

ARCHAEOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE IN THE ALTAI MOUNTAINS OF MONGOLIA: CELEBRATING TWO DECADES OF ACHIEVEMENT

Esther Jacobson-Tepfer, James E. Meacham, Gary Tepfer. *Archaeology and Landscape in the Mongolian Altai: An Atlas*. Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2010. xvi + 209 pp. ISBN 978-1-58948-232-6.

Archaeology and Landscape in the Altai Mountains of Mongolia <<http://mongolianaltai.uoregon.edu/index.php>>

Mongolian Altai Inventory Image Collection
<<http://boundless.uoregon.edu/digcol/maic/>>

Readers of *The Silk Road* may first have read about this important project several years ago, before the publication of the *Atlas* and creation of the website.¹ Known as the “Joint Mongolian-American-Russian Project, Altay,” the project’s initial focus in 1994 was the rock art sites in Bayan-Ölgiy Aimag, the western tip of Mongolia. As the work developed, its scope expanded to include intensive and extensive archaeological survey of all kinds of monuments, documenting them photographically and with GPS measurements that would enable them to be plotted cartographically. This is one of the most extensive and earliest major archaeological survey projects in Mongolia to use modern methods. As with any such undertaking, to a considerable degree analysis of the data collected still lies in the future. However, it has been possible to begin serious exploration of cultural landscapes, that is to determine the relationship between human remains and their surrounding geography and thus try to gain insights into the possible ways people thought about and interacted with their surroundings. The book

and the website, which complement each other and should be used together, provide, as Esther Jacobson-Tepfer puts it, “only part of the full story.” Underlying them is a massive database, which these publications but introduce. Other, more detailed publications document petroglyphs. But much remains to be done, not least being to undertake serious archaeological excavation in a region where to date there has been little.

The initiative to organize the project was that of Prof. Jacobson-Tepfer, with financial support from American sources (including a major NEH grant for the publications reviewed here). Logistical and other support was provided by the Mongolian and Russian partners. Credit for the photographic documentation belongs to Gary Tepfer, and the sophisticated cartography based on GIS was the responsibility of James Meacham.

The *Atlas* introduces the physical and human geography and provides a brief overview of early efforts to map and explore the region, notably the extensive travels through it by V. V. Sapozhnikov at the beginning of the 20th century. There is a general discussion of cultural landscapes and a helpful reference chronology of ancient cultures. The problem of the chronology of rock art and memorial structures still defies precise solutions, but the *Atlas* groups the materials by type and in some rough chronological sequence from early Bronze Age through the Turkic period. There are some very suggestive correlations of photographs with maps to show the “view shed” from particular monuments across landscape. After this introductory material, the book proceeds by watershed: the Oigor Gol, especially its huge rock art

complex of the Tsagaan Salaa-Baga Oigor; the Sogoo Gol; Tsagaan Gol; Khoton and Khurgan Nuur; Dayan Nuur; Sagsay Gol; Khovd Gol. Within each section is an overview of the geography and the archaeological monuments, and then a chronologically arranged treatment of them. A concluding section discusses various aspects of the cultural significance of the region, among other things emphasizing its connections with adjoining areas of the Altai that are on the other side of the international borders separating Mongolia from Russia and China.

The reference materials include maps, a gazetteer, and a selection of photographs illustrating the various kinds of monuments. The laboriously developed list of place names and their relationship to the archaeology of the region represents the most complete such mapping for any region in Mongolia to date. In large format, the book has superb photographs, in color but for the selective illustrations of the different types of monuments at the end. There are numerous exquisitely drawn topographic maps, with point indications of the locations of the surveyed objects. All in all, the book well deserves the recognition it has received.²

While the website covers the same territory geographically, its descriptive pages condense substantially what one finds in the book. The main rubrics cover Altai geography, Archaeology (under which one can find separate sections on the types of monuments, e.g., khirigsuurs, Turkic monuments, petroglyphs), and Cultural Landscapes (whose subsections are: Confluences, Rivers Downstream, Mountains and Ridges, Orientation, Period Overlay, Stone Re-use). For each page under these various rubrics, there is a small selection of illustrative images, which can be enlarged.

All this might seem unexceptional. What is not is the way in which the technology has been harnessed (through Flash animation) to offer interactive versions of the beautifully drawn topographic maps. One can zoom in to fine detail, select various overlays to show locations of particular kinds of monuments, and, where there is a linked photograph, click to bring up the image. Thus, one can, for example, choose the Tsagaan Gol basin, locate in it khirigsuurs (mounds with a surrounding stone perimeter, which date from the Bronze Age), select a sub-type of khirigsuur, and view the locations set clearly on a shaded topographic map. One should remember that the images linked to the maps are only a small selection of the total number available in the picture gallery database.

The other feature the website offers is its link to picture galleries which to date contain more than 2600 images (accessible either by the Gallery Search link

or separately through the URL listed above for the Mongolian Altai Inventory). Various kinds of search terms can be entered to narrow down the selection. As with any such search mechanism on the Internet, the user needs to practice a bit for best results. There is a detailed list of the terms for "monument type" (click on the "More" button on the left); for the box labeled "Petroglyph Subject Search" one can also bring up a list of the terms that are used (e.g., "carts," but not "chariots"; "archers," but not "bows" or "arrows."). For the advanced search boxes, there is no equivalent list for the drainages, where it would have been nice to have a nested tabulation of the main ones and under each the secondary ones contained within it. However, if one were to do a very basic search (say, all images of "altars"), by clicking on the headers to the tabulated descriptive data, one can order the result by drainage and/or chronology. As is the case nowadays with many many art museum collections, one can select particular images into a "my favorites" collection. While the images are copyrighted, it is possible to copy and save them, should one wish to use them, say, for personal study or teaching purposes.

As we would expect, the quality of Gary Tepfer's photographs is excellent. (I have seen a stunning exhibition of his enlarged prints which capture the rich textures and colors of the Mongolian landscapes like no others.) That said, the photoshopping of some of the images for the website is rather mixed (in particular, some need brightening and shadow adjustment), though easily adjusted if one wished to use them in a lecture. Similarly, with the maps, while the deliberately washed rendering of the shaded topography on the website works perfectly well for highlighting the site location points, my old eyes have found that darkening by adjusting brightness/contrast levels makes it a lot easier to appreciate details. Of course a lot depends on the calibration of individual computer monitors—what I see on my PC may not replicate that on other machines.

If we place the website alongside other Internet resources for learning about the cultures of Eurasia, it stands out for the beauty of its design, the accessibility of its information, and its innovative use of a GIS database. This is not (at least yet) a project of the scope of, say, the International Dunhuang Project, with its ultimate goal to put the entire documentation for the Chinese end of the Silk Road on line. That said, the Internet-accessible photographic archive of the Altai project is being expanded and presumably may eventually encompass the full collection. It could serve as the nucleus for a much more comprehensive database of rock art in Eurasia. Apart from having the photos, it would be nice to add as well the tracings of the images, which can often clarify details difficult to discern

in photos. True, as Prof. Jacobson-Tepfer reminds us in her studies of this material, tracings by themselves are not enough. They frequently are inaccurate, and they do not capture the details of context — patina, nature of pecking, and so on — which may be important in determining date and distinguishing layering of imagery from different periods.

Would there be other kinds of data which might be added for the online records? Some might wish for GPS coordinates, but here it is important to recognize that the Altai materials are in an unprotected environment (unlike, say, Dunhuang manuscripts safely deposited in the British Library). Providing GPS coordinates on an openly accessible website is not desirable. They can always be made available on request to serious researchers. Given the fact that some of what the Altai project has documented has already disappeared over the years, to publish the detailed data would merely facilitate more depredation.

As I know from having been in some of these areas but briefly, part of the pleasure of seeing the material *in situ* is the excitement of discovery, even if it can sometimes be frustrating to search for a particular image in a large boulder field and not locate it. The *Atlas* and the website provide access points and the encouragement for users to follow up with more detailed study. Anyone viewing the website might well then be encouraged to visit the Altai to see these cultural landscapes, armed, one would hope, with a sense of respect for the material and its preservation. I wish I had had these resources to consult back in 2005, since they would have considerably enhanced my appreciation of what I saw.

For more serious study, at least for the petroglyphs there are some obvious starting points. The gold standard for scholarly publication of Inner Asian petroglyphs is the series *Répertoire des pétroglyphes d'Asie Centrale* (part of the *Mémoires de la Mission archéologique française en Asie Centrale*, Vol. V), edited by Jakov Sher and Henri-Paul Francfort. Fascicules 6 and 7 of the series contain the publication of two of the largest and most important petroglyph sites in all Asia, those in the Tsagaan Salaa/Baga Oigor drainages of the Oigor Gol and the area of the upper Tsagaan Gol.³ Each volume (in two parts) contains analytical essays, followed by drawings of the petroglyphs and a generous selection of high-quality photos.

Since the appearance of these volumes, in which most of the material is in English, other publications of that same material have been appearing in Russian and Mongolian. Unfortunately, the relationship between those and the publications of *Répertoire* is not always explicit and, it seems, in some cases credit is not given where it is due.

The quite impressive Russian version of the publication of the Tsagaan Salaa/Baga Oigor site is in some ways quite different.⁴ While I have not done a minute comparison, Jacobson-Tepfer's essays seem to be fairly close translations of hers from *Répertoire*. Kubarev, who assigned himself the credit here as the lead author, has expanded especially his discussion of image types and chronology and presumably was responsible for some re-writing in Tseveendorj's contributions. Although there is no warning to the reader, a few dozen tracings have been added to those other-wise reproduced in their entirety from *Répertoire*, which then means that the image numbers in the two volumes do not correspond (and there is no correlation table to enable one to match them, nor is there the table of descriptive captions found in *Répertoire*). A feature not found in the French volume is illustrations that group tracings of different subjects, so that images with a single subject can be compared directly, rather than requiring the reader to search through the images in the main dataset. Of course, taken out of context, such image comparisons may be limited in their value. The Russian volume has a few dozen color photos, but the photo documentation it provides is much less extensive than that with Gary Tepfer's images in *Répertoire*. Moreover, most of the careful topographic maps of the latter are not in the Russian volume.

The publication of the Tsagaan Gol petroglyphs (*Répertoire*, Fasc. No. 7), has to date spawned two other versions, one in Russian, and the other in Mongolian. The late Vladimir Kubarev's Russian variant⁵ is certainly a step backwards compared to his republication of the Tsagaan Salaa/Baga-Oigor material, in that he takes sole authorial credit, gives no indication of how the project came about, who funded it, and so on. In his somewhat mechanical descriptive essay, he has rearranged the material first by drainage and then by subject groupings, drawing on, but not properly acknowledging the mapping done by the University of Oregon team. The elegant maps of *Répertoire* No. 7 have vanished, replaced by a satellite image and rough sketch map of the site, but with no marking of the sectional boundaries. Those seriously interested in trying to interpret the petroglyphs of the upper Tsagaan Gol, especially in reference to the inferred chronology of the different subjects, should not start with Kubarev. Rather, begin with Jacobson-Tepfer's essays, which form the introduction to *Répertoire* No. 7 but have not been translated here for the Russian audience. Understandably Kubarev omits the correlation table of sections and sites in *Répertoire*. And his book further lacks the descriptive caption list for the illustrations. He reproduces all the drawings of *Répertoire*, with the same sequential numbering as in

the original publication. There is but a relatively small selection of photographs though, including ones not in *Répertoire* showing members of the expedition at work.

For the Mongolian version, which seems to be for the most part a translation of Kubarev's Russian publication, the principal authorial credit has been assigned to Tseveendorj, although at least the co-authors of the project make it onto the title page.⁶ While the introduction describes the Paris edition, there is no proper citation of the original title, which, curiously, has not even been included in the bibliography. Yet, both the Russian and Mongolian publications add titles to what had originally been a more select bibliography, the additions mainly publications in Russian and Mongolian, which can be useful if one wants a list of everything Kubarev and Tseveendorj have ever published on the subject. The Mongolian publication contains only a small and inferior selection of photographs.

Mongolia is home to some of the most extensive and important rock art sites in all of northern Asia, on landscapes crowded with monuments which invite serious archaeological investigation. Much is being accomplished, especially by international teams, but in a sense we are still in a very early stage of learning about the historical cultures.⁷ The Altai project surveyed here is an impressive example of how far we have come, and we can be thankful that its results are being made available both for serious academic study and for broader audiences.

— Daniel C. Waugh

Notes

1. Esther Jacobson-Tepfer, "The Rock Art of Mongolia," *The Silk Road* 4/1 (2006): 5-13. The article is a broad introduction

to the subject and does not just concentrate on the area and material which is the focus of the current review.

2. The *Atlas* has been honored by the Association of American Geographers' Globe Book Prize for 2010 and the CaGIS Honorable Mention for the best published atlas in 2010 (beaten out by the new National Geographic world atlas...).

3. Esther Jacobson, Vladimir Kubarev, Damdensurenjin Tseveendorj. *Répertoire des pétroglyphes d'Asie Centrale. Fascicule No. 6: Mongolie du nord-ouest. Tsagaan Salaa/ Baga Oigor*. Avec la collaboration de Gary Tepfer et James Meacham. 2 parts. Paris: De Boccard, 2001; Esther Jacobson-Tepfer, Vladimir Kubarev, Damdensurenjin Tseveendorj. *Répertoire des pétroglyphes d'Asie Centrale. Fascicule No. 7: Mongolie du nord-ouest. Haut Tsagaan Gol*. Photographies, Gary Tepfer; Cartographie, James Meacham. 2 parts. Paris: De Boccard, 2006.

4. V. D. Kubarev, D. Tseveendorzh, E. Iakobson. *Petroglify Tsagaan-Salaa i Baga-Oigor (Mongol'skii Altai)*. Novosibirsk etc.: Izd-vo. Instituta arkheologii i etnografii SO RAN, 2005.

5. V. D. Kubarev. *Petroglify Shiveet-Khairkhana (Mongol'skii Altai)*. Novosibirsk: Izd-vo. Instituta arkheologii i etnografii SO RAN, 2009.

6. D. Tseveendorzh, V. D. Kubarev, E. Iakobson. *Shiveet Khairkhany khadny zurag*. Ulaanbaatar, ShUA-iin Arkheologiin khureelengiin khevel, 2010.

7. For a good overview of archaeology in Mongolia, see the proceedings of the first international conference devoted to the subject: *Current Archaeological Research in Mongolia*. Bonn Contributions to Asian Archaeology, 4. Ed. Jan Bemmman et al. (Bonn, 2009), briefly reviewed in *The Silk Road* 8 (2010): 125-27.

(right) View east down the Tsagaan Salaa in the far western tip of Mongolia, looking across the rock outcropping TG04132, whose huge surface is covered with petroglyphs (cf *Répertoire* Fasc. 7, Pl. 522).



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(left) Closeup of one of the images, showing a large cervid, a dog and a rider (cf *Répertoire* Fasc. 7, Pl. 551).