

The Silk Road

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The Silk Road is a semi-annual publication of the Silkroad Foundation. *The Silk Road* can also be viewed on-line at <<http://www.silkroadfoundation.org>>. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or contributions. Guidelines for contributors may be found in Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 2004) on the website.

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From the Editor

This year Mongolia celebrates the 800th anniversary of the *kuriltai* which marked the founding of the Mongolian Empire under its leader newly designated as Chingis Khan. Under Chingis and his successors Mongolia in the 13th century was for a time indeed at the 'center of the world.' As students of Inner Asian history know, at several earlier times in its history too, Mongolia had been the center of nomadic polities which encompassed large portions of Inner Asia and played a major role in the lives of their nomadic and sedentary neighbors. It is appropriate therefore that we devote much of this issue of *The Silk Road* to Mongolia.

I feel fortunate to have spent some six weeks in Mongolia last summer, initially as a lecturer and participant in the archaeological expedition co-sponsored by the Silkroad Foundation and the Mongolian National University, and then doing independent touring to view petroglyphs in the Altai Mountains of Mongolia's far west. This was my third and longest visit there, one made the more rewarding by my preparation in recent years to introduce students to Mongolian history. It is no accident that the final course I chose to teach before my recent retirement was one devoted to Mongolia, even though I hardly qualify as a 'specialist' on its history.

There are a great many reasons to learn about Mongolia — its present as well as its past. Rarely these days do more than a few weeks pass without the publication of yet another news article

extolling the natural beauties of the country, the warm hospitality of its people, or the mixed successes in facing the challenges of economic and political transition during the post-communist period. In a previous number of *The Silk Road* (Vol. 2, no. 1) Prof. Morris Rossabi, who has spent so much of his career enlightening us about the country's earlier history, provided an eye-opening overview of those challenges and the disappointments of the last decade and a half, which he analyzes in some detail in his most recent book. His observations were reinforced for me last year in Bayan Ölgii, a town of some 20,000 in Mongolia's far west, where what little manufacturing there had been collapsed with the end of socialist subsidies, and the town was without electricity for much of the day due to its inability to pay its electric bill. Our visit to the local museum was a curious post-socialist experience of viewing displays still glorifying heroic workers and revolutionaries, which we could see only because we had brought our flashlights.

Should all that sound depressing, on the contrary, seeing how people are imaginatively adapting to the challenges of transition is in fact inspiring. One comes away with an even greater appreciation of the ways in which traditional Mongolian life and values retain their vitality. For in fact the adaptations worked out millennia ago to live well in an often harsh natural environment have proved to be remarkably suited to sustaining the cultures out of which emerged political leaders whose organizational

abilities made Mongolia so important historically. It is no accident that the Kazakh, Mongolian and Tuvan herders of the Altai are tracing still the time-tested grazing routes and wintering in the same locations as their remote predecessors who left the glorious arrays of petroglyphs about which Prof. Esther Jacobson writes in this issue. Right now, herding is profitable, although the mix of profits, leading to a greater emphasis in some areas on the herding of goats, which destroy the regenerative power of the vegetation as they eat it, poses a threat for the future. So also does the impact of climate change. Here we are talking not just about the unseasonable winters of a few years ago, in which so many animals died, a frequent enough occurrence historically. It is possible that longer-term changes in precipitation have begun, where insufficient moisture means some pastures dry out much earlier than used to be the case, and eventually the rivers too may dwindle.

As David Purcell and Kimberly Spurr note in their excavation report below, the Orkhon River valley in north central Mongolia is an area of particular historical interest, since it formed the heartland of empires from the Xiongnu down through the Mongol. One may go to the Orkhon with at least a vague awareness of its importance — after all, many know that is where Karakorum, the Mongol capital so vividly described by William of Rubruck in the 1250s, was located. And many have heard of the Orkhon Inscriptions (Fig. 1), the earliest major collection of texts in Old Turkic, without necessarily associating them with the place where they may still be seen. Yet to visit the Orkhon is a revelation. How can it be, one may ask, that this remote region was the center of entities so important as the Turk or Mongol Empires? Today simply finding the right road to get there amongst the multitude of unpaved and unmarked tracks across the steppe

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Fig. 2. Wooden bridge across the Orkhon River, looking toward Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu (the hill in center).

can be a challenge for the urbanized driver from Ulaanbaatar (our driver managed to get lost...). That we ask such a question reflects merely how far we outsiders are removed from the context and time of those earlier empires, and from the values which animated their inhabitants.

Looked on from a different perspective, the Orkhon and its tributaries such as the Tamir are ideal country for pastoral herders (Fig. 2): rich in water and grass; easily traveled, where the topography that seems somewhat intimidating on a modern map turns out to be rolling hills or cut

by easily traversable passes. One can appreciate why the Xiongnu who buried their dead at Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu where we excavated would have chosen that site, on the south-facing slopes of a hill with an inspiring view out over the tree-lined, winding course of the Tamir River. We cannot know whether those Xiongnu had the same kind of aesthetic appreciation we do today, thrilling at the contrast of the late afternoon sun intensifying the green meadow next to the river against the backdrop of black thunderclouds on the northern horizon, or marveling at the sunset colors on the clouds of a rain squall passing to the south. Indeed, a place to perform the rituals of final farewells with the hope that the dead would remain undisturbed.

Undisturbed they were not, at least judging from the limited excavations so far undertaken, for most of the graves seem to have been looted. What remains suggests that at least the elite in the Xiongnu society of some 2000 years ago at Tamir were well-connected and well-to-do. We found abundant evidence that they owned Chinese lacquerware and prized Chinese bronze mirrors (see the articles below). Regarding the Chinese connection, readers should find the observations of Dr. Di Cosmo in this issue to be of particular interest, inviting us to re-think traditional conceptions about nomadic aggression and the

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Fig. 1. The Bilge Qaghan stele, containing one of the famous Orkhon Inscriptions, ca. 730 CE. In final stages of restoration and cleaning by members of the Turkish-Mongolian archaeological expedition.

raison d'être of the Great Wall. That the nomads acquired considerable wealth was further supported by the fragments we found, suggesting that they dressed their dead with gold jewelry and imported beads. So far we can only hypothesize that the Xiongnu of Tamir clothed their dead in silks and fine woolen fabrics, but the evidence of better-preserved Xiongnu burials provides a reasonable basis for such an assumption. These may not have been royal tombs, but they were tombs of those who lived well. The essay below detailing finds from the recent Russian excavations headed by Dr. Miniaev in Buriatia, just north of the Mongolian border, gives an idea of the riches of what likely was a royal tomb.

Any excavation leaves us with more questions than answers, among the more interesting ones being that of the ethnic composition of the Xiongnu. Dr. Batsaikhan's interesting speculations on that question in this issue will need to be tested by further analysis and the accumulation of much more data than we currently have, but most scholars today would probably agree that the nomadic confederations such as the Xiongnu were certainly multi-ethnic. Of particular interest for me in this connection is the issue of the degree to which agriculture may have played a significant role in their lives. There is a variety of interesting evidence that even somewhat farther to the north, growing and processing of grains was important for the Xiongnu, and in later centuries, we have an Arab traveler's account of Karabalghasun (Fig. 3), the Uighur capital located in the heart of the Orkhon Valley, which suggests it was surrounded by productive fields and villages. It is hard to know, of course, whether such an indication conflates what he saw in Mongolia with what he may have seen much farther west in the oases along the way. Are we dealing with a society in which

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Fig. 3. A portion of the vast ruins of Karabalghasun, the Uighur capital of the 9th century, located in the Orkhon valley just north of Karakorum.

certain of its peoples were valued because of their prowess at agriculture? Can we ever know? To what degree is it possible to determine ethnicity from grave goods?

The richness of Mongolia's past is yet little explored, despite important excavations by Mongolian archaeologists and their colleagues from a number of countries. In recent years, as we learn below from Prof. Tumen and her colleagues, the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the Mongolian National University has been laying the basis for what may emerge as a 'Golden Age' of Mongolian archaeology, by carrying out extensive survey work and undertaking excavations in new areas with striking results. Among the most impressive finds are those of the Chingisid burials near the border with the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region in China. One of the highlights of last summer for me was a meeting we had with Dr. Navaan, whose interview about his new finds is in this issue. We were in the classroom/museum of his department at the University, surrounded by display cases of some of the remarkable finds from their expeditions. He brought out a few of the artifacts from his most recent season — among them the gold *vajra* and the gold filigree hat decoration with its inlay which we show below. I was very much reminded of the latter when viewing similarly crafted pieces at

the State Historical Museum in Moscow later in the summer. The objects there were mid-14th century finds from the territory of the Golden Horde (the western part of the Mongol Empire), further evidence for the vast scope of the cultural interchange which took place across Eurasia in the Mongol period.

This rich panorama of Mongolia is, of course, only part of the larger history of Eurasian culture and exchange. As a reminder of the rest, we include in this issue news of a still poorly known collection of Khotan antiquities in Munich, which is being carefully catalogued by Dr. Jäger. Our next issue will shift focus to the west, when we will have several articles devoted to Bactria and Afghanistan.

It is unfortunate to have to conclude here on sad note. As we were finalizing this number, the news came from Panjikent that we have lost an inspirational scholar and true friend, Dr. Boris Marshak. His contributions to our knowledge of the Silk Road were immeasurable. A short appreciation follows, and we hope to publish a longer one in the future.

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