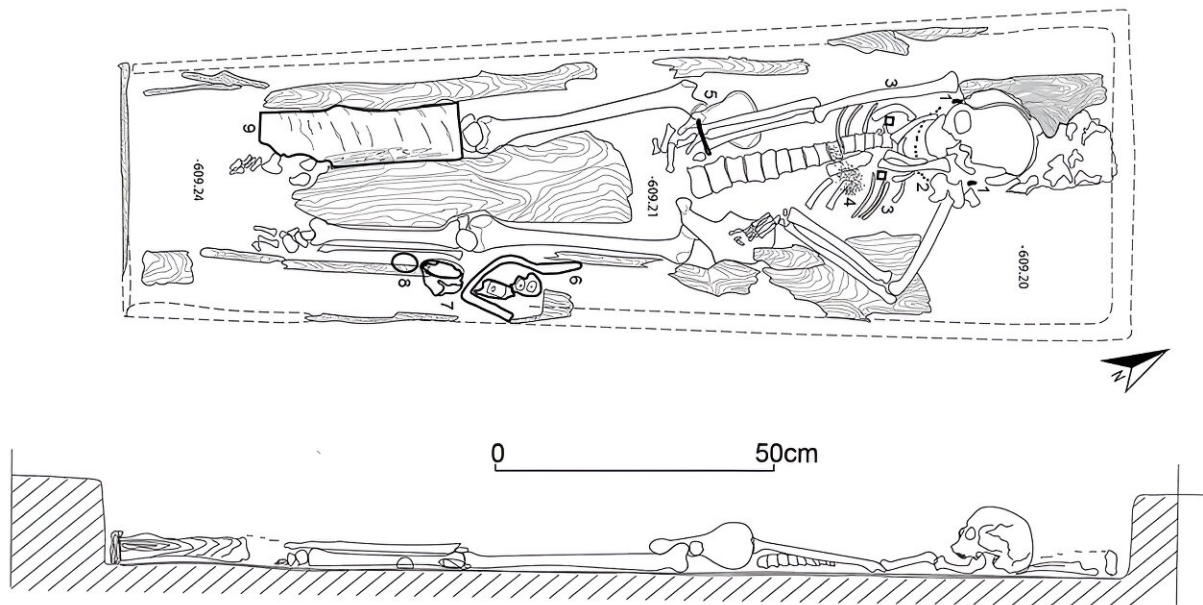


# Pre-Mongolian elite grave found in an abandoned fortress

August 12 2024, by Sandee Oster



Khar Nur grave plan, including elevation measurements, profile view and numbered indicators of where artifacts were found. Credit: *Archaeological Research in Asia* (2024). DOI: 10.1016/j.ara.2024.100537

In 2022, an international team forming the Joint Mongolian-Israeli-American Archaeological Project excavated an abandoned frontier fortress. They made an unexpected discovery: an elite grave buried in the walls of an abandoned fortress dating to the post-Kitan and pre-Mongol periods. The results of their research were recently [published](#) in

*Archaeological Research in Asia.*

The Kitan-Liao Empire (916–1125CE) once controlled great swaths of land, including large parts of central and eastern Mongolia; after its collapse, the Mongolian Empire and the great Chinggis Khan rose to prominence by 1206CE.

However, the interim period between the rise and fall of these empires is still poorly understood, and therefore, insights into the social and [political landscape](#) are lacking. This is because, historically and archaeologically, very few records and remains are preserved.

Professor Shelach-Lavi, an archaeologist working on the project, explains, "There are two main reasons for this: 1. Mongolia is a large country and, relatively speaking, the amount of archaeology done is not that much. The area where the grave was found is relatively unknown archaeologically, and our project is among the first to target it.

"2. The period between the fall of the Liao dynasty and the rise of the Mongol state and empire is a relatively obscure period in the history as well as the archaeology of this region—partly because there was not centralization of control over Mongolia and no strong political entity, so investment in monuments is less than in other periods."

The abandoned fortress, Khar Nuur, was part of a much larger set of walls and fortresses that spanned more than 4,000 km in length. The fortress itself, and its accompanying wall and ditch make up approximately 737 km.

The burial was discovered by chance within the walls of Khar Nuur. It consisted of a wooden coffin, various grave goods, and a woman's body. The grave is one of only 25 other Mongolian burials found thus far dating to this period.

Professor Shelach-Lavi provides a possible explanation for the rarity of graves dating to this period. "The grave we found was not marked above the surface (we found it by chance), so perhaps this was the norm during this period, and therefore fewer graves have been identified and excavated.

"Also, I should point out that this is a relatively short period of less than 100 years, so perhaps it did not 'produce' many burials or other sites, but it is also very important for our understanding of the rise of the Mongol empire."

The woman was buried between 1158 and 1214CE. As evidenced by radiocarbon dates, she was between the ages of 40 and 60 when she died. Her body was placed in a supine (face-up) position in a shallow grave; for the burial, she had been dressed in a yellow silk robe and headdress reminiscent of traditional medieval women's hats, called bogtag malgai.

She likely belonged to the elite, as evidenced by the golden earrings, silver cup, bronze vessel, gold bracelet, and coral and glass beads found within her grave, among other grave goods.

How these objects may have facilitated her in the afterlife is unknown, says Prof. Shelach-Lavi. "We really do not know much about specific ideas. We know that the belief in the Sky (Tengri) already existed in Mongolia and that Shamanism was also practiced, but we cannot connect those broad ideas to the specific artifacts and practices seen in the grave."

Many of the artifacts were of non-local origin, such as the silk which likely originated in the south in China, or the wood (sourced from birch, mulberry and/or larch), whose native counterparts grew 150 to 300 km away.

The woman's grave is rather unique, though it shows some consistencies with other Mongolian burials at the time, such as the northward orientation, the wooden coffin and the mix of material goods. It also lacks some aspects, such as a stone-built feature to mark the grave or pottery (although the bronze vessel and silver cup may have fulfilled this role).

Prof. Shelach-Lavi says, "The most surprising is the richness of the grave—considering its modest size and also in comparison to other known graves of this era. Even more surprising are the variety of artifacts and materials found and their diverse origins.

"The fact that artifacts that were produced in different places, some of them probably quite distant, and materials from diverse origins (including, for example, the wood types found in the grave) ended up in this grave suggest a network of connections that are unknown from historical records of the time.

"Also surprising, as we mentioned in the paper, is the placement of the grave which was dug into the wall of an earlier (but not much earlier) fortress."

It is most similar to the graves found almost 500 km southwest in Tavan Tolgoi cemetery. Here, the burials represent individuals of the elite and royal lineages. The Khar Nuur woman was also likely from a prestigious lineage, with political standing and networks that enabled her to gain access to wealth and artifacts from around and beyond her homeland.

Why she was buried within the fort walls remains unknown; perhaps the fortress was seen as a symbol of prestige, befitting of her status, or her burial enabled the local community to strengthen their hold over this part of their territory.

The archaeologists cannot say for sure; however, ongoing research may provide insights in the years to come.

"We continue to work at the same region of Northeast Mongolia. The main focus of our research is a series of long (or 'great') walls and accompanying fortresses built in this region during the Medieval period. But we also like to excavate graves from this period that can provide more information about the people who inhabited the region.

"This year, for example, we located a large graveyard north of where we work and we will excavate one or more graves to get a better idea of their date and content. We are also continuing to examine the artifacts found in the grave and compare them to similar artifacts from the same [period](#) (or from slightly earlier and later periods)."

**More information:** Amartuvshin Chunag et al, An elite grave of the pre-Mongol period, from Dornod Province, Mongolia, *Archaeological Research in Asia* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ara.2024.100537](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ara.2024.100537)

© 2024 Science X Network

Citation: Pre-Mongolian elite grave found in an abandoned fortress (2024, August 12) retrieved 12 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-pre-mongolian-elite-grave-abandoned.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.