

Short Report

Society for the Exploration of EurAsia

Campaign Summary 2018 - Tunnug I

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The excavation project at Tunnug 1, which is now the official name of the site, registered with the cultural heritage administration of Russia, was successfully started in late May 2018. The project was led by Dr. Gino Caspari, Timur Sadikov, and Jegor Blochin as in the previous year. The Russian cultural heritage administration required us to excavate at least 2500 m² of the site. It was the aim of this campaign to understand the southern periphery of the burial mound and define a methodology for the safe and scientifically proper excavation and documentation of this unique monument. We also needed an accurate date for the burial mound, confirming the two existing ¹⁴C dates. Furthermore, a camp structure for subsequent campaigns needed to be established.

The excavation turned out to be a lot more complicated than we first thought. In accordance with other royal Scythian burial mounds in the Uyuk Valley, we expected a number of structures from a similar time period in the southern periphery, where our drone mapping indicated that we had to expect at least one larger buried stone structure. A grid of 8m x 8m squares was established for the periphery and we managed to uncover 41 squares (2624 m²). To our surprise, we found Bronze Age ceramics from the Okuneva period, iron arrowheads and belt buckles from the Turkic period, Iron Age arrow heads of late Scythian time, and 21 skeletons most of them likely dating to the early medieval period (Kokel culture). It thus became clear that the site is a lot more extensive than we previously thought. We find remains of all Prehistoric cultures of Tuva starting from the middle Bronze Age.

The first major problem we had to deal with is very strong cryoturbation which mixes up layers and makes the soil very difficult to read and document. In some cases, we had a stone structure on the surface which was shifted more than a meter to the side and effectively not covering the burial pit anymore. The second issue was related to heavy rainfalls. Tuva is usually a rather dry place, but this summer we were hit with two weeks of daily rain and sometimes hailstorms. Our trenches were flooded, and our supply lines were cut. We lost a lot of time due to these circumstances and were not able to finish two low-lying peripheral kurgans with deep chambers, which promise to yield excellent organic remains (permafrost in August lies on 1.5m below ground in areas without stones). The water made it impossible to document the pits and we had to conserve them at the end of August, to wait for a drier period next year. In the burial mound of one of these kurgans we found a very early Scythian mirror and some ceramic fragments, which might date to the same period.

The finances for the 2019 excavation are already in place. We were able to establish a camp structure infrastructure which allows us to work efficiently. We were able to define a suitable methodology for next year's campaign. Geophysical surveying would be a great help for planning the next steps and is thus being implemented at the beginning of the next campaign.

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We recovered well-preserved wood from the construction of the main burial mound. The log was sampled and we were able to count a total of 61 tree rings. This provides a very good basis for wiggle-matching and receiving an accurate date for the construction of Tunnug 1. The full report will be made available after the article about the field campaign currently under review at the journal *Antiquity* has been published.



Figure 1: The site with the excavated southern periphery. The two kurgans in the south are clearly visible. The trenches were completely filled with water after heavy rainstorms. Excavating the southern kurgans without heavy-duty pumps will not be possible.



Figure 2: Quadrants at the border of the main burial mound. The cleaning and documentation of the stones takes a lot of time. On top of the stone surface, the majority of the skeletons was found, barely covered with soil. This situation is unknown and requires further investigation.



Figure 3: We established camp on an elevated part in the Uyuk Valley flood plain. A traditional yurt serves as the office and meeting place. We built a sauna close to Uyuk river which replaces showers.



Figure 4: Trenches completely filled with water, a common occurrence and major problem during the first campaign at Tunnug 1.



Figure 5: The team of archaeologists with Explorers Club Flag #134 held by Dr. Gino Caspari.