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Archaeology of the Mongolian Period: A Brief Introduction

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The Mongolian period (13th-14th c. CE) in Inner Asia is well documented in written historical sources. These include narrative histories and documents in Persian, Chinese, Arabic and other languages. For the earliest stages of the history of the Mongol Empire, one of main sources is 'The Secret History of Mongols,' written in the thirteenth century, whose oldest copy is written in transcription by means of Chinese characters. The 'Secret History' has been studied from a variety of viewpoints: historical, linguistic, ethnological, and literary. The Mongols had not had their own written language and borrowed scripts from other cultures, such as the Uighur. However, in 1269 they established the new 'squared' script. While it never replaced Uighur, it was used in Qubilai Khan's time on seals and paizas or passports which guaranteed free passage for diplomats and others through Mongol lands.

In addition to the written sources, archaeological investigation in Mongolia and its surrounding territory has discovered various monuments belonging to the period of the Mongol Empire, including ruins of settlements, human statues, inscriptions on stone and wood, and graves. Ruins of several historically attested settlements from the period of the Mongol Empire have been the subject of scholarly investigation. The earliest one is Aurag Balgas (early thirteenth century). The Aurag Balgas ruin was discovered by Mongolian scholar Kh. Perlee in the

1950s. In 1990-1993 the Mongolian-Japanese 'Gurvan Gol' expedition reexamined the ruin. A Mongolian-Japanese expedition continues archaeological excavation of the Aurag Balgas ruin today.

Karakorum, the former capital city of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century, is the best studied archaeological site from the period. Russian scholar N. M. Iadrntsev first discovered its ruins in 1889. The Mongolian-Russian historical and cultural expedition led by Russian archaeologist S. B. Kiselev undertook major excavation of the site in 1948-1950, at which time they explored what they determined was the ruin of Khan Ogedei's palace (Kiselev 1965). In 1976-1980, Mongolian archaeologist N. Ser-Odjav and his team renewed excavation of the city's ruins. Among their unique discoveries was a Muslim cemetery with burials of ordinary people. In 1995 a Mongolian-Japanese expedition undertook an archaeological survey and made a topographic map of the city's ruin. Since 1999, the Mongolian-German joint archaeological expedition has been excavating at Karakorum (*Dschingis Khan* 2005). [They found the kiln used to produce the numerous ceramic dishes and roof tiles of Karakorum and recently have concentrated on the area in the center of the commercial district of the city occupied, it seems, by Chinese artisans and merchants. In exploring further the site Kiselev's expedition had established as the palace, the Mongolian-German team has raised doubts about that

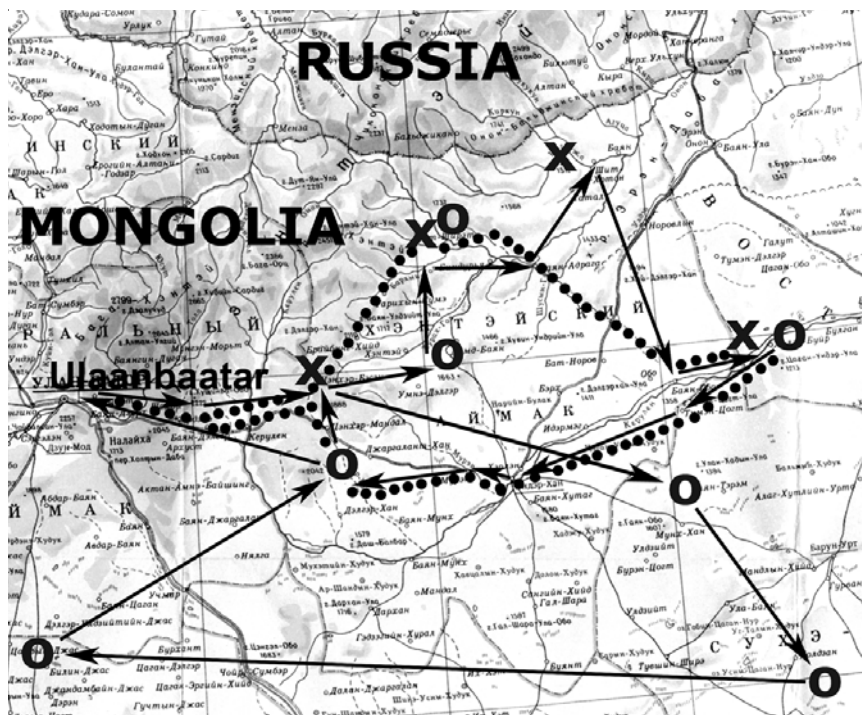


Fig. 1. 'Eastern Mongolia' Research Project fieldwork routes, 2002-2005.
 X Archaeological Expedition 1, Dr. Z. Batsaikhan.
 O --- Archaeological Expedition 2, Drs. D. Navaan, M. Erdene.

attribution, arguing that the building may in fact be a Buddhist temple. – Ed.]

Grave monuments are found all over the territory of Mongolia and its surrounding regions. So far around 300 graves have been excavated in Mongolia and

Transbaikalia (Russian Buriatia). These excavations have established that there are generally as few as two to three or as many as five to ten graves at one place. Grave monuments from Mongolia and Transbaikalia have common surface construction. A common finding in Mongolian graves is tibial bones of sheep.

Since 1996 the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology of the National University of Mongolia has carried out archaeological survey and excavation in eastern and central Mongolia. With the support of the Asia Research

Center at the National University of Mongolia, the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology implemented the project 'Dornod Mongol' (Eastern Mongolia) in 2002-2005. As part of this project, the Department's team of scholars carried out extensive archaeological reconnaissance in the territory of eastern Mongolia and revealed a number of interesting sites, belonging to different periods of Mongolian history, from Palaeolithic to Mediaeval. The study used GPS methods to determine their exact geographical location. Figs. 1 and 2 show the main routes and newly discovered archaeological sites.

In 2002 three previously unknown sites were found and partly excavated in the Tsuvraa mountain area of Khulnuv aimag, Dornod aimag. In each site there were some hundred graves from the Mongolian and Xiongnu periods. In 2004 the Department's archaeological team discovered several previously unknown and very interesting sites from the period of the Mongol Empire in Tavan Tolgoi (Ongon sum), Altan Ovoo and Gangyn Tsagan (Dariganga sum and Munkhkhaan sum), Sukhbaatar aimag (Fig. 3, next page). In each site there are more than ten graves. Some of them yielded valuable findings which may be related to Chingis Khan's royal lineage. Here is a brief description of some of those graves (see also the interview with D. Navaan below).

Grave No. 1, Tavan Tolgoi site, Ongon sum, Sukhbaatar aimag. Grave No. 1 contained a skeleton of a headless horse with a saddle whose bow was sheathed in gold. To the right of the horse skeleton lay the remains of a woman

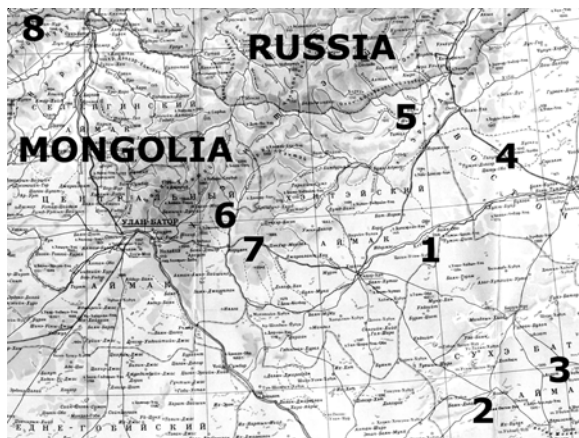


Fig. 2. Newly discovered and partly excavated archaeological sites from Xiongnu and Mongolian Periods by the archaeological expeditions from the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, National University of Mongolia (2002-2005).

1. Khaikhan chuluu site, Munkhkhaan sum, Sukhbaatar aimag (Mongolian Period). 2. Tavan Tolgoi site, Ongon sum, Sukhbaatar aimag (Xiongnu and Mongolian Periods). 3. Gangyn Tsagaan site, Altan Ovoo Site, Dariganga sum, Sukhbaatar aimag (Mongolian Period). 4. Tsuvraa Uul, Bayan Uul, Takhilagt Uul sites, Khulnuv aimag, Dornod aimag (Xiongnu and Mongolian Periods). 5, 6, 7. Nugaar, Shuus and Zuun Bayangiin Am, Bugat sites, Khentii aimag (Bronze Age, Xiongnu and Mongolian Periods). 8. Emu site, Selenge aimag (Mongolian Period).

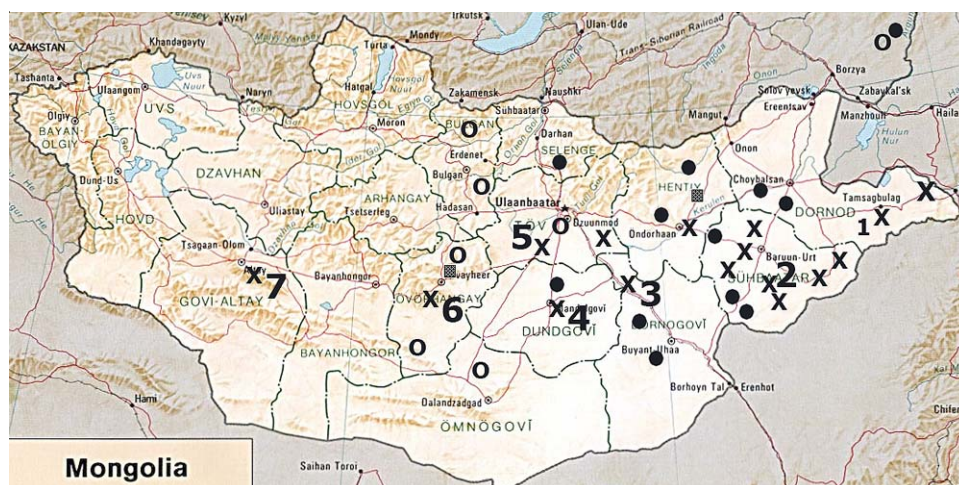


Fig. 3. Archaeological sites from the Mongolian Period.

○ Grave sites excavated by Department's archaeological team.

● Graves excavated by archaeologists.

■ Settlement ruins.

X Stone-man sites: 1. Dornod aimag, 2. Sukhbaatar aimag, 3. Domo Gobi aimag, 4. Dund Gobi aimag, 5. Tov aimag, 6. Ueberkhangai aimag, 7. Gobi Altai aimag.

oriented toward the northwest. The woman's skeleton was very well preserved. She wore a two golden rings on the fingers of her left hand; on the inner surface of each ring was inscribed an image of a falcon. According to C14 analysis, Grave No. 1 is dated 1190-1230 CE or the period of Great Mongol Empire.

Grave No. 2 revealed a horseman buried not far from the woman's grave. He was holding in his right hand silk material in which was wrapped a large pearl resting upon a base that was shaped like a flower. This large pearl set onto a flower-shaped base is called a *jins* in Mongolian and was used as a marker of status.

Grave TT-2005 B-4. Geographical position: N – 45°05'55.7, E – 112°42'47.1; elevation 1089 m above sea level. The grave is located on the southern slope of the Dund Ovoot hill, 500 m. to the west of the hilltop.

The following artifacts were found in the grave: a sheep's shoulder blade, ribs, ankle and tibia bone, all lay near a human skull; and a horse head with harness lay to the left of the human remains. Sheep vertebrae and a shin bone and a horse hoof

lay to the right of the human remains. A stirrup and a birch-bark arrow quiver with four arrowheads inside were unearthed at the human's legs. The archaeological findings and other mortuary materials from the grave, in particular the sheep tibial and ankle bones, show that the grave belongs to the Mongolian period. Furthermore, some characteristics of palaeoanthropological findings from the grave, such as trauma of the left clavicle, outer and inner constructions of the grave, and associated archaeological materials suggest that the grave belongs to an individual of lower social status, e.g. a common warrior.

Grave TT-2005 B-5. Geographical position: N – 45°05'59.0, E – 112°43'10.9; elevation 1096 m above sea level. The grave is located on the southern slope of Dund Ovoot hill of Tavan Tolgoi at the upper left periphery of the group of graves. The surface structure is a ring-shaped stone construction 8.5 m. in diameter, not mounded on the surface.

A horse tooth and other bones were found at a depth of 50 cm. At a depth of 1.10 m, there was a

harnessed horse head at the left hind corner of the burial pit. The harness had knob-like decorations at the knots, and leather pieces of harness were found elsewhere. At 1.30 m, the excavation unearthed a horse on whose saddle was a gold bow-plate with a dragon image.

To the right of the horse skeleton, separated by a large stone, lay human remains in a wooden coffin. The human skeleton, of a supine female, retained its anatomical structure, but in a very poor state of preservation. Further excavation revealed

various gold and silver goods. She wore a gold ring on a finger of her left hand and a golden crown on her head. A pair of gold earrings was found near the skull. A small golden container had a black powder inside, and 'ochir' and other decorations beautifully crafted of gold were found there too. Other findings in the grave included a silver pot, a bowl containing grain, a human image made from jade and a bronze mirror wrapped in cloth. The buried woman wore a fine silk outer garment and leather boots with sharp tips.

Although the stone structure of the grave on the surface appears to date to the Xiongnu period, the internal structure and the objects recovered during excavation date it to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries CE. Moreover, the pelvic structure of the human remains and the associated gold objects suggest that the burial belongs to a woman of high social status.

Grave TT-2005 B-6. Geographical position: N – 45°05'58.9, E – 112°43'10.7; elevation 1103 m above sea level. The grave is located on the southern slope of Dund Ovoot hill of Tavan Tolgoi, below and to the left of grave TT-

2005 B-5. The surface structure is a ring-shaped stone construction 6 m in diameter, not mounded on the surface.

At a depth of 70 cm, ribs and foot bones of animals, bone knobs with metal centers (their purpose is unclear), and pieces of birch bark were found. At 1.1 m were the remains of a horse with a leather saddle. At 1.80 m, there was wooden coffin, whose inner surface was painted with red and white decoration and covered in some places with birch bark. Archaeological findings from the grave include a golden ring, cloth (possibly the lining of the coffin), a 3-petal golden 'ochir,' a jade belt decoration inlaid with square turquoise, and a 7-petal decoration made of bone. Palaeoanthropological materials were uncovered without any anatomical structure and consisted of skull fragments, a clavicle, ribs, vertebrae, a radius, a fibula, feet bones and phalanxes. Bone structure and relief of paleoanthropological materials show that the human remains are from a male.

Archaeological findings from the grave TT-2005 B-6, among them the fully-equipped horse, suggest that the grave dates to the Mongolian period and belongs to a male aristocrat. The grave appears to have been pillaged in antiquity.

Grave TT-2005 B-7. Geographical position: N – 45°05'58.7, E – 112° 43'11.1; elevation 1096 m above sea level. The grave is located on the southern slope of Dund Ovoot hill of Tavan Tolgoi, down from the grave TT-2005 B-5. The surface structure is a ring-shaped stone construction, not mounded on the surface.

Excavation was undertaken on an area of 3 x 2.2 m. At 85 cm, the burial pit was identified and further excavation then conducted over an area of 2.6 x 1.7 m. At a depth of 1.5 to 1.7 m were found horse vertebrae, a hoof, saddle

trim made from bone, birch bark, copper and iron goods, buttons and a belt buckle.

At 2.10 m, the upper lid of a wooden coffin oriented north-south was revealed. The well-preserved coffin had been placed in a stone-sided pit and covered by large flat stones. One of the boards of the coffin lid was broken. The coffin had iron girdles at the head and foot ends and appeared to have had a copper one in the middle. The coffin interior was lined with silky material with small white ornaments. The measurements of the coffin were: length 2.12 m; upper width at the head 60 cm, bottom 55 cm; upper width at the foot 54 cm, bottom 42 cm; height at the head 56 cm, at the foot 50 cm; thickness of lid board 3 cm, side wall 6 cm, foot wall 8 cm.

The human remains in the grave were completely disrupted, and the skull with mandible was found out of the coffin on the north edge of its lid, facing to the east. Other bones, such as clavicle, radius and ulna were found out of the coffin at a depth of 2 m. Nonetheless, lower limb bones, scapula, ribs, and sacral bone were recovered in the coffin. Since they were out of anatomical order, it was not possible to ascertain the position of the body in the grave. However, by the coffin shape, it could be supposed that the interred individual was placed supine and oriented to the north. The grave also has unique characteristics. A golden earring was discovered under the skull of the human remains, which appear to be those of a man.

From the archaeological findings, including the wooden coffin and grave structure, we can assume that the grave dates to the Mongolian period and belongs to an individual of high social status. The single earring found in the grave may have been connected to rituals, and shows that medieval Mongolian nobles used to wear a single earring in their left ear.

The graves excavated in 2004-2005 at the Tavan Tolgoi site all had a horse associated with the interred individual and are of great importance to the archaeology of the Mongolian period. Assuming that the findings are evidence that the Tavan Tolgoi site is connected with the history of Great Mongol Empire, we can conclude that graves TT-2004 B-1, TT-2004-B-2, TT-2005 B-5, TT-2005 B-6, TT-2005 B-7 were burials of nobles who had a close relationship to Chingis Khan's Golden Lineage. The territory of Ongon sum was the land of the Onggirat tribe in the 12th-13th centuries, a tribe which had an old bond with Chingis Khan's Golden Lineage. Thus we might conclude that the Tavan Tolgoi area was the burial ground of the Onggirat tribe.

The conclusion regarding the royal connections of the graves is supported by some of the key archaeological finds: the *jins* marker in the man's grave, the woman's rings with a falcon seal inside, the gold saddle bow-plate, and the other jewelry, all of which undoubtedly belonged to a royal family during the Great Mongolian Empire. Of particular significance were the gold rings with the engraved image of a falcon, which signifies that the person to whom the rings belonged must be of great importance. The falcon is mentioned in the thirteenth-century 'Secret History of Mongols' and provides a link to Chingis Khan's lineage. In its 63rd section Onggirat Dei Sechen speaks to Yisügei Baatar, Temüjin's father, when he came to betrothe his 9 year-old-son to Börte, Dei Sechen's daughter: '... This night I saw the dream that the white falcon came to me holding the sun and the moon and left them on my hand Dear Yisügei, your coming with your son explains my dream. The totem of you, Kiyat people, has come...' (Chengdū-yin Damdinsüren 1947). Temüjin was described in this story as the Falcon, a totem of the Kiyat Borjigin tribe.

About the Authors

The authors are all members of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology of the National University of Mongolia. Prof. **Navaan Dorjpagma** is the department's senior professor. He received his initial training in Archaeology at Moscow State University and for many decades worked in the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. His specialty is Bronze Age archaeology of Eastern Mongolia; he has published three monographs and over 200 scholarly articles. Prof. **Tumen Dashvereg** likewise received her degrees from Russian institutions and since 1995 has chaired her department. She has held numerous visiting appointments at distinguished foreign universities and recently completed a lecture tour in the United States and Canada, sponsored by the Silkroad Foundation. Her publications in her specialization of paleoanthropology include three books and some 90 articles. Her e-mail is <tumen@mun.edu.mn>. She, Prof. Navaan, and the third co-author, Prof. **M. Erdene** of her department, presented a paper in April 2006 at the 19th Annual C14 Conference (held at Oxford) on the carbon 14 dating of the Tavan Tolgoi site.

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Tombs of Chingisids Are Still Being Found...

An Interview with Senior Archaeologist, Professor Dorjpagma Navaan

Interviewed by Shirchin Baatar on August 3, 2005.

We are meeting again after exactly one year. I heard that you made number of discoveries during the most recent season. Can you tell us about your new discoveries as well as older ones?

Last year, during the expedition organized by the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology of the National University of Mongolia, we found some interesting discoveries related to the thirteenth century. We informed the public and planned to continue work in 2005. We excavated three burials in the hope of finding some more interesting and valuable items. Our hopes were met.



Photo © Daniel C. Waugh 2005

Fig. 1. Prof. Navaan discussing his 2005 excavations. Looking on is Prof. Al Dien (Stanford), who lectured for the Silkroad Foundation's summer institute in Mongolia.

Thank you for the good news. First you found a burial of a female aristocrat. Exactly what kinds of things were with her? What was the position of the body?

First we went to a place named Tavan Tolgoi in Ongon sum, Sukhbaatar aimag (Fig. 1, next page). When we were exploring there, I found some graves on the slope of Dund Ovoot mountain. Because of the external structure of the burials I assumed that they