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the lack of good tools for regional comparison and synthesis, researchers are becoming ever more specialized and afraid of tackling the “big questions” of the past.

By using the Archaeological Markup Language, we will enable unprecedented capabilities fully to use and reexamine primary data. The Archaeological Markup Language has a powerful flexible data model that can provide a common structure to diverse sets of archaeological and philological data sets. This flexibility is essential to insuring that online data repositories do more than just preserve information. With this tool, scholars can fully integrate different archaeological data sets and develop analytically rigorous and comprehensive new syntheses. It

enables scholars to put together small pieces of knowledge to reveal the full picture of the past. When these technology solutions are combined with innovative intellectual property frameworks, as developed by Creative Commons, the result is an information infrastructure that enables research to be created, shared, used and reused globally. This collaboration between the AAI and Central Asian specialists is just one step in enabling this vision to become a reality.

#### About the Author

**Eric Kansa** received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 2001. He has participated in archaeological excavations in

Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and currently is working at the Neolithic site of Domuz-tepe in Turkey. He is the founder and Executive Director of the Alexandria Archive Institute and is a Visiting Scholar at Stanford University.

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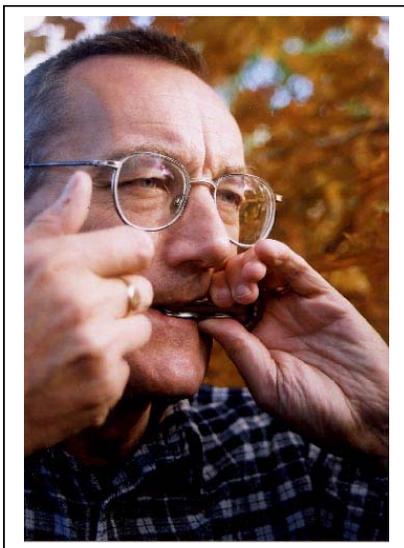
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## The Search for the Origins of the Jew’s Harp

**Michael Wright**

*Oxford, England*



As a player of the musical instrument known as the Jew’s or jaws harp, the two most frequent questions asked by my audience are, “How did it get its name?” and “Where does it come from?” One of the challenging and, at times, frustrating aspects of researching popular instruments is the lack of reference material we have to work with. Early writers simply did not think the instrument worthy of comment, or if they did it was often in derisory terms, not meriting serious study and, like many throw-away items, once the novelty had worn off or the instrument had been broken, it was discarded. Nevertheless, we have enough information to help us understand an instrument manufactured and played worldwide, constructed by

craftsmen or mass produced in numerous forms and shapes reflecting the material available to the makers, and of ancient origin.

This article explains what a Jew’s harp is and its global appeal; briefly explains what we know about the English language name; looks at the archaeological evidence; considers the relationship between instruments in Asia and Europe; and, finally, their likely transfer east to west.

#### *What is a Jew’s harp?*

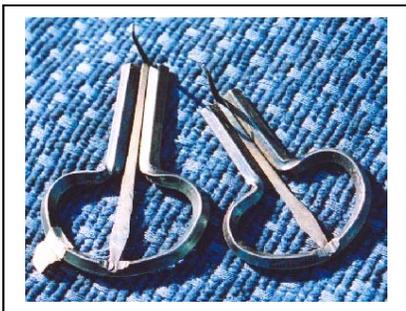
The first thing to recognise is that Jew’s harps are subtle musical instruments with an extraordinary variety of shapes, sizes and methods of playing.

They are international, being made extensively throughout the world from Polynesia, Asia and Eastern Russia to Europe and the United States. They are known in the Middle East and Africa, though these were exported from Europe or introduced as barter by early colonists and do not appear to be native to those countries.

A Jew's harp is a single reed instrument of two types: idioglot, where the vibrating reed or tongue of the instrument is cut from a single piece of wood,



bamboo, bone or thin flat metal, such as brass, and heteroglot, where there is a cast or bent metal frame to which is fixed a separate, flexible metal reed.<sup>1</sup>



To play the Jew's harp requires three component parts – the instrument, the player's mouth and a means of activation. The mouth acts as a sound-box and, though the Jew's harp itself has no musical quality other than the fundamental note that the reed produces as it passes between the frame, other notes can be produced by a player by altering the shape of his mouth, mainly by using his own tongue

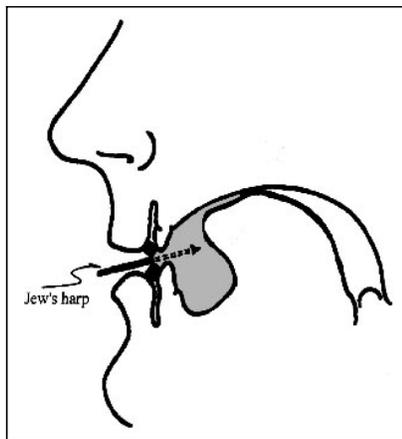


Fig. 1. Jew's harp & mouth cross-section – "high note" position.

to make the 'sound-box' larger or smaller. To produce a low note the player's tongue is placed at the bottom of the mouth, and to produce a high note the player's tongue is placed at the top (Fig. 1). It has been categorised as a plucked idiophone, or an instrument that creates sound primarily by way of the instrument itself vibrating, and an aerophone, or one that produces sound primarily by causing a body of air to vibrate – an argument that is still going on.

#### The name

Worldwide more around 1000 different names for the instrument have been noted, and the list is expanding. European languages mainly use *mouth* and sometimes *lips* or *teeth* linked with *trump* and *harp*. *Trump* in various forms and spellings are used today in Europe, such as *Mondtrom* in Dutch and *Tromp* in Flemish. *Harp* is used in Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, *Munnharpa*, Denmark, *Mundharpe* and Finland, *Huuliharpu*. *Doromb* can be found in Hungary, with *Drymba* in Ukraine and *Drombulja* in Serbia. As we go further east we have variations on *Komys*, *Kupus*, and *Khomus* in northern and eastern Asia, while *Morchang*, *Morsing*, *Dan Moi* and *Gengong*, can be found in India, Vietnam and Indonesia. As a general point, in

Asia the instrument has a name relating to the material from which it is made, along with animal or insect terms and sounds, whereas in Europe it has more human connections and names of other musical instruments. There is, in addition, the use of more derogatory terms such as *lackey*, *bauble* and *snore* [Bakx 2004].

English is the only language where there is an association with a particular race. We have no idea why it became known as the *Jew's harp*, only that it remains the earliest name found to date. The instrument has nothing to do with the musical culture of the Jewish race, though the name confuses the issue of where it comes from as there is a natural, but erroneous, belief that the origins are Middle Eastern. The prefix *Jew's* is only used in English and small part of Germany and is first definitely identified as the instrument in a document dated 1481 as *Jue harpes* and *Jue trumpes*. The significance of this document, a petty customs account, cannot be underestimated, as it not only gives us the early name but a port of origin, Arnemuiden west of Antwerp, and the merchant for whom the consignment was intended, a certain William Codde. It also clearly indicates that the names *Jue harpes* and *Jue trumpes* were in common usage in the late 15th century and known to both customs officer and merchant [Wright 2004]. The term *Jaws harp* is not seen before the mid-eighteenth century. There has been a suggestion that the instrument might originally have been called a *trump*, from the French *Trompe*, but clear evidence is lacking. That name, however, is still used today in parts of Ireland and Scotland.

#### European and UK finds

Tracing the history of the instrument is largely reliant upon archaeological finds and the

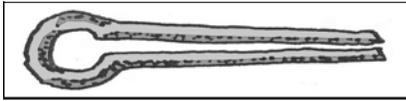


Fig. 2. "Roman" Jew's harp.

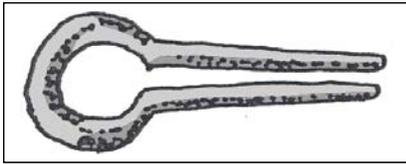


Fig. 3. "Anglo-Saxon" Jew's harp.

study of traditional types of instrument as used today or in recent times, researched by ethnomusicologists, and in museum collections such as the Musee de l'Homme in France, the Pitt Rivers Museum and Horniman Museum in the UK, along with studies by Soviet scholars and their successors. Collections have more numerous examples, but they lack the historical authenticity of actual finds when it comes to relating types to age. Archaeological idioglot finds are extremely rare, mainly due to the local climate and the material of the instruments, but when they do exist they are extremely old, ranging between 2,000 and 2,400 years. Hetroglot instrument finds are much more common, though almost exclusively they produce the frame only. Sometimes you come across fragments of the reed where it was fixed to the frame, but because the reed is the most fragile part, constantly in motion when played, plucked with the finger and allowed to run freely between the frame in order to obtain a note, it breaks quite frequently. Without its reed the Jew's harp is completely useless, although one frame was found used as a gate catch in Hawkshill, Surry, England [Elliston-Erwood 1943].

The age of finds is often hotly disputed and accurate dating has been difficult, particularly up to the immediate post-war era. Three Jew's harps, for example, discovered in the 19th century in Gallo-Roman sites at Rouen and

Parthenay, in France, have caused some excitement in Jew's harp circles, as have a fair number of mid-20th-century instruments found in the Southeast of England and dated as Anglo-Saxon (Figs. 2 and 3). But we have problems. Firstly, while there is no doubt that the finds came from Gallo-Roman and Anglo-Saxon sites, they could have been dropped there at a later date and are sometimes described as top-soil finds. Secondly, when we look at how the instrument arrived in Europe, there is no evidence of indigenous populations of the Roman Empire using them and no references, to my knowledge, by Roman writers that such instruments were played. My concern regarding the Anglo-Saxon finds is that there is the similarity with Jew's harps recovered in an 18th-century North American site. We either have to accept that the frame shape remains identical from Anglo-Saxon to Colonial American times or that the Anglo-Saxon instruments are in fact

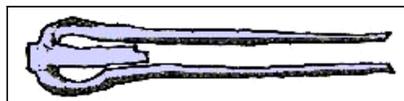


Fig. 4 Uppsala Jew's harp.

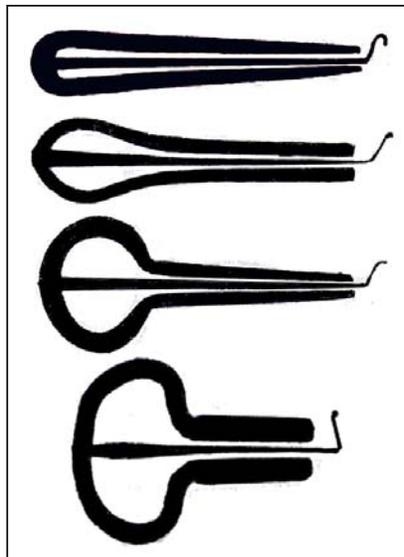


Fig. 5. Gjermond Kolltviet theory.

from the 18th century [Kolltviet 2000, p. 390].

One of the earliest accepted finds comes from Uppsala in Sweden, and is dated 13th century (Fig. 4). It is very distinctive, being hairpin shaped without the characteristic form of the bow shape now associated with modern instruments. Gjermond Kolltviet has recently completed a PhD thesis on 850 European finds, and his research is due for publication late in 2004. He has used a typology system to provide an explanation as to the relative ages of Jew's harps throughout Europe, with his basic theory being that the oldest instruments are like the Uppsala find and, as the instrument evolved, the bow section became more pronounced, while the playing section became shorter (Fig. 5) [Kolltviet 2000, p. 389].

We have visual references in Europe going back to the 14th century, the earliest of which comes from the seal of the

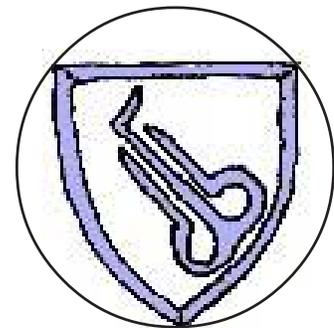


Fig 6. Seal of Trompii family.

Trompii family of Grüningen, near Aarburg, Switzerland, dated 1353, and there is no doubt that this is a Jew's harp of, if we accept Kolltviet's system, a late type (Fig. 6) [Crane 2003, p. 3]. In England there is a fantastic series of miniature enamels of angels playing various musical instruments displayed on the Crosier of William of Wickham, to be found in the chapel of New College, Oxford, one of which not



Fig. 7. Crozier angel.

only clearly shows a Jew's harp, but the angel flicking the instrument's tongue with his finger (Fig. 7). There are also a number of watermarks from the late 14th century from a widespread area of northern France and the Low Countries [Crane 2003, p. 4].

The only definite dates we can rely on for Europe are, therefore, the 13th-century find in Sweden, and the mid-to-late-14th-century images from the seal and the New College crozier.

### Origins

Further to the east archaeological finds give tantalising

glimpses of instruments from the 4th century BCE on (Fig. 8), but finds are few and far between and the time gaps are immense. A better idea of the huge variety of instruments is provided by the study of local instruments collected by museums. Bringing together these two strands



Fig. 8. 3 BCE Chinese drawing.

provides a bigger, if risky, picture (Map 1).

The most likely and compelling theory of the beginnings of the instrument suggests an Asian origin, though there is no evidence to support the hypothesis. Bamboo examples are played throughout Asia and Polynesia but, because

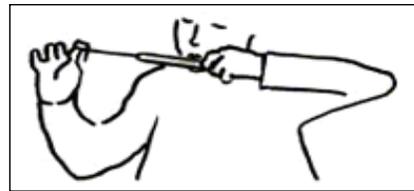


Fig. 9. String-pull bamboo Jew's harp.

of the basic structure of the single reed concept, it is possible that the instruments evolved in various ways independently rather than from one single source. The Polynesian types, for instance, require the player to find an optimum part of the reed, which is then tapped or bounced upon a bony part of his wrist or knuckle allowing the reed to vibrate through the frame. Filipinos and North Vietnamese, on the other hand, have instruments that are plucked with the thumb or finger. A common method, however, that is found from Bali to Siberia, Japan to Nepal, is a string-pull (Fig. 9). It is this type that was found in Inner Mongolia dated circa 4 BCE (date unsubstantiated).

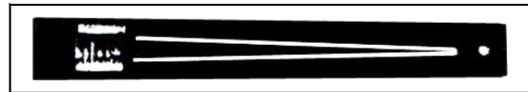


Fig. 10. Transitional Jew's harp.

Curt Sachs, the esteemed musicologist, suggested that the change from bamboo to metal is likely to have occurred in Northern India [Sachs 1921]. Sibyl Marcuse points out that the instruments of Taiwan and Engalio of the Philippine Islands represent a transitional type, as these are idioglot in form, but heteroglot in manufacture (Fig. 10) [Marcuse 1965, p. 264]. They are, however, on islands on the eastern periphery of known Jew's harp use. A bamboo or wooden frame with a metal tongue produced in Vietnam does have the characteristics of a heteroglot instrument, but might just as well be a copy of the metal type using local materials. What is apparent is that ideoglot



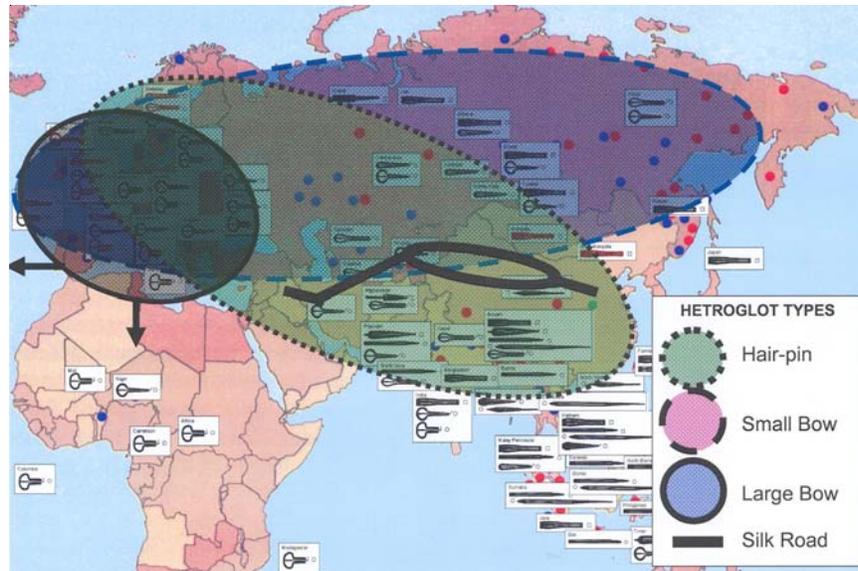
Map 1. World Jew's harp types.

instruments centre around Asia and hetroglot centre around Europe (Maps 2 and 3).

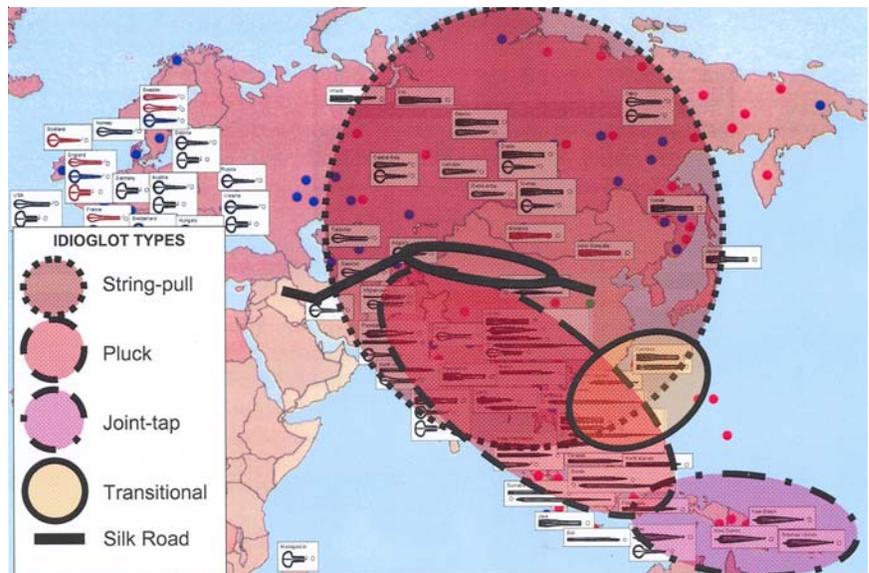
**The move from East to West**

Theoretically the instrument could have been developed in Europe in its own right and not from bamboo single reed instruments at all. I think this is unlikely, all the evidence pointing to an instrument fully formed when in Europe. This means that at some point they moved from east to west, and the most likely source appear to be trade routes or migration. David Christian suggests that four cultural zones

Map 3. Hetroglot Jew's harp areas.



can be identified that have an influence on the region covered by the Silk Road. He notes that the important gateways into Inner Eurasia were through the northern and north western borders of China; across the Central Asian borders with Iran and Afghanistan, and through the passes of the Caucasus; and through the passage between the Black Sea and the Capathians that leads from the Balkans... channelling particular Outer Eurasian influences to particular

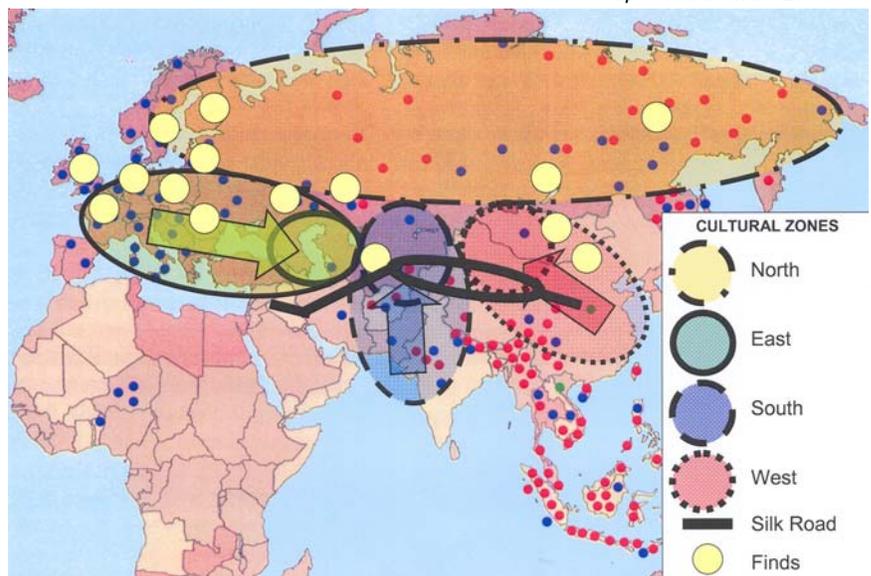


Map 2. Idioglot Jew's harp areas.

regions of Inner Eurasia. [Christian 1998, p. 18]

The western regions are indicated as the Urals and the Caspian Sea, influenced by the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and Europe; the southern as Central Asia and Kazakstan, influenced by Iran, Afghanistan and India; eastern as Zungaria, Kansu (provinces in north-western China) and Mongolia, influenced by China, with a limited impact from the north that stretched from Scandinavia to the Bering Straits [Ibid.]. Linking

Map 4. Cultural Zones.



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these to Jew's harps played in known regions provides a way in which they might have spread, particularly from the south and east (Map 4, previous page).

Going back to the Gallo-Roman finds in France, there was trade between Rome and India; so it is possible for the instrument to have arrived in Europe via that route. There are, however, no instruments played by the indigenous people on the western section of the Silk Road, which one might have expected and which we find in other areas to the north. Again the Anglo-Saxon finds might have come via the Hun invasions of the 4th century, particularly as more instruments are to be found in the area north of the Caspian Sea. Thus there is a more rational link east to west. Given the theory that the Huns originated from the eastern end of the Eurasian Steppe as the Xiiongnu (Hsiung-nu), and the wooden Jew's harp find from a Xiongnu burial site in Mongolia, this looks possible. The Turkic movements of the 6th and 7th centuries also look promising, and we have the trade routes post-Marco Polo and the Mongol invasions, both of significance in the potential for cultural spread, but possibly a little late.

Jew's harps in Asia, though scarce, have been found in archaeological sites in Bashkortostan, Altai, Khanty-Mansi Oblast, Buryatia, Sakha (Yakutsk, Vilyuisk), China (Inner Mongolia) and Mongolia (Map. 4). I have drawings of the Bashkortostan, and Inner Mongolia instruments, but not the others to date. So it is difficult to assess if there are any patterns of type or development, although with so few, it would be highly conjectural anyway. Finds from Finland make interesting comparisons with those played in Afghanistan, though how much emphasis can be put on the importance of

modern instruments as indicative representations of a particular people's ancient traditions is also open to speculation.

### Conclusion

The Jew's harp is an international instrument that is likely to have originated in Asia and travelled to Europe, arriving sometime around the 13th century. Archaeological evidence might push the date further back, and a substantiated Roman find would be a fantastic discovery, as would any instruments unearthed along the western section of the Silk Road. The Jew's harp appears in Europe fully formed. Older types could be hairpin in shape developing into the later bow section common today, but there are no idioglot finds. These could have been wooden and have rotted away, but the lack of any other description or indication of an evolving instrument seriously undermines an earlier existence before 1200.

That it is an ancient instrument, there is no doubt. Finds are gradually coming to light and the picture is a little clearer, but what may well move the theories forward is the pulling together of information from outside the specific archaeological finds and ethno-musicological collections. Trade looks to be a likely source. We await further revelations that I am convinced will appear. The important thing is that this musical instrument clearly is worth investigating further and that the evidence be collected, preferably in one place.

### About the Author

Michael Wright (jews.harper@virgin.net) has been playing the Jew's harp since the late 1960's, and has studied the social impact and use of the instrument, particularly in the United Kingdom

and Ireland, for the past six years. As a player he has performed at folk festivals in England and France and at the opening concert of the 2003 Galpin Society and American Musical Instrument Society — the first Jew's harpist to do so. As a researcher, Michael has published a number of articles for journals on subjects as varied as the discovery of the earliest English-language reference to the name, customs records from 1545 to 1765, the Jew's harp and the law and the various techniques of playing different versions of the instrument found worldwide. As a teacher he regularly leads workshops on playing the Jew's harp and gives talks on his research. Michael's main aim is to help raise the profile of this international, historic and versatile musical instrument.

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#### Note

1. Dourdon-Taurelle and Wright 1978 use a categorization of the Jew's harp based upon the direction of the tongue or lamella in relation to the hand — pointing towards or away. This article uses the more usual Sachs system of heteroglot and idioglot.

## Excavation and Survey in Arkhangai and Bulgan Aimaqs, Mongolia July 20-August 17, 2005

For the summer of 2005, the Silkroad Foundation, in conjunction with the Department of Archaeology at the Mongolian National University, will be sponsoring excavation and survey in Arkhangai and Bulgan aimaqs, Mongolia. You are invited to join in the first season of this collaborative project.

The field directors for this project are Dr. Mark Hall (Archaeological Research Facility, University of California, Berkeley) and Dr. Zagd Batsaihan (Department of Archaeology, Mongolian National University). Dr. Hall has excavated in Bulgan aimaq in 1996 and 1998, while Dr. Batsaihan has worked in these aimaqs since the early 1990s.

The main focus of the research will be looking at Xiongnu cemeteries and possible Xiongnu settlements in these two aimaqs. For the past several years, both Dr. Hall and Dr. Batsaihan have been working on Xiongnu material in an attempt to look at: 1) trade and exchange relationships within the Xiongnu confederacy; 2) trade and exchange between the Xiongnu and Han; and 3) developing an absolute chronology of the Xiongnu. Excavations are being done in order to gather more data to look at these issues.

This program is an exciting opportunity for participants with a wide range of interests. The early nomadic societies of Eurasia played a critical role in the development of economic and cultural exchange along the "Silk Roads." As the Han Dynasty histories emphasize, of particular importance was the Xiongnu

confederacy in the last centuries BCE and beginning of the Common Era (AD). Our understanding of the nomads themselves and their relations with sedentary centers has been transformed by the archaeological work of recent decades. A wealth of new material is being unearthed, and new methods are being applied to its analysis. In addition to enhancing your understanding of the origin of the Silk Roads and offering hands-on experience in archaeological field work, the program will be an excellent introduction to the broader cultural world of the steppe nomads and to the history and culture of Mongolia. The Xiongnu were only one of several important nomadic confederacies which were centered there, the best known being that of the empire which would encompass much of Eurasia under Chingis Khan and his successors in the 13th century. To spend significant time in the grasslands of Mongolia's spectacular landscapes, where many aspects of traditional herding culture are still alive (although by no means uninfluenced by the modern world), can greatly enhance one's understanding of this region's importance in world history. This is a program which should appeal to anyone eager to learn about Eurasian history and experience first-hand rich cultural traditions which are very different from one's own.

#### Language

The official language of the seminar is English. Lectures by local Mongolian scholars will be translated.