

VEHICLES OF THE STEPPE ELITE: CHARIOTS AND CARTS IN XIONGNU TOMBS¹

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Exquisite Chinese chariots of the Han empire have been found overtop many of the chambers of lavishly furnished aristocratic tombs of the Xiongnu empire (Yerööl-Erdene and Gantulga 2007). Archaeologists have equated their interment to an adoption of Chinese funerary traditions (Polosmak et al. 2008, p. 69), and historians have lumped the remains of these chariots with other luxuries from China as evidence of the “Sinicization” of the Xiongnu elite (Yü 1967, p. 209). However, evidence from some of the more well-preserved standard tombs of the Xiongnu clearly demonstrates an existing practice of interring the remains of wooden vehicles overtop the containment of the deceased – a practice into which the Chinese chariots were likely incorporated. In this paper, I present both historical and archaeological evidence for established vehicle traditions among the Xiongnu, most especially their interment in graves, that exotic Chinese chariots augmented and elaborated without necessarily altering the practices with which they were associated.

Vehicles of the Xiongnu

Ample evidence exists in stone carved art of Mongolia from the preceding Bronze Age for the use of chariots

Fig. 1. Etched drawings of covered carts on birch-bark containers from graves 79 and 51, Burkhan Tolgoi (After: Törbat et al. 2003).

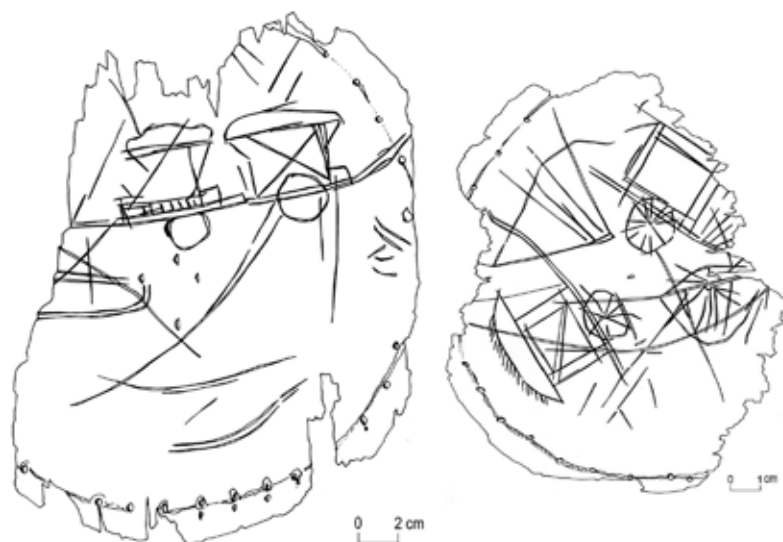


Fig. 2. Tents and carts on birch-bark container, Tomb 7, Tsaram (After: Miniaev and Sakharovskaia 2007b, Fig.11).

in the steppes (Volkov 1967; Jacobson-Tepfer 2012), but horse drawn two-wheeled vehicles were certainly not the only vehicle employed by steppe peoples. Artistic renderings and historical narratives illustrate a variety of vehicles and wooden structures used by the Xiongnu nomads. The Chinese depiction of steppe vehicles not surprisingly paints an unsophisticated picture. “Xiongnu vehicles are without silver, gold, threads or lacquer ornamentation; simple [so as] to be practical and strong” (匈奴車器無銀黃絲漆之飾素成而務堅) (Yantie lun 52). Drawings of two-wheeled vehicles on birch-bark containers of the Xiongnu show covered vehicles with a structure mounted on the wheels and yoke apparatus (Fig. 1). While these may be representations of the more elaborate vehicles, as opposed to the “practical” carts for everyday hauling or seasonal migrations, they nonetheless attest to something a bit more complex than what is described by the Chinese chroniclers.

The Xiongnu also had “domed huts for homes” (穹廬為家室) (Yantie lun 38) and “woven branches to make houses” (織柳為室) (Yantie lun 52). Such trellised structures are depicted as well by drawings etched on birch-bark containers, and are even shown mounted on wheels as a sort of tent-cart with waving banners (Fig. 2). It is thus clear that a variety of vehicles were used by the Xiongnu, only some of which were simple carts while others were more complex covered wagons or moveable houses. In addition to this collection of artistic and historical evidence for vehicle traditions of the Xiongnu, recent archaeological excava-

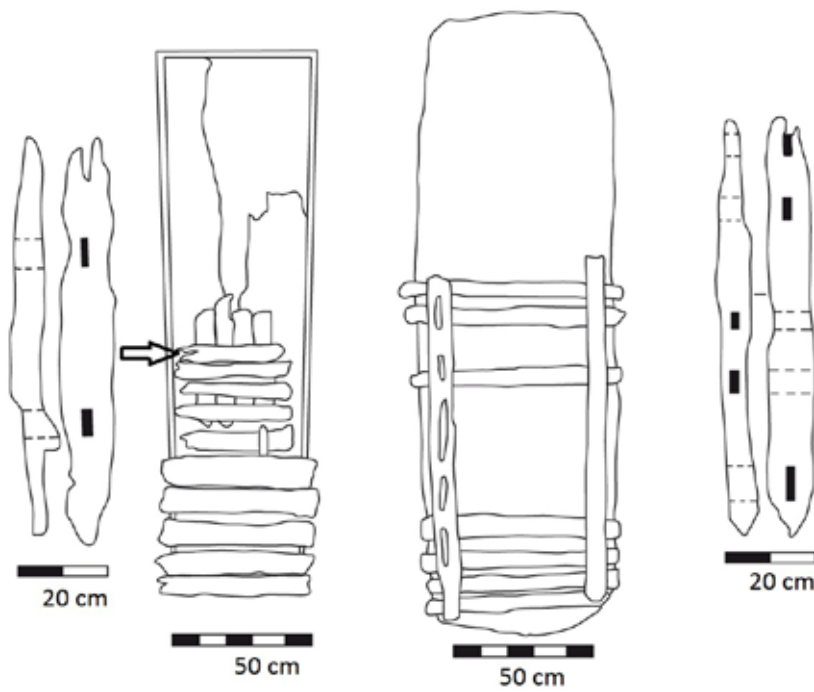


Fig. 3. Wood beams over coffins of graves 3,8,1 at Tevsh Uul (After: Tseveendorj 1985, figs.15,4,11).

tions provide data for the incorporation of vehicles in mortuary rites.²

Wooden Carts in Standard Xiongnu Graves

Broken wooden beams laid overtop the coffins of standard Xiongnu graves were first recognized as cart pieces by archaeologists working at the site of Tevsh

Fig. 4. Wood beams over coffin of grave 2 at Tevsh Uul, and reconstruction of cart (After: Tseveendorj 1985, fig.13).



Uul, Bogd sum, Övörkhangaï aimag in the Gobi regions of southwestern Mongolia (Tseveendorj 1985).³ Seven graves in the cemetery contained an array of wooden beams – laid length-wise, width-wise, or both – overtop wood plank coffins (Fig. 3). Many of the wood pieces had rectangular holes carved through them, but their broken condition, placement over the coffin, and lack of accompanying wood pieces slotted into the holes indicated that the beams were most likely not made for structural fittings of a burial chamber. Several beams in these graves had holes through two directions, further indicating the use of these beams in a construction previous to the burial. Archaeologists working at Tevsh Uul reconstructed the beams over the coffin in grave

2 as a simple framework of short planks between two longer planks (Fig. 4). This framework resembles the flat bed portion of two wheeled carts still used by herders in Mongolia (Fig. 5). In addition, some of the pieces found with holes in two directions through wooden beams (Figs. 3, 7) appear analogous to certain portions of more recent wooden carts (Fig. 6a, b).

Broken wood beams found in six out of fifteen burials recently excavated at the hinterland cemetery of Shombuuzyn Belchir (SBR) have further confirmed the presence of cart pieces in standard Xiongnu graves (Miller et al. 2009, 2011). Similar to the high degree of preservation at Tevsh Uul, the organic remains at Shombuuzyn Belchir, in the southern Altai Mountains of western Mongolia, provide rare possibilities for discerning particular characteristics of wood pieces in Xiongnu burials and hence understanding specific aspects of coffin construction and burial furnishings which archaeologists have been unable to perceive at most Xiongnu cemeteries.

Fig. 5. Wooden cart, 19th century (National Museum of Mongolia).





Fig. 6a. Wood beams and wheel (detail): wooden cart, 19th century (National Museum of Mongolia).



Fig. 6b. Wood beam joins (detail): wooden cart, 19th century (National Museum of Mongolia).

Numerous wooden beams found in these graves have particular features that are not facets of chamber construction and may be seen as indicative of previous constructions. These features include rounded ends with notches, oval ends with holes that resemble the ends of yoke beams, beams with holes through in both directions, sometimes even meeting at the center of a beam, and beams with holes still filled with the pegs of tenons (Figs. 7, 10). Comparisons to present-day lattice constructions of ger tents (similar to those depicted in Xiongnu etched drawings) and to joined beams of carts suggest a structure similar to such wooden vehicles (Figs. 5, 6a, b). While one should refrain from reconstructing the excavated beams as exact replicas of present carts, the presence of certain facets like yoke beams and the similarities between many elements of these ancient beams and portions of recent carts undeniably link these wooden pieces in the graves to some comparable type of wooden vehicles.

In addition to confirming the use of carts in burials, the findings at SBR demonstrate the inclusion of cart

Fig. 7. Wooden beam with slot holes and peg, and wooden yoke end, grave 12, Shombuuzyn Belchir.



pieces not only in the larger standard graves – with deep pits and decorated wooden coffins – but even in the most meager of interments – stone cists in shallow pits. Although wooden carts therefore appear to permeate interments of all social levels, detailed documentation of the burials at this cemetery shows slight differences in the manners of deposition of cart remains between the simpler and more elaborate graves.

Three of the eight stone cist graves found at SBR contained adult interments, and two of them included wood beams attributable to carts: graves 12 and 13 (Fig. 8). Unlike standard Xiongnu burials marked by large stone rings, these graves were marked on the surface only by small clusters of stones a couple meters in diameter. The stone cists within were constructed less than a meter and a half beneath the ground surface and were only slightly larger than the bodies they contained. In both graves a few beams were set across the tops of the stone slabs that served as the walls of the cists. Then, stone slabs that served as lids of the cists were placed overtop the wooden beams. These beams clearly did not function as the lids to these cists, yet

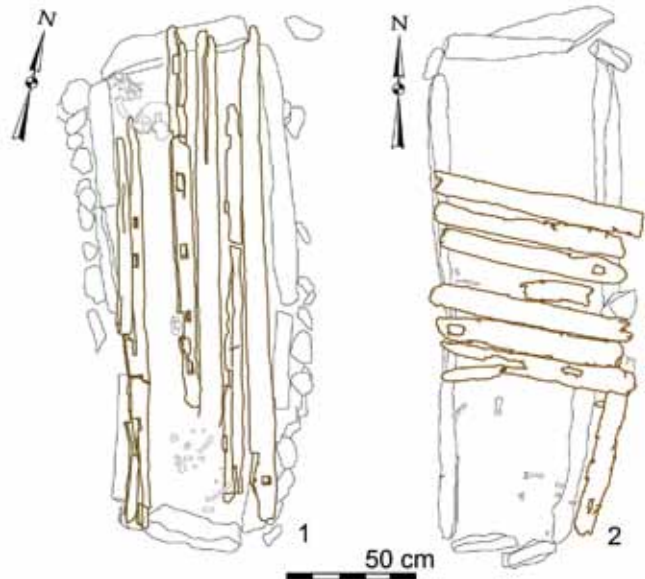


Fig. 8. Graves 12 and 13, Shombuuzyn Belchir.

Fig. 9. Grave 20, Shombuuzyn Belchir.

they were incorporated in the burial furnishings. The number of beams included in these graves, especially in grave 12, do not represent all pieces necessary for constructing wooden vehicles. In addition, since neither of these graves were looted, it is clear that only portions of deconstructed wooden vehicles were included in these burials.

More numerous pieces of wooden vehicles appear to have been placed in the deeper ring graves overtop the wooden coffins. Grave 20 contained a coffin built from small wooden slats and twigs placed almost two and a half meters below the surface. A total of fourteen wooden beams were placed overtop this coffin (Fig. 9). Although they number more than the handful of beams set in graves 12 and 13, they were laid overtop the containment of the deceased in a similar manner, with none of the beams fitted together. These wooden pieces also had holes indicative of their use in a previous construction — one beam with slots carved at both sides so that the holes met in the middle, and

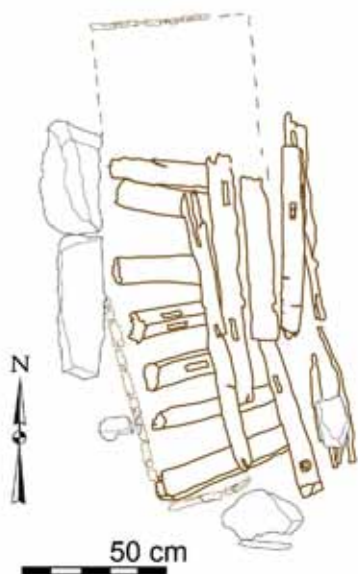
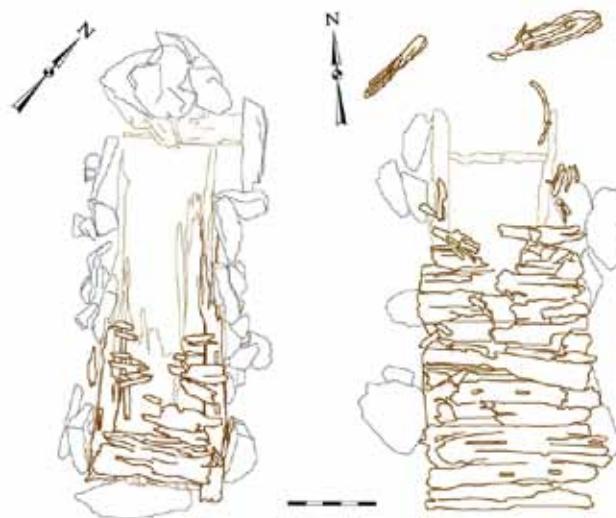


Fig. 11. Graves 15 and 16, Shombuuzyn Belchir.



another beam with one rounded end and a notch cut into it (Fig. 10). Although it is difficult to affirm the exact position of these beams in their previous construction, or the complete form of their previous structure, the close parallel to joints, notches and fittings in present-day wooden carts is strongly suggestive of vehicle construction (see Fig. 5).

The resemblance of the frame from pieces in Tevsh Uul grave 2 (Fig. 4) to the bed of a present-day wooden cart (Fig. 5) may also be seen in the complex frameworks surrounding wooden coffins in the larger of the three graves with wooden beams at SBR. These were all stone ring graves with decorated wood plank coffins made by mortis and tenon construction: grave 15 was painted with lattice patterns, grave 16 was ornamented with iron quatrefoils, and a gold foil pair of crescent moon and disc sun had been mounted to the coffin in grave 7. The former two graves had both been heavily looted, but the southern ends of the chambers contained numerous beams placed in a layer over the coffins (Fig. 11). Close analysis of the wood pieces and their positions revealed that the numerous transverse beams, some of which had rectangular holes in them, rested across longer beams alongside the east and west walls of the coffins

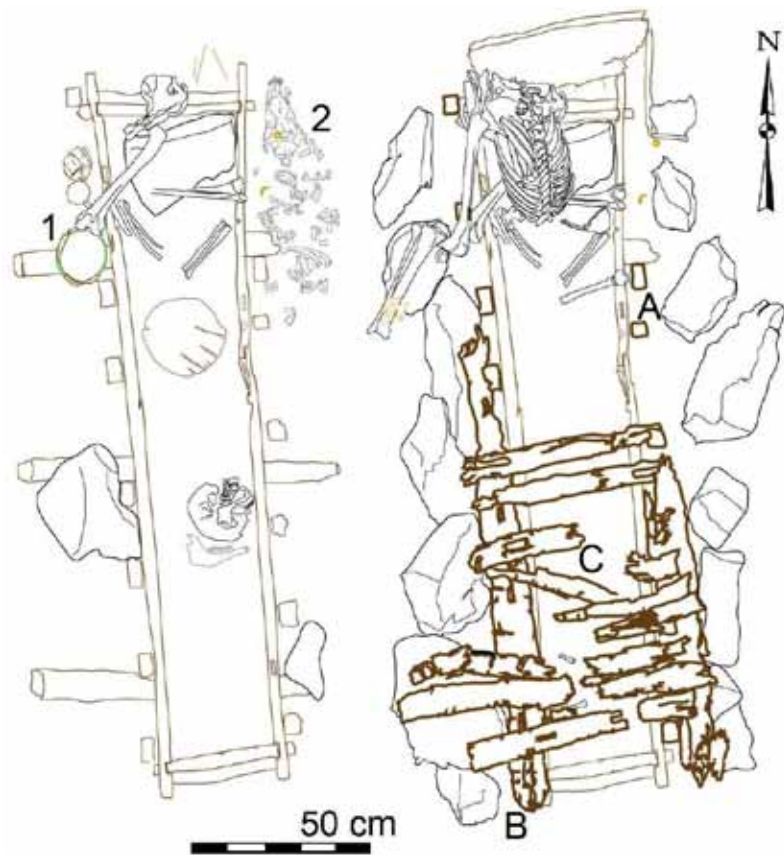


Fig. 10. Wooden beams with notches and slot holes (marked by arrows) laid over coffin, grave 20, Shombuuzyn Belchir.

Fig. 12. Grave 7, Shombuuzyn Belchir: (1) Bronze cauldron containing sheep/goat vertebrae, (2) sheep/goat skull, ribs, vertebrae and phalanges; (A) wooden posts, (B) wooden side beams, (C) wooden cross beams.

rather than directly overtop the plank lids of the coffins. A series of slots in the long side beams showed remains of small wooden posts that fitted in these holes and held the long beams up along either side of the coffins.

The best example of this skeleton structure of recycled cart pieces was found in grave 7 (Fig. 12). Despite the interior of the coffin having been mostly emptied by robbers, the coffin structure and the materials around it remained undisturbed. Careful excavation documented three basic components of the structure that surrounded the coffin of the deceased and the offerings laid beside it: (a) wooden support posts, (b) wooden side beams, and (c) wooden cross beams. In addition to numerous artifacts that would have adorned the deceased and been placed within the coffin, some offerings were placed directly against the coffin walls on either side. These included animal parts representing the offering of at least one caprid (sheep/goat) placed outside the northern end of the east wall, as well as a round birch-bark container with two sheep/goat vertebrae, a wooden ladle, and a bronze cauldron covered with animal skin that con-



tained additional sheep/goat vertebrae all against the northern end of the west wall. These animal remains and accoutrements were interred as part of the funeral ceremonies, for which the cart would have been dismantled and rebuilt overtop the coffin.

The posts, numbering eight on each side, were set approximately 15–20 cm apart and measured about 6 cm wide (Fig. 13). The post at the southeast corner of the grave, though, was larger than the others and had two holes similar to cross beams found in many burials. The two long beams were fitted onto the posts through a series of holes (Fig. 14), creating a structure resembling an open slat bed of a basic cart (see Fig.

Fig. 14. Wood posts and side beam next to coffin: east side, south end of grave 7, Shombuuzyn Belchir.



Fig. 13. Wood posts next to coffin: west side, south end of grave 7, Shombuuzyn Belchir.



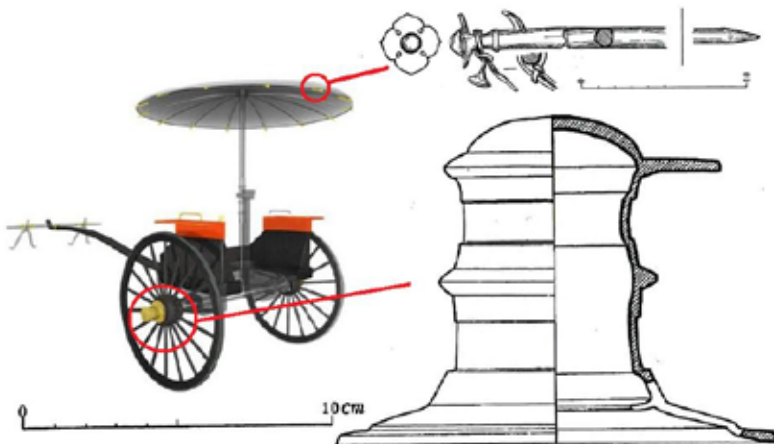
Fig. 15. Wood side beams and cross beams over coffin: south view of grave 7, Shombuuzyn Belchir.

5). The numerous broken beams, some with holes from their previous contexts, rested overtop the long side beams without being fitted together in any way. Once the cart pieces were set in place, the offerings were then set between the wooden posts erected along the eastern and western sides of the coffin, and stones were packed into the burial pit around the coffin, the offerings, and the wooden outer structure (Fig. 15).

The well-preserved wooden furnishings in grave 7 verify the details of the structures in graves 15 and 16, and the remains at SBR may collectively also help clarify fragments of wood and stains in the dirt found in more deteriorated Xiongnu graves elsewhere. Long beams to the east and west of the coffins in some of the graves at Tevsh Uul (Figs. 3, 4) and Holtost Nug (Törbat et al. 2003) may correspond to side beams of such skeleton structures as those found at SBR. The smeared outline of a wooden coffin in a satellite grave (GM2-1-19) at the Gol Mod 2 Xiongnu necropolis was flanked by a series of evenly spaced circular stains of decayed wood pieces a few centimeters thick and approximately the same height of the coffin (Miller et al. 2006). With the knowledge of wood posts surrounding the graves at SBR, we may hypothesize that the poorly preserved remains of small wood fragments on either side of the coffin



Fig. 16. Bronze axle cap and umbrella finial of Han chariot (Umeshara 1960, 87; 91) and reconstruction of Chinese chariot from Gol Mod cemetery (After: Desroches and André 2007, p. 75).



in this satellite grave were part of a similar outer structure of recycled cart pieces.

In sum, sufficient findings at well-preserved sites exist for us to deduce a custom among the Xiongnu of using wood pieces from dismantled vehicles as part of the ritual deposits along with animal parts and feasting accoutrements. The surfaces of most of the wood pieces were severely flaking, but since some pieces showed fresh, sharp carving marks and other beams with holes were still covered in bark, we may deduce that some vehicles were made specifically for the burial rites rather than interred after a life of usage. We should also note differences in the manners of vehicle deposition within the spectrum of

graves. While simple stone cists contained only a few pieces of wooden vehicles, the larger interments, especially those with decorated coffins, included numerous broken wooden pieces from disassembled carts that were reassembled into complex structures that set the vehicle fragments overtop the containment of the deceased. These wooden pieces may or may not have been from vehicles that transported the deceased to the grave, but their presence in Xiongnu burials clearly demonstrates the importance of vehicles in mortuary practices and beliefs of the steppe nomads.

Chinese Chariots in Monumental Xiongnu Tombs

Pieces of ornate chariots have been found in large tombs of the Xiongnu ruling elite all over Mongolia and southern Siberia. Comparisons with small chariots with large wheels found in tombs of the Han empire (see Sun 2001) demonstrate that the chariots in Xiongnu tombs were indeed manufactured in China (Fig. 16), and numerous examples of Han chariots gifted to the Xiongnu rulers appear throughout the Chinese histories. Specific mentions are given of “magnificently dressed chariots” (盛服車乘) (*Han shu* 48: 2265 n. 3) as well as “silver ornamented chariots” (*yinche* 銀車) that were decorated with embroidery, brocade tapestries, and carvings that made them equivalent to “imperial carriages” (*yucancheng* 御驂乘) (*Xin shu* 4.1).



Fig. 17. Han chariot pieces: (1) gilded bronze umbrella finial (After: Polosmak et al. 2008, Fig.3); (2) bronze monster-face fitting (After: Desroches and André 2007, p. 76); (3) lacquered seat box with cloud design and Chinese characters (After: Erdenebaatar 2012, p. 163).

Chariots from the Han amidst the Xiongnu constituted a radically different style of vehicle with colored silks, ornate bronze fittings, and painted lacquered seat boxes (Fig. 17), which would have exuded exoticism and prestige for those steppe rulers who rode in them. Yet despite the drastically different form of the Chinese-style chariots interred in the large tombs of the Xiongnu, we may interpret them as exotic transports incorporated into well-established vehicle traditions of the steppe nomads. In particular, the interment of Han chariots overtop the chambers of large Xiongnu tombs does not reflect an adherence to Chinese customs but instead may be deemed in accordance with steppe traditions.

Some of the well-documented tombs show them set between or above layers of stones overtop the burial chamber (Fig. 18), and the chariots are often dismantled, whether simply by removing the wheels (Polosmak et al. 2008, p. 69) or completely breaking apart the vehicle (Mission 2003, pp. 124-36). The position and treatment of Han

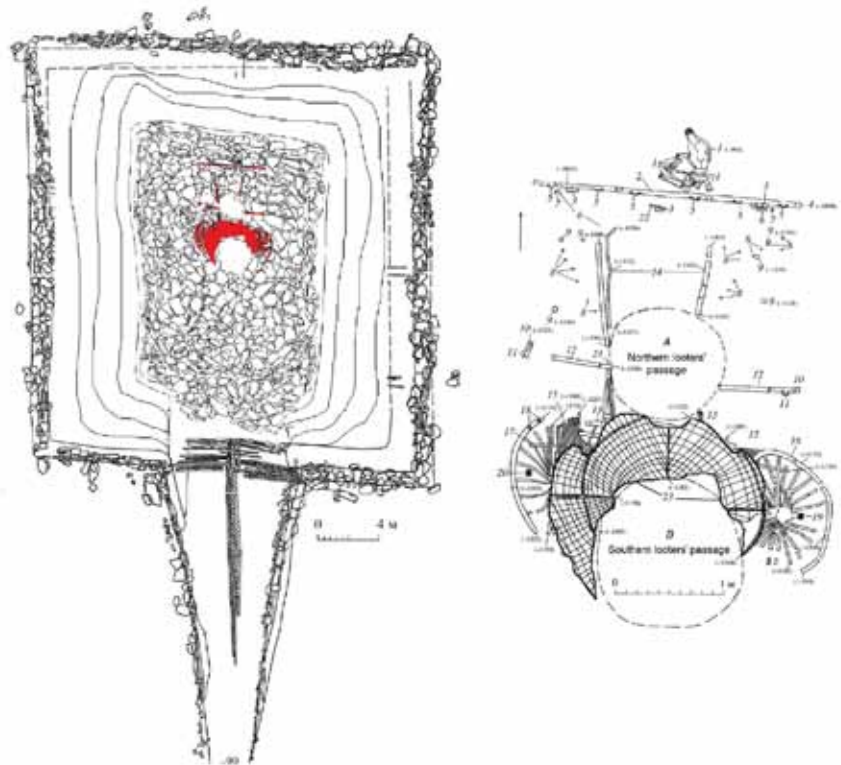


Fig. 18. Chariot over stone covering of chamber, tomb 7, Tsaram (After: Miniaev and Sakharovskaia 2007b, Figs.5-6).

chariots is thus clearly analogous to the placement of vehicle parts in standard and lesser Xiongnu graves.

Han chariots were often interred in tombs that also contained ornate precious metal horse ornaments depicting mythical beasts (Yerööl-Erdene 2011), and were part of composite retinues of prestige goods acquired by the uppermost echelon of the Xiongnu aristocracy. Even from the first Han tribute missions sent to placate the founding Xiongnu ruler Modun 冒頓 (*Han shu* 94A: 3754-5), chariots are mentioned in the Chinese histories as gifts to the Xiongnu rulers. A "leisure chariot" (*anche* 安車) and 15 horses are mentioned in the list of gifts to the later Xiongnu ruler Huhanye 呼韓邪, who capitulated to the Chinese in order

to garner support for regaining power in the steppes (*Han shu* 94B: 3798). Decades afterward, when the Chinese usurper ruler Wang Mang 王莽 attempted to encourage splintering among the northern nomads by giving out the Xiongnu title of "chanyu" to any steppe leaders who would take it, the court of the "New" (yet short-lived) Chinese dynasty gave an assemblage of gifts that intentionally imitated the gifts given to Huhanye. These included "a leisure chariot and a war chariot" (*anche guche* 安車鼓車) (*Han shu* 94B: 3823).

Since chariots have been found only in the large ramped square tombs, and never the standard graves of the Xiongnu, we may deduce proscriptions of their distribution among those elite who were interred in the most elaborate tombs. These exotic vehicles, along with other imports, may have been items of relative inalienability (Lesure 1999) that, through their restrictions to members of the uppermost echelon, would have helped to distinguish the imperial aristocracy from the other elites buried within standard graves.

Conclusions

With full knowledge of the importance of vehicles among the Xiongnu, the Chinese purposefully sent chariots that would cater to the tastes of the steppe leaders. The Five Bait (wu'er 五餌) proposal of the Chinese minister Jia Yi 賈誼 suggested giving various meats, entertaining ladies, and stores of food, as well as adorned chariots and horses, that would adhere to the desires of the nomadic elite. Yet despite any attempts mentioned in the histories of the Chinese to "bait" the Xiongnu into submission, Han imports were not part of an acculturative process. They occurred alongside steppe-style ornaments, felt garments, and typical Xiongnu burial goods and burial styles that continued to dominate mortuary arenas in the steppes. The well-preserved remains of wooden beams and posts found in standard graves of western Mongolia attest to customs of vehicle interment practiced by all level of Xiongnu society. Archaeological evidence for such vehicle traditions presents a new context for interpreting the deposits of Chinese chariots in the tombs of the Xiongnu rulers. They may therefore be seen as exotic vehicles incorporated into local traditions.

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Bryan K. Miller received his Ph.D. in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from the University of Pennsylvania and his M.A. in Archaeology from the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA. He has conducted surveys and excavations of Xiongnu remains in Mongolia since 2001, and has focused on historical and archaeological investigations of early empires in East Asia. He is presently on a Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and is hosted by the Pre- and Early Historical Archaeology Department at Bonn University in Germany. His current research addresses modeling of Inner Asian states and issues of connectivity and cohesion in polities formed by nomadic groups.

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Notes

1. A previous version of this article was printed in Mongolian for a special volume of the journal of the National Mu-

seum of Mongolia (*Nüüdelchdiin öv sudlal* vol. 11) on the occasion of the 2,220-year anniversary of the Xiongnu Empire.

2. Wuhuan tribes of southern Manchuria, who neighbored the Xiongnu, are recorded by the Chinese as having used carriages and horses to bear the deceased to their graves (*Hou Han shu*: 2980). Although no mention is given for carts regarding funerary rites of the Xiongnu (see *Shiji*: 2982), general similarities between these “nomadic” cultures are acknowledged by Chinese chroniclers. Furthermore, one must concede the distinct possibility that not all materials and practices of the Northerners were properly recorded by the Chinese.

3. Excavations at Tevsh Uul site were carried out by N. Ser-Odjav, Vitalii V. Volkov, Dorjpagma Navaan, and Damdin-süren Tseveendorj between 1972 and 1977.