

ORGOITON – A XIONGNU CEMETERY IN TRANSBAIKALIA

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During the 2016 season, the Central Asian Expedition of the State Hermitage Museum, headed by Nikolai N. Nikolaev, in collaboration with Sergei S. Miniaev (the Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences), completed the study of an elite Xiongnu barrow in the Orgoiton Valley on the left bank of the Selenga River in the Dzhida region of the Republic of Buriatia [Fig. 1]. The site had been discovered at the end of the 19th century by Julian. D. Tal'ko-Gryntsevich (1900/1999, pp. 79-81), who classified it in a group of "burials in larch chambers" which he identified as belonging to the Asiatic Huns (Xiongnu). In 2009, the Central Asian Expedition renewed the study of the site, compiled a detailed map of the cemetery and excavated the small Barrow № 5 (Nikolaev 2010). At the bottom of the latter's burial pit was a monumental stone structure resembling a stone "sarcophagus," constructed of horizontally and vertically placed slabs. There was no evidence of a grave or timber chamber within this "sarcophagus." The burial had been completely looted, the skeleton of the interred missing. In the fill of the grave pit was found a fragment of a bronze mirror of the TVL-type dating no earlier than the first century BCE [Fig. 2].

The subsequent work of the expedition concentrated on the study of the largest barrow in the cemetery (№ 6), located in its northern sector. On the surface of the barrow were visible the destroyed and sod-covered remains of a stone cover measuring 16 x 14 m., on whose southern side was an entrance ramp (dromos), which also was defined on the surface along its perimeter by a stone cover. In the cover of the barrow, which had been created from horizontally laid slabs, were several stone steles. In the upper part of the burial pit were the remains of three partitions – two of them transverse, oriented east to west, and one axial, oriented north-south. The foundation of the partitions consisted of thick beams held in place by stone slabs. In the center of the burial pit was the outline of a looter's entrance, in the fill of which almost to the very bottom were encountered fragments of a human skeleton and animal bones. At a depth of about 6 m in the northwestern corner of the burial pit was a large collection of animal bones (skulls of cattle and small horned animals, ribs, the pelvic part of the spinal column, metapodia and tail bones).

The internal structure of the grave included a triple burial chamber (an outer wooden frame, an inner wooden frame and a wooden coffin). On the planks of the cover of the outer chamber were no fewer than five skulls of cattle. Atop the eastern and western walls of the burial chamber were remains of the wheels of a



Fig. 1. Location map.



Fig. 2. The fragment of a Chinese TVL bronze mirror found in Barrow № 5.



Fig. 3. The burial pit of Barrow № 6, showing the remains of the Chinese chariot.

Chinese chariot [Fig. 3]. The body and shaft of the chariot had been destroyed during the looting. The small fragments of painted wood found in the fill of the grave support the supposition that the chariot was painted in red, white, green and brown colors. The wheels were covered in black lacquer. Three tips from the ribs of the chariot's umbrella along with traces of silk were found in the fill of the burial pit.

The internal grave structure had suffered substantially during the looting. Five of seven logs of the northern wall had been hacked through; only one large fragment of the lower part of its eastern wall remained from the coffin, which was covered by the beams of the eastern wall of the inner chamber.

In the northwestern corner of the northern corridor of the burial chamber was a large clay vessel, crushed by the beams of the burial structure. Inside the vessel were remains of cereals. Next to it were fragments of another ceramic vessel and remains of two small vessels made of organic material. In the western and eastern corridors on the walls of the chamber were fragments of woolen fabric and silk. In the western outer corridor were two large accumulations of iron bridle bits and cheek-pieces, numerous iron buckles and iron brackets of a saddle bow. Clearing the remains of the coffin revealed on its exterior quatrefoil rosettes and intersecting strips made of thin gold foil, the traditional decoration of the coffins of the Xiongnu elite. The burial was at a depth of 10.27 m.

The barrow excavated in the Orgoiton valley compares with Barrow № 24 of the Noyon uul Cemetery which was excavated in 1924 by S. A. Teploukhov (Teploukhov 1925, pp. 41-52; Rudenko 1962, pp. 9-12, 121-22, Pls. I-III and passim).

The relatively small dimensions of Barrow № 6 notwithstanding, one can assign it to the elite Xiongnu barrows on the basis of the features of its construction, the measurements and the presence of prestige artefacts: the chariot, the gold decorations of the coffin, etc. This is the first barrow of the given type which has been studied on the left bank of the Selenga River, and the results of its excavation may prove to be of primary importance in the delineation of the local and chronological features of elite Xiongnu barrows.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sergei S. Miniaev is the author of numerous articles and monographs on Xiongnu archaeology and founding editor of a Russian monograph series, *Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Siunnu*. In 2007 he received an award from the Euroasian Archaeological Institute in Izmir recognizing his contributions to Xiongnu archaeology; in 2008 he was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Additional material on his excavations may be found at <<http://archo.academia.edu/SergeyMiniaev/>>. E-mail: <ssmin@yandex.ru>.

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