*Xiong*News: Fourscore Years Since the First Excavations at Noyon uul

Even though the beginnings of Xiongnu archaeology date to the end of the 19th century with the work of Iu. D. Tal'ko–Gryntsevich, it was the excavations at Noyon uul in north central Mongolia in the 1920s which really put the Xiongnu on the map. As the recent international conference on Xiongnu archaeology and publication of its papers highlighted, huge advances have been made especially in recent decades. The first book reviewed here celebrates the opening of a new era of excavation at Noyon uul, and the second book is the catalogue for the most important exhibition mounted to date of Xiongnu artifacts.

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Nataliia V. Polos'mak, Evgenii S. Bogdanov, Damdinsüren Tseveendorzh. *Dvadtsatyi Noin-ulinskii kurgan /The Twentieth Noyon uul Tumulus*. Novosibirsk: "Infolio," 2011. 184 pp. ISBN 978-5-905727-01-6.

This large-format, lavishly illustrated volume is the most extensive report to date on the results of the remarkable single–season complete exavation of Tomb No. 20 in the Sutszukte Valley of Noyon uul in Mongolia in 2006. One can be thankful that Nataliia Polos'mak, of "Siberian Ice Princess" fame, has found a new focus for her energies, after Altai nationalists succeeded in preventing her from continuing her work in the frozen tombs of the Ukok Plateau. She was the co-director of the joint Russian–Mongolian expedition at Noyon uul and has since excavated another of the major Xiongnu burials there.

The cemeteries at Noyon uul were what first really brought Xiongnu archaeology to world attention. Discovered in 1912 by a mining engineer Andrei Ballod, who undertook an amateurish dig in one of the largest tombs, the cemeteries were then mapped and more serious excavation undertaken by members of the expedition headed by the well-known Russian explorer Petr Kozlov in 1924–5. The spectacular discoveries of the 1920s formed the basis of an important Noyon uul collection better known from the portion deposited in the Hermitage Museum than from that in the National Museum of Mongolia. The most complete discussion and analysis of those early excavations and their artifacts is still the monograph by Sergei I. Rudenko, published in 1962 and subsequently translated into German.[1]

Since there has been substantial criticism in recent times regarding the methodologies of the Kozlov expedition (the blame being directed at Kozlov himself), one of the important contributions of the book under review here is the opening essay by T. I. Iusupova, which attempts to set the record straight. She draws on Russian archival materials to show how Ballod's initial attempt to draw serious attention to Noyon uul largely fell on deaf ears, and how Kozlov's decision to undertake excavations was in effect unplanned, made at the moment when his expedition had officially been recalled due to accusations made against him for supposed White (anti-Bolshevik) leanings. He did not have a trained archaeologist on his staff, but when the first discoveries became known, he readily accepted the assignment of archaeologists for the second season of digging. Academic rivalries affected support for the excavations and continued once conservation work was underway in Leningrad, with the Russian Museum and the Hermitage vying to see which would house the artifacts. Presumably there will be further information forthcoming soon on this early history of the Hermitage collection, whose re-mounted exhibit is about to re-open and is the subject of what should finally be a properly detailed catalogue, compiled by Sergei Miniaev and Iuliia Elikhina.

Iusupova's essay is nicely illustrated with archival photos, though it is perhaps telling that so many of them are formally posed portraits of expedition members and so few actually show any of the excavation work. Nonetheless, we can enjoy the lovely portrait of Kozlov and his wife that was taken in 1912 and a photo of Roy Chapman Andrews and Kozlov from September 1924. To promote news of what was being accomplished, Kozlov had invited the American to visit the excavation. Back row center in another of these photos, depicting the Scientific Committee of Mongolia in 1926, is a young Nicholas Poppe, who would become a famous if somewhat controversial specialist on Mongolian philology. While he managed to continue his career in the United States after World War II, some of the Russian specialists who worked on

the Noyon uul materials fell victim to Stalin's purges, which then delayed publication of the material.

The description of the new excavation begins then only some 50 pages into the book, the essay of Ch. 2 devoted to a formal description of the tomb structure and illustrated with an extensive set of photographs and drawings showing details of the various levels and the complex stone and wooden structures. This was the first tomb at Noyon uul to have been completedly excavated with modern methods. The bottom of the tomb was some 18 meters down, the deepest of all the Noyon uul burials excavated to date. The tomb structure is quite similar to that of a number of other Xiongnu square ramped tombs, ones which, as this essay emphasizes, seem clearly to follow models of Han Chinese elite burials. The date of the tomb would seem to be early first century CE (a dated lacquer cup of 9 CE provides a *terminus a quo*). At a number of places in the discussion, the authors here indicate some disagreement with analysis by Sergei Miniaev based on his excavations in Buriatiia — for example, they (and, one might note, other scholars) do not accept his idea about Xiongnu satellite burials being sacrificial ones. This, however, is a minor point made in passing (no satellite burials were involved here); in general the results of the excavations both by Miniaev and by Prokopii Konovalov provide important analogues to what was uncovered in Tomb 20.

While the tomb had been robbed in antiquity, a looter's hole having been dug directly down into the center of the burial chamber, and then the double wooden chamber having collapsed, a great many artefacts remained. Of the corpse itself only some teeth survived, on the basis of which it was determined the deceased had probably been a young woman of an anthropological type found in the Caucasus and northwestern India. The hypothesis here is that she may have been a wife of a Xiongnu ruler.

The focus in the description of the artefacts is on the metal plaques which decorated horse harness that presumably had been hung on the walls of the outer burial chamber and on the lacquered objects. The former include gilded iron browband deocrations for bridles and a good many silver breast band and crouper decorations with depictions of fantastic animals (notably unicorns). The lengthy, and I think persuasive, analysis of these silver objects (which are similar to ones found in other Xiongnu burials) concludes that they are all the work of Chinese craftsmen and must have been imports, likely gifts to the Xiongnu ruler.

The unique metal objects found in the tomb are two round silver phalars (that is, breast plates attached to horse harness), one without decoration but of a type known from the Roman world, the other and more interesting one with relief imagery derived ultimately from Hellenisitic art. It seems likely that the latter plaque originally may have served another decorative purpose and then was re-cycled as a phalar. The discussion here situates its depiction on a broad canvas of Hellenistic imagery that then was copied and often re-worked in the Roman period. While the style can be related to the school of Pergamon, such objects were being made in Parthia and Bactria. The essay here argues that the depiction is that of Artemis, warding off the attentions of a satyr, with a curious herm (pillar decorated with a human head but also an erect phallus) off to one side. The imagery then is a kind of composite, for which no exact parallel is currently known. The essay on this remarkable piece concludes with some rather imaginative speculation about how the object might have been carried by the Roman soldiers who were supposedly part of a Xiongnu force defeated on the Talas River and taken off as captives to China. Homer Hasenpflug Dubs's vividly imagined lost Roman legion marches on. In this argument then, the relief silver disk might have come to the Xiongnu in Mongolia as part of a gift of rare objects sent by the Chinese emperor. At very least the possible Parthian (Bactrian?) connections would seem to fit with what is known about the textiles in some of the Xiongnu elite tombs (see, *inter alia*, the article by Sergey Yatsenko elsewhere in this volume of *The Silk Road*).

Among the lacquered objects in the tomb, the most striking is the remains of a light chariot, from which the ribs of its parasol, a part of its basket, and parts of its wheels have been preserved. Of course this is not a unique find, as dismantled Chinese chariots have been uncovered in other Xiongnu elite burials, and we know from the Chinese annals that they were among the gifts sent to the Xiongnu from the Chinese court. The extent of preservation of the parasol here and parts of the chariot basket is impressive. Fragments of leather and cloth remain from where the covering of the parasol was attached to its frame. A sizeable section of one side of the chariot basket shows the cross-hatched decorative appearance created by scoring the lacquer.

Not surprisingly, the other lacquered objects in the tomb included eared cups, two of which have inscriptions indicating they had been made in one of the Imperial workshops in Chang'an. One of the inscriptions has the date 9 CE.[2] Unique in this burial are a lacquered case made to enclose a long lock of human hair, and a wooden fish, decorated with actual fish skin under the lacquer. Fish-shaped "envelopes" for messages written on silk scrolls are known from

Han burials, though whether there was any real functionality of the object in the Xiongnu tomb is not clear.

Appendices to the book detail technical analysis of the metal artefacts, the lacquer and the textiles, although for the last of these the book otherwise provides only rather scanty information and somewhat unsatisfactory images. The technical details derived from microphotography and various kinds of spectral analysis include chemical composition and, for the textiles at least the names of the dyes. The work on the lacquer is of particular interest, since it explores the structure and the exact techniques of its creation and reveals that composition of its raw materials is not that most commonly found in Chinese lacquerware. The appendices are illustrated with graphs of the spectral analysis and a good many microphotographs. As the authors emphasize, the challenges posed by conservation and technical analysis of the objects provided the stimulus to bring together a multi-disciplinary team of specialists, who worked to develop new techinques that may be applied in the future.[3]

An informative two-page English abstract of the book emphasizes the conclusion that "virtually the entire rich content of these [royal Xiongnu] burials was borrowed from other peoples and cultures. The graves of high-born Xiongnu are filled with things mainly made in the Han China and Parthia, as well as in Roman provinces" (p. 181). This includes the horse harness, jade objects (hardly discussed otherwise in the book), and lacquerware (including the apparent lacquering of the exterior walls of the coffin). The fabrics also all seem to have been imported. The authors leave open the question of how we might interpret the role of borrowing and borrowed objects, beyond the obvious fact that they formed such a significant component in burial rituals.

Reports of any substance on excavations often have taken decades to appear in print or languish unpublished in the archives. While what we have here, published with admirable speed, makes no pretense to be a full report on the excavation of this tomb, it nonethless provides an immense amount of valuable detail. To a degree one will want to supplement the book with some of the material that has appeared in separate publications: for example, a good many of the finds are depicted (sometimes with different detail) in the *Treasures of the Xiongnu* exhibition book described below. For those who do not read Russian, an article in English by Polos'mak et al. provides a good summary of the decorative details, the basic construction technique, and the inscriptions on the lacquer cups.[4] Various articles by Iusupova anticipate her essay here about the early history of the Noyon uul excavations. Details of the analysis of the teeth from the deceased are to be found in a separate article. References may be found in this book's bibliography.

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Khunnugiin öv. Nuudelchdiin ankhny tör – Khunnu gurnii soël / Treasures ot the Xiongnu. Culture of Xiongnu, the first Nomadic Empire in Mongolia, ed. G. Eregzen. Ulaanbaatar: ShUA-iin Arkheologiin khureelen; Mongolyn Undesnii muzei, 2011. 296 pp. ISBN 978-99962-55-97-x.

This exhibition catalogue for the commemoration of the 2220th anniversary of the establishment of the Xiongnu Empire is valuable above all for its rich and high-quality photographic documentation of excavations and objects. While there are illustrations of familiar material from the early excavations at Noyon uul back in the 1920s, much of interest here comes from work of recent years, some of it as yet otherwise not published or properly analyzed in print.[5] Among the more spectacular recent finds are embroidered textiles from Noyon uul, shown in their restored form for the first time at this exhibition in 2011. (Some of them are analyzed by Sergey Yatsenko in the current issue of this journal.) There are short essays by leading Mongolian archaeologists introducing the various sections. After a brief introduction on history and territory, the material is grouped under headings that include tombs, settlements, rock art, and various objects of material culture such as clothing, pottery, textiles.... Essays and all the captions are in both Mongolian and English. Rich as this collection is, one might regret that the organizers of the event confined themselves to displaying only that which was excavated within the boundaries of today's Mongolia. It would have been of some interest to compare finds made on the other side of current international borders, especially since the wider territory would have better represented that which was occupied by the "first nomadic empire" (whose theoretical extent is shown on the nice color map on p. 25).[6]

Notes

1. S. I. Rudenko. *Kul'tura khunnov i noinulinskie kurgany*. Moscow-Leningrad: Izd'vo. AN SSSR, 1962.

2. Oddly, missing from the bibliography here is the article by Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, "Chinese Lacquerware from Noyon uul: Some Problems of Manufacturing and Distribution," *The Silk Road* 7 (2009): 31-41, even though the immediately preceding article by Miniaev and Elikhina on the chronology of the Noyon uul barrows is cited.

3. Anticipating this multidisciplinary work in Novosibirsk was the project focusing on the analysis of textiles from the Altai burials which produced the important volume by Polos'mak and many collaborators, *Tekstil' iz 'zamerzshikh' mogil Gornogo Altaia IV-III vv. do n.e. (opyt mezhdistsiplinarnogo issledovaniia)* (Novosibirsk: Izd-vo. Sibirskogo otdeleniia RAN, 2006).:

4. Natal'ia V. Polos'mak et al. "Lacquer Ear-Cups from Burial Mound 20 in Noyon uul." In: *Xiongnu Archaeology. Multidisciplinary Perspectives of the First Steppe Empire in Inner Asia*. Ed. Ursula Brosseder and Bryan K. Miller. Bonn: Vor- und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2011: 327–32.

5. Among the excavations from which material is illustrated are ones co-sponsored by the Silkroad Foundation at Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu in 2005, Tahiltin-hotgor in 2007, and Shombuuziin-belchir in 2008, reported in *The Silk Road* 4/1 (2006), 5/2 (2008) and 7 (2009), and concerning whose finds several additional articles have been published in this journal.

6. See, for example, the articles by Sergei Miniaev and Lidiia Sakharovskaia on the Tsaram excavation in Buriatiia in *The Silk Road* 4/1 (2006) and 5/1 (2007).