

Shrines and graves in the mountains of Inner Asia

A selection of photos taken for the most part during while hiking or biking in the indicated areas. The majority are from areas with Kyrgyz population (both in Kyrgyzstan and in western Xinjiang). There are a few from the Kazakh region of western Mongolia, and a few from among the Balti in Pakistan. With the exception of the images taken at Cholpon Ata (mostly petroglyphs) and Burana, where the remains date from the medieval period, these all show modern burials and shrines. The final two photos are for aficionados of the “Great Game”. Photos are all scanned from slides but for those taken in Mongolia, which have digital originals. I have reduced the image size here; large tiffs can be supplied on request. All photos taken by Daniel Waugh.

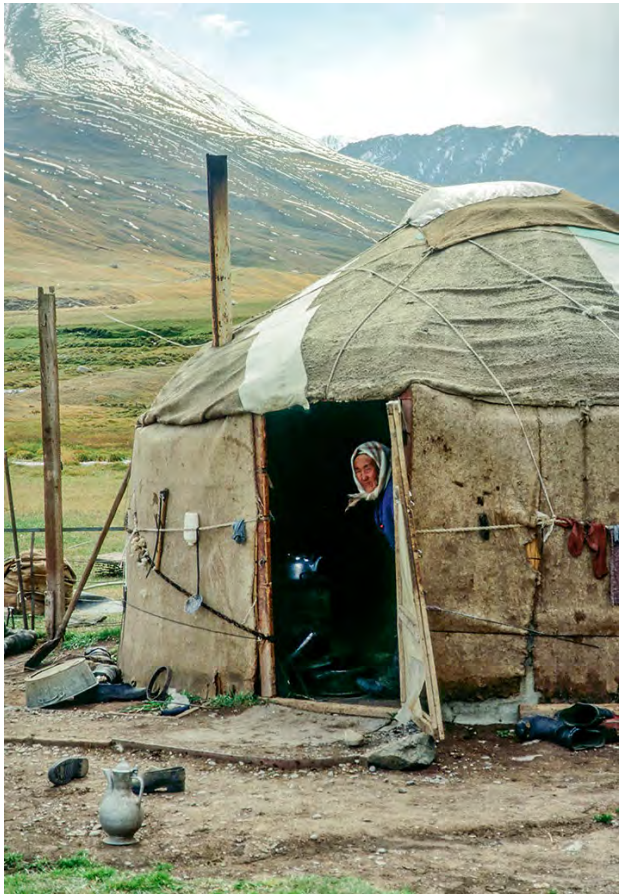
Kyrgyzstan. Ala Archa valley, mountains south of Bishkek. 1996.

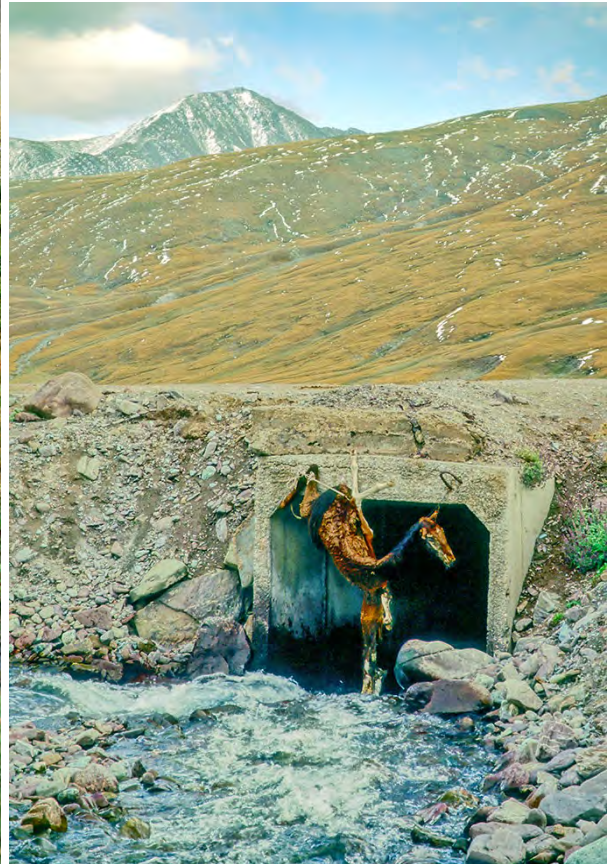
It is common to mark particular locations in the local geography with “offerings” of animal carcasses, in this case a lone tree where a stream entered the main stream in the Ala Archa valley. Photo taken on a hike there in 1996. The British Mt. Kongur expedition in the 1980s south of Kashgar photographed a similarly marked tree in one of the valleys leading down into the Gez River.



Kyrgyzstan. E. Karakol Valley, 1995.

A Kyrgyz herding family, spending the summer in the pastures, the winter in a frame house in town. The yurt in many ways is traditional, but note the iron stove, and (next page), the water-powered generator used to provide some electric light in the yurt. A stack of dried dung for stove fuel was in the yard. They truck most of their gear and the animals down to their winter camp at the end of the season. Photos taken when leading an REI mountain bike trip that crossed Kyrgyzstan into Xinjiang, stopped in Kashgar, then went down the Karakorum Highway into Pakistan, ending at Gilgit.





Across from the summer camp of the herders was a culvert under the dirt road on which they had hung a sheep or goat carcass, presumably for ritual reasons.

Karavshin valley, Pamir Alai Mountains, 1999.

The upper reaches of the valley are an area of pastoralist herding in the summer. In earlier times, there were pockets of settlement lower down, including, apparently some political detention camps where the inmates may have been involved in mining. In 1999, one could see a number of indicators of the cultural changes following on the collapse of communism; in particular, evidence of the open reassertion of Islamic belief. The second picture here is an *ovo/obo*, or cairn, such as one can see in many places in Asia, marking in this case a high point along the trail and next to what were apparently a couple of graves. A bit further along, at a point where a side valley entered the main one, was a newly built mosque, next to a traditional shrine with mountain goat horns on poles and “offerings” of rocks that had been polished into unusual shapes by the stream. There also was a cramped cave under a boulder where a visitor could sleep.





The niche is the mihrab.



Upper Kengxuar River near Mt. Mustagh Ata, Xinjiang. 1996.

Photo taken on a two-and-a-half week solo (unsupported) hike in the mountains south of Kashgar. Shown here is what seemed to be a constructed “depository” for mountain goat or ibex horns on a little rise overlooking the river at a hunters’ camp. Ibex/goats over millennia were a “sacred animal” for many of the pastoralists in the mountain regions of Asia; one finds their images on pottery, and they figure in oral epic. Creating or decorating a shrine out of mountain sheep horns also common. In 1930, Gunnar Jarring photographed such a display outside the portal of the Afaq Khoja “Tomb of the Fragrant Concubine” in Kashgar (see his *Return to Kashgar*, p. 193).



On the same hike in 1996, I ascended along the Tigarmansu from the Gez River in Xinjiang, the area one of Kyrgyz settlement in winter villages and at summer camps scattered higher in the mountains. In a side valley that enters the Tigramensu, I came across this shrine (below), probably a grave, marked by a yak tail on a pole, ibex horns and prayer flags. A similar one was in the wide area of the Kaying Valley further along, an area whose first European visitor was apparently the British Consul in Kashgar in the 1920s, C. P. Skrine.





The Kaying valley

Cholpon Ata, Kyrgyzstan, on the shores of Lake Issyk Kul. 1999.

An area of ancient settlement, next to the relatively warm waters of the lake and good pasturage. There is a striking group of early petroglyphs on the rocks of a slop above the lake; lying among them are a couple of early Turkic carved statues (“balbals”) which may at one time have marked graves. It is likely that somewhere near here was where the Chinese pilgrim monk Xuanzang in the 7th century met the Turk ruler. I seem to recall there have been some interesting archaeological discoveries in the area recently. The town is a resort area today, with hotels and a good many private summer homes, some of which have yurts in the courtyards for entertaining guests. When I was there in 1999, a new mosque was being built, apparently funded by the Wahhabis. The local cemetery has a mix of grave markers, some “Western” with depictions of the deceased; others with metal frames shaped like yurts or the domes of Islamic mausolea.







A cemetery on the outskirts of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. 1995.



Kozhomkul, Kyrgyzstan. 1995.

Located where the W. Karakol River enters the Susamyr (which then descends as the Kokemerren), Kozhomkul is named for a famous Kyrgyz strongman and wrestler, Kozhomkul Kara (1889-1955), who was born there. The town has a monument to him, a decaying wooden and clay structure termed his “home”, and a cemetery on the hills above in which is a decaying mausoleum where he is buried.





The "House of Kozhomkul"

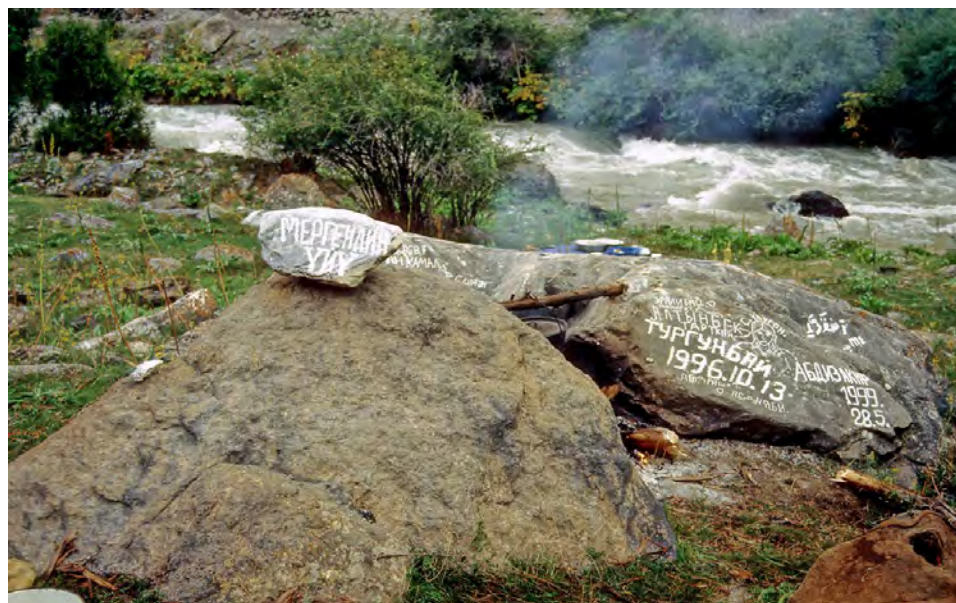




Continuing down river from Kozhomkul, one comes to a cemetery near Kizyl-oi.



In the *Pamir-Alai Mountains of Southern Kyrgyzstan*, at the confluence of the Uryam and Lailak rivers, there is a precipitous peak which is reputed to have been the last hold-out of the Basmachi who were fighting the Bolsheviks in the 1920s. At the base of the peak is what is believed to be the grave of Turdali Mergen, one of the Basmachi heroes who died there. On the near side of the Uryam (which comes in from the upper left), among the graffiti on the rocks is one reading “home of Mergen.” While the memory of the site presumably survived through the Soviet era, the open marking of it is undoubtedly post-1991. Photos taken in 1999.



Going down the Lailak, one comes to a burial site with a Muslim grave.



At Karakuli Lake south of Kashgar, along the Karakorum Highway, next to Mustagh Ata and looking across to the Kongur range, the village of Subax has a cemetery with traditional Muslim sun-dried brick mausolea. While this may be just a guess, the one grave with a rope stretched along the top possibly would be a horse burial. At least some of the Kyrgyz who live in the often substantial houses at Subax spend summers in the mountain pastures in their yurts. Karakuli Lake is a now big tourist destination, with a yurt camp, restaurant, camel rides, duck boats, etc. Photos from 1995 while on the bicycle trip that started in Kyrgyzstan and ended up in Pakistan.





There is a more modest cemetery away from the lake and road, back in to the west of the *Kengxuar River*, which flows between Mustagh Ata and Kongur. From this somewhat elevated spot, one can look across to the Kongur massif, below which (out of the picture on its right) is the location of a summer Kyrgyz camp. One wonders who or what is in the very small burials shown in the bottom photo. Photo from 1996.



The cemetery at Astore, a Balti village on the Braldu River, near where it flows out of the Baltoro Glacier, Pakistan. This is the standard route mountaineers take to reach K2 and the other 8000m peaks in the Karakorum. Balti porters, one praying at Astore; the other just finishing his prayers on the Baltoro Glacier. Peak in background may be Masherbrum. Photos taken 1994.



Western Mongolia. Kazakh Muslim cemetery Baga Oigor valley, 2005.

There are many Kazakhs in the far western part of Mongolia as one gets into the Altai Mountains. One sees both the winter camps and the summer gers, many of the latter with solar panels and satellite dishes nowadays. The pictures here near a group of winter camps were taken on the way up the Baga Oigor to one of the areas that is particularly rich in early petroglyphs. Esther Jacobson-Tepfer and colleagues have studied and published those petroglyphs as part of a major survey and documentation project in the Altai.









For medieval remains, the tower of *Burana, near Tokmak, east of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan*. A minaret from the Karakhanid period in the 12th century. There is an argument that this was the location of the capital, Balasagun. The site today also has an “open air museum” of early Turk statues, which have been moved there from various locations. And one can see the excavated foundations of what presumably were medieval Muslim mausolea. Photos taken in 1995.



The British cemetery at Gilgit, Pakistan.

Gilgit was one of the British outposts in the era of the so-called "Great Game." The often tragic fate of some of the first Europeans to venture out of the cozy confines of British India into the mountains has been fodder for dramatic tales told by authors such as Peter Hopkirk and John Keay. George Hayward was one of those who did not return. Photos taken in 1995.

