

Foreign Tribes in the Xiongnu Confederation

Zagd Batsaikhan

Mongolian National University, Ulaanbaatar

Although the surviving written sources contain too little information about ancient nomads of Inner Asia, archaeological findings of the last decade enable us to reconstruct a great deal about them and their history. We are both enriching our knowledge and testing previous assumptions. This new material is essential for establishing different influences on the ethnic composition and cultural level of the ancient Inner Asian nomads. Scholars have devoted much attention to establishing the relationships between ancient nomads in the west of Eurasia and those of the east. Yet the inadequacy of source materials has prevented this problem from being solved convincingly. Of particular value has been the new paleo-anthropological information from recent excavations. For example,



Fig. 1. Feature 109, Tamir 1 site, in the process of excavation.

more than 20 Xiongnu burials, some with europoid craniums, were found at Naimaa Tolgoi, Erdenemandal sum, Arkhangai aimag. Also the 16 graves so far excavated from among the 370 at Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu (the Tamir 1 site) have yielded 5 unbroken europoid craniums, and two of the ten Xiongnu graves excavated some ten km from that site contained europoid craniums.

The design of these burials and the grave contents are quite similar to those of Xiongnu burials in other parts of Mongolia and Transbaikalia. The three walled enclosures found at the Tamir 2 site 10 km west of Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu have a design similar to Xiongnu walls in other locations (see drawings in the article by David Purcell above). While the date of Tamir 2 has not yet been determined, it may be connected with the cemetery at Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu.

Despite similarities, the Tamir 1 graves have some features which distinguish them from other Xiongnu graves, viz.: the greater depth (three to four meters) (Fig. 1), wooden bulkheads, the orientation of the bodies, infrequent finds of cattle bones and weaponry, and the number

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Fig. 2. Bronze cauldron with an iron base, excavated in Feature 97, Tamir 1 site.



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Fig. 3. Antler and iron decorations, probably for a harness, excavated in Feature 97, Tamir 1 site.

of pieces of pottery. Most of the graves had been plundered. Yet important and interesting objects remained, such as a bronze bell, bronze cauldrons (Fig. 2), and decorations made from bone (Fig. 3). All these features are probably to be connected with the culture and agriculture of the foreign tribes which were members of the Xiongnu confederacy. These tribes paid tribute to the Xiongnu and were responsible for agriculture.

The Chinese written sources indicate that the northern Xiongnu conquered tribes such as the Hunyu, Qushe, Dingling, Gekun, and Xinli. By the time the *Shanyu*



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Fig. 4. A broken grinding stone from Feature 109, Tamir 1 site.

Modun wrote to the Han emperor in 176 BCE he could claim that besides the Donghu there were as many as 30 small and large tribes which had submitted to the Xiongnu. Among them have to have been tribes speaking both Mongolian and Turkic languages. Among the most important tribes with which the Xiongnu had extensive relations was the Wusun. The written sources from the second century BCE indicate that they first lived in the area of what is today western Gansu province and then were forced to move further west under their leader, the Kunmo. Their political and trade center was Chigu, an important center on the Silk Road. When in 105 BCE the Wusun ruler received a Han princess as a bride, the Shanyu responded by sending his daughter to the Kunmo, a move that would have important political consequences for the Xiongnu.

In 73 BCE the Wusun made some changes within their territories, separating them into three parts: central, eastern, and western. As the Han began to strengthen their control of the Western Regions, in the period 64-51 BCE resistance developed among some of the peoples in Inner Asia. The power of the Wusun grew, but then civil strife developed between two major factions. This war provided an opportunity for the Han Dynasty to use the Wusun against the Xiongnu and take control of the Silk Road. During this period of

extended conflict, migrations from east to west were undoubtedly accelerated and occurred more than once.

The sources indicate that the Wusun was a nomadic tribe which always sought in its migrations grasslands and water for

its cattle. Since the Wusun lifestyle was identical with that of the Xiongnu, it is no surprise that they could adapt easily to the climate of Mongolia. Some sources suggest that the Wusun settled there some time before 138 BCE.

Statistical analysis of cattle bones tells us that they were in fact semi-nomadic. Burials at Aktas which are related to the Wusun period contain, among many other items, a stone mattock, a bronze scythe and 11 complete and 15 broken grinding stones (Fig. 4). These items form the main evidence that the Wusun were involved in agriculture. Excavation near this site has uncovered an agricultural area (60-150 m²) with a simple irrigation system.

Most of the Wusun burials are round and located alongside a river. The dead are usually placed in the grave without a coffin, laid out straight and facing west. Decorations, pottery, and weaponry were placed on the left, right and above the head. Researchers have determined that there are three types of Wusun burials in the Semirech'e basin (westernmost Xinjiang; easternmost Kazakhstan—Ed.). The most numerous of these types is the third, where the grave diameter is approximately 5-10 m, and the contents include 1-2 pots, iron knives, bronze earrings, and various decorations.

Researchers have divided the Wusun remains into four periods:

4th-2nd centuries BCE, 2nd-1st centuries BCE, 1st-3rd centuries CE, 3rd-5th centuries CE. Also they have demonstrated that the Wusun's anthropological characteristics have not changed throughout the four periods and thus might be assumed to have been established as early as the 3rd century BCE. The anthropological features indicate that the Wusun had mixed mongoloid-europoid faces, just like people from the Tian-Shan, where this type of face was probably established after the 3rd century BCE. However, the materials from the Tianshan have more mongoloid characteristics than do the findings from Semirech'e. If we then compare the cranium found at Naimaa Tolgoi in Mongolia, with other materials from Inner Asia, it turns out to have the same anthropological characteristics as Wusun craniums. This mixed type is not only found in Naimaa Tolgoi but also in Central and Eastern parts of Mongolia.

Written sources indicate that another europoid tribe which was a component of the Xiongnu was the Huzi (in some sources written Zihu). Chinese historian Ma Changshou, has suggested that the name Huzi is a combination of Xiongnu and Zi, and the name Zihu is the same as Zi. While the sources do not tell us enough about this people's anthropological characteristics, they provide some interesting suggestions deserving of attention. For example, Zhang Ming indicates that they have a high nose and long beard. Chinese historian Yao Weiyan uses Han dynasty sources to prove that in their culture and outward appearance the Huzi were part of the Yuezhi, who in turn at one time were part of the Xiongnu. G. Sukhbaatar has asserted that they were a europoid people from Central Asia. Thus, even though the sources do not reveal anything about the life style and boundaries of the Huzi, it seems that that there were two europoid tribes among the Xiongnu.

We cannot say for sure that burials from Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu, Emeel Tolgoi, Naimaa Tolgoi are precisely from the Wusun period; so this association so far is a guess. Further, we need to take into account the fact that Indoeuropean tribes were already migrating from the West to western parts of Mongolia as early as the Neolithic, Eneolithic, and Bronze Ages, and once there they mixed in among the native people. By the time of the Xiongnu they were settled in the center of the empire, which meant that not only their culture but also their anthropological characteristics began to change and disappear. Yet there is still sufficient evidence in the sources to identify some of the burials at the given sites as being those of the Wusun.

Finally we can say that the Xiongnu people who emerged from the Wusun later participated in the process of the establishment of the Turkic-Mongolian ethnic group. Both the written sources and archaeological findings prove that the carriers of this culture migrated into and settled in the western part of the Xiongnu empire.

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About the Author

Dr. **Zagd Batsaikhan** is a professor in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the Mongolian National University. He has led numerous important archaeological expeditions in Mongolia, participated in the Joint Mongolian-Russian-American Archaeological Expeditions of the 1990s, and was the lead archaeologist for the Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu excavation in 2005. Among his many publications is a monograph on the Xiongnu.

Investigation of a Xiongnu Royal Tomb Complex in the Tsaraam Valley

Sergei S. Miniaev

L. M. Sakharovskaia

*Institute for the History of Material Culture,
Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg*

The Xiongnu, otherwise known as the Asiatic Huns, created a powerful alliance of cattle-breeding tribes in the late third to early second century BCE and then dominated the eastern part of Central Asia for four centuries. Systematic studies of Xiongnu archaeological sites have been carried out for more than a century. At present, materials of considerable value in the characterization of settlement complexes and cemeteries of various types have been obtained. However, elite barrows, which usually contain important

information about social structure, material culture, and the art of a particular society, are neither well-known nor systematically investigated using archaeological techniques.

In 1996 the Trans-Baikal Archaeological Expedition of the Institute of History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, initiated a survey of the Tsaraam valley, situated 1.5 km to the south of Naushki village (Buriat Republic, Russian Federation) (Fig. 1). Archaeological work at the

Tsaraam Cemetery began in the nineteenth century with the discovery of the site in June of 1896 by the pioneer of Xiongnu archaeology, Iu. D. Tal'ko-Gryntsevich. He recorded, '...more than 20 barrows, dispersed in a forest' in the Tsaraam location. In June 1903, Tal'ko-Gryntsevich and Ia. S. Smolev excavated five of the burials. All of them had been robbed, and only few artifacts were found (Tal'ko-Gryntsevich 1999: 117-118). Tal'ko-Gryntsevich drew a schematic map with an approximate location of the

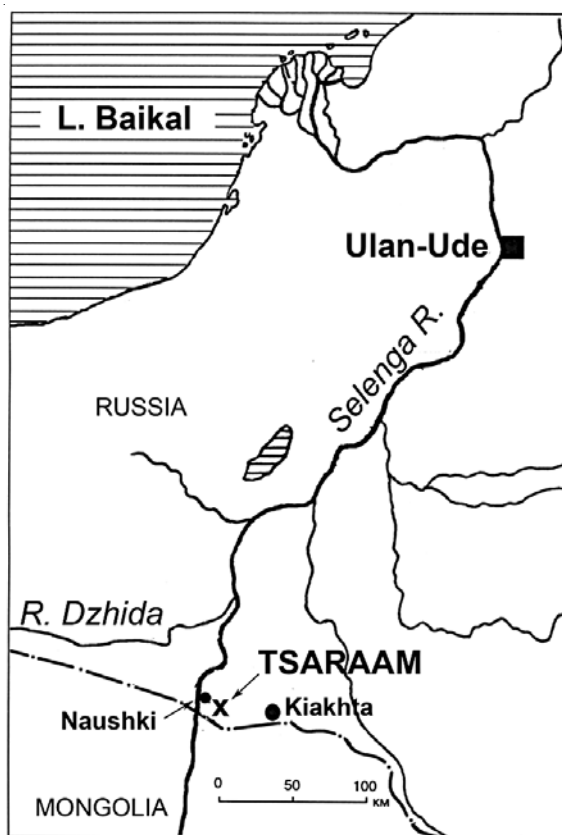


Fig. 1. Map showing location of the Tsaraam Valley. Copyright © Sergei S. Miniaev 2006.