

## New excavations of the Xiongnu's epoch burial ground Ala-Tey in Tuva in 2016

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With the support of the "Society for the Exploration of EurAsia" an unknown burial ground from the Xiongnu period, named **Terezin**, was discovered in Central Tuva in 2007. This archaeological site was about to collapse due to the natural erosion provoked by the Sayan-Shushenskoe hydrostation reservoir and its annual rising water level. During its research we have managed to identify and locate 15 burials, including several intact ones. In the burials and around the already destroyed stone constructions, rich funeral inventory was discovered, including typically Xiongnu weaponry and bronze details of belts, items imported from China – a fragment of Han' bronze mirror for example. Large openwork bronze belt buckles belong to the most interesting findings because of parallels among Xiongnu period sites of the neighboring areas: the Minusinsk Basin, Transbaikalia, Mongolia, Ordos and others. (Fig. 1)



*Fig 1. Xiongnu's period cemetery of Terezin and some excavated artefacts*

Such buckles were so far unknown in Tuva, except one from the Urbiun cemetery at the confluence of Chaa-Hol' river and Yenisei, only 6 kilometers away from Terezin burial ground.

In that area there is also another burial ground called Airmyrlyg located 10 kilometers upstream the Chaa-Hol' river. About 200 burials were excavated by E. Stambulnik in the 1970-80s, some belong to the Xiongnu period (up to now the excavations data has not been published, precise dating of most of the burials is impossible). About 40 kilometers up the Yenisei river valley, near the

town of Shagonar, big mounds of the Xiongnu's nobles were discovered and excavated by A.Mandelshtam in 1965-66 and 1976-77, resembling the burials of Noin-Ula in Mongolia. Unfortunately those in Tuva were heavily looted.

Overall, there are several sites of the Xiongnu period in this part of Ulug-Khem basin besides Terezin, but most of them were looted in the past, or the funeral inventory was rather poor. Dating of those sites also remained relative. This part of Ulug-Khem basin at the entrance to Sayan canyon is strategically an important area: here begins the way across the Sayan ridge to the Minusinsk Basin; moreover the largest and best pastures in Central Tuva were situated here. This is also the reason why numerous archeological sites, which belong to the Bronze Age, times of Scythians, Xiongnu and ancient Turks (settlements, fortresses and burial grounds), are all concentrated in this part of the valley. (Fig. 2)



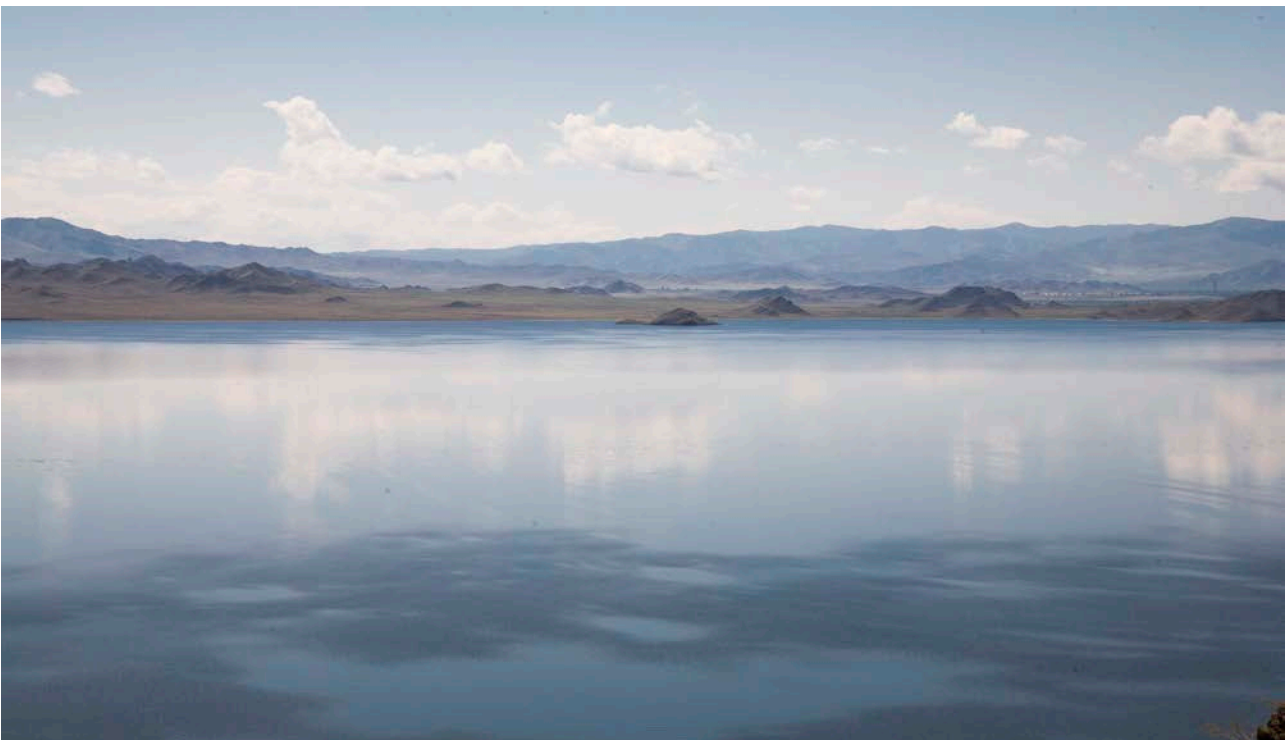
*Fig. 2 Part of the Scythian's time cemetery on the reservoir floor, before flooding*

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Chaa-Hol' village was the most important trade center in Tuva, later this settlement had been moved to another place because of the flooding zone. Control of this area was an important task during all historical periods, so a detection of the Xiongnu period sites, was not a surprise. The main problem is however that the central part of this territory is covered with water of the Sayan-Shushenskoe hydrostation reservoir. (Figs. 3, 4).

The difficulty of finding flat graves in the flooding zone is that time for archeological work is here very limited. Snow melts at the end of April-beginning of May, and only when the smelting water left it is possible to start working. By the middle of June the water of reservoir raises and the main area of investigation is flooded again and inaccessible for researchers until the following year.



*Fig. 3 The reservoir floor at the beginning of June*



*Fig. 4 The reservoir at the beginning of July, after flooding*

In 2014 our expedition managed to find another untouched burial ground of the Xiongnu period – called by the name of the nearest cliff: **Ala-Tey**. This cemetery is situated 4,5 kilometers

from Terezin, on the flooded part of the steppe where excavations are only possible 3-4 weeks within one year. When full, the surface of the Sayano-Shushenskoe reservoir is 540 meters above mean sea level, while the Ala-Tey cemetery lies at 523 m AMSL, hence it lies almost 20 meters below the water surface.

During the 2015 expedition objects 1-15 were excavated (s. report 2015). The upper layer of soil was washed away by the reservoir as well as the upper stones of a few funeral stone boxes. To date there are 33 objects excavated here, mostly containing untouched burials of Xiongnu. (Fig. 5)



*Fig. 5 Excavation of the Ala-Tey cemetery, before flooding*

The excavations at the Ala-Tey cemetery were continued in 2016. The expedition lasted from 03 June to 18 June 2016. In this year, the Sayano-Shushenskoe reservoir filled up with water somewhat earlier, so that by 17 June the water had already come quite close the excavation site.

Objects 16-33 were discovered and exposed during the excavation. Objects 17-33 are flat graves, Object 16 is not a grave, merely a pair of small stone panels lying in a shaft. The deceased had been deposited in the excavated graves in supine extended position. Double burials were found in four of the graves: 2x2 adults, 1x 2 children (a stone cist atop the other in a burial pit), 1x mother and child.

There are several types of burial constructions – stone boxes – (Figs. 6-7), often built in two levels (like in the burial # 9 from Terezin), burials in narrow pits (where the contours of burial pits are impossible to track as since the end of the 1980s this sandy landscape is at the bottom of the water reservoir most time of the year), overlaid with stones or stone tiles. Those constructions are usually rectangular (in one case – boat-shaped – (Fig.8), sometimes we could notice remains of a wooden frame inside (maybe a coffin, but due to the regular water erosion, the condition of the wood is either extremely bad or there are no remains at all).



*Fig. 6 Cist grave*



Fig. 7 Cist grave



Fig. 8 „Boat-shaped” stone burial construction

There are also graves without any burial constructions – (Fig. 9), which could have been wooden and did not survive.

Most of the skeletons lay in supine position like in the burials of Xiongnu in Transbaikalia and Mongolia, also in the burials of the Tes' culture of Minusinsk Basin. In few instances the deceased was buried on the back with the legs bent. There were pot-shaped molded vessels standing in all the burials beyond the deceased's head. No weaponry was recovered, but several belt and cloths' decorations, necklaces, pendants and earrings, local copies and imports of Chinese mirrors and fragments were excavated.



Fig. 9 Grave without burial construction, with a stone belt buckle with insets of coral, turquoise and mother of pearl.

There was also an intact bronze mirror in one of the burials with an inscription in Chinese: “When I look at the sky, I always think about the ruler” (Fig. 10). A similar mirror is kept in the Minusinsk museum. In two of the burials, belts were found, decorated with bronze models of cowrie’s shells and wu zhu coins – (Fig. 11), which provide a *terminus post quem* – 118 B.C. – the first year when such coins appeared into circulation in China.



*Fig. 10 Chinese bronze mirror with inscription*



*Fig. 11 Chinese Wu Zhu coins, bronze models of cowries shells and buckle with insets of coral, turquoise and mother of pearl.*



Openwork bronze belt buckles made of different types, found in the Terezin and Ala-Tey cemeteries, present themselves as masterpieces of the metal art casting and attract a great interest. Firstly we should mention large plaques with the image of two yaks walking towards each other (for now we have found 4 such buckles – 2 in Terezin, 2 in Ala-Tey) – (Fig. 12). Their massive bodies are decorated with drop-shaped patterns, representing fur and four legs with hooves. The heads are depicted en face with horns, nostrils and “bulging” eyes. Notched relief on the back shows the mane. The frame of the buckles is designed with set-in rectangles, as well as drop-shaped ones for colored insets. Such large belt plaques with the image of two opposing bulls or yaks are known, mostly on the territory of the Minusinsk Basin, where several intact buckles and their fragments were found (totally 19 examples), in the main those are casual findings. Another such buckle, likely comes from Inner Mongolia, and a pair of buckles from the burial ground of Early Han' dynasty on the north-east of Liaoning Province in Manchuria. We obtained an absolute date for one of the burials with such buckle on Ala-Tey – 2092 +/- 27 BP.



*Fig. 12 Openwork bronze belt buckle with two yaks*

A unique large buckle with an en face depiction of a bull was found on Ala-Tey – (Fig. 13). Ears and horns are shown with drop-shaped patterns, the muzzle is long with opened mouth, “bulging” eyes, the body seem shortened and stretched also en face. It is difficult to grasp the pattern design because all surface of buckle is covered with leaf and drop-shaped indentations.



*Fig. 13 Large belt buckle with depiction of a bull or yak*

A belt buckle with the image of two Bactrian camels was found in one of the Ala-Tey burials – (Fig. 14). Although buckles with camels have been found in the monuments of Mongolia and the Ordos, we have found no direct analogies for this buckle from Ala-Tey.



*Fig. 14 Belt buckle with two Bactrian camels*

Because all the burials in Ala-Tey were intact, we were able to identify the construction of belts, which were an important part of the ancient nomad's dress. A series of belt plaques made of shale and decorated with color insets is quite interesting. There are small plaques, which probably served as analogy to the small bronze belt plaques and large ones – analogies of large belt buckles. We found also a stone plaque that is drilled so it could be attached to the belt. This big buckle from Ala-Tey has the impressive size 19x9 cm, and is decorated with insets of coral, turquoise and mother of pearl – (Figs 9, 11). Undoubtedly a prestige item, which belonged to a man of high social status. Such plaques are well known from Transbaikalia but in most cases they are damaged and the color insets are lost.

It is notable that the women's graves have relatively rich grave goods (e.g. bronze mirror, earrings made of gold and bronze, openwork belt plaques, Wu-Zhu coins, etc.) By contrast, grave goods in the men's graves are fairly scanty, aside from ceramic pots they only occasionally feature smaller objects made of iron.

There are no items executed in Scythia-Siberian animal style in the burials of Xiongnu in Tuva, since in the late Scythian burials there are no such stone belt buckles with fishnet pattern. We meet only single items, which could be referred to Xiongnu. Although some of these monuments coexist, because some late Scythian burials could be dated to the 1st century B.C. At the same time, Scythian funeral rites with placement of bodies with the legs bent into stone boxes exist on the burial grounds connected with the Xiongnu, like in Terezin or Ala-Tey.

Presumably, these people in Central Tuva who settled in a key location at the entrance of the Yenisei River to the Sayan canyon, had close contacts with the Xiongnu of Mongolia and Transbaikalia and also with the Tes' culture of the Minusinsk Basin. Along with them, the last bearers of the late Scythian culture existed here. We think that with the expansion of the Xiongnu Empire an assimilation of the Scythian culture took place and as a result of a merging process, both cultures disappeared, or transformed into the Kokel' culture.

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