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NOMADIC TOWNS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS IN MONGOLIA.
The Khi-Land Project's research into Khar Bukh Balgas and other Khitan settlements

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The recent study of 10th–12th-century archaeological sites of the Khitan Liao Empire in Mongolia produced significant new results. Earlier research focused mainly on the internal structure of a few fortified settlements, while recent investigations placed greater emphasis on the immediate environment of these central places. In 2023, the Hungarian-Mongolian joint project called Khi-Land facilitated fieldwork at one of the most important archaeological sites of the region, Khar Bukh Balgas. This paper presents the geophysical and archaeological surveys conducted at this settlement and briefly discusses the features around the fortification that were examined by aerial photography. Exploring the small, enclosed sites in the region through aerial surveys and field walks contributes to a better understanding of Khitan period settlement networks and the general phenomenon of nomadic towns.

Keywords: Khitan Empire, landscape archaeology, forts, fortified places, geophysical surveys, aerial photography

INTRODUCTION

The settlement of Khar Bukh Balgas is traditionally associated by research with the Liao Dynasty of Khitan origin that ruled over the territory of present-day Mongolia. In the early 10th century, Abaoji (872–926) of the Khitan Yelü tribe forged a powerful tribal alliance and became the founder of the Liao Dynasty when he became emperor in 916. In 1005, the so-called Treaty of Chanyuan established the borders with the Song Dynasty that ruled over the Chinese territories south of Liao, defining the division of China between the Western Xia Empire, the Liao, and the Song Dynasties (Hang 2018). Several Khitan archaeological sites are known in present-day Mongolia, but their role in the Khitan state organisation is yet to be fully understood.

The Khi-Land Project, conducted jointly by the Research Center for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of History and Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, was launched in the autumn of 2016 and had its fifth fieldwork season in April 2023.[8] One of the main objectives of the project is to gain a better understanding of settlement formation and the Khitan settlement networks in the 10th–12th centuries. In 2017–18, our team conducted field walks in the area of Khar Bukh Balgas in the Dashinchilen district, in the county of Bulgan, while in 2019, we investigated Khitan settlements in East Mongolia (*Fig. 1*). A significant step towards the sustainability of the project was the launch the Khitan Research Center at the University of Science and Technology of Ulaanbataar in 2019, which

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[8] The project (2017–2023) is based on an agreement between the two institutions. Although both institutions have been reorganised since 2017 and there have been changes in the scientific staff, they continued supporting the original objectives. The program is currently run in collaboration between the HUN-REN Research Network's Centre for Humanities and the Institute of Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. The project has been supported by several organisations: the Arnold Stein Fund of the British Academy, the László Kádár Foundation for Mongolian Research, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, the Central European University, and the Tahiméter Ltd.

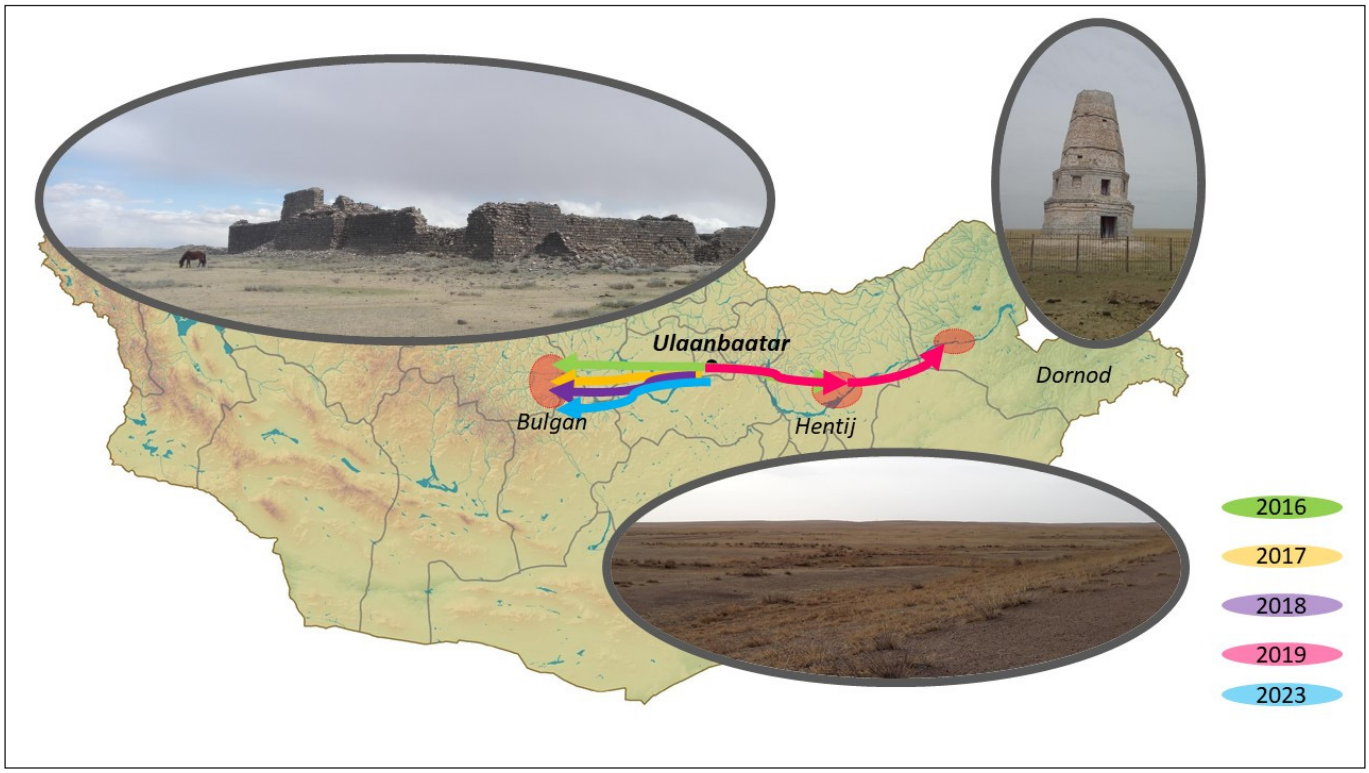

Fig. 1. Khitan settlements in Mongolia and the areas researched in the Khi-Land project

promotes both educational and scientific research programmes.[9] The project's results have been regularly communicated in the journal *Hungarian Archaeology* (Csiky *et al.* 2017; Erdenebold *et al.* 2018; Tolnai *et al.* 2019). In 2020, the project was suspended due to the pandemic, and in 2022, because of Russia's war in Ukraine. In the past years, we have concentrated on processing the collected data, and as a result, a number of papers have been published in Hungarian and other languages.

GOALS OF THE 2023 FIELDWORK

Fieldwork continued in the area of Khar Bukh Balgas in late April 2023 with a team of eleven people. In addition to aerial reconnaissance and targeted field walks, which we had used earlier, now we had the chance to apply another remote sensing method, as a team of Geomega Ltd, T. Tóth, Z. Hámori, and M. J. Tóth, joined us to conduct geophysical surveys in both the core and the vicinity of the fortified settlement. Our long-time Mongolian colleague, Lkh. Erdenbold helped us organise the fieldwork, and G. Urtnasan, a Mongolian archaeologist specialising in the Khitan sites, joined the research team. The weather with strong winds, sandstorms, and 0–15°C cold impeded this year's survey.

Between 2017 and 2023, our fieldwork and data collection targeted specific research questions and working hypotheses. First and foremost, we aimed to investigate nomadic towns and their environments and landscape features that may shed light on the formation, habitation, and abandonment of these settlements. We collected data at various sites, including urbanised and enclosed (fortified) ones, and in some cases (e.g., at Khar Bukh Balgas and Ulaan kherem), it proved possible to explore the internal structure of the settlement. Research into settlement structure revealed that townscapes did not form organically but followed a predetermined, conscious design. This is evidenced by the evenly distributed partitions and the position of individual buildings and building rows. The location of each settlement also seems to have been deliberately chosen and planned, with close proximity to watercourses and the settlements situated at roughly the same distance. Traces of land cultivation were observed in the environment of several sites.

[9] Монгол-Унгарын хамтарсан Khi-Land төслийн Киданы судалгааны төв / Research Laboratory of the Mongol-Hungarian Khi-Land Project on Khitan Heritage.

Although dating these requires collecting more data on the field, it may be hypothesised that the traces of land cultivation are coeval with the fortified settlements. This is evidenced by potsherds scattered throughout the area and the cultivation traces in question, often found at places with no later archaeological features.

Drawing on these, three main objectives were formulated for the 2023 fieldwork:

1. In light of earlier magnetometer surveys that covered only small areas, we decided to test how other geophysical methods can contribute to the exploration of the character of the town inside the walls, the structure of the fortification walls, and discernible features in the settlements' vicinity. The main question related to the settlement core is what raw materials were used in its construction. The inner area of the fortification was divided into four quarters by two perpendicular main roads. These were very wide, and the 3D model generated from the aerial photos shows no traces of any constructions on them. In order to explore the structure of the road, we conducted surveys close to the gate tower. To understand the structure of the fortification wall, we also planned to investigate its cross-section. One of the aims was to conduct an intensive field walk in the area before applying geophysical survey methods to record the variations in surface vegetation, the micro-relief phenomena, and the spatial distribution of the artefacts.
2. Aerial survey of structures and landscape features in the immediate vicinity of the site, primarily to identify the external parts of the settlement and the traces of cultivation around it. This part of the research was closely linked to earlier investigations by Gergely Csiky and the results of the previous systematic surface find collecting surveys.
3. The aerial survey and archaeological field walks focused on approximately twenty (fortified) places in the vicinity of the main site to potentially uncover more about the Khitan town structure and settlement hierarchy. These surveys were expected to reveal which sites date back to the Khitan period. Research into settlement structure also facilitates a preliminary typology.

FIELDWORK RESULTS

1. Geophysical surveys in the inner core of the settlement of Khar Bukh Balgas

In 2017, we conducted a geophysical survey with magnetometer and resistivity measurements in the inner area of Khar Bukh Balgas. At that time, we were assisted by our Mongolian colleague L. Ganbaatar, who had spent his university years in Hungary in the 1970s. This magnetometer survey covered the inner area of the fort in 14 rows at roughly 50m intervals, using a Geometrics G-856 magnetometer. The outcome made it clear that it is worth using prospecting and non-destructive methods in the area, but additional surveys are obviously needed to refine the preliminary results. An important example of the potential of geophysical research in Mongolia is the magnetometer and topographic survey of Karakorum, the 13th-century Mongolian capital. This research covered ca. 465 hectares and produced fresh results concerning the structure and environment of the city. It was an important observation that a certain type of grass, a species also present at Khar Bukh Balgas, indicates the presence of underground features made of brick (Bemmann *et al.* 2022).

The 2023 fieldwork presented an opportunity to conduct a detailed geophysical survey of one part of the fort's area. In the end, the team of Geomega Ltd surveyed an even larger area than planned despite the challenging weather conditions. They used two different measurement techniques in parallel: a Zond-12e ground penetrating radar (GPR) device with 900 mHz antennas and a CMD Mini Explorer electromagnetic (EM) resistance meter; the measurements were positioned using differential GPS. Using both instruments simultaneously proved a very good decision as they complemented each other. GPR surveys were hampered by different vegetation types, including *Achnatherum splendens*, a common grass species in the area with solid stems and up to 50 cm long leaves. Thus, resistivity measurements were applied to refine the results in areas covered with dense vegetation (*Fig. 2*).[10] The GPR survey was conducted with an antenna

[10] For more information on the archaeological applications of geophysical methods, please refer to the recommendations of English Heritage. https://www.europae-archaeologiae-consilium.org/_files/ugd/881a59_fdb1636e95f64813a65178895aea87cf.pdf

Fig. 2. GPR (red) and EM (blue) surveys of the fortified settlement of Khar Bukh Balgas

frequency of around 900 MHz along a 0.25m grid. EM measurements were performed by mapping three effective depths (0.25m, 0.5m and 0.9m).

Of the total study area of more than 50 ha, 1.4 ha were surveyed with GPR and 10ha with EM, of which 0.8 ha was surveyed with both methods (*Fig. 3*). Areas where remains of buildings were suspected based on previous drone imagery and where no vegetation was present on the surface to impede the GPR were primarily selected for GPR survey. In contrast, EM measurements were also taken at places with dense vegetation with long grass and small shrubs (*Fig. 4–5*). GPR measurements were taken along tape-measured sections with post-corrected DGPS positioning and under one-centimetre accuracy. EM measurements were positioned using the device's internal GPS data. Preliminary processing of the EM measurement data suggests that most of the ruins identified in the previous drone survey show higher electrical conductivity than their surroundings. This is presumably due to the residual, clayey material of the one-time walls. The 'background' is dry, sandy soil with low electrical conductivity, providing a favourable environment for GPR measurements and good subsurface penetration for radar waves. Preliminary processing of the GPR measurements shows a penetration of the waves in a depth of more than 1m, i.e., subsurface objects and layers could be mapped with decimetric detail in this depth range. Scattered archaeological features were identified in high numbers during the primary interpretation of the results from the ruined area. Mapping of these is in progress. Despite their

Fig. 3. Geophysical survey of Khar Bukh Balgas: GPR survey of the non-vegetation-covered parts within the fortification

Fig. 4. Khar Bukh Balgas, the central part of the fortified settlement on a drone image. Differences in vegetation indicate the position of the building remains underground

uniform appearance on the surface, measurements of the fort walls show variations in the building materials used. The same forms dominate everywhere, but building materials with different characteristics and provenance were used to construct the rampart (wall) structure. This preliminary observation was confirmed by a series of geophysical measurements on both sides of the wall.

The intensive field walk that accompanied the geophysical survey made it possible to identify functional units within the fortification based on, for example, the spatial distribution of artefacts for processing cereals (e.g., grindstones). A concentration of characteristic Khitan roof tiles or their complete absence also revealed information about the character of the buildings that once stood there. A further task is to interpret the complex relationships between the micro-relief phenomena explored by aerial reconnaissance, the anomalies revealed by the geophysical survey, the spatial variations in the surface vegetation, and the archaeological finds and phenomena observed on the surface. This will provide a more accurate picture of the internal structure of the fortified settlement without excavations, also allowing a reinterpretation of the small-scale excavations carried out so far (Ochir, Enkhtör, & Erdenebold 2005).

Fig. 5. Khar Bukh Balgas, remains of the modern period monastery within the fortification. Differences in vegetation indicate the position of some Khitan building remains underground

The intensive field walk that followed the geophysical survey (within the fortification and at its walls), combined with the aerial photos and field walks outside the fortification, revealed new information about land use around the former settlement. As has been proven by earlier intensive field walks,[11] there is a high variability in the spatial distribution of surface finds outside the fortification. Traces of land cultivation, seen in the satellite images and drone photos, were identified on the northern and eastern

[11] Gergely Csiky's unpublished study, intended to be published in *Hungarian Archaeology* in the near future.

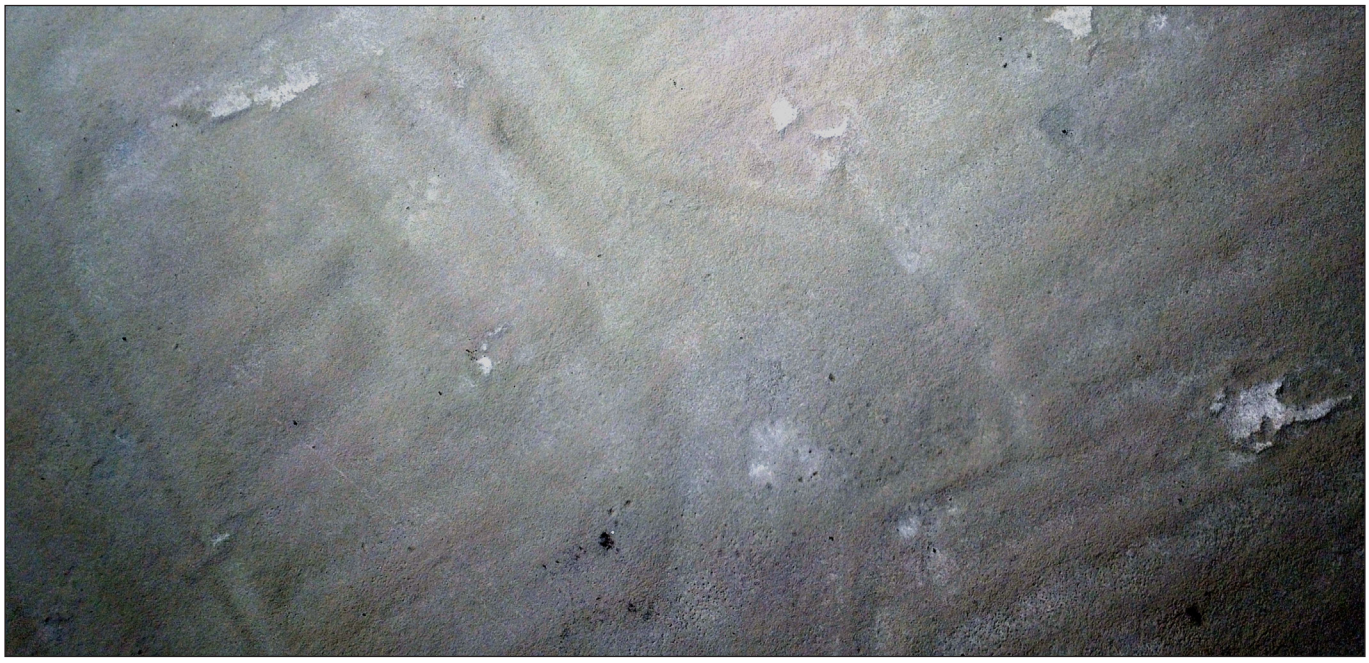

Fig. 6. Khar Bukh Balgas, survey area No. 10 outside the fortification with traces of landscape archaeological features and land use on the drone image. The identified features were surveyed using geophysical methods

sides of the settlement, where they extended to the fortification trench that enclosed the town (*Fig. 6*). The old roads in these areas follow a pattern that acknowledges the arrangement of cultivated lands. Modern roads sometimes follow the same route, but at places, they cut through the old boundaries seen in the aerial photos. Surface finds were sporadic in these areas and usually associated with visible external features, the function of which is still unclear. Traces of agricultural cultivation were present at considerable distances (up to several kilometres), usually stretching to the nearby riverbed. Plot borders, also visible on aerial photographs, allow the identification of units of different sizes, with smaller units appearing closer to the fort. These must have been horticultural units, while the larger ones may indicate arable land. The 2023 fieldwork also suggested that settlement traces outside the walls can be expected on the south and southwest sides of the fort, as shown by the distribution of surface finds; there were no signs of cultivation in these areas. Further research will determine whether the evidence of settlement outside the fort and the elements of agricultural cultivation coexisted or overlapped. In the latter case, these areas were possibly used differently at different times of the Khitan period.

2. Aerial archaeology, panoramic photography

In addition to the geophysical surveys, we also continued conducting targeted UAV flights for topographic purposes (*Fig. 7*). As in our previous fieldwork session, the flights followed predetermined tracks at an altitude of 100 m, using a Mavic Pro Platinum drone at 21 different sites. During the flights this year, over 3,500 images were captured, representing 33 GB of raw data. This means collecting data from nearly 40 sites throughout the project (2017–2023), based on which a detailed map can be produced. Conditions were not ideal for flights during the 2023 season: very strong winds, typical of the Mongolian spring, slowed the flight speed considerably, with flights of around 6 minutes under optimal conditions often requiring a full battery load and 15–20 minutes of flight time. Over the seven years of the project, this adds up to nearly 400 minutes of airtime and nearly 100 kilometres flown.

Most sites documented by aerial photographs and investigated through archaeological fieldwork are small, square or rectangular enclosures close to watercourses (*Fig. 8*). No additional features were observed inside them. In many cases, the perimeter walls have partially eroded due to changes in the riverbed. No gates, towers or other protective features (e.g., ditches) were observed along the perimeter walls, which indicates that these enclosures may have served non-military purposes. However, some enclosures also contain additional

Fig. 7. Drone mapping of landscape archaeological features, enclosures, and traces of modern land use

Fig. 8. Aerial and field walk survey of Naidag uuliin, dörböljin kherem, an enclosure site

Table 1. Sites documented on aerial photographs and investigated by archaeological field walks

Mongolian name	Size	Area (ha)	Description
Süüjiin golin kherem	120m × 140 m	1.68	Two-part fenced area. The smaller part is square, oriented NE-SW, 120m × 140m. Its southern side adjoins an enclosure of at least 400 × 230 m, the western / southern extent of which cannot be established. No archaeological features were identified inside the fence.
Savartai golin balgas	400m × 300m	12	Diamond-shaped enclosure. No traces of archaeological features were found inside.
Khermen ders	300m × 300m	9	Square enclosure in a highly waterlogged area, facing northeast. Its surrounding walls have largely been washed away by the nearby river, and no features can be recorded inside them.
Naidag uuliin dörböljin kherem	100m × 100m	1	Small rectangular fenced area oriented slightly NE-SW. A modern road runs through its centre. No archaeological feature is known inside.
Tsagaan üzüriin kherem	200m × 210m	4.2	A regular, almost rectangular. No archaeological feature is currently known inside.
Tsagaan üzüriin kherem 2	116m × 120m	1.392	Rhomboidal enclosed area with perimeter walls in poor condition.
Tsagaan üzüriin kherem 3	105m × 105m	1.1025	Square, NW-SE oriented fenced area. No archaeological features were observed inside.
Öndör denjiin soroon kherem	65m × 60m	0.39	Very small fenced area in poor condition.
Ondgoin dörböljin	210m × 120m	2.52	Rectangular enclosure 4 km SE of the Ulaan kherem site. Traces of archaeological features were observed within the enclosure.
Khermen denj C	180m × 210m	3.78	Enclosure with an internal structure very different from the other square enclosures. The site was photographed in 2018, but a sandstorm prevented aerial photography, so the survey was repeated in 2023. Based on the structure of the site, this enclosure is unlikely to be settlement-related but rather a burial ground or a ritual building. Further fieldwork and archaeological excavation, planned in the next project phase, are required to clarify that.
Near Tola River, Cagaan denjiin balgas 2.	60m × 90m	0.54	Rectangular enclosure with barely discernible traces of archaeological features inside.
Dersen kherem 3	80m × 30m	0.024	A heavily degraded rectangular, presumably enclosed feature in a heavily waterlogged area, difficult to identify.
Dersen kherem 4	270m × 140m	3.78	Partly destroyed enclosure in a highly waterlogged area. Both corners are visible on its southern side, demarcating a 270m wide side. Its NE extent cannot be determined at present.

landscape features, so further investigation of their possible connection with agriculture is necessary. The table in this article summarises the details of the main sites photographed from the air *(Table 1)*.

As part of the project, panoramic photography was taken for the first time using an Insta360 camera. The panoramic photography aimed to record the current state of the site and create a digital file that can be remotely accessed online. In this way, the project makes the sites accessible to both researchers and the public, even when on-site visits are not feasible. Images of the interior of a museum located near Khar Bukh Balgas also help create a small virtual exhibition.

MODERN NOMADISM AND PRESENT-DAY LANDSCAPE USE

The objectives of the Khi-Land project included research into landscape archaeology of the Khitan period and exploring archaeological features that date from other eras at the investigated sites and in their environment. As reported previously (Erdenebold *et al*. 2018; Tolnai *et al*. 2019), the task also involves collecting historical and ethnographic information about the sites. This year's fieldwork proved successful in this regard.

In 2023, we focused on how present-day Mongolians use the landscape. Most of the *kherem*s (forts, enclosures) we investigated had been weathered for centuries and are hardly recognisable in the landscape. Local nomads do not differentiate between these features and the natural environment and use these sites as pasture if the vegetation is suitable for the herd. However, they are very much aware of the special status of these places, which is often reflected in the toponyms. Where fortification walls are more-or-less preserved, the wall surrounding the *kherem* is occasionally used to protect the nomads' campsites (*Fig. 9*). Winter camps, including both yurts and sheepfolds, often take advantage of the protection provided by the wall against the wind and the manure used as fuel during the winter is stored in the lee of the wall (*Fig. 10*).

At one such winter camp, the interviewees provided important information on the transformation of Mongolian nomadism in the 21st century. Located near the centre of Dashinchilen aimag Bayan nuur sum (dis-

Fig. 9. Empty winter dwelling with pens on top of which the collected manure is dried and the embankment of a kherem, an enclosed site in the background

Fig. 10. Documenting the embankment of an enclosed site and the structures of the recent winter dwelling

trict), this winter shelter was within sight of the settlement, and the animals were herded from here to the spring shelter by April while their owner stayed in town. Herding followed a practice that is now common across Mongolia: nomads prefer to graze the herds in the immediate vicinity of settlements, often keeping the animals of several families together in one herd. This has an adverse environmental impact, causing overgrazing and desertification, as the grasslands have no time to regenerate. Most income is generated by animal husbandry; however, the balance between natural capacities and human demands is disrupted. The situation is especially severe in the Bayan nuur and Dashinchilen districts in Bulgan County, an area with exceptional natural conditions (an extremely dry region surrounded by high mountains where the annual precipitation is very low even by Mongolian standards). In such an environment, changes in the composition of herds and the growing number of goats – a problem that Mongolians have to face in many parts of the country – pose an even graver danger to sustainability.[12] The low-quality vegetation that grows in desertified areas can only sustain goats, and at the same time, there is a rising demand for cashmere wool, which promises a decent living to farmers. However, the breakdown of centuries-long standards inevitably leads to natural damage, which, in turn, may force people to abandon their present way of life. Our fieldwork was scheduled for the goat shearing season, and we had the chance to talk to a herder who owned 300 goats and much fewer sheep. In traditional family herds, most animals were sheep, with a small number of goats that never exceeded the third or, at maximum, half of the livestock. This ancient paradigm has changed due to modern market demand. The 2023 experience was similar to the 2018: this new form of herding has become the norm.

HISTORICAL AND SACRAL TRADITION

The previous publications of the Khi-Land project, and especially one of our earlier papers (Byambaragchaa, Laszlovszky & Szilágyi 2020), have addressed the modern sacral role of archaeological sites. Our research interest also includes the importance of the archaeological sites in the lives of local communities in both the Mongolian cultural and historical tradition and the local identity of people living nearby. The Khar

[12] https://www.ceicdata.com/en/mongolia/number-of-livestock/number-of-livestock-goat; https://news.mn/en/798530/

Bukh Balgas is a thought-provoking example in this regard, as it plays an important part in defining the local identity. The monastery was built here at the turn of the 16th century, and the remains of a stupa there played a role in the history of Mongolian Buddhism. The monastery's history is well-known from written sources; most of the texts found in the stupa and subsequently published are connected to the Buddhist tradition (Chiodo 2000; 2009). At a conference hosted by the Institute of History and Ethnography at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and the Dzhenghis Khan National Museum in April 2023, B. Natsagdorj gave a paper about the fragments of a manuscript of the Epic of King Gesar, found at this very site.[13] This epic has a major impact on Mongolian culture: scholars from (Inner) Mongolia spare no effort to study these texts and collect different variants. The sustained academic interest of the Institute of Ethnic Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Bao & Chao Gejin 2016) also bears out the importance of this text.

Unmistakable signs that Khar Bukh Balgas has traditional sacral functions—offerings and *khadags*, i.e., ceremonial silk ribbons placed in and around the stupa and other buildings—were observed both in earlier years and in 2023: visitors continue to come to the site to make offerings, and thus, the place's ritual importance has been preserved. The site is part of Mongolian history and architectural heritage but also functions as a place of worship.

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[13] This project involves the study of the three major Inner Asian epic traditions, the Geser, the Jangar and the Manas, which are still alive today. The institute researches the Geser epic among the Mongol, Tibetan, Yugur, and other nationalities living in China and the cross-border Mongol and Buryat traditions. The epic was inscribed into the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2006. CSSN-Dissemination of the epic Gesar requires multiple approaches (last accessed: 08/20/2023).

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