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Recovering Mongolia's Past

by Daniel C. Waugh

Why should we care about Mongolia? Its population is less than half that of the greater Seattle metropolitan area, and its GDP per capita places it in the bottom third of all countries in the world. Many years ago UW stopped teaching Mongolia's national language, and only episodically have we had courses on its history. It is only by a stroke of good fortune that students here right now can learn something about modern Mongolian literature, a subject which is ignored almost everywhere else in American academia. Yet who has not heard of Chingis Khan and the Mongol Empire of the 13th and 14th centuries, even if largely through the prism of negative stereotypes about nomadic hordes sweeping out of the fastness of Inner Asia and destroying everything in their path? While indeed there seems to be an endless fascination with the "Mongol Hordes," as I hope to demonstrate here, in fact there is much about Mongolia's more distant and more recent past deserving of our attention. The academic study of Mongolia is very vigorous, even if not here in Seattle.

My personal fascination with Mongolia's history originates in a fairly conventional, if biased way, with my long-standing focus on pre-modern Russia. Every student of Russian history hears of the "Mongol yoke," where the Russian principalities were conquered in the 13th century and for about a century and a half were subjected to Mongol rule. Yet the stereotypes of rapacious khans somehow being responsible for Russian economic "backwardness" right down to modern times and for the establishment of the authoritarian political system under which Russians suffered need to be abandoned.¹ In fact there were positive aspects to the inclusion of the Russian principalities in the Mongol Empire's Eurasian trade zone, and it is quite clear that the Mongols had nothing to do with "cutting Russia off from the West" and thus delaying the country's "modernization." Autocracy and serfdom emerged in Russia well after the demise of the Mongol Empire.



Fig. 2. Ritually broken fragments of a Chinese Han Dynasty bronze mirror



Fig. 1. The author at work in a Xiongnu grave. Among the grave goods he is photographing are a bronze cauldron and the remains of a Chinese lacquerware bowl. (© 2005 Charlotte Green Waugh)

As I developed an interest in the historic Silk Roads across Eurasia, opportunities arose to experience first-hand the explorations of the more distant past of Mongolia, whose inhabitants, as it turns out, played a significant role in Inner Asian history long before the era of Chingis Khan. The Bronze and early Iron Age archaeology of Mongolia is one of the most vigorous of academic fields today because of what we are learning that throws light on broader trends in the early history of Eurasian pastoralists and because of the increasingly sophisticated methodologies which are enabling us to locate and date sites of even temporary settlement and explore their relationship to the surrounding landscapes. While the conclusions do not, of course, derive solely from the study of Mongolia, we are being forced to revise what we thought we knew about "nomadism," and to reinterpret "nomadic" societies as ones occupying a continuum between total mobility and permanent settlement.² The study

excavated in a Xiongnu grave. (© 2005 Daniel C. Waugh)

of the rich archaeological evidence in the Altai Mountains (which extend from parts of northern Xinjiang (China) and south-central Siberia across into Mongolia) shows affinities among the cultures of a vast swath of Inner Asia in centuries well prior to the formation of the first significant inner Asian empire, that of the Xiongnu (ca. 2nd century BCE—ca. 2nd century CE). The evidence is of various kinds — petroglyphs, ritual standing stones and mounds, graves. How rich this archaeological landscape is has been documented by a number of major survey projects in recent years, one of the most important ones centered at the University of Oregon.³

As we move into what we might term the historic period (when we have written sources to correlate with the archaeological evidence), we learn that Mongolia was the heartland of the Xiongnu and the later empires of the Turks and early Uighurs (6th–9th centuries). All of these extended their power far to the west and played a significant role in the history of northern China. Conventional histories of the Silk Road date the beginning of that long international route of exchange to the interreaction between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu. Excavate almost any Xiongnu elite grave in Mongolia [Figs. 1, 2] or Buriatia today and you find inevitably Chinese bronze mirrors and lacquerware, an occasional Chinese chariot, and even, where the soil conditions are right, exquisite examples of Chinese embroidered silk.⁴ As our knowledge of these northern “nomads” has grown in recent years, we have had to revise our view of the Chinese Great Wall as marking a sharp divide between the “civilized” and the “barbarian.” This new interpretive stance has significant implications for our understanding of the borderlands of China in later periods as well.

We are fortunate that it is still possible here at UW to learn about the famous Orkhon Turkic texts, among the earliest examples of the written Turkic language, inscribed in the 8th century on stone steles in runic characters and marking the memorial sites for the Turkic Qaghans in the Orkhon River valley of north central Mongolia [Fig. 3].⁵ Here for the first time we have in writing what would seem to be the thoughts of the indigenous peoples of the region — that is we are not relying here on what biased outsiders tell us about them. The Turkic rulers warn their people against accepting sedentary ways and being seduced by Chinese luxuries.



Fig. 3. A detail of one of the Orkhon Turkic inscriptions. (© 2005 Daniel C. Waugh)



Fig. 4. A small part of the vast ruins of the Uighur capital Khar Balgas. (© 2005 Daniel C. Waugh)

Yet one of the striking facts about the history of early Mongolia is the extent to which in various periods there were settled centers, many surrounded by substantial walls, and some containing houses and evidence of craft manufacture and agriculture. One of the largest and best preserved of these sites is that of Khar Balgas [Fig. 4], the Uighur capital located not far from the somewhat earlier site of the Orkhon inscriptions and the later site of the Mongol Empire capital, Karakorum. When the Abbasid caliph sent an embassy to the Uighurs in the early 9th century, he traveled all the way to Khar Balgas and was very impressed by the size and prosperity of this “city in the steppe.”

Of course we might well ask how such “cities”

related to the nomadic polities in which they were found. The Xiongnu, Turks, and at least the early Uighurs probably in the first instance relied on their herds and moved on a regular seasonal basis. It is unlikely that they took up permanent residence in a town. The same seems to have been the case for the Chingizid khans in the 13th century even after the establishment of Karakorum as their capital some 25 km. south of Khar Balgas. Recent archaeological work is revealing more about the circuits of the movement of the nomadic rulers and their courts. Yet even as famous a site as Karakorum is still little known, despite major archaeological investigations. What was once thought to be the palace of the Chingizid khans there apparently was from its beginnings a Buddhist temple [Fig. 5]; we still are not quite sure that we have located the remains of the palace. The palace in any event was at best a place for



Fig. 5. Looking across the remains of the Buddhist temple (once considered to have been the palace) at the Mongol empire capital of Karakorum. In the distance are the walls of the Erdeni Tzu Monastery. (© 2005 Daniel C. Waugh)

occasional ceremonies, not for the khan's residence. To a considerable degree the towns were probably for merchants and craftsmen, many of them conscripted, who supplied the Mongol elite. Even after Quibilai Khan moved the Mongol capital to Beijing (Dadu) in the 1260s, he seems to have spent much of his year on a circuit between that "southern capital" and Shangdu, the northern, summer one in the steppes of Inner Mongolia. A huge site, Shangdu (the romanticized Xanadu of Coleridge's poem) is only now beginning to see serious excavation [Fig. 6].

Just as there is still much to learn about this early and important history of Mongolia, so also is there much to be learned from the study of Mongolia's recent past. Not the least of the challenges with the one and the other is the matter of preservation. Over time, rock carvings erode or are defaced; some of them disappear from the landscape when they are stolen for sale to private collectors. Road construction crews (insofar as there is road construction in the vast empty spaces of Mongolia) may find it convenient to dismantle three-thousand-year-old stone mounds simply because they are a convenient source of building material. And the phenomenon of grave robbing is both an ancient and a modern one. Even legally authorized excavations of Mongolian sites, when carried out by what are now considered to be obsolete methods, may barely rise above the level of looting in that they destroy, rather than preserve, valuable evidence.



Fig. 6. Excavations of the palace at Shangdu in 2009. (© 2009 Daniel C. Waugh)

One of the great tragedies of Mongolia's modern history was the nearly complete destruction of its Buddhist culture by the Communist authorities in the 1930s. Buddhism was probably known in Mongolia as early as the time of the Uighurs. Under the Mongol khans of the 13th century, there was cultivation of Tibetan Buddhism, although one should not think of it then as a "state religion," since the khans were at least somewhat tolerant of various faiths, among them eastern Christianity. In the late 16th and 17th centuries though, ties with Tibetan Buddhism were strengthened, and what we might term a theocratic state emerged. The landscape became populated with temples and monasteries, and a sizeable percentage of the male population became monks.

With the consolidation of Communist rule in the 1920s, systematic persecution of religion began, culminating in the execution of the most important monks, the forced secularization of the others and the destruction of most of the temples and monasteries. It is only in the last 20 years with the end of communism that a significant Buddhist revival has begun, one handicapped by the almost total break that had occurred with earlier traditions. There are now serious efforts to re-establish monastic discipline and Buddhist education, though with still uneven success. Simply documenting the Buddhist past of Mongolia has been a major challenge, as the last of the old monks who somehow survived the purges and are the living memory of that culture are dying.⁶

To a degree, the challenges of resurrecting Mongolian Buddhism are the same challenges faced in many countries whose economies still have not recovered from Communism and whose younger population may find more attractive the easy lures of "western" culture. There is in fact much to be learned by studying the post-communist experience in Mongolia, where surprisingly vigorous roots of a democratic political system have been established, but where the country at the same time experienced some of the economic hardships inflicted by well-meaning if misguided attempts to introduce economic "shock therapy."⁷ Whether Mongolia's economic future will be hostage to rapacious foreign exploiters of the country's rich mineral resources remains to be seen.

Of considerable interest for those studying the construction of national identity is the cult of Chingis Khan in Mongolia, which brings together at least a mythologized version of the distant past and the aspirations of those who would hope for a better future.⁸ Despite some official effort to control the phenomenon, Chingis has become a brand name for everything from banking to beer [Fig. 7]. It is hard to imagine any time in the future the re-emergence of a Chingizid empire, but it is more than disturbing to learn how for many young Mongols there seems little reason to condemn modern tyrants such as Hitler or Stalin, who in this view embody the best qualities of the quintessentially strong national hero who at one time sought to rule the world. Unlike in Russia, where Stalinist nostalgia is largely the province of the old who have suffered through the transition, in Mongolia the appeal of this kind of thinking spreads as well to the younger generation. One can only hope that those who invoke the rich history of Mongolia will do so with some real understanding of what it involved.



Fig. 7. Savoring the pleasures of Chingis beer in Ulaanbaatar. (© 2004 Daniel C. Waugh)

Before his retirement in 2006 UW Professor Emeritus Daniel Waugh, a specialist on the history of pre-modern Russia, taught as well courses on *The Silk Road* and on the *History of Mongolia*. He edits the Silkroad Foundation's journal, *The Silk Road*, and is currently working on a book about the Silk Road with the support of a Mellon Emeritus Fellowship. He may be contacted at dwaugh@u.washington.edu.

1. See my essay, "The Golden Horde and Russia," in *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire*, ed. William W. Fitzhugh, Morris Rossabi, and William Honeychurch (Santa Barbara, CA: Perpetua Press, 2009): 172-179. This book provides a well-illustrated and authoritative introduction to its subject.
2. For an examination of some of the recent literature, see my "Paths Less Trodden," *The Silk Road* 7 (2009): 3-8. This journal is available on-line at <http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/toc/newsletter.html>.
3. Information may be found on the project's excellent website, 'Archaeology and Landscape in the Altai Mountains of Mongolia' <http://img.uoregon.edu/mongolian/index.php>.
4. On the Xiongnu period excavations in which the author participated, see several articles in *The Silk Road* 4/1 (2006) and 5/2 (2008), available on-line at the Silkroad Foundation website.
5. A valuable resource for learning about the Turkic sites and their inscriptions is "Türk bitig" <http://irg.kaznpu.kz/?lang=e>, accessible in Kazakh, English and Russian.
6. See the website "Mongolyn Sum Khiidiin Tuukhen Tovchoo Tosol/Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries" <http://www.mongoliantemples.net/en/> in English and Mongolian. On the modern and recent history of Mongolian Buddhism, see Vesna A. Wallace, "Mediating the Power of Dharma: The Mongols' Approaches to Reviving Buddhism in Mongolia," *The Silk Road* 6/1 (2008): 44-53; Zsuzsa Majer and Krisztina Teleki, "Buddhism in Mongolia Today," *The Silk Road* 7 (2009): 51-73.
7. For a very critical analysis of the impact of "shock therapy" see the book by the noted scholar of early Mongol history, Morris Rossabi, *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 2005).
8. See Nomin Lkhagvasuren, "Today's Genghis Khan: From Hero to Outcast to Hero Again," in *Genghis Khan*, pp. 283-287.



The Ellison Center REECAS Program
Box 353650
203B Thomson Hall Seattle, WA 98195-3650
(206) 543-4852 phone
(206) 685-0668 fax
reecas@u.washington.edu

CONTACTS

James Augerot, *Director and Program Chair*
bigjim@u.washington.edu

Marta B. Mikkelsen, *Associate Director*
martam@u.washington.edu

Allison Dvaladze, *Assistant Director for Outreach*
dvaladze@u.washington.edu

Carrie O'Donoghue, *Program Coordinator and Treadgold Managing Editor*
codonogh@u.washington.edu

Julia Hon, *Newsletter Editor*
reecasnl@u.washington.edu

Seth Mahoney, *Outreach and Website Assistant*
ecweb@u.washington.edu

Laada Bilaniuk, *Editor, Treadgold Papers*
bilaniuk@u.washington.edu

REECAS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

James Augerot, *Ellison Center Director and Chair; Professor*
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