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A HISTORY NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN: MASS BURIALS IN MONGOLIA

by Bruno Frohlich and David Hunt



In the summer of 2003, while Smithsonian physical anthropologist Bruno Frohlich was surveying burial mounds in the Hovsgol aimag (province), he was informed by Naran Bazarsad of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences that mass burials had been discovered earlier that year at Hambiin Ovoo outside Ulaanbaatar. The mass burials had been excavated by monks, but there were many concerns that the mass graves had not been documented adequately for historic and forensic purposes.

A few miles outside the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, construction workers removing fill for housing construction had found the remains of many individuals with Buddhist monks' clothing and religious objects. They notified the lamas at Ulaanbaatar's Gandan Monastery, whose leader Lama Purevbat decided to have the monastery lamas retrieve as many bodies as possible and render Buddhist ceremonies and burial practices for the dead. The number of crania and femora (thigh bones) uncovered in their work suggested that the grave site contained more than 600 individuals. Following the removal of the bodies with large construction equipment, the lamas performed rituals for the dead and cremated the remains at the mass grave site.

Subsequent negotiations between the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and Lama Purevbat and his associates from the Gandan Monastery resulted in a plan for continued excavation of the burial site at a later time through the application of modern forensic techniques and evidence collection. As part of this negotiation, Bruno Frohlich visited the Gandan Monastery where Lama Purevbat gave him a fascinating introduction to Buddhist mortuary practices, Buddhist anatomical learning, and the traditional treatment of human remains. The Mongolian Academy of Sciences agreed to coordinate with the

Gandan Monastery and notify the Smithsonian Institution when the scientists could proceed with further study.

A few months later, the Mongolian Academy of Sciences approved the continued documentation and investigation. Frohlich and Naran were to organize survey and excavation at the Hambiin Ovoo site with the assistance of Smithsonian physical anthropologist David Hunt and Erdene Batshatar, Tsend Amgalantugs, Enkhtur Altangerel, Batsukh Dunburee, and Jamsranjav Bayarsaikhan from the Institute of Archeology and the National Museum of Mongolian History.

During the initial visit to the Gandan Monastery, Frohlich had been allowed to view about 80 skulls and some postcranial remains kept by Lama Purevbat in a small building within the monastery. As proof of the killings, these remains had been preserved rather than cremated. About 70 out of the 80 crania had two holes in the cranial vault, one in back and one in front, typical features of projectile entry and exit trauma made by firearms in the execution of victims. In most cases, the position of the holes suggested that the individual was executed by a gun fired directly at the lower left part of the head (occipital) and with its projectile exiting at the front of the head (upper frontal bone). Extensive fracturing of cranial bones was present, especially around the exit hole. Associated clothing from the bodies in the mass grave strongly suggested that the executed individuals were all Buddhist monks. The artifacts and objects present with the bodies were commonly used in the 1930s and 1940s. From this evidence, it was inferred that the bodies were from mass executions carried out by the Mongolian Stalinist regime between 1937 and 1939.





The three vertical depressions in the foreground (two to the left of the center and one to the right) identify the original location of the remains removed by Lama Purevbat. The small area between the depressions includes our excavations during a two week period in September 2003.

Historical Context

After the fall of Communism and other totalitarian regimes, and their replacement with more open and democratic forms of government, the world has become aware of the enormous number of state-sanctioned killings justified in the names of development and state security. In a November 2003 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, it was estimated that during the 20th century 170 million people were victims of government approved, intentional killings by “induced famines, forced labor, assassinations, extra-judicial executions, massacres and full-scale genocides.” This compared to ‘only’ 34 million recorded battle deaths resulting from civil and international wars fought during the same period. The Hitler, Stalin and Mao regimes were responsible for more than 100 million of these 170 million murders. Even with the highly efficient killing process that these regimes developed over time, they never succeeded in annihilating more than five to ten percent of the total populations in their respective countries. Few, if any compare in percentages to Pol Pot’s genocides of the Cambodian population from 1975 to 1979 that annihilated more than 30 percent of that population.

Unfortunately, government sponsored killing is not a ‘past’ event. Such killings are taking place while this is being written and will undoubtedly continue in the future.

Most recently, mass burials found in Iraq suggest that between 1979 and 2003 the Saddam Hussein regime was responsible for the arbitrary murder of about 300,000 people because of their political, ethnic, or religious associations.

The identification, documentation, and exposure of mass burials provide important information for the writing of contemporary history. As a result of the involvement of Smithsonian anthropologists in the documentation of the mass graves in Mongolia, future generations may become more aware of the onset and extent of such atrocities, and may be able to keep history from repeating itself.

Background for Present Research

From about 1922 to the fall of Communism in the early 1990s, the Mongolian government was controlled by its northern neighbor, the Soviet Union. Mass burials now being discovered and identified in Mongolia parallel events that took place in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries in the 1930s and possibly into the 1960s. Collectivization, ethnic purges, communization and the killing of citizens with higher education, different religious beliefs, and undesirable ethnic affiliations resulted in an untold number of state sponsored killings. It is with this background that we view the finds of contemporary mass burials in Mongolia.



The excavations at Hamiin Ovoo included personnel from Mongolia and U.S.A. Tsend Amgalantugs, Erdene Batshatar, Enkhtur Altangerel, David Hunt, and Batsukh Dunburee are seen after the completion of the work.

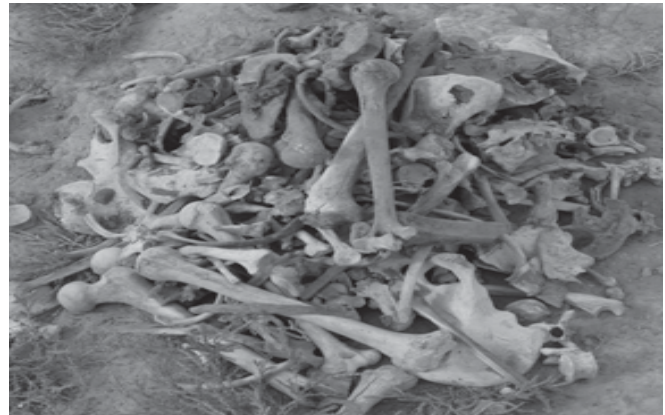


Research at Hambiin Owoo

Our initial visit to the mass burial at Hambiin Owoo was on the afternoon of September 18, 2003. After identifying the initial extent of the burial site, we began to document the site by surveying, extensive photography, and detailed descriptions. Because of limited time, we relied heavily on Geographic Positioning System (GPS) surveying and photography, in this case digital photography. We continued with the removal of surface vegetation and the careful collection of human remains found on the ground. David Hunt was in charge of surface collections. Despite

strenuous effort, it was impossible to collect everything. The previous use of heavy construction equipment had only removed part of the upper layers of possibly more than one mass burial, leaving thousands of human bones scattered over a large area. Therefore, the removal of one

Information received from Mongolian sources suggests that more than 30,000 Mongolian citizens were murdered, probably between 1925 and 1940. Of these, a large number were Buddhist monks from all over Mongolia. As one example, the historical record describes how the Soviet regime, in 1937, executed more than 350 monks from the 200-year-old Buddhist monastery at Manzhir Mandzusheer, located 25 km outside Ulaanbaatar. After the executions the monastery was destroyed, leaving little except for stone foundations and mud-brick walls.



The area surrounding the Lama's excavations and our test excavations were surveyed using high precision GPS equipment. Erdene Batshatar, Tsend Amgalantugs, and Enkhtur Altangerel are using the Ashtech/Magellan Rover unit to record longitude, latitude and elevation of selected positions. Data is later downloaded to a small computer and the results can be observed and used shortly afterwards.



Top photo shows extensive surface finds. Below, test excavations displayed high degree of disarticulation in upper levels indicating this site as place of execution and burial for a prolonged period of time. Lower levels showed less disturbance and greater articulation of bodies.

bone most often resulted in the appearance of two new ones. In terms of volume, the remains collected from the surface added up to between one and two cubic meters of bones.

Based on the results of a series of 1 by 1-meter test pit excavations, we began excavating a 4 x 5.5 meter square. In forensic phraseology, we used a 'modified archaeological technique,' a compromise between the accuracy of archaeological methodology and the speed necessary in forensic investigations, resulting in good and reliable evidence handling.

Our finds yielded several layers of human bodies. All skulls, except for one, suggested an execution style trauma similar to the crania observed by Froehlich at the Gandan Monastery. We reconstructed how the executions and internments took place: the person was brought to the site of burial (the pit had already been excavated or was excavated by the victim before execution), forced to kneel down at the end of the burial pit, and shot in the back of the head, resulting in an entry opening in the lower left occipital bone and an exit opening in the frontal bone.

A single burial about 550 meters northwest of the mass burial yielded an approximately 30-year-old male who had been shot in the back of the head and placed in a shallow grave. The burial pit was not deep enough to hold the body so the killers had to turn the body around, resulting in a supine position with the hands still tied behind his back. After removing his body, we found the heavily damaged projectile at the base of the burial pit. A reconstruction showed that this would be the place where we would expect to find the projectile after it had passed through the victim's head while he was being executed kneeling at the end of the burial pit. This type of secure and accurate reconstruction was only possible in this case of a single burial.

At our 4 x 5.5 meters square, we found several layers of human bodies, mostly articulated but all mixed, suggesting that the bodies had been placed within the burial pit without any specific order in mind. Little soil was found between the individual bodies and layers of bones, suggesting that the total number of identified bodies represented one killing session, most likely carried out in a relatively short time.

Most of the upper layers were significantly disturbed, making it difficult to establish complete articulation between the bones. As soon as we reached layers less



The body of one male about 30 years old was found in a shallow grave about 500 meters northwest of the mass burial. The body was placed on its back in a supine position with the arms tied up behind the back. An entry hole was identified in the lower left occipital bone and an exit hole in the frontal bone indicating that the individual had been executed. The find of a severely damaged iron projectile below the individual's back strongly suggests that the person had been executed while kneeling in front of the grave.

exposed to destructive forces, such as later excavations for burials and heavy vehicle traffic, we started to find the degree of articulation we expected. Because of the extensive post-mortem destruction of the remains and likely post-mortem disarticulation, we were unable to verify if the victims had been exposed to severe maltreatment and torture before the executions. We identified several cases of well-healed fractures of upper and lower extremities both in the Gandan monastery collection and some from our own excavations. Although the healing took place without proper setting and alignment of the fractured bones, it strongly suggested that the victims at an earlier time in their lives had received reasonably good care in helping them recover from fractured bones. Such healed fractures are unrelated to the executions and burials of the victims.

Preservation of the remains found in the lower layers was significantly poorer than the bodies found and removed by Lama Purevbat. We would have expected the opposite if the bodies had been placed in the burial pit at the same time. For this reason we argue that this specific location includes more than one mass burial and most likely represents different time periods. At this time we have no basis for exact dating; however, with the analysis of the associated gun shell casings and other objects, we may be

able to establish an approximate date for the killings and subsequent burials.

Recovered Objects

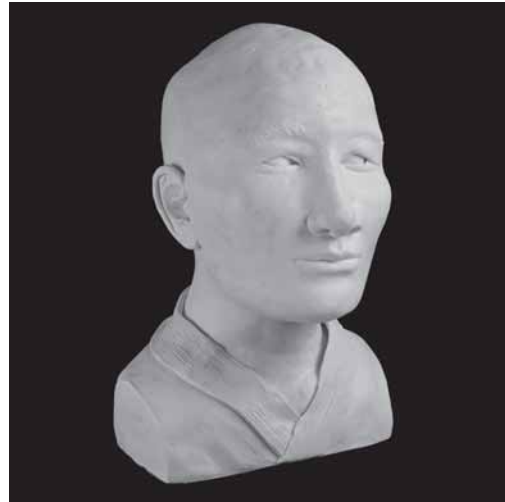
Our tentative conclusion is based on the initial analysis and description of the human remains and on finds of associated clothes (mostly similar to items used by Buddhist monks), Russian artifacts including metal cups, and other objects.

A minimum of seven German-made ammunition casings were found with the bodies. Detailed analysis shows that this 7.63 mm ammunition was generally used in the Tokarev pistol developed in the mid 1920s and used by Soviet and eastern European armed forces.

We have only found adolescent and adult males, perhaps consistent with a mass burial of Buddhist monks, although our sample size is too small for a definitive conclusion. One cranium and one mandible were brought to the Smithsonian for x-ray analysis, CT scanning and facial reconstruction. Facial reconstruction was done at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Alexandria, Virginia. Multivariate statistical comparison of 30 Hambiin Ovoo cases with Buriats from the Lake Baikal area, Mongols from Ulaanbaatar/Urga (collected by Ales Hrdlicka) (Mongols), and northern Chinese showed excellent statistical separation between Buriats, Mongols, and Chinese groups. Variation in the Hambiin Ovoo mass burial cases encompassed the variation of the other three groups, thus supporting the assumption that the Gandan Monastery was an important center where Buddhist monks from isolated groups all over Mongolia and the surrounding countries assembled for religious and academic purposes.



Side view of casing found with the bodies excavated from the 4 x 5.5 meter square site. Ammunition most likely manufactured by the Deutsche Waffen- und Munitionsfabriken AG in Karlsruhe, Germany.



Facial reconstruction of the skull of the 30 year-old male recovered, completed by Joe Mullins at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Alexandria, Virginia.

Additional Mass Burials in Mongolia

Hambiin Ovoo area is only one of several mass burials reported in Mongolia. We are told that similar burials have been found in Dornod (northeastern Mongolia), mostly including murdered Buriats, in Ulaango (northwestern Mongolia), Khovsol (northern Mongolia), Bayankhongor (central-southern Mongolia), Tsetserleg (central Mongolia), and at other locations in the eastern part of Ulaanbaatar province. It is believed that investigations of all these places and others unknown to us will show that the 30,000 number of individuals thought to have been murdered is a very conservative number.

Reference

Mass Burials at Hambiin Ovoo, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. 2004. Bruno Frohlich, Naran Bazarsad, David Hunt, and Enkhtur Altangerel. In: William Fitzhugh, ed., *The Hovsgol Deer Stone Project 2003 Field Report*, pp. 92-104. The Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian Institution.

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