

ANCIENT UIGHUR MAUSOLEA DISCOVERED IN MONGOLIA

Ayudai Ochir
Tserendorj Odbaatar
Batsuuri Ankhbayar
Lhagwasüren Erdenebold
Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

The modern nation of Mongolia, located between Russian Siberia and China, is mostly wide-open steppes — an area where animal husbandry, hunting, and a nomadic lifestyle have been optimal for thousands of years. Dynamic competition for pasture and conquests by different groups led to the establishment of many powerful steppe empires: the Xiongnu (3rd century BCE – 1st century CE), Turkish (552 – 745 CE), Uighur (744 – 840), Khitan (Liao, 9th – 11th centuries CE) and Mongol Empires (12th – 14th centuries) succeeded one another in ruling the steppes of Central Asia. The Uighur groups that gained power in the Mongolian steppes were of similar language and culture with the ancient Turks who came before them. Even though the territories of Mongolia are rich with archaeological sites attributed to the Uighurs, very few excavations on this period have been done. Most researchers who have studied the Uighurs have focused on their inscriptions.

Since 2005, a joint Mongolian–Chinese archaeological project has investigated archaeological sites in Mongolia. The participating institutions are the National Museum of Mongolia, the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations (Ulaanbaatar) and the Inner Mongolia Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (Hohhot).¹ In 2005 we traveled over

Fig. 2. The Uighur capital Ordu-Balik (Khar Balgas). 360°+ panorama photo © 2007 Daniel C. Waugh, taken from NW corner of "palace" in SE corner of citadel.



Fig. 1. Location of durvuljin.

3000 km in Mongolia and visited hundreds of archaeological sites in order to introduce them to the Chinese scholars and select the ones to investigate for the next five years. This survey of sites from all periods is now published in Mongolian and Chinese (Enkhtuvshin et al. 2008a).

After the survey, we chose to investigate sites in Central Mongolia known as durvuljin. Local people call them "square sites" (*durvuljin*) because of the square or rectangular shape. There is some information from scholars who visited these sites before, but they had no idea about their function. There is but one brief article, by Mongolian Academician Huduugiin Perlee, in which he proposed that the site might be a Turkic royal tomb (Perlee 1941/2001). We therefore chose this kind of site in order better to understand its function and determine its date. Most durvuljins have been found in the Orkhon Valley [Fig. 1], where we chose to investigate those located in Khotont county of Arkhangai province, near the Uighur capital of Khar Balgas (Ordu-Balik) [Fig 2].

The only other confirmed durvuljin site outside of the Orkhon Valley, located to the north in Bulgan province, is the one named Mogoin Shine Us or Moyunchur stele [Fig. 3]. We compared



Fig. 3. The Moyunchur ritual site.

the Moyunchur site complex with the durvuljin in the Orkhon Valley and saw that their general shapes are very similar, but there is no stele in the durvuljin sites in the Orkhon Valley. There are famous Uighur inscriptions on the Moyunchur stele; so we thought it possible that the durvuljin were from the Uighur period of the 8th – 9th centuries [Fig. 4].



Fig. 4. The stele with a runic inscription at Moyunchur.

We discovered about 40 durvuljin in the Orkhon valley during preliminary vehicle surveys and by asking local people. These sites are very easy to see in the open landscape, often located in groups of three to eight in the gorges along the edges of mountains and hills. The structure of durvuljin square sites is a rectangular shaped earthen wall only about 0.5 – 1 m high, with a water channel dug outside the wall. There is a small mound inside the wall made of earth, stone and bricks. The wall gate is always located on the east side.

While our goal was to excavate only the durvuljin Uighur sites, we found and excavated within the durvuljin complexes burials from other periods, some from before the Uighur period and some belonging to the later Mongol period. For example, a Xiongnu grave (3rd century BCE – 1st century CE) was dug 2000 years ago beneath the Khulhiin am site.

Eight centuries later the Uighur people placed their square site on top of it. Since most Xiongnu graves have stone surface markings, the Uighurs probably knew the burial was there. The Xiongnu grave was disturbed by the process of digging and building up the durvuljin wall but had not been looted — the bones and artifacts were moved around but had not been removed from the pit. Then 400 years after the Uighur square site was built, the Mongols buried eight of their dead inside the walls of the Uighur durvuljin. Therefore, there are three different cultures together in one place at the Khulhiin am square site.

So far we have excavated six durvuljin: two sites of Uvur havtsaliin am in 2006 (no. 3) and 2009 (no. 5), Khulhiin am in 2006-2007 (no. 1), Khundiin khooloi in 2007 (no. 3), and two additional durvuljin at Khundiin khooloi in 2008 (nos. 5, 6). Here is a brief summary of the discoveries.

1. Khulhiin am site no. 1

We excavated the better preserved durvuljin no. 1 among the three square sites found in a narrow valley here [Fig. 5, next page], starting with the Mongol graves inside the square walls. In them, we found gold ornaments and buttons, pearls, and a birch bark hat which were used by Mongol wives of the 13th – 14th centuries. When later we excavated the walls, we discovered the Xiongnu tomb beneath the northern earthen wall. In this disturbed grave were pottery fragments, many bone arrowheads, bone bow pieces, bronze decoration, and other wooden and bone artifacts.





Fig. 5. Durvuljin at Khulhiin am.

The durvuljin walls measured 48 x 40 m and stood 0.5 m high. Surrounding this rammed earthen wall was a ditch. We also discovered a small brickwork water channel projecting from the northern wall, constructed apparently for drainage. Also, we found a pit used to mix plaster from chalk for preparing a plaster layer for wall decoration. There is one rectangular structure in the middle of the wall enclosure — a foundation of rammed earth surrounded by bricks, and then plastered over. There were many bricks for walls on top of this foundation, probably for another building, but the bricks were very disturbed.

We found a total of six graves inside the wall enclosure, located to the west, north and east of the central building. Each grave had a dis-



Fig. 6. Grave no. 1 and gold earring, Khulhiin am.



Fig. 7. Grave no. 6 and gold earrings, Khulhiin am.



here underneath a small tunnel vault of bricks was a baby around 1 ½ years old. Because small rodents had disturbed the grave it was difficult to know the manner of burial. The baby's head was to the west; so maybe this was the orientation. The baby had a gold earring.

Grave no. 6 was found from a soil spot 35 cm below the surface to the east of the central building [Fig. 7]. This pit was 74 x 32 cm and 115 cm deep. A brick box with a lid of wood, stone and brick was set into a side niche aligned southwest – northwest, with a natural step opposite the box. Skeletal remains of a baby, also 1 ½ years old, were inside the box, and a couple of tiny gold earrings and three beads were found on the floor of the grave. The orientation of the baby also appears to have been to the west.



Fig.8. Graves no. 3 (above and lower right); no. 2 (right) Khulhiin am.

Grave no. 3 was also located to the east of the central building [Figs. 8, 11 next page]. The looters' hole was 1.5 m in diameter. In it we found human and animal bones, brick fragments, thick gray-colored architectural fragments which had fallen in from above, ceramic fragments decorated with patterns, white and red plaster fragments, human skull fragments, and brown and black ceramics. 170 cm deep into the hole were leg bones, shoulder bones and stacked bricks. At a depth of 270 cm was a chamber tomb constructed of bricks and packed clay. The looters' hole penetrated the entrance of the tomb chamber. Inside, the chamber measured 190 x 115 cm and 104 cm tall, with an extra length for the chamber entrance. The chamber was filled with soil; there were scattered human bones of a teenager and a skull in the northwest corner.

Grave no. 2, found beneath a layer of building fragments from the central structure, has a long entryway with stairs measuring 4.8 x 1.2 m and oriented northwest to southeast. The chamber entrance, made of bricks, was damaged by looters when opened. Two fragments of a small burned ceramic pot lay on the floor outside the entrance, perhaps used for a lamp. The chamber is shaped like a bent tunnel, 5.4 m long and 1 m high. The tunnel was walled and floored with bricks packed with clay.



The bones of the body lay close to the entrance, and the skull was found in a tight cloth bag to the east of the chest [Fig. 8]. The jaw was outside of the bag; because there were no teeth maybe it was from an older person. Under the chest were two badly preserved leather boots whose shape and decoration could still be discerned. We also found two bone bow joints, on one of which is a runic inscription with 5 letters [Fig. 9]. According to Japanese and



Fig. 9. Bow joint with runic inscription, Grave no. 2, Khulhiin am.

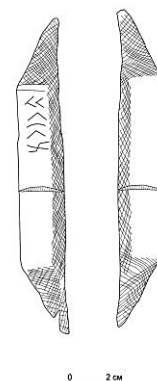




Fig. 10. Entrance to Grave no. 4 and bronze coin from Grave no. 5, Khulhiin am.

Mongolian specialists they read "tonuz," possibly a name, maybe that of the dead person, or maybe someone else's, inscribed on an object which had been given to him. We found an analogous example on the bone bow piece with markings from the Xiongnu tomb under the square site wall — demonstrating that there was a long tradition of inscribing bow pieces.

Grave no. 4 consisted of a long stepped entryway 3.8 m long and 1.2 m wide, and a chambered pit 325 x 280 cm, with a constructed entrance between these two sections [Fig. 10]. At the top of the chamber roof looters had made a hole, in which were bricks, sheep/goat bones and some ceramic fragments. The vaulted brick ceiling of the chamber was 1.6 m high. Small stones were set between the bricks to secure them in position and then packed with fine clay. Unlike the bricks of the wall, the bricks in the roof had on one side the imprint of a rope. This was probably not for decoration or from being pressed into a mold, but rather for fitting the bricks in the ceiling to protect them from sliding. The chamber entrance wall was painted with red ochre, and a bronze belt decoration was found on the entry stairs. This find is not a ritual object, just something that was lost when the tomb was being built. Since the looters came in through the roof, the chamber entrance was intact — the bricked entrance was covered with a layer of mud. The entire chamber floor was paved with bricks, and a second tier of bricks formed a platform in the north part of the

chamber, probably the resting place for the deceased before the looters scattered the bones.

Grave no. 5 was also a chamber tomb. The entryway was 3.2 x 1.3 m and 2.8 m deep, and many animal bones and brick fragments



Fig. 11. Entrance to Grave no. 3 and looters' hole, Khulhiin am.



Fig. 12. Step-shaped bricks from Grave no. 5, Khulhiin am.

were found in this section [Fig. 12]. As with the other chamber tombs, the bricked entrance was small, only 62 cm tall; the looters had entered through its upper part. The chamber floor was paved with bricks. In the entryway was a bronze coin fragment, a *kai yuan tongbao* from the early Tang Dynasty (625 CE) [Fig. 10]. This gives a terminus post quem for the site, although one should remember that many coins are kept for a long time. Enough of the bones remained to determine that the dead person was a teenager.

Although the children's burials were not looted, the destruction caused by small rodents makes it difficult to determine the burial practices. The looters passed over the children's graves either because they thought they were poorer than the bigger tombs or perhaps simply because they did not notice such small graves, which left few traces. Since there were 3 gold earrings and 3 beads in the two children's graves, it is reasonable to assume that the bigger tombs were very rich before looting. Some of the bigger tombs were looted several times, which would suggest that significant time might have elapsed between the separate incursions.

2. Uvur havtsal site no. 3

We have excavated two of nine square sites in this mountain pass (here we report on the excavation of 2006, but not the one done in 2009). There are no deep trenches outside of the earthen wall of site no. 3, nor is the wall

high, only about 0.4 m. The outer wall measures 31 m east-west by 34 m north-south, and there is a 3 m wide gate on the east side. A rammed earth mound in the middle of the walled enclosure is 1.5 m high and 12 m wide; its surface is covered with some brick fragments and gray and buff-colored roof tiles. It is also walled with bricks and covered in a chalk plaster layer around the perimeter. In addition to bricks, tiles and pottery fragments, we found decorative pieces of a zoomorphic design. At first we thought they were bats, but larger pieces proved to be stylized dragons.

We found one brick chamber tomb with a stepped entryway and small bricked entrance northwest of the central structure [Fig. 13]. The entryway measured 5 m long and 1 m wide;



Fig. 13. Chamber tomb at Uvur khavtsal site no. 3.

the diameter of the circular brick chamber itself is 4.3 m and the height of its dome 2.3 m. Inside were a cow's head, human vertebrae and some foot bones, a human jaw, some fragments of pottery and construction materials.

3. Khundiin khooloi site no. 3

At Khundiin khooloi, we excavated three of seven square sites [Figs. 14, 15, next page]. At site no. 3, the earthen wall with an eastern gate has a ditch around it, and a rammed earthen mound, 15 m wide and 1.8 m high, lies in the middle. Architectural elements like bricks, tiles, and pottery fragments are similar to those found at the other sites excavated, but this mound is distinct in that it has a circular shape. The bricks at this site look more worn

and maybe are old and were recycled from another construction. The most interesting thing is that there was no chamber tomb here, which shows that not all durvuljin sites have tombs.

Fig. 14 (below). Durvuljin at Khundiin khooloi site no. 3.

Fig. 15 (right). Central mound at Khundiin khooloi site no. 3.



Fig. 16. The 6th durvuljin at Khundiin khooloi.

4. Khundiin khooloi site no. 6

At Khundiin khooloi, we found two durvuljin sites next to each other. Square site no. 6 is on the north side of durvuljin no. 5 [Fig. 16]. Site no. 6 measured 21 m wide and had a wall with outside ditch and central mound with brick and chalk plaster construction as at the other sites. Here also there were no tombs.

5. Khundiin khooloi site no.5



This is the biggest square site we excavated up through 2008 [Fig. 17]. The outer earthen wall measures 34 x 51 m, and its gate faces southeast. The central structure is a large stone mound covered with a layer of mud and with a flat top and some steps. There was probably a larger stone structure like a pagoda built on this foundation. A ramp of bricks on the east side forms a

Fig. 17. The 5th dur-
vuljin at Khundiin
khooloi.

kind of stair to this mound. Excavation of the site revealed six other foundations around the central structure. Most of them are rammed earth and brick walls and floors like the central structures of other square sites, though some are only rammed earth.

- The second structure measures 6.8 x 7 m and stands 1 m high [Fig. 18]. Only the east side does not have a brick wall around the rammed earthen foundation.



- The third structure is 5 x 5 m square and 0.9 m high [Fig. 19]. There were many chalk plaster fragments around this platform, which was faced with brick.

- The fourth structure connects to the northwestern side of the central structure [Fig. 20, next page]. It measures 6 x 4 m and 1 m high. We discovered inside the rammed earth foundation wooden poles, 3 along the eastern part and 3 along the western part.

- The base of the fifth structure was made of rammed clay 10 cm thick, on top of which there was a small earthen foundation, 1 x 0.8 m, covered with bricks [Fig. 21].

- The sixth structure is badly disrupted and stands only 0.4 m high; so it is difficult to

Fig. 18 (above). Structure no. 2, Khundiin khooloi site no. 5.

Fig. 19 (below). Structure no. 3, Khundiin khooloi site no. 5.



Fig. 20. Structure no. 4, Khundiin khooloi site no. 5.

see the shape [Fig. 22]. It has plastered brick walls. We found 3 pits for chalk plaster mixing aligned along the south wall. There was some dried chalk plaster on the bottom of the pits indicating that they were used to prepare the mortar for those buildings.

During the excavation we found one brick chamber tomb to the north of the central stone mound. The entryway is 5.4 m in length and consists of five natural earth steps. The bricked entrance is just large enough for an adult person to enter. The chamber diameter is 3 meters; its dome has a height of 2 m. The entryway is 4 m long, and 1.3 m wide. At the top of the dome is a 0.8 m diameter hole from the looters. The floor is rammed clay, and in the middle of the chamber floor is a small standing wood beam whose



Fig. 21. Structure no. 5, Khundiin khooloi site no. 5.

bottom is surrounded by small stones. This may have been a pillar in the center of the chamber room. At the front of the chamber, stones and bricks remain from a partitioning wall.

There were mural paintings on the back north wall of the chamber, the first such discovered in Mongolia [Fig. 23]. The mural is 74 cm high and extends 2.3 m around the curved back wall. White chalk plaster was put onto a mud layer that covered the bricks of the chamber wall, and a detailed drawing of a flower was repeated 5 times. The paint is from natural earthen colors: black, reddish-orange, green and chalk-white. This wall painting of flowers presumably expresses the idea of a peaceful afterlife for the dead. They look similar to the lotus, which can symbolize sleep and peace. Apart from the interesting mural, human leg bones were the only artifacts from this looted tomb.

Conclusions regarding the durvuljin sites

In conclusion, we summarize our observations regarding several important questions:

Date. Because many of the bricks look old and show much eroding and crumbling, we think the Uighurs re-used these bricks from other structures and that they were not always made expressly for the square sites or chambers. Maybe they were brought from other places nearby such as Khar Balgas (Ordu-Balik) city. The architectural elements —



Fig. 22. Structure no. 6, Khundiin khooloi site no. 5; Ceramic decoration found near the central building on its northwest side.

Fig. 23. Mural painting in the chamber tomb at Khundiin khooloi site no. 5.



bricks, tiles and decorative clay pieces — look

very much like the pieces from Uighur cities and sites such as Por-Bajin in Tuva, Russia.²

Some of the artifacts in the graves are also very similar to those from graves excavated in Tuva. The ceramic pots, bone and bronze arrowheads, and ceramic spindles are similar to ones commonly found in Tuva. Two coins indicate a date of the Tang Dynasty, and the durvuljin form looks like a site to the north where there is a famous Uighur inscription at Mogoin Shine Us. We also received ¹⁴C dates from human bones and some wood which fall in the range of the 7th – 9th centuries CE (the Uighur Empire in Mongolia existed in the 8th – 9th centuries). All of this evidence makes us think these durvuljin sites are from the Uighur period.

Function. Most of the many graves we excavated at the six square sites used brick; the six brick chamber tombs varied in form. There were many kinds of people buried in these chambers: a 50(+)-year-old man, a 10-year-old boy, a 30-year-old woman, a 15-year-old boy, and even a one-year-old child. It demonstrates that these tombs are not just for older people nor just for men. Probably the chamber tombs were not for the common people but rather are those of the elite. Two of the square sites had no burials, two of them only one burial, and one of them had six burials. Many burials together in one place may indicate relatives. The sites without burials were maybe just ritual sites (perhaps constructed to commemorate someone who had died elsewhere) or constructed on the wish of a person who was dying.

Attribution. A number of arguments affirm that the durvuljin sites are to be connected with the Uighurs:

- The square architecture and layout are the same as those found at the ritual site of the second Uighur khagan Moyunchur.
- The ¹⁴C data provided by Beijing University indicate a date of the 7th – 9th centuries, the time of the Uighur Empire's existence.
- There is the one runic inscription found at Khulhiin am. Among the Central Asian no-

mads, only the Turks and Uighurs used runic inscriptions. The durvuljin sites are very different from the ritual sites of the Turkic khagans.

- Architectural elements found at the durvuljin sites are similar to those found at the Uighur city of Por Bajin in Russian Tuva. Also, the bricks are like those found at the Uighur capital Ordu-Balik. Those bricks show that the Ordu-Balik and durvuljin sites are connected, a fact that is reinforced by the close proximity of the square sites to Ordu-Balik (17 km).
- Some of the finds at the square sites are very similar to those made by the Russian archaeologist Leonid R. Kyzlasov, who excavated Uighur tombs in Tuva in the 1950s (Kyzlasov 1969, 1979).

We hope that our excavation of the durvuljin will encourage further investigation of ancient Uighur chamber tombs. Our results have already provided much new information for the study of the Uighurs' rituals and mortuary practices.

About the authors

Professor **Ayudai Ochir**, a historian, is currently coordinator of international research projects at the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations. He was director of the Institute of History of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences from 1990-2001 and Director of the National Museum of Mongolia from 2003-2007. In the research on the durvuljins, he headed the Mongolian side of the Mongolian-Chinese archaeological team. **Tserendorj Odbaatar**, a Ph.D. candidate in archaeology at the Mongolian State University of Education, headed the durvuljin excavations and in particular supervised those at Khulhiin am and the 5th durvuljin at Uvur havtsaliin. He has been a curator and archaeologist at the National Museum of Mongolia since 2003. He may be contacted at <odbaatar@nationalmuseum.mn>. **Batsuuri Ankhbayar** is a Ph.D. candidate in archaeology at the Inner Mongolia University in China and a researcher at the International

Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations. He has worked on the durvuljin since 2005. E-mail: <b.ankhaa@gmail.com>. **Lhagwasüren Erdenebold**, Ph.D., is a research scholar at the Mongolian University of Science and Technology. His e-mail: <erdenethnology@yahoo.com>.

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Notes

1. The scholars from the Inner Mongolia Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (Hohhot) were Ta La, Chen Yongzhi, Son Guo Dong, Yue Gou Ming and Sarenbilge.
2. A brief overview what is known about the very interesting site of Por-Bajin may be found at <http://www.geomorph.org/sp/arch/Por-Bajin_Field_Workshop_1.pdf>. More detail is available in the booklet *Proekt "Krepost' Por-Bazhin"*. *Nauchnyi al'manakh* (N.p., ca. 2007). A good many photographs of the site are at various places on the Internet, including Google Earth, where you type in the coordinates: 50°36'53.87" N, 97°23'6.57"E.