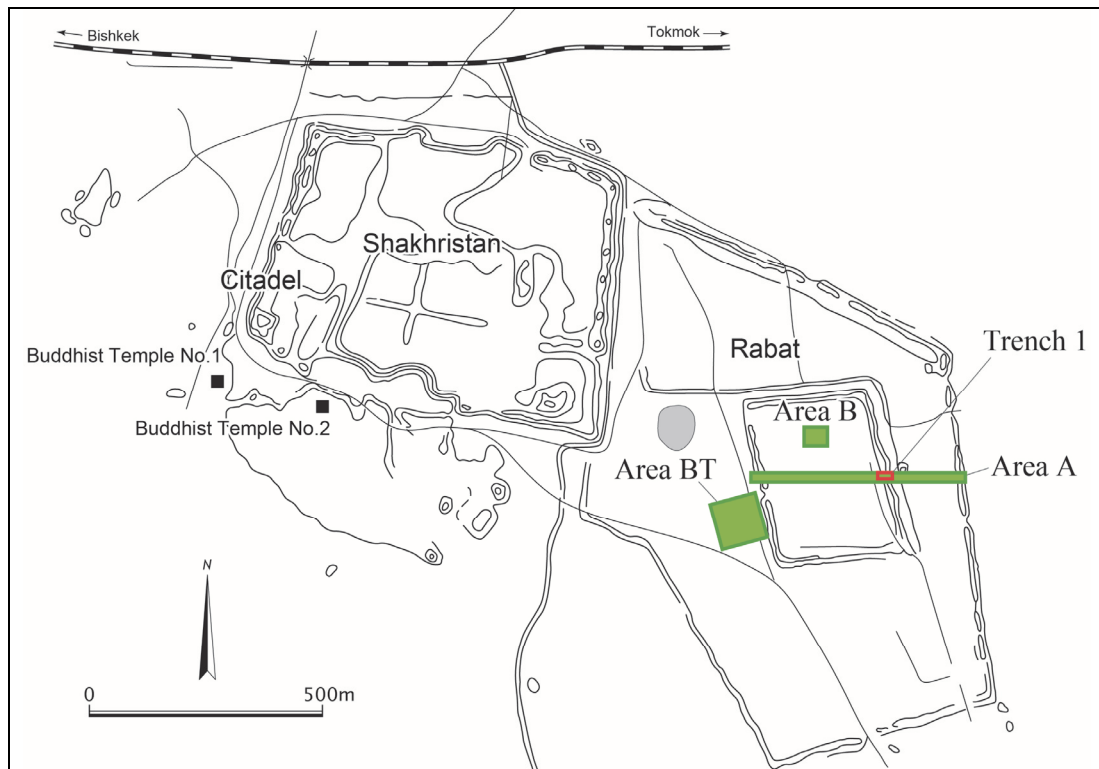


Fig. 1: Plan of Ak-Beshim site (after Kenjeahmet 2009)

In 648 AD, the Tang dynasty established the Protectorate General to Pacify the West to control the Tarim Basin including four main cities. *Suyab* as one of them had been controlled by the Tang dynasty, though taken over by the Tibetan Empire in a few times. A historical record “*Old Book of Tang* (旧唐书)” referring to newly construction of the *Rabat* in 679 AD eastwards from the *Shakhristan* implies how important role was played by the city on the Silk Roads in those days.

After the Tang dynasty retreated from the region in 719 AD, several polities ruled the city one after the other. Finally, the Kala-Khanid dynasty decided to place their capital there around the tenth century AD, as a part of Islamic expansion to the east. In the eleventh century AD, the city was abandoned at last and Balasagun (the present Burana) was established as a new capital of the dynasty at the same time.

3. Results of Excavation

Trace of outer and inner fortifications surrounding the *Rabat* was clearly visible on a satellite image taken by Corona in the 1960s, although the latter was completely vanished soon later, probably due to cultivation. Since this season aimed at yielding cultural evidence related to the Tang dynasty, Trench 1, measuring 20 m E-W by 2 m N-S, was opened across estimated location of the inner fortification (eastern side).

Trench 1 was excavated depending on artificial depth (ca. 0.2 m per each investigation). Consequently, probable inner fortification was unearthed 0.2 m below the present surface, measuring ca. 6.5 m in width. The fortification seemed to be built to pile up compact clay lamps like *pakhsa*, because it did not yield any trace of rammed earth as Chinese construction way. The excavation produced another impressive result: construction remains

discovered in the west and east of the fortification would imply different characters and functions individually.

In the west of the fortification, there was a somehow hardened construction layer 0.8 m below the present surface (Fig. 2). Grayish burnt bricks were arranged in a line running almost east to west and amount of grayish roof tiles were accumulated in several spots on the surface, though they did not represent any clear plans of buildings. In addition, another concentration of large amount of grayish roof tiles was detected in a small test trench 1.1 m by 0.65 m dug into the originally recognized western side of the unearthed fortification, as a result of further investigation on this layer in order to check the eastern end of a lined grayish burnt bricks attached to the fortification.

Irregular-shaped walls built with mud bricks were confirmed in the eastern adjacent of the fortification, where seems to be outside of the inner 'palace' (Fig. 3). Located on the layer 0.8~1.2 m below the present surface, it included not only two ovens ca. 0.4 m in diameter but also blackened floor inside the eastern space segmented by the irregular-shaped wall.

The most remarkable finds in this season are no doubt amount of grayish clay tiles possibly put on building roofs, especially in the west of the fortification. Characteristically, most of them have imprint of close texture on concave side, though some were burnished or scraped on convex side. Furthermore, the grayish color of the tiles indicates reduced firing in kiln. These production techniques imply they belong to the Tang tradition dated back to the eighth century AD.

At least, thirteen burnt bricks were found on the layer in the western area, measuring ca. 14~34 cm in length, ca. 16 cm in width and ca. 5 cm in thickness. All of them are greenish gray in color indicating that they were fired under reduced condition. No pottery sherds were collected on the surface. On the other hand, some pottery sherds were found from fill of the eastern building remain. These include a cup with a loop handle, sherds of cooking vessel and so forth, which could be dated to the Kara-Khanid period, around the tenth to eleventh century AD.

In any case, accurate dates for the both areas must be determined through analyses of artifacts found on the floors and two collected samples for ^{14}C dating in future.



Fig. 2: Western part of Trench 1, looking SE



Fig. 3: Eastern part of Trench 1, looking W

4. Systematic Surface Collection

A total of three areas were traversed for comprehensive surface collection of archaeological materials in the *Rabat*. The survey took place by ten people in average during two days, taking around seven hours per day. The surveyed areas were individually divided into small grids measuring 10 m square or 20 m square.

The first area (Area A) extended along a modern agricultural channel in the east-west direction were divided into a total of 26 grids measuring 20 m square, 23 of which were surveyed except for easternmost and westernmost grids. A total of the collected artifacts reach ca. 23 kg, especially including amount of roof tiles, grayish ('Chinese'?) burnt bricks and pottery sherds.

The second area, designated in the western part of the *Rabat*, was called Area BT ("Buddhist Temple"). This area measures 100 m square and consists of 100 grids, each of which was 10 m square. As a result, total artifacts of ca. 321 kg were collected. The most significant one was roof tile, a total of which reach ca. 150 kg. It indicates clear tendency of concentration on central part of northern half of Area BT. Given that this tendency is mostly same as of pottery sherds, it is expected some rectangular building could have existed in the north.

Furthermore, the third one (Area B), measuring 50 m E-W by 40 m N-S, was located in the northern vicinity of the first one. It was divided into 20 grids measuring 10 m square individually to collect artifacts on each. Consequently, total artifacts of ca. 139 kg were collected, including ca. 66 kg of roof tiles which account for ca. 50% of all collected artifacts. Roof tiles intensively distributed in the southwestern part. Following roof tiles, collected pottery sherds weigh ca. 33 kg, distribution of which overlapped with roof tiles. In the case of grayish burnt bricks, which weigh ca. 26 kg totally, it concentrated in the eastern part.

5. Concluding Remarks

Locating on the Silk Roads, Ak-Beshim site has played historically important role in the transregional trade network through the Tien Shan region. In this context, the 2015 autumn season have been able to corroborate the importance through the following accomplished points:

- 1) Excavation in the *Rabat* revealed possibility that some "Chinese-style" roofed building might have ever existed. The building is considered as remain of administrative section probably situated in the inner fortification.
- 2) Results of intensive surface collection imply that extensive building activities had taken place in the *Rabat* before the present cultivation, probably during the Middle Age, in view of amount of collected artifacts.

Based on the above results, the next season will aim at a greater understanding of the historical and cultural importance of the site through archaeological research, in cooperation with other various disciplines.

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