

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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Khitan Landscapes from a New Perspective. Landscape Archaeology Research in Mongolia

Katalin Tolnai – Zsolt Szilágyi – András Harmath
Khitan Landscapes Project, Hungary

The Khi-Land, Khitan Landscapes in Mongolia 2017–2023 project is aimed at conducting landscape archaeological research at 10th-12th century Khitan period sites in Mongolia, with special focus on the fortified settlements in Bulgan aimag in Central Mongolia, especially on the ruins of Khar Bukh Balgas in Dashinchilen sum. The main goal of the project is understanding the inner structure of the settlements of the Khitan Empire and the relationships between the nomadic lifestyle and the towns of the Liao Empire, which once occupied parts of China and a large part of present-day Mongolia. A short history of the Liao Empire and the first results of the project were presented in the Hungarian Archaeology e-journal, as well as in some other publications (Csiky et al. 2017, Erdenebold et al. 2018, Harmath et al. 2019).

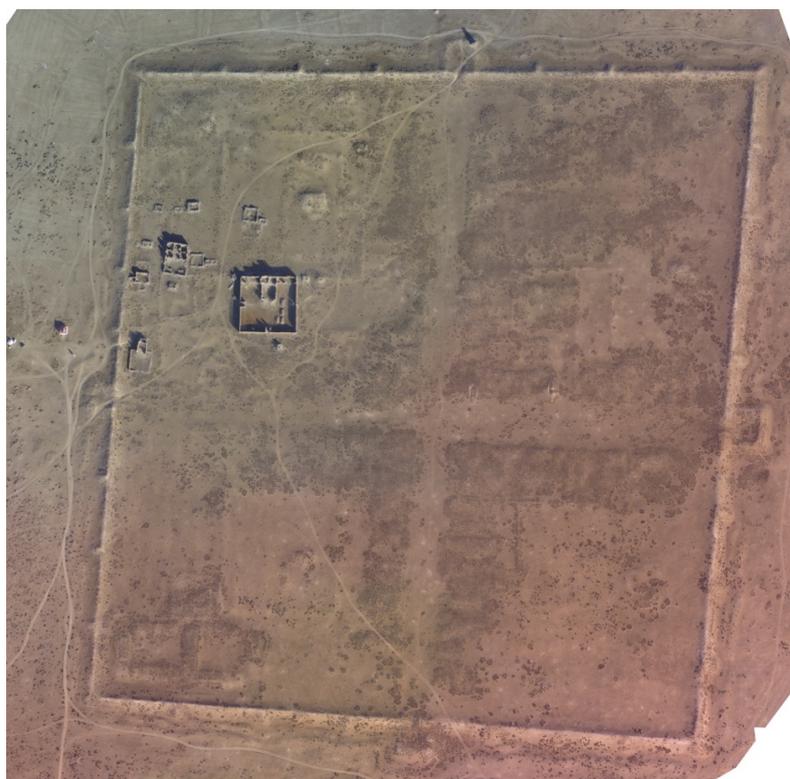
The basis of the Khi-Land project and previous research

Researchers from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences have been involved in Inner Asian and Mongolian research since the 1950's. This work was initiated by Louis Ligeti who, as a linguist, also studied the Khitans. His work was followed by that of Görgy Kara and András Róna-Tas, who is still involved in studying the Khitan script.¹ Among the Hungarian archaeologists it was István Erdélyi who conducted archaeological research in Mongolia between the years 1961–1990. He studied all the main historical periods of Mongolia from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages, and thoroughly analysed the Xiongnu and Turkic periods. Another aim of our project is to follow in his footsteps and carry out archaeological research in the territory of Mongolia involving Hungarian researchers.

The remains at Khar Bukh Balgas (*Image 1.*) were first studied by Russian researchers. In 1870, the explorer of the Russian Geographical Society, A. Paderin, studied the history and culture of the Orkhon river area in the central part of Mongolia. It was he who along with his fellow researchers discovered the remains

1 A research team formed voluntarily at the Department of Altaic Studies of the University of Szeged. The results of their work are published on their website:
<http://khitan.bibl.u-szeged.hu/>

of Khar Bukh Balgas and published a description of them. In 1890 the research team led by N.M. Jadrincev prepared a plan of the ruins, while in 1909 the research team of J. G. Granö published images of the site. In 1833–34 a plan of the fortified settlement was also created by D. D. Bukinich from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. In 1948–49 the famous Russian archaeologist S. V. Kiselev also conducted research on the settlement and on Khitan period kurgans. In the 1970's the Mongolian archaeologist Kh. Perlee conducted research at the ruins of Khar Bukh Balgas and compiled a plan of the site. He further declared that the site can be dated to the Khitan period. Small scale excavations were led at that time by the team of Kh. Perlee and E. V. Savkunov at the buildings located to the NE of the road junction. A. Ochir and Lkh. Erdenebold conducted excavations in 2002–2003 and 2011–2012, studying also the later periods of the site.



Although archaeological research has already been carried out on some Khitan period fortified settlements in the territory of Mongolia, their environment and contacts with the contemporary settlement network have not yet been studied in

detail. The aim of our project is to examine the Khitan sites in the context of the surrounding landscape in order to understand their role in the history and organization of the Liao Empire (947–1125), and to gain more information on their function in the northern frontier zone of the empire.

The Khi-Land project is based on collaboration between the Institute of Ethnology of the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of History and Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, under the cooperative agreement: *Mongolian and Hungarian joint research – Khitan Landscapes in Mongolia Project 2017–2023*.

Methodology

In our research we follow a landscape archaeological approach in which we study the sites in the context of their surroundings and their environment. We focus in particular on the water management systems of these areas as well as on those landscape archaeological features which can be discovered through a thorough study of micro topography (like settlement remains, visible burial mounds or stone carvings from various periods.) Besides field survey work we collect aerial photographs with an UAV (Unmanned aerial vehicle). This field season we used a DJI Mavic Pro Platinum UAV.² (*Image 2.*) We prepared flight plans before our field season using Litchi application. On the field we placed GCPs (ground control points), which we measured with a total station after measuring the initial coordinates with GPS.³ This method helped us to determine all the coordinates and give correct transformations to the aeriels.⁴



2 The UAV was donated to Katalin Tolnai by the László Kádár Research Fund for Mongolian Studies.

3 Many thanks to Hadzijanisz Konsztantinosz for the preparation of flight plans and the processing of data.

4 The tools needed for the survey were provided by the Tahiméter Kft.

In the field we paid special attention on Mongolian traditions, which determine the everyday life of the nomads. It is essential to know the traditions and taboos of everyday life, and follow the rules of i.e. moving within a yurt, following seating rules or the importance of the white foods. There are several taboos concerning everyday activities too, like the prohibition of stepping on a door-step, throwing garbage onto the fire, or stabbing a knife into the ground. These traditions can also limit the work of researchers as these should be also followed during research. Without stabbing a nail into the ground however it was more problematic for us to sign locations i.e. the ground control points (Bartha 2016).

Besides collecting aerials, we also conducted archaeological field surveys. (*Image 3*). Here we concentrated both on the inner structures of fortified settlements and on the features outside the protective walls. We analysed the types of inner features based on the building materials, shape, size and locations of sites. Furthermore we identified ceramic concentrations and located them along with the surveyed routes with Garmin GPS. The collected data will be further processed with GIS. (*Image 4-5*).



The fortified settlement of Khar Bukh Balgas

Khar Bukh Balgas, the site studied by our project, is a larger fortified settlement. The ruins are located at the coordinates $47^{\circ} 52' 249''$ N and $103^{\circ} 53' 051''$ E, 1015 meters above sea level. It is surrounded by rammed earthen walls oriented to the cardinal directions. The walls are placed to form a square; however, they do not have the same length on the eastern and northern sides. At present, the remaining walls are 3–4 m wide, and 2–2.5 m high. An earthen gate with an L-shaped outer structure has been uncovered in the middle section of each settlement wall. The corners were further strengthened with corner towers. Between the corner towers and the middle gates further 3 or 4 square-shaped towers were erected on each side. Within the walls the four gates were joined together with roads running N-S and E-W. These app. 30 m wide roads divided the inner area of the fortified settlement into 4 parts. Buildings once stood along these avenues. The outer wall is surrounded by a moat with smaller side ditches running out of it. The main ditch is fed by the Khar Bukh stream.

The remains at Khar Bukh Balgas have been studied by Russian and Mongolian researchers since the 19th century. Recently, in 2002–2003 and 2011–2012, A. Ochir and Lkh. Erdenebold conducted excavations, during which they also studied the later periods of the site. A large number of archaeological features can be detected at the site and at its vicinity. Remains of a pottery kiln were detected 35 m from the NW corner of Khar Bukh Balgas on the eastern bank of Khar Bukh stream. Remains of agricultural work in the form of small ditches and millstones can also be observed around the walls of the fortified settlement.

In the 16th-17th centuries a Buddhist monastery was built between the walls. The buildings of the monastery were made of ashlar, and are still 2–3 m high. The monastery included several buildings. Excavation within the central sanctuary resulted in a large number of artefacts in connection with religious activities, like Buddha depictions as well as textile and metal remains. A peculiarity of the excavation is that manuscripts were also found within the remains, preserved in very good condition.

Field research in 2017⁵

In May 2017, we carried out a longer field work on site. During our second visit we captured more detailed aerial photographs than the previous year, carried out a field survey inside and outside the fortress; and geophysical test measurements were also performed by the Mongolian geophysicist L. Ganbaatar. (*Image 6*). During the 2017 field work, we took aerial photographs in the inner area of the fortress, above a walled area north of the walls, and in two areas where circular objects were observed on the satellite imagery of Google Earth. In addition, further aerial photographs were taken in the areas south, north and east of the fort, and at the area of the potential pottery kiln near the Khar Bukh stream.



⁵ Gergely Csiky, Amina D Jambajantsan, András Harmath and Katalin Tolnai were the team members of the project and the fieldwork in 2016-2017.

The flights resulted in more than 4000 aerial photos. During the flights, we ensured that the overlap of images was over 80%, as a result at least 90% of the area had an overlap of 5 images or more. It also means that for the measuring of one point we used 5 different images, which provided us with extremely high accuracy.

The images were processed using the Pix4D and DroneDeploy applications, which are suitable for point cloud and orthophoto creation. The resulting point cloud enables us to map the surface objects in more detail. The digital surface models follow the WGS84 projection system, as GPS coordinates are recorded in the exif files of the images. With the help of the present model we are able to get contour lines or generate cross sections anywhere in the measured area.

The first surface model which we created from the aeriels of 2016 already showed a dense building coverage of the fortified area. In 2017 we prepared detailed photographic and descriptive documentation of the previously mapped building remains, including the Khitan and the 16th – 17th century stone buildings.

We carried out field surveys outside of the fortress in order to determine the extent of the former settlements and to identify the different economic activity zones. It is highly feasible that the Khitan settlement extended outside the area of the fortification; therefore we examined the areas south and east in 20 or 50 meter grids, until approximately 500 meters away from the southern walls. Based on the ceramic and roof tile density on the surface in both areas, it is highly probable that the settlement continued for several hundred meters beyond the walls (2–300 m from the southern walls and 4–500 m from the eastern wall). We also surveyed at the Khar bukh riverbank near the alleged pottery kiln, where a 10 x 20 m oval shaped area has a very dense ceramic coverage. There is, however, an empty area between the assumed kiln and the walls.

We process the collected materials using GIS which enables us to integrate the information obtained at different times through various methods (UAV, metering station, GPS, photo). Our system is based on the orthophoto and 3D model derived from drone (UAV) images. Vectorisation of the objects appearing on the images gives a close to accurate plan of the inner area of the fortress.

The dataset collected during our fieldwork is still being processed. Nevertheless, the Khar Bukh Balgas site and its surroundings raise several further questions. Can we consider these fortified settlements as the result of an urbanization process? Where were the real boundaries of the residents' activities? What role did this settlement have in the local settlement network? Why did life disappear at this site? The answers to these questions will require further years of research.

Archaeological sites visited during the 2018 fieldwork⁶

Ochir et al. 2015 published several Khitan period sites in the vicinity of Khar Bukh Balgas. Based on this study we observed the sites on Google Earth satellite images but we also identified most probably contemporaneous sites on which we planned field surveys and aerial photography (Ochir et al. 2015: 84–95). We visited the following sites during the field survey:

Tsagaan uzuuriin kherem

Two square shaped, enclosed areas are located 30 km south of Khar Bukh Balgas. The two kherems are 1 km from each other, the Northern one is already known from previous research. It is 201 m x 220 meters large; its enclosing walls are less significant. We could not identify any protective towers on its sides or corners (Tsagaan uzuuriin kherem 1).

There is another previously unknown kherem south of the first one. The enclosing walls were not high, but were built in rhomboid form. Its area is 114 x 116 meters. We could not detect any protective towers on the corners and on the sides. No inner features were detected in the inner area of the kherem either. In between the two kherems we were able to detect ceramic concentrations. Based on our observations it would be worthwhile to conduct more detailed research in this area. Besides the kherems we also studied a third area in the vicinity where we recognized a rampart-like feature on the satellite images. During our visit however it turned out that these were rather the remains of ditches. We also found some ceramic pieces here which were also identified as Khitan period pieces by Lkh. Erdenebold (Tsagaan uzuuriin kherem 2).

Settlement site near Chin tolgoi

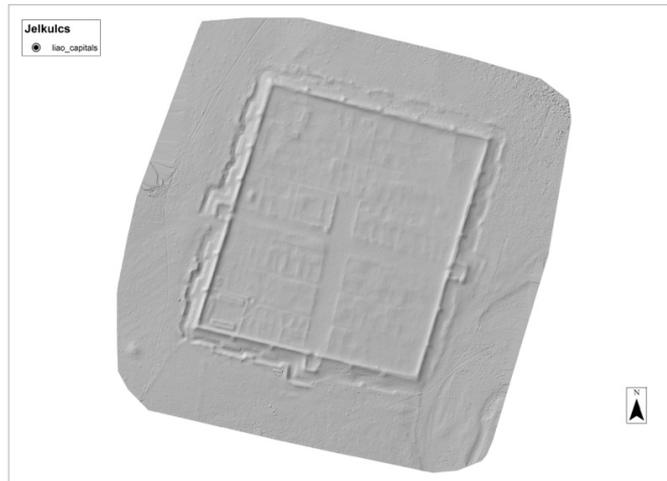
The Khitan period settlement of Chin tolgoi is located 26 km south of Khar Bukh Balgas. Based on the previous research this settlement was the former capital of the area (Kradin 2011). There have been excavations in the inner area of the settlement, however its surroundings have remained untouched. During our field work we made a short field visit west from the settlement where Lkh. Erdenebold previously identified a site with numerous Khitan period ceramics. This site is highly important also for the history of Chin Tolgoi, as no other contemporaneous sites were known before from its immediate surroundings. This site also confirms the conception that there were smaller sites in the vicinity of enclosed settlements.

Ulaan kherem 1–2.

We already collected aerials from Ulaan Kherem (*Image 7*), which is located 50 km east of Khar Bukh Balgas in 2017. This year we made a more systematic field survey of the inner areas and we also collected photos of the surrounding features.

⁶ The members of the 2018 fieldwork were András Harmath, Katalin Tolnai, László Laszlovszky, Csilla Siklódi and Zsolt Szilágyi.

This 470 x 530 meters large fortified settlement has remained in good condition, the ruins of the buildings are app. 1–1,5 m high compared to the level of the streets. There were 3 gates in the protective walls and 2 roads parted the inner area. On the corners there were protective towers, while on the northern side 3 side towers were erected. There was no gate in the northern sidewall of the settlement, but it was protected with 5 side towers. The lack of a northern gate is also mirrored in the inner structure of the settlement, as there were no inner partitions in its northern part.



According to the Google Earth satellite there are more enclosed areas along the river south of this fortified settlement. We collected aerial photographs of one of these which is a 350 x 400 meters large kherem, with only one mound-like feature at its centre. In between Ulaan Kherem and this latter one we also identified a small, mound-like, most probably man-made feature. We found Khitan period roof-tiles here, therefore we think it is contemporaneous with the kherem.

Khermen denj, Tsagaan denj

One of the most complex remains of the period is Khermen denj and Tsagaan denj lying in front of it on the opposite side of the river. In our field survey we realized that this latter site is in many ways different from the other fortified settlements. It is 200 x 165 meters large, oriented NE - SW, with only one entrance on the southern side. There are 3 seemingly high features in its inner area, while there are no protective towers on its rampart. Even though we also planned to take aerials here, we could not fly because of the strong wind and the approaching sandstorm.

The results of our fieldwork show that there are many different types of Khitan sites which most probably had different functions. The most spectacular among these are the fortified settlements (Khar Bukh Balgas, Chin tolgoi, Khermen denj, Ulaan Kherem) the inner area of which can be studied using aerials. In addition to these sites there are smaller, rectangular shaped sites as well, which probably functioned as burial sites, however there has been no research on their inner areas. In parallel to that there are also enclosed areas which are closely rectangular shaped but there are not any mound-like features in their inner area. These could have functioned as enclosed holding areas for livestock or as some kind of protective enclosure for non-permanent habitation (Tsagaan denj).

In our field survey we also found ceramic concentrations in between the enclosed areas which implies that there were habitation areas in between the presently known sites as well. This is a phenomenon which should be studied in the close future too, as written sources tell us that the high class of Khitans were not living within the settlements but followed a nomadic lifestyle nearby. These non-permanent habitation places however have not yet been identified by archaeological research.

Ethnological studies – cultural heritage protection

Besides the planned archaeological work of our project we also had the possibility to collect data for ethnological research. This work is in close connection with the problems of the protection of cultural heritage and archaeological sites. In the area of one site for example the head of a family also has heritage protection responsibilities. In the last couple of years the Mongolian government has paid more attention to heritage preservation and protection.⁷ Formerly the costs of monument restorations were covered by international financial support. In the last couple of years however local families have become responsible for these too. This is coordinated by the National Heritage Protection Centre of Mongolia (Soyoliin Öviin Töv). As Bulgan county, where our project takes place, is one of the areas richest in heritage remains, the protection of the area is of high importance. For example there is the Chin tolgoi ovoo, an offering place, which is still in everyday use by the people (Chuluun 2014: 163–166), but there is also a group of watchmen protecting the area. We also felt this attitude during our field work, as families contacted each other because of our work and also reported our presence to the local police. Nonetheless there is also a contradiction in the attitude of the local families as they also raise their yurts within cultural remains.

⁷ On the archaeological heritage protection status, see: <http://montsame.mn/en/read/14657>; for an international project for the protection of cultural heritage, see: https://www.academia.edu/3006617/The_Oyu_Tolgoi_Cultural_Heritage_Program

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