

## Site Background

This summer, with the support of the Archaeological Institute of America's Jane C. Waldbaum scholarship, I attended the American Center for Mongolian Studies' archaeological field school "Mongolia's Ancient Cities: Archaeological Excavation with the Uyghur Cultural Heritage Project" at Tsagaan Sumiin Balgas.

Tsagaan Sumiin Balgas is an archaeological site located in Tsenkher District of Arkhangai Province, Mongolia, consisting of the ruins of an Uyghur Khaganate-era rammed earth fortress. Its name means "Ruins at the White Temple" in Mongolian, referring to its proximity to a Buddhist temple in a nearby town, and is also known as Khukh Ordnung, or "Dark Blue Palace". It consists of 3 concentric square fortifications around a rectangular central mound, with the main gate facing east. Archaeologists believe the central mound may have been a platform for temporary residences like yurts, or *gers* in Mongolian. Another fortification attaches to the east side of the fortress, in front of the main gate, which may have been used as a garden or an area for stabling horses.

On the side of a hill around 0.8 kilometers northeast of the ruins is a burial site of 22-23 graves likely belonging to former residents of the fortress, each marked with a mound of stones. Tsagaan Sumiin Balgas is hypothesized to be the summer residence of an Uyghur khan (ruler) and his entourage. The Uyghur Khaganate was an empire that lasted from around 745-850 AD; one aim of our excavation was to collect organic materials for radiocarbon dating to more accurately define the dates of occupation.

## Dig Activities

The field school's lead instructors were Dr. Tumur-Ochir Batbayar and Dr. Tsend Amgalantugs from the Mongolian Institute of Archaeology. Unfortunately, the other lead instructor Dr. Richard Ciolek-Torello was unable to accompany us into the field. Our translator Duuya, who previously worked with Dr. Ciolek-Torello and has ample experience interpreting archaeological information, was integral to our instruction. Five high school interns also worked on the site with us and showed us the ropes of dig life.

Throughout the program, we excavated trenches along the central mound of the ruins in order to locate the edges of the rammed earth foundation and view its stratigraphy. During these excavations we unearthed animal bones, wood, charcoal, birch bark, roof tiles, and ceramic shards.

We also excavated five graves from the burial ground. As few Uyghur Khaganate-era burials have been excavated and studied in depth, this opportunity offered valuable clues for interpreting the beliefs and social relationships of the fortress's inhabitants. Dr. Batbayar hypothesized that most, if not all, of these graves had been previously looted not long after the initial interment given the position some remains were found in. We found that each person had been buried with their head facing north or northeast, and they were all accompanied by the

bones of animals such as cows, horses, sheep, and goats, perhaps as sacrifices. Some graves contained the remains of other animals, namely marmot mandibles and skull fragments of dogs or wolves. We also discovered iron belt buckles, arrowheads, and ceramics.

The human remains recovered from the burial site and other artifacts from both burial site and fortress will be sent abroad for DNA analysis and radiocarbon dating respectively. As this field school was my first experience with any kind of archaeological fieldwork, all the skills we practiced were new to me—such as dumpy leveling, processing artifacts, mapping site grids, creating plan and section drawings, and more. Our days generally followed the schedule below:

- *Breakfast at 7:00 am*
- *Excavation from 8:00 am-12:00 pm*
- *Lunch at 12:30 pm*
- *Excavation from 2:00 pm-5:30 pm*
- *Dinner at 7:00 pm*

We had the opportunity to go on several field trips, first to the National History Museum and Chinggis Khan Museum in Ulaanbaatar. Closer to our dig site we visited Khar Balgas, the ruins of a city that served as the capital of the Uyghur Khaganate; Kharkhorum, the capital of the Mongol Empire; Erdene Zuu monastery; a Bronze Age burial site; and the ruins of an Uyghur-era watchtower. These trips and accompanying lectures served to expand our knowledge not only of the Uyghur Khaganate but also the broader history of Mongolia. In our free time, we frequently played cards, volleyball, and soccer. Other activities such as horse riding, visiting a local herding family's ger, spending the day at nearby hot springs, and seeing the Orkhon Waterfall also exposed us to the country's beautiful cultural and natural landscapes.

### **Post Dig Thoughts**

This opportunity provided me with the foundational archaeological field experience needed to pursue my goals of graduate education in cultural heritage management, but it was also a deeply personal experience as a first generation Mongolian-American who hadn't visited my parents' country of origin in 12 years. I am incredibly grateful to the friends of AIA for enabling this academic and cultural opportunity, and I hope to revisit Tsagaan Sumiin Balgas during my future studies in the archaeology of Inner Asia.