# The Tahilt Region: A Preliminary Archaeological Survey of the Tahilt Surroundings to Contextualize the Tahilt Cemeteries

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The survey component of the 2007 Silkroad Foundation Tahilt expedition provided information which not only complements data collected by the Xiongnu period excavations conducted by the Mongol-American Hovd Archaeology Project but may also stand alone as a data related to broader regional considerations. A large scale survey can provide both a chronological and spatial context for particular sites, and the type of survey described here is intended to be the first stage in a methodology that would include more survey and more targeted excavation, a methodology that has been successful in other areas of Central Asia (Honeychurch, Wright and Amartuvshin 2007; Frachetti 2004). The survey of 2007 was designed to answer some preliminary questions and assess the suitability of the region for higher intensity survey in the future. Some of the questions are as follows:

• What types and kinds of sites exist in the Tahilt region?

• What types of environmental or landscape features are associated with archaeological features?

• What are the pre- and post-Xiongnu sites and how do they compare to the Xiongnu component in the archaeological landscape?

• What should future surveys of this area look like and what are the potential challenges?

# Methodology

The survey was conducted over a 40 square kilometer area generally to the southwest of the Tahilt Xiongnu cemetery. It consisted of a systematic

pedestrian survey with transects spaced at about 500 meters, terrain permitting. This region allowed the survey to encompass a number of environmental and landscape features such as rivers, high rocks, open spaces, and valleys. The rationale for survey by making large transects across the region involved a number of factors, the first being how best to understand the Tahilt region quickly while at the same time having the resolution to detect small sites or single artifacts. The methodology could be described as high resolution but low density. By low density I mean that the surveyed area represents what I estimate to be a ten percent

coverage or sample of the 40 sq km region (Honeychurch, Wright and Amartuvshin 2007). A small area was targeted for 100% survey coverage so as to prove that the target area was a very low density area and not low density due to the survey methodology [Fig 1, C]. Future surveys would be done at 100% coverage, as I will discuss below. GPS coordinates, site type and surrounding environmental data have been taken to establish the context of a site. Site typology is similar to that of other regional surveys conducted in northern and south

central Mongolia, in order to facilitate comparison with their results (Wright 2006). Sites were also categorized by the number of features. Features are single archaeological elements which make up an archaeological site. Recording the number of surface features, those elements that are visible from the survey, can be a useful ranking tool in discriminating between larger and smaller sites.

### What are the types and kinds of sites that exist in the Tahilt region?

Both artifact-based and monument-based sites indicate that the chronology of the Tahilt



Fig 1. Overview of the survey region with smaller areas indicated. All images copyright © 2008 Hovd Archaeology Project.

region appears to be continuous from the Paleolithic, roughly 100,000 B.P. based on stone tool typology, to the Turk period (ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century CE). Evidence for specific later historic periods such as Khitan or Mongol at this time has not been detected. For this paper I designate as monumental sites those with architectural features. I include burials and/or tombs but do not limit the designation to these types: i.e., all burials are monuments, but not all monuments are burials. Since none of them have been excavated, there is no evidence of the use of the monuments. This section will address the initial auestion of the survey concerning the types and kinds of sites in the Tahilt region and give a very brief description of them.

The Paleolithic and Mesolithic component in the Tahilt region is characterized by large stone chopper and axe tool types [Fig 2] generally in the area surrounding the large spring and river fed basin [Fig 1, A], now nearly dry. The well known Tsenker cave Paleolithic site is upstream of this basin. So the location of early stone tools in this area seems to relate to the river valley.

Fig 2. Paleolithic chipped hand tools.



Fig 3. Mesolithic and Neolithic flakes blades and bladelets.

Neolithic The component is characterized by smaller blade tools and more complex tool kits (Larichev, Pforr and Chard 1962) and in the case of Tahilt would include scrapers and retouched bladelets [Fig 3]. These were generally found in close proximity to Bronze Age monuments and pottery [Fig 4], a fact which suggests that sites were used and reused over long periods of time for habitation and stone tool production.

Bronze Age sites are both artifact sites and monumental. The only pottery scatters found during the survey are from this period or are modern or historic sherds which were not collected. Since nomadic sites lack n o n - m ortuary

architectural and other extensive material remains, the pottery generally would indicate a habitation site which it is useful to distinguish from a monumental site. There are both habitation and monumental sites for the Bronze Age, but this pattern does not appear for later periods. The monumental Bronze Age site types found in the Tahilt region are khirigsuur monuments, slab



*Figs. 3, 4. Flakes and blades with associated pottery.* 

burials and other features associated with those two, such as satellite features that are characteristic of khirigsuurs. A khirigsuur is a circular pile of stones which may or may not include an interment. The khirigsuurs at Tahilt have not been excavated: so there is no measure of those with interments and those without. However, the types and kinds of features recall khirigsuurs found in Central Mongolia, and the percentage with interments is expected to be generally very small, if it exists at all (Wright 2006). The other characteristics of khirigsuurs are most often circular or square surrounds and small



*Fig 5. (above) Example of a Khirigsuur with a square surround. Fig 6. (below) Selection of Khirigsuur types and features from the Tahilt region.* 



*Fig 7. Typical panel of rock art depicting sheep, goats and/or deer.* 



could be characterized as Xionanu but mav represent another chronological period. The future excavation of these smaller cemeteries and single burials will provide more information about their relationship to the major cemetery. Outside of the major cemetery complex no other square-ramped tombs have been detected. The

satellite features and/or rectangular pavements of stone [Figs. 5, 6].

Another site type generally characterized as Bronze Age is rock art. This would include any depiction made by humans painted or pecked into the stone (Jacobson-Tepfer 2006). At Tahilt there are seven rock art sites ranging from a single panel of a single animal to multiple panels with a variety of depictions of sheep or deer, which is within normal expectations of rock art for this area [Fig 7].

The evidence for the Xiongnu and the Iron Age comes most obviously from the Tahilt cemetery (Miller et al 2008) [Fig 1 B], but in addition there are three smaller cemetery sites in the area, containing between six and twenty-seven features/burials. Furthermore there are a number of single Xiongnu burials outside of the four main cemeteries and a number of stone ring features that burials in the other cemeteries are all circular in form [Fig 8 Map; Fig 9, both, facing page].

The smallest component to the chronology of the Tahilt region comes from the Turk period with two sites including standing stones and stone lines extending from them, as is typical of *balbal* lines found in other areas of Mongolia. The construction of the standing monument includes base support stones generally square-shaped [Fig 10, facing page] and thus not



*Fig 8. Locations of three or four secondary Xiongnu cemeteries.* 

to be confused with the deer stone or Bronze Age standing stone features.

The post-Turk period in Mongolia would encompass continuous use of the landscape for 100,000 years up to the Turk period; however, the use and understanding of this landscape within the survey area differs with the culture.



Fig 9. Xiongnu burial ring from a secondary cemetery.

*Fig 10. Standing stones assumed to be from the Turk period.* 

medieval and historic periods such as Uighur, Khitan, and Mongol. No evidence of these sites or characteristic pottery from these periods (Wright forthcoming) was detected during the survey. It is possible that the sample size is limiting the finds. However, the location of Tahilt is far from the core of any of the historic empires. In addition, periods such as the Mongol might not appear, given that they are relatively short in comparison to the major periods represented at Tahilt. What the preliminary survey shows is a



#### What types of environmental or landscape features are associated with archaeological features?

The connections between specific landscape features are, at this point anecdotal. However representing them graphically in a GIS is the first step to understanding what environmental features are important to locations of archaeological elements within the landscape. In the future the types of landscape features will be systematically categorized to clarify the relationships between the archaeological record and its environment. In addition this will help better to target surveys for the future.

The first of the major environmental features of the Tahilt region are the Hovt Tsenker and Dond Tsenker rivers. These two rivers come together at the modern town of Manhan. Also at this river junction is a large site with over 40 khirigsuur monuments ranging in size from ten to thirty-five meters. So far this is the largest site in the area with some of the largest monuments. The other main feature is the high rocks that run between the two rivers. While the high rocks do not affect the overall site locations, the sites are fairly uniform over the entire survey area. The larger

sites, both Bronze Age and Xiongnu, appear at the base of the high rocks and in the dry and river valleys [Fig 11]. The large basin mentioned earlier is to the west of the Tahilt cemetery; some of the major Khirigsuur sites overlook this basin. To the south of the Tahilt cemetery is a large open valley. This area contained evidence for modern use but was almost unused in the past. A section of this area was selected for 100% total coverage survey, and only four sites were detected within that area. Understanding the relationship between major landscape features and the surrounding archaeology strengthens our understanding of each component of the chronology.

### What are the pre- and post-Xiongnu sites and how do they compare to the Xiongnu component in the archaeological landscape?

The pre-Xiongnu component to the Tahilt region is the most visible

of all the periods, with 40% of all the sites dating to the Bronze Age, not including the rock art and associated Neolithic sites. The relationship between these two periods can begin to be understood even at the preliminary stages of survey. The key difference between the Bronze Age sites and the the Xiongnu sites is that there are no artifact or visible Xiongnu habitation sites, whereas in the Bronze Age we have both, sometimes in close proximity to the monumental sites. We can understand this to mean that during the Bronze Age the landscape was understood as both a ritual and habitation area, but the Xionanu were delineating a separation between a ritual and habitation space, thus creating a less homogeneous picture than the Bronze Age perspective on space. This may be unique to the periphery or be resulting from the limitations of the survey methodology. The evidence for the ritual use of the landscape in the Bronze Age is very visible and would have

> been visible to the Xiongnu. The evidence that the landscape was previously used for habitation is and was less apparent. It is possible that this is part of the criteria the Xionanu would have used in choosing a location for the Tahilt cemetery. However comparison of other major cemetery sites and the Bronze Aae component would need to be explored before we can be certain. At Tahilt we can see the Bronze Age mark on the land, and later the Xiongnu use a section of this landscape not currently occupied with monuments for their own monuments

and ritual. These distinctions also bring out the behavioral differences between the two groups during these time periods. The khirigsuurs represent monument and ritual without burial. The Tahilt cemetery and Xiongnu burials represent a ritual and mortuary site and behaviors (Miller et al. 2008). This can also be seen for later periods, where we have evidence for two Turk standing stones but no pottery. It is understood that two sites do not represent a significant sample, but future survey will easily either confirm or deny this pattern.

## **Future surveys**

The Tahilt region is interesting archaeologically and ideal for future regional survey. However, there are some challenges of which we became aware during the preliminary stages. Full coverage survey (that is, covering 100% of the landscape) would be ideal for the Tahilt region for overcoming some of these challenges. One of the challenges of survey in the Tahilt region was the absence of artifact sites, which makes it difficult to determine with any certainty the habitation and settlement patterns for the Xiongnu and Turks. A full coverage survey would detect more sites and increase the sample size, or, if the habitation area is in fact not in the Tahilt region, full coverage survey would detect this. The same could be said for understanding the Bronze Age complexity of the region. At this point the survey indicates where sites seem to be located but is not representative of the emerging spatial and cultural complexity studied during this period (Allard and Erdenebaatar 2005; Wright 2006, 2007). Expanding the survey to include more environmental zones would also increase the likelihood of detecting nomadic habitation sites for the Bronze Age, Xiongnu and later periods.

The other aspect that would need to be considered for future



*Fig 11. Location of larger sites or those with a higher feature count.* 

surveys would be to locate source materials for lithics and pottery. Since the site locations seem to be related to certain landscape features, future surveys would also want to consider the other elements that might affect this decision-making process. In addition, source material studies have been useful in other parts of Mongolia to prove whether pottery is locally produced or brought from other regions (Honeychurch, Wright and Amartuvshin 2007). In the case of Tahilt, since the habitation record for the Xiongnu and Turks is limited and/or nonexistent, pottery sourcing could help in understanding the locations of habitation. Simultaneously surveying the palaeoenvironment would clarify the environmental landscape and provide other layers of data to consider.

The Tahilt region has the potential to answer a number of interesting research questions. One single survey or excavation is not enough to characterize an entire region, but, with continued interest in the area, a clearer picture will emerge regarding the landscape in which the Xiongnu and other cultures of Central Asia lived. The study and survey of this region will no doubt continue.

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