

## Preliminary Excavation Findings from Shoroon Bumbagar, Ulaan Kherem, Mongolia

In 2001 an archaeological team led by Ayudai Ochir, Director of National History Museum, discovered a very interesting historical site in Bayannur sum, Bulgan province, Mongolia. At the nearby site called Ulaan Kherem, associated with the Khitan Empire of the Liao (907–1125), an ancient city with an earthen fortress had been discovered by the well-known Mongolian archaeologist Khödöögijn Perlee in 1961. The related account of his research discoveries was published in the same year (see Perlee 1961: 66–68).<sup>1</sup>

In summer 2002, Ayudai Ochir and Lhagvasuren Erdenebold carried out some research excavations near Ulaan Kherem and discovered several sites similar to the Shoroon Bumbagar site but different in structure and layout. Mapping and documentation of these sites was published in 2005 (Ochir, Erdenebold and Enkhtur 2005: 130–39; see also Ochir, Erdenebold and Enkhtur 2003).

The Shoroon Bumbagar site at Ulaan Kherem, as it is known to the locals, is an earthen mound with a 36-metre diameter base framed by a square earthen mound wall (Fig. 1A–B). The southern and northern sides of this wall are both 200 metres long, the eastern and western sides are each 180 metres long, with a gap in the south side indicating the location of the entrance. The wall is 0.4–0.5 metres high and 2–3 metres wide at the base. A trench acting as a moat surrounds the wall. Above ground the tomb mound is 32 metres in diameter and 4.2 metres high and was built by layering and ramming down mud.

<sup>1</sup> The presentation of this contribution at the Third International SEECHAC Colloquium in Vienna and its translation was made possible by the generous support of Eurasia-Pacific Uninet (EPU) and the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF)-Project *Nomadic Artefacts*.

It appears that this rammed down mound protected the monument beneath from anybody falling or digging into it from above.

From the moment it was discovered we carried out comparative studies of similar finds in neighbouring countries such as China (including Xinjiang) and South Korea, and came to the preliminary assumption that the monument is the burial tomb of an ancient nomadic aristocrat.

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

#### *Entranceway Excavation*

We started excavation of the earthen mound from its south-side base, marking out a 40 metre by 10 metre rectangle to the south of the mound. As we dug down to between 1.2 m and 30 cm within the rectangle, we unearthed grey stony soil.

As we excavated along this stony soil it became clear that the entrance-way is 42 metres long. Starting from the foremost point of the entrance way, it slopes 45 degrees down into the ground, flattening out past the second airshaft before reaching the tomb corridor.

The entrance-way is approximately 2.0 metres wide. The front has an apex height of 12–20 cm, reaching a depth of 5.2 metres at the end and sloping into the ground. The entrance-way goes further, turning into the corridor from the point it enters the ground.

Although the tomb entrance slopes into the ground at the end of the excavated area, it was discovered that four successive vertical airshafts reached the entrance-way from the surface. We have called the part of the entranceway that flattens out into the ground

a “corridor” or an entrance. The airshafts discovered here are all similar in structure and design with on average 1.8 metres height under the ground, 75–80 cm width at the middle, and 1.3 metres at the base trapezoidal hole, which arches at the top. The walls of the airshafts are also arched from the bottom to top and are faced with a thin layer of yellow clay. The airshafts and the corridor were filled with a mixture of earth and stones.

Four entrance-way airshaft holes seem to have been built to provide air and light for people working inside the tomb during construction work as well as serving as a passage for extracting removed soil. The entrance-way was backfilled after the funeral. The construction, shape and design are the same for all airshafts, with soil having been removed evenly for each, and all walls being faced with yellow clay mixed with grass to a height of 2.6–2.8 metres. The airshaft is 5.7–7.5 metres deep below ground level.

A skeleton of a person, presumably a tomb robber who was crushed trying to dig into the tomb, was found during the excavation of the third airshaft. The skeleton was face down, stooping forward, legs bent, with an iron tool near his hand bones. A complete skeleton of a dog was found just above this skeleton.

The discovery and excavation of the entrance-way allowed access to the tomb chamber. Its entrance was 42 meters long, 1.8 meters wide deepening to 7.5 meters at the end or the point where it goes into the tomb (see Fig. 2).

#### *Sacrificial Auxiliary Chamber Excavation*

When the excavation reached the fourth vertical airshaft, two auxiliary chambers were discovered east and west of it. These sacrificial chambers are smallish rooms dug and hollowed out of both side-walls of the entrance-way. These types of chambers usually contain various animal depictions, sacrifices and offerings in memory of the deceased, which was common in funerary tradition for nobles and aristocrats in East Asia such as China and Koguryō.

#### *Sacrificial Chamber A*

The sacrificial chamber was created by digging a hollow room into the wall of the entrance-way of the tomb 60 cm above floor level. A 1.0 x 1.0 m hole was dug 60 cm into the wall, widening and bulging outwards towards the end. The walls of the chamber are neatly flattened and tidily faced with yellow clay. A door was installed at the neck of the sacrificial chamber, which was closed and had thin flat stones stacked in front of it (Fig. 3A–B).

The door frame of the chamber is made of thick wooden board and the door panels are made of two thinner boards attached by special hinges to open sideways. The door frame is 124 cm high, 110 cm wide and 5 cm thick, and made of thick neatly cut wooden board painted with dark red natural pigments. Its four corners have thin, flat, gilded brass hinges. The middle of the two door panels is pierced by an iron spike and was locked by gilded brass lock (Fig. 3C).

Slightly further down the neck of the chamber is slightly enlarged and left with untouched original soil. The main chamber is 1.5 m wide by 2.0 m long. There was no internal layer left as natural soil in the main chamber compartment, so it has been extensively damaged, burying the artefacts inside it.

Numerous clay figurines were found inside, leaning against the chamber wall. In the middle of the chamber there are clay figurines of horsemen with and without armour (Fig. 4). The clay figurines placed against the wall were well fired, and hence well preserved compared to those in the middle, which were damaged by collapsed ruins.

The clay figurines are of a similar artistic style, being made of well-sifted yellow clay, well-fired and then painted with natural pigments to draw faces, clothes and accessories. Interestingly, all the figurines are painted with varying facial features (Fig. 5A–B).

#### *Excavation of Chamber B*

Opposite Chamber A is what we have called Chamber B, in the left wall of the entrance-way of the burial tomb, made by a hole dug horizontally into the wall. The chamber has a small wooden door with flat stones stacked up over it.

The chamber was dug with a 1.0 x 1.0 m neck and is 60 cm deep, similar to Chamber A. The main chamber compartment was made by digging out earth, without any inner lining. It is 1.8 m wide, 2.0 m long, and approximately 1.4 m high. The internal layout is the same as that of Chamber A.

However, the chamber door has been extensively damaged with only the remnants of the door frame in its original place. The door frame is a bridle joint construction of 5-cm-thick wooden board painted with dark red natural pigments. It is 125 cm high and 110 cm wide. More clay figurines were found inside leaning against the chamber wall (Fig. 6) and there were clay figurines of horsemen in the middle of the chamber. Interestingly, if the horsemen in Chamber A were shown playing musical instruments, those in Chamber B were all black and white, holding flags on wooden sticks.

### *Tomb Excavation*

The entrance-way continues and narrows to 1 m towards the end of the tomb. This is the tomb neck. When this section was constructed, the entrance-way was narrowed comparably, and a pile of flat stones covered the neck part door, which is oval shaped, 210 cm high and 130 cm wide at the base, 140 cm wide in the middle and 110 cm wide at the top, with the wooden tomb chamber door behind it. However, the wooden chamber door has been damaged and only a door frame remains in its original place. The tomb chamber walls were not lined and the earth roof has collapsed extensively and buried artefacts inside the chamber.

Two side walls of the neck section of the tomb are faced with a grass and yellow clay mixture. This section is 2.8 m long and extends to the main compartment of the tomb, which was constructed by digging out the soil, fixing the walls and giving it a domed roof. The main chamber is oval shaped, 3.5 m in diameter and 2.7 m high.

The tomb is 7.5 m below the surface level, its walls faced with 1.0–1.5 cm thick yellow clay painted with different-coloured natural pigments.

The western part of the tomb floor is covered with 5-cm-thick wooden boards and there is a big wooden coffin on the right. The coffin was presumed to be two-layered. The earth from the roof of the chamber had damaged it extensively. However, after cleaning out the tomb chamber we measured the coffin as 230 cm long, 85 cm wide at the foot, and 40 cm wide at the head. It had double barrier around it and faces about 30 degrees towards the north-west and has bridle-jointed boards reinforced with iron nails.

This coffin contained another wooden box 80 cm long and 40 cm wide. Cleaning this revealed a silk bag containing the ashes of the deceased. It is clear that this was the funeral custom for ancient nomads. The small wooden box was inlaid with golden yellow patterned silk (Fig. 7).

The box containing ashes had golden coins wrapped in silk in its right-hand corner, golden accessories wrapped in silk at the top side, with wooden, iron and clay objects and artefacts around them. When the tomb door area was cleared out it revealed two standing figurines of hybrid guardian animals either side of the door and two guardian figures (Fig. 8).

As Chinese sources record, in the ancient burial custom of nomads the deceased was cremated and in a particular season of the year the ashes were buried together with his favourite horse and various artefacts. This also makes this archaeological discovery the first ever to provide evidence of a burial tomb carrying the frag-

mented depiction of the deceased person's lifestyle and the warfare he was involved in.

### *Objects and Tools Discovered in the Tomb*

Approximately 560 objects were discovered in the tomb site. They can be classified as objects found in the tomb as well as in the sacrificial chambers.

A total of 114 objects were discovered in the sacrificial chambers of the entrance-way:

Chamber A contained 49 well-fired clay human figurines: one sheep clay figurine, one clay bird figurine, one dog figurine, one pig figurine (see Fig. 9), six figurines of horsemen on horses and one lock with its keys.

Chamber B contained 41 human clay figurines, one clay camel figurine (Fig. 10), 12 figurines of horsemen on horse, and one pair of keys and lock.

Items found in the tomb chamber can be classified as clay objects, golden objects, silver objects, copper objects, iron objects, stones, brass, bone, and textile objects. Over 150 golden objects were discovered in the tomb chamber and comprise:

37 golden coins with and without inscriptions (Fig. 11), 4 silver coins, a golden cup (Fig. 12), a golden bell, belt buckles (Fig. 13), a head decoration (Fig. 14), earrings, a ring, a bracelet, saddle conchos and other golden objects and decorations (Fig. 15A–D). 32 copper and iron objects were found, including silver plated stirrups, bridle bits, lock and key, spike etc.

12 wooden items discovered were predominantly figurines of people, birds, and mystical creatures.

Four well-designed clay figurines of two human guardian figurines and two mystical creatures or hybrid guardian animals were found (Figs. 16–20).

### *Wall Paintings*

There were colour paintings on both walls of the entrance-way.

The tomb wall paintings consist of:

- ▶ Entranceway wall paintings (Figs. 21–25);
- ▶ Upper wall painting in a corridor (Figs. 26–27);
- ▶ Vertical airshaft wall paintings (Fig. 28A–B);
- ▶ Wall paintings on the wall next to the sacrificial chamber door (Fig. 29A–B);
- ▶ Tomb chamber wall paintings (Fig. 30).

There are over 30 wall paintings on the walls of the entrance-way and tomb chamber. All are drawn in natural red, black and blue pigments. The wall and floors in the entrance-way and tomb chamber were flattened, faced with a 0.5-cm-thick mixture of clay and a little grass, and then plastered with a thin lime and water solution. Observations show that the wall paintings were drawn at least by two artists. The two side walls of the entrance-way and tomb chamber walls are decorated with 24 drawings of people, one white tiger, one blue dragon, two saddled horses, one dog, two flags and seven bushy trees. On the walls of the entrance-way there is the drawing of two buildings that can be identified as temples. Rows of birds are depicted as leaving from the two sides of its roof and joining to fly away to the far end. This may have been an ancient nomad's understanding of the departing soul of the deceased. The biggest painting in the tomb is of a white tiger (*tsagaan bar*) on the western wall of the entrance-way. At 7.9 metres high, it is the biggest and highest tomb painting so far found in Asia.

## CONCLUSION

The first ever discovery of a tomb with wall paintings in Mongolia is a monument which embodies and delivers ancient nomads' worldview, craftsmanship, creativity and aesthetics to our generation. The Shoroon Bumbagar tomb burial site at Ulaan Kherem is a monument built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century for a tomb owner who was a high-ranking aristocrat from one of the clans of Turkish ethnicity.

Two humanlike guardian figurines were discovered from the tomb burials. Moreover, next to those two guards, inside the door, facing the entrance, there is a figurine of a mystical creature with a beak-like mouth and a long tail. Those four creatures are guardians of the deceased person's soul. This beaked creature and the lion-like hybrid animal guarding the corner have their own specific features. Earlier similar tomb guardian figurines found in China usually had dual heads combining human and animal facial features, while the figurine found at the Shoroon Bumbagar has beak-like facial features.

The main chamber of the Shoroon Bumbagar tomb at Ulaan Kherem had numerous golden coins, artefacts, and the ashes of the deceased were placed in a double-lined silk bag. About 40 of the coins discovered are golden. So far we have identified that most of these were minted in Constantinople, some in AD 630.<sup>2</sup> These coins are made more for ornamental purposes than for trading as they

<sup>2</sup> Among the coins identified were also a number of pseudo-Byzantine coins, that is, imitations of Byzantine coins (see Yatsenko 2014: 18, 24).

have hinges and hooks or holes presumably made for threading through or for attaching as decorations. Most of the coins had some kind of image, including some with images of rulers of the Byzantine dynasty. Some coins are from the Middle East, with fire-offering images. This is a major feature of Manichaeism and was spread in one way or another among Turkish and Uighur nomadic ethnic groups of that period, influencing their worldview and burial customs.

The coins with inscriptions have attracted considerable attention from researchers. Although the inscriptions have not yet been completely studied and interpreted, they are clearly in Latin and Greek. These are the first coins with writings discovered on the territory of Mongolia, and definitely provide a great new source for research and information to study the history of not only the Mongols but also the whole Central and Eastern Asian peoples.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned gold and silver coins indicate that at this time Central Asian nomadic populations were somehow related to regions much further to the west, which opens up a completely new field of research. Artefacts explored from Shoroon Bumbagar are new findings that establish a wider research subject in terms of foreign relations of ancient nomads in the territory of present-day Mongolia.

A golden artefact with a flower pattern design found at Shoroon Bumbagar in the Ulaan Kherem complex is another fascinating object. This was intentionally destroyed and placed in the coffin, so there are slim chances of restoring it to its initial form. Close examination of the flower design reveals that it has heart-like shapes connected together in a round, revealing a whole flower pattern. As researchers have noted, this type of flower design originated in India and expresses life force or energy of life. The Chinese call it "a precious flower pattern", and though it originated in India it seems to have crossed into China and was becoming popular among Central Asian population groups. We presume that the golden flower pattern artefact found at Shoroon Bumbagar is either a crown or hat decoration. If it is indeed identified as a crown, then this would support our presumption that the monument we discovered is a burial tomb of one of the state royalties of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

A drawing on the upper side of the corridor, depicting a head of a creature with cow-like ears and horns, though with teeth in an upper jaw, also represents a guardian. This type of imagery was used in the depictions of Mongolian soldiers. These were usually attached to the right-hand edge of a soldier's sleeve by the wrist. These cow-like images are called *Khalkh* in Mongolian, and in some areas *Bambai*.

Shoroon Bumbagar has provided not only wall paintings but also more than 560 various other artefacts made from materials such as clay, gold, silver, copper, iron, wood, silk and other textiles and is recorded as one of the richest discoveries. The layout of the burial tomb, organisation, wall paintings, their locations, exquisite manufacture, colourful wall paintings, and precious artefacts are a cultural gallery of ancient nomads.

Previous archaeological findings have discovered that the western Turkish Empire had connections with the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire. The discoveries at the Shoroon Bumbagar excavation site now prove that nomadic groups governed by the eastern Turkish Empire also had relations with the Middle East, Middle Asia, and the western world in the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Previous discoveries of the spread of tomb burial painting in Asia have been limited to Japan, China and Korea. The discovery of tomb burial wall painting at the Shoroon Bumbagar has expanded this spread further into the west. This allows the inclusion not only of Mongolia but also the whole Central Asian plateau in the region where tomb wall paintings were the custom. On the other hand, it was presumed that only Central Asian and East Asian nomadic tribes under the Kidan dynasty used tomb burial wall painting, and this discovery provides us with new knowledge and proof that burial tomb wall paintings were used by earlier nomadic population groups on the territory of Mongolia.

The horseman painted next to a saddled and bridled horse on the right-hand wall of the tomb is wearing a hat and other attire that resembles a Middle Eastern design. However, the cut of his horse's mane is similar to those of ancient Turkish ethnicities. The depiction on the tomb wall of men and women next to a bushy tree, on one hand is reminiscent of Central Asian myths, on the other hand it gives an impression of a couple strolling in the park. This provides an insight into the development of the ancient nomad's creative mind.

The four entrance-way airshaft holes seem to have been built to provide air and light for people working inside the tomb during the construction work. However, after the funeral the entrance-way was backfilled with soil and rocks. Although the length and number of airshafts are determined by the depth of the tomb, it is also an indication of the tomb owner's social stratification, and the level of esteem he commanded.

Inside the tomb, on the left side of the chamber, there is a wooden podium with a wooden horse, a camel and a cart on top. Next to the horse, facing his owner, there is a bridle near the horse's head, stirrups near his ribs and a saddle near his back. Flags and domestic

animals above and to the left of this horse indicate that this had a sacrificial purpose.

The artefacts found at Shoroon Bumbagar indicate that ancient, 7<sup>th</sup> century inhabitants of present-day Mongolia had direct and indirect connections with the Middle East in the west, Greece, Rome in the west, China in the south, Tibet and India in the south-west, and Mohe and Bohai (ancestors of the Koreans) in the east, and not only knew them but had a certain level of interactions with them. No burial tomb with complete wall paintings and rich artefacts has previously been discovered on the territory of not only Mongolia but also of Central Asia. Researchers therefore regard the burial tomb of Shoroon Bumbagar, Ulaan Kherem, as a new archaeological finding of ancient nomadic culture.

Although we have not been able to identify the owner of the tomb, objects found at the site, the burial chamber design and structure, and the burial custom used all clearly indicate that the person was of high social and political status at the time. A tentative conclusion suggests that the tomb may date to the second part of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The rare findings at Shoroon Bumbagar contribute new materials to launch historical and archaeological research in terms of burial construction and custom of ancient nomads, their aesthetics, creative thinking, craftsmanship development and world view. Undoubtedly, these findings would provide fundamental tools to further our knowledge about ancient nomadic society in the territory of present-day Mongolia, their socioeconomic, intellectual development and foreign relations.

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Fig. 1A-B: Tomb mound, Shoroon Bumbagar site  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).

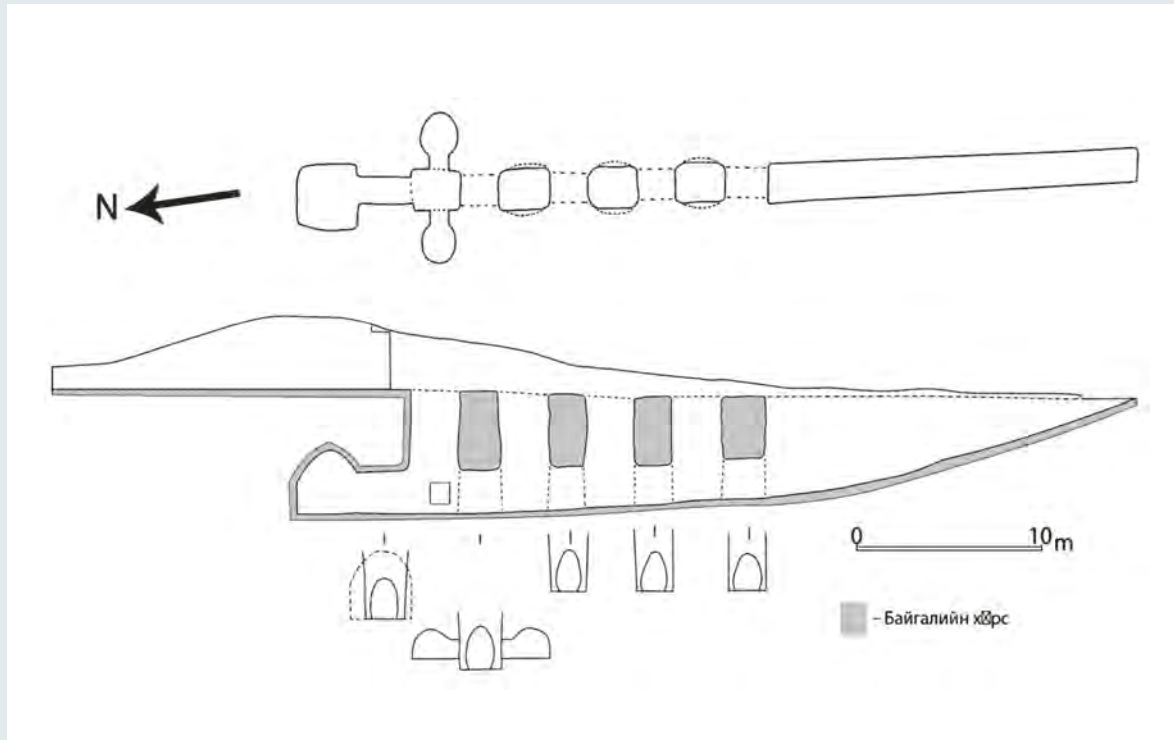


Fig. 2: Subterranean burial site  
(drawing: L. Erdenebold, 2011).

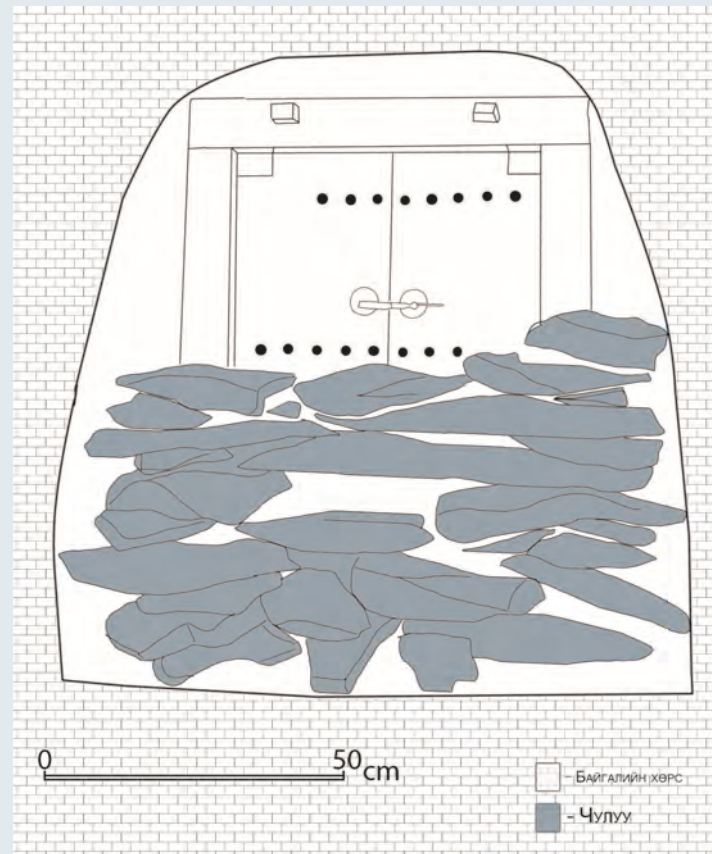


Fig. 3A-B: Door to sacrificial chamber on its first discovery (photo and drawing: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 3C: Gilded brass lock  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 4: Clay figurines of horsemen, sacrificial chamber A  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).





Fig. 5A–B: Clay human figurines with different facial characters and horsemen with musical instruments, sacrificial chamber A (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 6: Clay figurine of a horse, sacrificial chamber B (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 7: Fragments of golden yellow patterned silk, placed inside the coffin (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 8: Clay figurines of four guardians of the grave on its first discovery (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 9A-D: Clay figurines of four animals (sheep, dog, pig and chicken) (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 10: Clay figurine of a camel  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 11: Golden coins with and without inscription (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 12: Golden cup  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 13: Golden belt buckles  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



**Fig. 14:** Golden head decoration  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).





Fig. 15A-D: Various golden items  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 16: Clay figurine of a guardian figure of the grave (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).

Fig. 17: Details of a guardian figure of the grave (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 18: Clay figurine of a guardian figure of the grave (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 19: Clay figurine of a guardian hybrid animal (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).

Fig. 20: Clay figurine of a guardian hybrid animal  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).





Fig. 21: Entranceway wall paintings  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 22: Entranceway wall paintings  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 23–25: Entranceway wall paintings  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 26–27: Upper wall painting in a corridor (temple, mystical creature) (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).





Fig. 28A–B: Vertical airshaft wall paintings  
(photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 29A-B: Wall paintings on the wall next to the sacrificial chamber door (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).



Fig. 30: Tomb chamber wall painting (photo: L. Erdenebold, 2011).