An overview of scholarship on the Mongolian Empire reveals a puzzling irony. Extensive historical research exists on far-flung regions of the empire and the relationships between Mongol overlords and their imperial subjects, but less attention has been focused on the heartland of the Mongol Empire in present-day Mongolia. The very few indigenous historical sources left by the Mongols themselves, the most notable of which is *The Secret History of the Mongols*, provide important insight to the genesis and practices of the burgeoning Mongol state within the steppe regions. However, the small number of sources, as well as the limited subject matter and social groups treated by such sources, are insufficient to shed light on the wide range of questions researchers seek to answer about this period. The paucity of direct information on local steppe communities during the time of the Mongol Empire and, in comparison, the voluminous sources of information derived from regions external to the steppe have resulted in a somewhat skewed appreciation of the Mongols and their indigenous political traditions. Key to addressing this lopsided viewpoint is deeper investigation of what Mongol overlords introduced to conquered regions from their own political traditions, culture, and the pastoral nomadic steppe context. Close attention to these problems by historians has resulted in a number of what might be called ‘revisionist histories’ of the Mongolian empire and the Mongol steppe heartland, and these new ideas have begun to intersect with theory generated by archaeological research from Mongolia. Archaeology has its own complexities and limitations, but its one great strength is an ability to provide information on local communities and common people from regions that do not figure prominently in textual documents. In many parts of the Mongolian steppe, events that occurred 800 years ago can only be known through the work of archaeologists.

As such, the Mongol ‘imperial’ period (1206–1368 CE) provides an interesting example of the diverse methods by which scholars obtain information on the past and how these combined efforts can yield a more accurate account of the lifeways of the medieval Mongols. However, the archaeological record of Mongolia, much
like the historical record, is fraught with difficulties. For example, pastoral nomadic households were mobile and chose seasonal campsites at which they may have spent a few weeks or months, leaving little in the way of material remains. Surface survey to detect these obscure sites is a painstaking field method that requires years of ground walking and careful inspection just to find medieval living areas. A more common source of archaeological information is the many medieval Mongol burials containing skeletal remains of humans and animals, as well as funerary goods. Excavations of these mortuary sites has been the primary form of fieldwork in Mongolia for the past century, and advanced analytical studies have provided evidence on diet, mobility, genetics, material culture, and social differentiation, as well as funerary practices. The difficulty in discovering and excavating the seasonal campsites of nomadic households is offset somewhat by the urban walled sites constructed during the Mongol imperial period. These impressive sites give archaeologists an idea of the importance of central places on the steppe and about industries and craft specialization, farming, and how urban centers integrated with surrounding hinterlands of mobile herders. This chapter provides an overview of these different archaeological site types and what archaeologists have learned about life in the heartland of the Mongol Empire.

PRELUDE TO EMPIRE

Even though the Mongol Empire is by far the best known of the major nomadic polities from the east Eurasian steppe, it was not the only or even the first imperial steppe state. Those who built the medieval empire followed on a political tradition of more than 1,000 years of state and empire building in Mongolia, beginning with the rise of the initial Xiongnu state during the 3rd century BCE.2 The Xiongnu state was followed a few centuries later by the Turk and Uyghur empires (550–840), and these were followed in turn by the Khitan Empire (907–1125), which was centered in southeastern Inner Mongolia but controlled much of eastern and central Mongolia.

In historical accounts, the fall of the Khitan in 1125 and the consolidation of the Mongol state in 1206 are easily differentiated in time, but archaeologists have greater difficulty in separating these events as seen through the material record. Radiocarbon dating typically has error ranges measured in centuries, and the local areas most archaeological studies focus on were often slow to reveal major changes in political conditions at the uppermost echelons of society. Although everyday ceramic styles and metallurgical practices tend to be similar over the Khitan and Mongol periods, other sites and material types were different, including details in burial practice, city sites, imported goods, and stylistic traditions. However, it is clear from both historical and archaeological research that the Khitan political presence on the eastern and central Mongolian steppe had major implications for the subsequent Mongol state. Khitan cities were fortified urban sites interlaced with smaller walled settlements likely related to promoting a strong military presence on the steppe with emphasis on the northern regions.3 Evidence suggestive of a political frontier along the Selenge River in northern Bulgan province comes from two archaeological survey projects in the Egiin Gol and Tarvagatai valleys (Map 30.1). Intensive ground walking in both valleys turned up only a handful of Khitan punctate-decorated pottery, while similar surveys in the Gobi region of Mongolia have recovered thousands of such Khitan
pottery pieces. This evidence for some kind of boundary complements historical reports of sporadic conflict along the Khitan’s northern frontier, as do archaeological remains of massive fortified walls across northeastern Mongolia and Siberia. The Khitan imperial occupation of the Mongolian steppe likely had the effect of consolidating political groups, especially as the empire declined in the early 12th century.

THE EARLIEST MONGOL CENTERS

The roughly 80-year period leading up to the unification of the Mongolian steppe under Chinggis Khan was a time of power struggles and political realignments in the wake of Khitan withdrawal. A number of powerful named groups appear in the historical record during this period, including the Kereit, Merkit, Tatar, and Naiman, but archaeologists can say little about their organization and material culture. Very likely, these were not tribally organized kinship groups, as often described, but were polities made up of multiple elite factions or aristocratic ‘houses’ in an alliance framework, having a senior elite house filling a nominal leadership role. Two points, however, are clear from the archaeological record. First, based on observations from a very small number of sites and survey areas, patterns in material culture, technologies, and landscape organization tend to show a degree of continuity from the late Turkic period through the Khitan and pre-Mongol state periods. Second, given that the excavation of burials has been one of the prime methods of Mongolian
archaeologists, a wealth of preserved human bone in academic collections is now being analyzed for ancient DNA. The story genetics tells is one of local and regional populations that were not radically different over time. Although eastern genetic groups begin to make up a slightly greater proportion of local areas during the Mongol imperial period, these were basically the same populations that had already occupied the Mongolian plateau for thousands of years. In other words, it seems that periods of major change were political and organizational in nature, more so than the result of new groups migrating in from elsewhere.

Given these general observations, the rise of the imperial Mongols probably involved communities that had a long history in the northeastern part of Mongolia known today as Khentii province. Archaeologists and historians both identify this area as the likely homeland of the early Mongols and an important ritual and political center in the later empire. These northeastern groups had a history of confronting Khitan attempts to dominate the region based on the discovery of two large fortified sites of the Khitan period known as Zuun Kherem and Baruun Kherem along the Kherlen (Kerülen) River in southern Khentii province (Map 30.1). Historical accounts report campaigns to subdue northeastern nomadic groups and mention two walled centers, identified with these sites, as involved in the conflict. By the 12th century, these impressive centers had been abandoned, and regional political alliances made up of nomadic elites vied for influence on the steppe. Historians do not know exactly how the northeastern groups were connected to the several polities mentioned earlier, but at least one theory views northeastern elites as competing for power over the Kereit polity along with other aristocratic houses. Emerging victorious from these internecine conflicts was the leader of the northeastern faction, Temujin, who would assume the title of Chinggis Khan and establish Khentii as the center of the Mongol state by 1206.

Some of the earliest archaeological evidence that this political transformation and consolidation was underway is found at an unassuming riverside site called Avargyn Balgas (or Avraga) in Khentii province (Map 30.1). In the 1990s, a collaborative Mongolian-Japanese survey project employed ground-penetrating radar to reveal stone foundation structures suggestive of the kind of architectural remains expected at an elite settlement. The Avraga site stretches along a tributary stream flowing south to the Kherlen River and occupies an area of 1,200 m by 500 m with evidence for several square mounds that had once been building platforms. At the center of these building foundations, a large platform indicated the existence of a special architectural structure around which the entire settlement had been spatially organized (Figure 30.1).

Archaeologists have focused excavation in and around this structure, which was oriented and arranged with an open plaza to the south in a manner similar to historical accounts of the imperial palaces for Mongol royalty. Excavations reveal that the platform was surrounded by a walled embankment and had multiple stone bases for columns as well as dressed stone foundations to support walls, which outlined a rectangular building plan. This uppermost level, of what archaeologists describe as a central palace, was strewn with fragments of imported stoneware and porcelain pottery dating to the late 13th to mid-14th century (Yuan Dynasty period) and confirmed by radiocarbon dating.
Continued excavations below this level revealed additional archaeological layers indicating reuse and repurposing of this structure for more than a century. The lowermost level also had a square or rectangular building situated on a prepared earth and clay platform erected on natural subsoils as the very first structure of the settlement. Both radiocarbon dates and dateable coins from the Jin Dynasty place the initial construction and use period during the late 12th and early 13th century, contemporaneous with the rise of Chinggis Khan’s Mongol state. Whether or not this settlement marks the location of the ‘great palace’ of Chinggis Khan, as long suspected by Mongolian archaeologists, Avraga is clearly an example of early Mongol infrastructure and investment in the political consolidation of their steppe polity, and this hypothesis is supported by the changing role of the palace over time. Studies of the faunal remains associated with each phase of palace construction indicate a subsistence-based assemblage of sheep, cattle, and goats that would be expected of a wealthy pastoral household. A century later, during the final period of the palace complex, the faunal assemblage shifts dramatically to emphasize specific portions of cattle and especially horses known to have had ritual significance. This pattern suggests a transformation in the function of the site from an early
administrative and elite center to what later became a place of ritual and ceremonial importance. If so, this evidence would coincide with historical reports of later Mongolian qa’ans making ritual offerings annually at important sites within their ancestral homeland.

To the east and west of the central platform are sectors of the Avraga site best understood as supporting areas for craft production. Here archaeologists have done much less excavation but have found evidence for a wide range of glazed and earthenware ceramics, glass, bronze coins, iron-working debris, evidence for extensive agricultural production nearby the settlement, and a wide range of animal species, including herded and wild animals. To date, workshops dedicated to bone, horn and antler fashioning, composite bow and arrow manufacture, glasswork, and iron and bronze production have all been identified. Some of the most interesting finds testify to the importance of ironworking. During the Khitan period, iron was strictly controlled and even prohibited from circulation into the steppe regions, making reliable access to iron a sign of political power. The Avraga settlement not only had a robust ironworking industry, it seems to have been a central distribution point for portable iron ingots that have been found up to 200 km away and were used for the local manufacture of weapons and tools.

This very early palace complex helps archaeologists link the material record to the historical record and substantiates the idea that northeastern Mongolia was indeed the political epicenter of medieval Mongol state building. Archaeologists are now discovering that Avraga was not the only palace complex in Khentii province but was an entire network of what are thought to be seasonally occupied palace sites across eastern and central Mongolia. The Khanzat site, 250 km northeast of Avraga along the Kherlen River (Map 30.1), was surveyed and test excavated in 2018 and 2019 and is yet another palace complex. Khanzat has an external wall with gated entries and an internal embankment that surrounds earthen mounds similar to those at Avraga and which likely represent building platforms. A large central platform in the southern part of the site near to the river once supported the main palace and has many stone column supports, fragments of fired roof tiles, and brightly glazed floor tiles, indicating a substantial architectural investment that dates to the mid-13th century. Fieldwork continues at Khanzat, but both its location on the northern bank of the Kherlen River and its probable relation to Avraga are interesting from a landscape perspective. Palace sites like these located along major rivers and their tributaries were likely seasonal campsites for the Mongol qa’ans, who retained their tradition of nomadic mobility despite having numerous walled settlements, cities, and palace sites.

By the time of the Mongol Empire, this mobile tradition among the steppe elite had already been in practice for more than 1,000 years, and situating palace sites along rivers afforded natural corridors of movement for mobile royal courts traveling with huge retinues and massive wooden wagons pulled by cattle. At a deeper level, this tradition reveals the pervasive role of mobility in Mongolian culture. The building of permanent settlements with infrastructure and impressive architecture was, like many practices of the medieval Mongols, part of a long-standing nomadic tradition that, taken as a whole, could be described as a new approach to urbanism itself.
THE SEAT OF AN EMPIRE: QARAQORUM AND IMPERIAL URBANISM

There is great historical speculation as to why the center of the growing Mongol Empire was moved from northeastern to central Mongolia in the Orkhon Valley (Map 30.1). The first reason was probably purely administrative: as the steppe polity grew rapidly to immense size through successful military campaigns, a more central area of administration was required. However, this decision to move the seat of power, possibly made by Chinggis Khan himself, had ulterior motives that were both functional and ideological in nature. Grassland and water resources were abundant and dependable in this area, especially since the early 13th century experienced ameliorating climate conditions across the Orkhon subregion favoring precipitation and warmer temperatures. Geographically, Qaraqorum’s location in the upper Orkhon River valley neatly bridges the major ecological zones of northern forested steppe and southern Gobi Desert; an ecotone that also represents a midpoint between the distinct cultural regions of northwest and southeast, which is apparent from at least the Bronze Age. The Orkhon River itself is one of the few north–south trending waterways, and since its headwaters intersect with the two southernmost rivers in Mongolia, the Ongi and Tuin rivers, movement along these central waterways provides access to Siberia in the north as well as southern jump-off points to Inner Mongolia in the south. As such, Qaraqorum controlled several major long-distance movement and trade corridors and therefore represented a highly functional point for exerting influence relative to the larger steppe region. In addition, the Orkhon Valley had once been the site of major Turkic political monuments and the Uyghur period capital of Ordu Baliq (8th–9th century). Constructing the Mongol capital in this location appropriated the ideological authority associated with these preceding polities. This was a prudent measure on the part of the Mongols since the vast majority of peoples in the growing Mongol Empire were of Turkic descent.

Qaraqorum is located on the open steppe at the eastern base of the Khangai Mountains, from which the Orkhon River flows approximately 3.5 km west of the city. The city site itself is not terribly impressive and is dominated by the later construction of the Buddhist monastery, Erdene Zuu, atop the city’s ruins during the late 16th century (Figure 30.2). The site is so unassuming that, during the 19th century, the exact location of the Mongol imperial capital was debated by scholars. Fortunately, an inscribed stele from Qaraqorum had been erected and preserved in the courtyard of the Erdene Zuu temple complex, and both its translation as well as inspection of the earthworks and broken porcelain pottery adjacent to the monastery convinced historians that Erdene Zuu had indeed been constructed on the site of the former capital.

All evidence points to 1235 as the initial period of construction for the walls and main palace, although the general area was probably utilized as a seasonal campsite for the qa’an’s court prior to the formal building project. The layout of the city is surrounded by a semi-rectangular, pounded-earth wall that is now much deteriorated but once may have stood as high as 5–8 m. The wall encloses approximately 1.2 sq. km comprising the majority of building remains at the site, although geophysical prospection and the production of a high-resolution Digital Terrain Model clearly show extensions of the town beyond the walls, especially in...
the northern and eastern sectors. Some of these extensions are building foundations, but others were determined to be cemeteries in the northwest and southeast, as well as a workshop district on the eastern side. Including these additional areas, the built landscape attributable to the urban center is 2 sq. km in total, slightly smaller than the city of London at 1200. Qaraqorum was arranged according to a roughly rectangular grid with north–south and east–west avenues crossing in the center of the walled space and leading to four main gateways. Historical reports describe each gateway as hosting a city market for different commodities, including locally farmed grain, sheep and goats, cattle, wagons, and horses – all suggesting a lively economic sector within the city itself.

Interest in economic production, workshops, and craft manufacture at Qaraqorum led the most recent Mongolian and German excavation team to focus on the central crossroads where prior archaeologists had documented an assortment of tools and worked materials, as well as deep stratigraphic sections showing each rebuilding episode at the town center (Figure 30.3). The main north–south roadway proved to be a well-engineered paved structure with drainage channels first constructed in the
early 13th century and subsequently rebuilt three times, the last of which occurred during the 14th century.\textsuperscript{a} Road margins were littered with broken ceramic roof tiles, indicating a district of roofed buildings on either side of the avenue. These were built of wooden beams and brick architecture with internal courtyards and fronted by the wooden outlines of industrial workshops. These residential and manufacturing sectors were reconstructed several times throughout the history of the capital, although their basic layout did not change radically.\textsuperscript{b} Based on the nature of artifacts recovered in this sector, the city center had long been a primary area for artisans and craftsmen, whose work produced functional everyday items as well as exotic and precious goods likely intended for elite patrons. The documented range of manufacturing activities is impressive and includes evidence for the working of gold, silver, and bronze; blacksmithing shops for the manufacture of iron and steel tools, wagon parts, and arrowheads; fine lapidary and glasswork; bone and antler carving; and wool and textile production.\textsuperscript{c}

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the ongoing fieldwork at Qaraqorum is the search for the qa’an’s royal palace, described in some detail by visitors to the capital city during the 13th century. Since the 1940s, a large architectural
complex inside the southwestern wall has been interpreted as the palace sector. Recent excavations, however, provide evidence to the contrary, showing that this area represented an impressive Buddhist temple based on its architectural layout, columned hallway, and numerous clay images of the Buddha recovered within its foundations. This important revision raises the pressing question of where the palace could have been situated within the walled site. Based on a hypothesis advanced by Russian historians and geographers at the end of the 19th century, archaeologists surmised that the remnants of the qa'an’s palace might lie beneath the walled precinct of the Erdene Zuu monastery. The walls enclosing the temple complex are strangely irregular in layout, suggesting that they had not been constructed anew in the 16th century. With permission of the Buddhist authorities in charge of the monastery, several deep trenches were excavated below the visible walls. These revealed much older underlying brick and masonry foundations measuring up to 8 m in width. Based on several lines of evidence, including the size, composition, and stamp marks of the foundation bricks; associated pottery in the lower foundations; and direct dating using thermoluminescence techniques, these earlier walls can be dated to the 13th century and represent the strongest evidence yet for the location of the qa'an’s palace.

Even if archaeologists had not identified the palace sector, other remains suggest the presence of an elite court and its imperial infrastructure at Qaraqorum. Materials and practices from far-flung parts of the empire attest clearly to this and include coins and glass beads from the Islamic world, Muslim-style burials in the northwestern cemetery, and what are potentially the remains of a Nestorian Christian church. Archaeologists have also recovered silks and a great deal of porcelain and stoneware from kilns in China; elephant tusks meant for carving; and on the botanical side, black pepper from Southeast Asia, walnuts from the Himalayas, and hulled and emmer wheat from western Asia or even possibly from as far as Europe. Occurrence of these foreign and prestige goods, however, are rare in comparison to finds related to the staple diet of thousands of commoners who also inhabited the city and its surrounding areas. The capital was embedded within a rich pastureland with good soils and sufficient water resources to support warm-weather intensive farming. Local cultivation of millet, barley, and bread wheat is evidenced both by botanical remains and by the discovery of iron farming tools, relict field systems near the city walls, and canals and water reservoirs. Likewise, the pastoral economy is well represented in every sector of the city by faunal remains of sheep/goats, cattle, and horses, with a small complement of wild animals, including steppe marmot, hare, and several indigenous fish species.

From 2007 to 2011, Mongolian and German archaeologists conducted a systematic survey of the Orkhon Valley to build a better understanding of the diachronic landscape and especially the hinterland or “peri-urban” context for the Mongol capital. As with most urban areas, the survey documented resource extraction from sites up to 15 km away that supported the construction and functioning of the city. Two granite quarries have been discovered with unfinished grinding stones and column bases, as well as brief inscriptions in Chinese script by at least two literate stonemasons. Industrial scale kilns for firing architectural bricks, glazed tiles, and pottery were situated near the southwest wall, and two other kiln sites were discovered at distances of 3.5 and 6 km southwest of the city along the Orkhon
River. After geophysical survey and extensive excavation, the site located 6 km away from Qaraqorum proved to be a craft manufacturing settlement 24 h in size.\(^{40}\)

Despite this productive capacity, historical sources report the constant arrival of caravans at the city gates loaded with staple foods and supplies for the urban population.\(^{41}\) This raises the question of whether Qaraqorum was in fact a dependent center unable to feed and support what must have been a sizeable population or, to the contrary, whether an unprecedented investment in infrastructure and the large population residing in and around the city required the additional transport of resources from beyond the steppe.\(^{42}\) Calculating population numbers in a mobile context is particularly challenging, but historians estimate that the Orkhon Valley may have held up to 100,000 people, while the city of Qaraqorum may have had between 18,000 and 30,000 inhabitants.\(^{43}\) These figures represent a substantial range but would make the demographic size of the capital city comparable to modern-day provincial capitals in Mongolia, such as the nearby towns of Tsetserleg and Arvaikheer. This ethnographic observation is important for understanding Qaraqorum as a unique kind of urban setting in which the traditional mobility of inhabitants around the city suggests that the “urban center” was not as central as it might at first appear.

The clearest combination of archaeological and historical evidence supporting this hypothesis has been advanced by Shiraishi and Atwood, who both assess the seasonal movements of the royal court over circuits of more than 450 km within the Orkhon Valley.\(^{44}\) In keeping with the pastoral nomadic tradition of moving between seasonal campsites, the qa’ans regularly moved between seasonal palaces in orbit of Qaraqorum. For example, Shiraishi presents compelling textual and material evidence for a spring palace location at the site of Doityn Balgas, approximately 56 km northwest of the capital, and a winter palace site at Shaazan Khot, 140 km to the southeast.\(^{45}\) Several lines of evidence support Shiraishi’s identifications. First, the mobility of the royal court is clearly attested in multiple histories, and these palace ruins were indeed contemporaneous with Qaraqorum. Second, each site has material culture consistent with an elite occupation, comprising of artifact types similar to those recovered at the capital city. Finally, the geographical and environmental locations of Doityn Balgas and Shaazan Khot represent suitable sites for respective warm- and cold-weather camps given what we know of pastoral campsite preferences. We should point out that different qa’ans practiced different forms of seasonal movement and sometimes preferred sites far beyond the Orkhon region.

Therefore, in terms of the political aspect of what makes a center central, Qaraqorum seems to have been but one location among several at which political power and authority periodically arrived and then disembarked. We can imagine the number of advisors, retainers, servants, and herds attached to the royal court moving along with the qa’an, greatly shifting community population numbers at each seasonal location. Moreover, a majority of the Qaraqorum population was likely seasonally itinerant as well, like their qa’ans, and transitioned between ger communities on the outskirts of the city and seasonal camps throughout the upper and middle Orkhon Valley.\(^{46}\) Given the archaeological evidence and the current state of historical scholarship on the medieval Mongol period, we concur with Moses and Greer, Shiraishi, and Rogers that urbanism under the Mongol Empire was a unique phenomenon in which the city center was secondary to the nomadic setting that embedded it.\(^{47}\) Most models of settled urbanism view the center as relatively static.
through time, experiencing gradual change as the urban area develops. As we have seen in the case of Qaraqorum, both population and seats of power circulated on a seasonal basis around the urban settlement, and these frequent micro-shifts effectively dissociate centrality from any one point and instead move it to a larger spatial scale. In effect, the entire region encompassing interaction and movement becomes the operative scale for centrality, as suggested by Tkachev, who views the place name “Qaraqorum” as not just designating the city center but the entire Orkhon Valley.48

**BURIALS AND FUNERARY PRACTICES**

One testament to the breadth of the Mongol imperial presence in Eurasia is that medieval reports depicting the funeral and burial place of Chinggis Khan were composed and passed down in the historical literature of China, Iran, Italy, and France, in addition to Mongolia. The cause of death of the Great Qa’an in 1227 is debated, but having initiated an imperial lineage of rulers, his funeral was something extraordinary and unique. According to various accounts, Chinggis Khan’s body was transported to a spot that he had chosen in the region of his birth, at the base of a mountain called Burqan Qaldun. The exact place was kept secret by reportedly having all attendants involved in the burial construction and ceremonies killed afterwards and the greater area around the tomb site made a forbidden zone called Ikh Khorig. The burial itself reportedly had no surface markings, and all disrupted soils were returned to their natural state with trees and shrubs as ground cover.49 Based on a great deal of research, the probable location of Burqan Qaldun has been identified by scholars as a crescent shaped peak today known as Khentii Khan in northeastern Khentii province (see Map 30.1). This peak conforms geographically to the description of Chinggis Khan’s sacred mountain as the place from which three major rivers – the Onan, Tuul, and Kherlen – arise. Khentii Khan Mountain has been the site of cultic worship for many centuries related to the Chinggisid lineage, and local folklore identifies the peak as the site chosen by the Great Qa’an for his burial.50

Mortuary research is a primary source of data used by Mongolian archaeologists. Although we have various historical reports on the funerary practices of the medieval Mongols, including aristocratic and commoner burials, the accuracy of these descriptions varies substantially. However, in the case of burial structure and inclusions provided for members of the aristocracy, some accounts have proven to be quite accurate, especially ones documenting Yuan Dynasty practices.51 Based on a wealth of material and textual evidence, archaeologists and historians agree that burial formats marked distinctions in what was an elaborate social and political hierarchy.

To date, archaeologists have documented two basic mortuary treatments: inhumations of various kinds, most notably pit-burials, and cave or rock shelter burials. This last form is a kind of exposure burial in which the deceased individual’s body is left exposed to the natural elements.

Archaeologists divide these burial types into three timeframes: a formative period (10/11th–12th centuries); a classic period during the rise of the state and empire (13th–14th centuries); and a post-classic phase, during which time practices related to Tibetan Buddhism increased (15th–17th centuries).52 This periodization tracks a process of gradual change in both political power and burial practices from the time
of the Turk and Uyghur empires (6th–9th centuries) to that of Mongol hegemony. The reasons that burial practices change over time is a topic of much debate among archaeologists. Archaeological burial sites comprise the remains of a funerary event followed by whatever happened subsequently within that space (e.g., re-use, pillaging, desecration). Funerals tend to have layered rather than singular meanings, and these might pertain to personal and household symbolism, community ideologies, cosmology and longer-term traditions, as well as assertions of political affiliation and display. As an event that could gather dispersed nomadic households from across a region, the activities conducted at a funeral were a form of what archaeologists refer to as ‘commensal politics.’ Political deliberations during these times of ritual significance, ceremony, and feasting allowed steppe nomads to forge alliances and realign power relationships, making funeral events all the more momentous occasions. A case in point was the royal assemblies (qurilta or quriltai) to select a new imperial ruler upon the death of a Qa’an. By the time of Chinggis Khan’s death, the actual funeral and the assembly had become separate events, but this too conforms to a 4,000-year tradition of funerary politics practiced among steppe nomads.53

Based on what the archaeological record preserves for us to discover, inhumation in a pit-burial was the standard Mongol imperial period practice for disposing of the dead. Since the royal burials of the Chinggisid lineage have not been found, archaeologists can only address the mortuary treatments given to secondary elites or members of aristocratic lineages and that provided to local elite and commoners of high status. The issue of identifying ‘commoner’ burials is problematic since it is not clear that every individual was given a mortuary treatment that archaeologists can detect. As such, it is possible that even the simplest pit-burials indicate a level of status beyond that of a common herder. In any case, the burials of aristocratic individuals (i.e., lower in status than the Chinggisid royal lineage) are clearly attested in both historical sources and by archaeology. Several such sites have been studied in Siberia, Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia, with the most comprehensive analytical results from the cemetery of Tavan Tolgoi (southeastern Mongolia, Map 30.1).

The Tavan Tolgoi cemetery is located in southern Sukhbaatar province, approximately 365 km southeast of the Avraga settlement, and has been the focus of intensive fieldwork and laboratory analysis. This site first became known through publication in 1927 of the photographs and descriptions of two life-size stone statues depicting individuals seated in folding armchairs sculpted from marble. Attired in decorated belted robes and boots in styles displaying wealth and high rank, both figures originally held goblets half raised in their now broken right hands, while their left hands still hold prayer beads (Figure 30.4). The head portions of both statues were fragmented long ago, but numerous pieces from one of them indicate a medieval brimmed hat with a top decoration and tassel displaying the status of the wearer.54 Similar stone statues dating to the 13th and 14th centuries exist in many parts of southeastern Mongolia and north-central Inner Mongolia and due to their individualized characteristic are thought to represent actual elite individuals in the empire. Although today most are regrettably broken, they provide a great deal of information on medieval clothing styles, personal decorations, implements, and headgear.55 Such statue stones are often situated on the southeast side of a large mounded stone feature with stone alignments and standing stelae thought to be for ritual offerings. Such attributes mark a local landscape as having ceremonial

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significance for the medieval Mongol aristocracy.¹⁶ The discovery of these two figures strongly suggests that the Tavan Tolgoi cemetery, discovered just to the south of these statue stones, may represent the burial grounds of an elite extended family within what was once their territorial jurisdiction.

Beginning in 2004, archaeologists recorded 62 burial features at Tavan Tolgoi ranging in date from the Bronze Age to the Mongol period, identified by various types of stone surface constructions. Together, these features comprise a multi-phase mortuary complex distributed over an area of 2.5 km and concentrated around three low-lying hills in a setting of open steppe grassland. Of these stone features, 40

Figure 30.4 One of a pair of marble stone sculptures of seated Mongol nobles located among the burials at the Tavan Tolgoi cemetery.

Source: (photo credit: Ch. Amartuvshin).
are marked by stone-built rings or semi-circular stone mounds ranging in size from 4.4 to 8.5 m and dated to the Mongol imperial period (i.e., the ‘classic’ period) based on the excavation and analysis of 12 of these burials. As would be expected from the presence of the marble statue stones, the material culture unearthed from these burials has been impressive. Tavan Tolgoi comprises comparatively large pit graves of 1.5–3 m in depth with full or partial horse burials, often with saddles and full harness gear, positioned next to a single individual interred in a heavy plank coffin oriented to the north or northwest (Figure 30.5).

Although these burials are somewhat unusual for the Mongol period, for example, only 15% of known burials are oriented to the northwest and only 4% include

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**Figure 30.5** Schematic plan of Burial 61 at Tavan Tolgoi showing a semi-ring of stones on the modern surface underlain by a burial chamber. The chamber is 3–4 m below the surface stones and contained an interred individual in a wooden coffin with a partial horse skeleton to the east, along with a wooden saddle. Note that the chamber arrangement is enlarged for detail and the meter scale pertains to the surface feature only.

horse remains, the majority of artifacts recovered instantly alerted excavators that the individuals buried here were of special status. Despite evidence of disruption, the artifact assemblage taken as a whole includes substantial numbers of exotic and luxury items, indicating great wealth. These include imported silks from China and coffin woods from Southeast Asia; belt sets made from gold, silver, and rock crystal; gold and silver personal decorations inset with gemstones, turquoise, jade, and pearls; drinking vessels of precious metal and porcelains; and gilded saddle decorations (Figure 30.6). Some burials also included objects only associated with the medieval aristocracy, such as hat decorations in gold known to indicate high

Figure 30.6 Precious artifacts, mostly personal ornaments and items indicating status, unearthed from Tavan Tolgoi burials. The artifacts shown are comprised of gold and silver, semi-precious stones, and pearls
Source: (photo permission: U. Erdenebat).
status, portable folding chairs shown in court paintings of the Mongol Ilkhanate of Persia, and seal stamps (tamgha) reserved for elite authorities as a means to render their approval.\(^5\) Ancient DNA research supports the idea that at least some of the Tavan Tolgoi individuals were distantly related and likely belonged to a lineage group of high political rank.\(^6\) However, we are skeptical of the opinion expressed in this research that Tavan Tolgoi individuals can be directly linked to Chinggis Khan.\(^7\)

Tavan Tolgoi is the best-studied aristocratic burial site in Mongolia, but several others have been discovered recently and are currently under investigation. These include the Khorig Uul cemetery in Khovsgol province (Map 30.1), with well-preserved silk garments now being analyzed at the Smithsonian Institution, as well as the Bukhyn Khoshuu burial from Khentii province (Map 30.1).\(^8\) This latter burial was pillaged only recently, but when archaeologists arrived to conserve what was left, they found a coffin sealed with bands of iron, a gold gilded belt set with turquoise inset, and three brocaded silk robes made with gold entwined silk that combined technologies from eastern Iran, Central Asia, and China.\(^9\) Moving just outside the borders of Mongolia, archaeologists have excavated additional elite cemeteries, revealing interesting geographic variability in aristocratic burial practices. For example, the Okoshki cemetery in southeastern Transbaikal (Map 30.1) has 49 surface features in the form of stone rings or ovals, but the burials most similar to those at Tavan Tolgoi internally were constructed under large earthen mounds 11–14 m in size and about 1 m in height.\(^10\) This form of Mongol elite burial has not been recorded in Mongolia but has been found in the Altai mountains of Siberia and might be considered a more northerly practice within the imperial steppe territory.\(^11\) To the south, near the Yuan Dynasty palace of Shangdu in Inner Mongolia, the Yike Shu cemetery (Map 30.1) contained elite burials with piled stone surface features and individuals buried in coffins made of split and hollowed logs, strapped together with bands of iron and gold, and placed inside a chamber floored with bricks.\(^12\) These geographically distributed cases demonstrate the varieties of elite mortuary practices as well as the tendency to continue some aspects of local burial traditions despite regional trends toward standardized formats.

While burials of the aristocratic elite receive close attention for their impressive construction and wealth, most people of the Mongol period did not receive such lavish treatment. As mentioned, archaeologists are not certain whether to label the most common form of Mongol-period burial as a treatment provided for commoners per se. Some evidence suggests that these burials found throughout Mongolia and Transbaikal might be those of local people of some status. Such burials are lesser versions of those found at Tavan Tolgoi and consist of a slightly mounded oval or ring-shaped stone feature made up of medium-sized local stones. Their spatial distribution varies between small clusters of two or three, ranging up to larger groups of 18–20 burials, but very large cemeteries do exist, especially in eastern Mongolia, numbering 100 or more such burials.\(^13\) These ‘local’ Mongol period burials are frequently found on the south-facing slopes of hills or foothills, sometimes in the upper portions of small enclosed valleys or on the banks of erosion cuts. Below the stone coverings, most burials consist of an earthen pit as much as 1.5 m deep in which a supine individual oriented to the north or northeast.
was provided with a wrapping of leather, felt, or birch bark, or a wooden plank coffin. Other individuals were simply positioned on the earthen floor of the burial chamber sometimes with stone slabs providing a siding around the perimeter of the burial chamber.\textsuperscript{68}

In contrast to pit burial inhumations, the study of naturally mummified individuals interred in rock crevices, cave compartments, and overhangs has yielded some of the best examples of preserved material culture and sophisticated bioarchaeological analysis conducted to date in Mongolia. Approximately 100 individuals have been identified in these contexts situated in rocky outcrops and among mountain peaks, where the deceased was placed along with common burial goods in a coffin or sometimes on the wooden sections of a dismantled cart and left exposed to the elements (Figure 30.7). Mongolia’s extremely cold and dry climate naturally freeze-dries organic materials and can, under the right conditions, produce a fully mummified individual, still clothed in preserved robes, silks, and boots.\textsuperscript{69} One of the most complete rock shelter burials dated by radiocarbon to the classic Mongol period (14th century) comes from the Tsagaan Khad site in Ovorkhangai province of Central Mongolia (Map 30.1). A cave discovered by local herders preserved most of the body and clothing of an individual, who had placed beside him a silk strung composite bow and a full complement of fletched arrows still housed in a leather quiver. Physical anthropologists at the Smithsonian

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure30.7}
\caption{An example of an intact rock or cave burial dating to the Mongol imperial period at the western site of Khagt in the Altai Mountains. This individual was deposited in a rock alcove in an extremely cold and dry environment which preserved skin, clothing, and footwear.}
\label{fig:30.7}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{68} Erdenebat et al. —

\textsuperscript{69} Source: (photo credit: Ch. Amartuvshin).
Institution CT scanned these mummified remains to reveal the deceased individual as a 15-year-old male whose cause of death is unknown and who probably ate a mixed diet of meat and grain based on his bone chemistry. Similar burials to this one date to a wide time range, from as early as the 4th and 5th centuries to the 17th century, showing once again the long-term persistence of certain mortuary traditions despite political and cultural transformation over time.

**LIFE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: TWO VALLEY COMMUNITIES**

Archaeology also allows us to view the lifeways of common people whose activities made up the vast majority of the archaeological record. Survey and excavation projects in the Egiin Gol-Tarvagatai valley region of Bulgan province (Map 30.1) provide a perspective on what life was like for local people and their communities. These neighboring valleys in north-central Mongolia have rich forested grasslands situated along rivers that provide dependable water ideal for both farming and herding. The valleys are connected by a series of mountain passes and have comparable present-day populations of 33 and 28 herding households, respectively. By all measures, these two areas are comparable in habitable land, waterways, and pastoral resources and constitute two equivalent centers of community occupation within the greater region. Despite being similar in resources and in contemporary household numbers, these ‘twin valleys’ had very different mortuary, landscape, and settlement characteristics during the Mongol imperial period.

The medieval landscape of Egiin Gol was centered on the large Bayan Gol settlement in the southeastern part of the valley, which has several radiocarbon dates ranging from the 11th through 14th centuries. The settlement is by far the largest site in the valley during this period and is associated with extensive finds of porcelain ceramics, large millstones, and a central platform mound surrounded by nine circular pieces of white granite that excavators believe once formed the foundations of a building structure. Two contemporaneous Mongol period cemeteries are located to the northwest and southeast of the Bayan Gol settlement and include some of the largest and most impressive Mongol burials in the entire region. Based on excavated diameter measurements, the burials from these cemeteries are more than 1 m larger on average than Mongol burials from all other parts of the valley. Given that the neighboring Tarvagatai Valley has no such burials whatsoever, and the Egiin Gol Valley has 110 of these burials differentiated by size and location, what have been perceived as ‘common’ pit burials may in fact indicate a degree of local social differentiation, as suggested earlier.

In contrast to Egiin Gol, a very different kind of central place was discovered in the Tarvagatai Valley just 50 km to the northwest of the large Bayan Gol settlement and cemetery complex. Recent paleo-environmental research in Mongolia has proposed that in conjunction with the emergence of the Mongol state during the early 13th century, regional climatic conditions shifted to a higher precipitation and warmer regime favoring abundant pasture and farming. Historical sources also suggest that the upper Selenge River basin where the Tarvagatai and Egiin Gol valleys are located was integrated into the early Mongol state in part due to the rich agricultural resources available in this region. This historical point has been borne out
by evidence from the Tsagaan Ereg settlement site, recently discovered by survey archaeologists in the Tarvagatai Valley (Figure 30.8).

Tsagaan Ereg is also a large settlement, but unlike the Bayan Gol complex with its central architectural mounds and cemeteries, it has several round pit-house features with wooden supports for roof coverings, hearths, and birch bark flooring. These habitations were probably semi-permanent and used as seasonal dwellings given that the exposed nature of the site would have been extremely cold during winter. The settlement is next to an extensive plain with irrigation channels, and its position at the confluence of two waterways makes it a good location to support intensive farming. Radiocarbon analyses date the early occupation of these pit-houses to around 1220 and the site continued to be inhabited at least through the end of the Yuan Dynasty (late 14th century). Evidence for agricultural production includes botanical remains of wheat, barley, and millet, as well as significant amounts of wheat pollen presumably deposited from neighboring field plots. Nearby the settlement, a heavy granite threshing stone was unearthed with embedded organics that provided radiocarbon dates contemporaneous with the pit-house occupation.

Two of these pit-houses have been fully excavated, revealing a great deal of broken earthenware pottery but no evidence of imported porcelain or other luxury items, as were found at the Bayan Gol settlement in Egiin Gol. All this evidence indicates that Tsagaan Ereg was a farming settlement likely occupied by local people who split their time between raising crops and herding in the valley. Fragmented faunal remains of
sheep, goat, and cattle with evidence for cut marks and marrow processing show that the local pastoral economy was fully functioning, and local households were seasonally mobile, judging from several small Mongol medieval period campsites conforming to a clear winter-summer habitation pattern. Both of the excavated pit-houses had internal hearths for warmth and cooking, but the second one also had ironworking slag and substantial areas, with burnt earth and charcoal representing the remains of a furnace for blacksmithing. Metallurgical analysis of these remains suggests that two different forms of ironworking were practiced at the settlement to produce high-quality steel. The first was standard bloomery processing, also found to be the main form of ironworking at Qaraqorum, but in this context practiced at a micro scale as would befit a part-time specialist in a local community.

The second form of steel production has not yet been documented at any large urban sites but is found primarily at Khitan and Mongol-period campsites associated with herding households in eastern Mongolia. This technology is unique to the medieval Mongol steppe region and involves the use of cast iron scrap pieces obtained from broken implements and vessels originally manufactured in China during prior centuries. Cast iron is brittle and cannot be used for tools or weapons unless it is treated to reduce its carbon content. This was accomplished by Tsagaan Ereg blacksmiths, who employed a complicated micro process of heat-treating to bring cast iron fragments to near melting temperatures, thereby producing steel through the release of carbon. These steel pieces could then be forged into arrowheads, knives, armor plate, or common tools, as has been documented at medieval sites in eastern Mongolia. This technology is well suited to small-scale production of essential materials in the context of a mobile herding lifeway where specialized formal workshops were not available. It is a fine demonstration of the flexible technological tradition that Mongolian nomads innovated based upon their unique culture and environment.

The very different Mongol period archaeological records at Egiin Gol and Tarvagatai beg the question of what the relationship might have been between these two valleys. Clearly, the two areas had very different roles to play in the larger imperial political system. Egiin Gol might have been the center of a low-level administrative district based on the patterns observed at the Bayan Gol settlement complex. If so, it is possible that part of the administrative duties of the local elite of Egiin Gol might have been managing the productive capacity of the surrounding region, including the important center for farming and craft manufacture in the neighboring Tarvagatai Valley. Based on hypothesized sizes for administrative districts during the imperial period and given present-day household numbers, these two valleys would have comprised only 9–20% of the population included in a typical jurisdiction overseen by an elite household appointed by the qa’an. In geographical terms, it would take up to 12 times the Egiin Gol-Tarvagatai region to assemble such a territory, showing once again the vast spatial extents involved in the organization of the Empire.

CONCLUSION

Study of the past is a tall order, but by thoughtfully integrating historical sources of information with archaeological data, the distant past is indeed knowable. Decades of archaeological fieldwork and analysis have allowed us to perceive the dim outlines of organization in what was the heartland of the Mongol Empire. Here we present
evidence-based scenarios of mobile qa’ans with their palaces and cities, spacious political districts administered by aristocratic houses, elite funerals as sites of political negotiations and theater, and the local communities whose ways of life transformed under a growing imperial order. In this manner, archaeology allows us to see both the large- and small-scale details of social class, local life, and the intimacies of death during a pivotal period of about two centuries. To restate a previous idea, archaeology is the only way for us to know about the Mongolian imperial period in places like Egiin Gol and the Tarvagatai Valley, whose peoples do not appear in the few historical texts of this time. Even though a great deal more work is required to test and confirm some of the ideas developed by archaeologists, Mongolian scholars working with a growing cohort of international collaborators have already presented us with important new insights into the imperial past.

NOTES

1 Sneath 2007.
2 Di Cosmo 1999.
3 Kradin et al. 2015.
4 Gardner et al., Forthcoming.
6 Allsen 1994, 325.
7 Konovalov 2017.
8 Rogers 2016, 103; Lee 2009.
9 Perlee 2011, 45.
11 Shiraishi 2006.
12 Shiraishi 2006, 87.
13 Shiraishi and Tsogtbaatar 2009.
15 Shiraishi and Tsogtbaatar 2009.
16 Tsogtbaatar et al. 2017; Park et al. 2019.
17 Rogers 2017.
18 Tsogtbaatar et al. 2019.
19 Atwood 2015.
21 Erdenebat 2018.
22 Di Cosmo 2015.
23 Burentogtokh et al. 2019, 60.
24 Allsen 1996, 128.
25 Heidemann et al. 2006.
26 Roth and Erdenebat 2002, 30.
27 Pohl et al. 2012.
28 Rubruck 1990, 221.
29 Bemmann et al. 2010, 69–79.
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*RDB,* See List of Abbreviations.


