Urban centres and the emergence of empires in Eastern Inner Asia

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The inner mechanics of Mongol empires are revealed through recent surveys by an American-Mongolian team. The large political confederations of high mobility which traditionally characterise the great Mongol empires of the first and second millennia AD are shown to have made use of highly sophisticated urban places which feature advanced planning and design, and impressive monumentality serving a variety of specific functions. Planning included open spaces within the walls reserved for the erection of tents.

Keywords: Mongolia, Mongol, civilisation, empire, urbanism

Introduction

The history of eastern Inner Asia, centred on modern-day Mongolia and the surrounding regions of China, Siberia and eastern Kazakhstan, provides important comparative perspectives on the rise of large-scale expansionistic states (Figure 1). The Mongols created the most famous of these, led by Chinggis Khan and his successors. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries they established the largest contiguous empire ever known. The expansion of this empire was exceptionally dramatic, leaving the lasting impression that it had little in the way of antecedents. There is, however, a long history of state and empire development in eastern Inner Asia beginning with the Xiongnu (200 BC to AD 155) followed by other polities that involved a complex array of ethnic, religious and political forces (Honeychurch & Amartuvshin 2005). A strong tradition of historical research based on Chinese documentary sources has developed an impressive picture of how these empires operated (Barfield 1989; Di Cosmo 2002; Jagchid & Symons 1989). While many studies of early states and empires throughout the world have focused on disjuncture and replacement of political order through warfare, forms of crisis and imperial successions, there is also abundant evidence for continuity of economic and social practices over long stretches of time (Van Buren & Richards 2000: 9; Sinopoli 2001). To understand patterns of change it is also necessary to understand those aspects of a culture that are resistant to change. In this way, both continuities and discontinuities in the material record are critical components to interpretation of long-term patterns of growth, decline and other forms of social interaction.

Among the most significant archaeological evidence for empire development in Inner Asia are the settlements that served key administrative, mercantile and military functions.

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Compared with contemporary states in China, for instance, the settlements discussed here were usually much smaller and less complex. Even so, they fit the definition of urban centres typically applied to early civilisations. Although definitions of urbanism are highly variable (Adams 1966; Bairoch 1988), the key factor is the role of providing specialised functions to a broader region. In the present case, the urban centres were population concentrations that fulfilled many roles, but were especially associated with administrative activities, craft specialisation and maintenance of elite retinues. In this regard, the settlements of the steppe polities clearly fall within the range of urban centres established by early states and empires (e.g. Trigger 2003: 120).

In a region of the world dominated by a steppe environment of bitter winters and short summers and where pastoral nomadism was practiced as early as 3000-2500 BC (Tsybiktarov 2003: 86), the presence of towns and cities is often overlooked in explanations of regional political developments. The seeming contradiction of nomads who built complex permanent settlements raises the question of whether we have understood the fundamental dynamics of the economy. For instance, much of the literature emphasises the extractive nature of the steppe polities, in the sense of what Barfield (2001) terms ‘shadow empires’. This interpretation presents the states formed by the steppe pastoralists as a reflection of events in China. By contrast, Di Cosmo (1994) emphasises a dynamic relationship and questions whether China is the only significant source for agricultural and luxury goods valued by the steppe polities. The urban centres of eastern Inner Asia integrated cultural ideals that valued mobility with the practical requirements of statecraft, but also engaged in diverse economic activities including extensive agriculture and specialised craft production. Presented here is
some of the archaeological evidence for a long sequence of complex settlements supported by a dynamic range of economic and administrative functions.

Among the various settlements, significant forms of continuity are evident in the modes of construction of urban centres, as well as trade centres, palaces, elite cemeteries and military posts. Although there are clear architectural similarities of construction, the more significant continuities are those concerning specific purpose, location and a steppe commonality that served the unique requirements of the environment and an economy founded on pastoralism. These shared characteristics reflect a far more predictable basis than previously recognised for the consolidation of steppe polities. The attributes of the steppe polities also allow expanded interpretation of urbanism in empire development through alternative ways of thinking about the relationship between the scale of political entities and their relative complexity.

Among the most significant attributes of the steppe urban centre is what may be termed purpose-driven construction. Whatever the overall function of a centre might have been, it was very seldom the product of a long period of growth and accretion, as was common in some other regions of the world (e.g. Frangipane 1997; Keith 2003). Nor did most settlements house large resident populations on a scale with agrarian societies. Instead, they provided focal points for military and trade purposes and central places associated with the conduct of administration, agriculture and craft production.

In addition to the implications of planned construction, the major urban centres having administrative and royal precincts expressed power differentials through elaborate and costly constructions. However, there was also a more diffuse side to the physical representation of status and hierarchy as epitomised by the use of royal tents, the shifting location of royal encampments and the construction of relatively modest palaces away from the urban centres. The shifting locus of royal encampments is an elite representation of the complex web of interactions linking the urban centres to smaller settlements and an extensive number of mobile encampments of outlying agropastoralists. The urban centre was part of not just a network, but of a pattern of population movements that carried out some of the functions more routinely concentrated within the walls and public spaces of early towns and cities, such as those in India (Smith 2003), Mesopotamia (Stone 1995) or Mesoamerica (Sanders et al. 2003).

**Characteristics of urban centres**

The following is a brief description of selected settlements in central Mongolia presented in chronological order, ranging in date from AD 500 to 1400. The sites discussed are some of the largest and most complex centres and serve as examples of architectural continuity, variation and the economic basis for the settlement. A joint project of the Mongolian Institute of Archaeology and the Smithsonian Institution studied each site in the summer of 2002. Four of the five site plans presented here are based on a combination of previously published and new field information.

The largest pre-modern urban centre in Mongolia is the Uighur empire capital of Khar Balgas, known in early documents as Ordu Balik (Figure 2). The construction of the city seems to have been a planned event shortly following the consolidation of the Uighur empire.
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and was occupied for less than 100 years, between c. AD 750 and 840 (Mackerras 1972). In 1892 Radloff (cited in Minorsky 1947: 295) described the exterior defensive wall as enclosing a rectangle 7km long and 2.5km wide, while Kiselev (1957: 94) described the city as covering an area of 25 sq. km. Within the walls there are areas of residential architecture, an area for public buildings and a citadel with gardens and elite residences (Figure 3). Other
large areas within the walls are devoid of permanent construction and may represent space for tented neighbourhoods.

Khar Balgas is located in the broad valley of the Orkhon River, 24km north of Kharkhorum, the future capital of the Mongol empire. Modern intensive irrigation agriculture on the eastern and southern sides of the site has greatly disturbed surface indications, although brief research in the 1890s, 1933-1934 and again in 1949 provide an overview of the city's organisation (Kiselev 1957; Minorsky 1947; Perlee 1961: 49-51; Ulambayar 1999). Recent study of aerial photographs has produced a more accurate map of the citadel, located in the north-east portion of the site (Plümer & Roth 2002). Archaeological reconnaissance has also noted the presence of irrigation systems and an eyewitness account by Tamīn ibn Bahr around AD 821, notes that the city was rich in agriculture and there were many closely spaced outlying villages adjacent to cultivated lands (Minorsky 1947: 283).

Another important centre associated with the Uighur empire is Baibalyk, much smaller than Khar Balgas, and consisting primarily of three square defensive enclosures along the Tsagaan River near its confluence with the Selenge River (Figure 4). The largest of the enclosures (Fortress 1) still has substantial walls in place (Figure 5). Although unconfirmed, Baibalyk may be a second Uighur centre on the Selenge River mentioned in Chinese sources of the time (Mackerras 1972: 13). Very little is known about the function of each of the enclosures or about how areas between or near the enclosures may have been used (Bayar 1999: 176).

Because of its cultural affiliation with the Khitan empire of the tenth and eleventh centuries AD and its location on the Khar Bukhyn River, the site of Khar Bukhyn Balgas is often described as a military outpost and colony along the northern border of the Khitan empire (Jagchid 1981; Scott 1975). The site consists of a large square defensive enclosure
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Figure 4. Location of Fortresses 1, 2 and 3 at the Baibalyk site (adapted from Moriyasu and Ochir 1999: plate 12a).

Figure 5. Remnants of walls approximately 4m tall forming north and eastern sides of Fortress I at the Baibalyk site. Photo by John E. Woods.

with walls surviving 2-4m tall, constructed of rammed earth and surrounded by a ditch (Figure 6). Midway along each wall is a fortified gate connected to north-south and east-west streets dividing the enclosed space into quadrants. The ruins of several stone buildings
The remains of probable irrigation canals are located north and east of the fortification wall.

dominating the north-west quadrant of the fortress are associated with a later seventeenth century reutilisation of the site. A large stone stupa along the north wall is the location of the discovery of an early Buddhist birch bark book (Bayar 1999: 188). To the north and east of the fortress a series of irrigation canals stretch across the river floodplain. One of the canals ends very close to the north-east corner of the fortress and may have been the city’s source of water. Fragments of grinding stones for grain processing were noted on the surface.

The best known and most extensively studied of the early settlements of Mongolia is the capital city of Kharkhorum (Figure 7). The general vicinity was a significant place in the history of the Mongol tribes as early as the eighth century, although it was not a major centre until the empire was consolidated under Chinggis Khan in AD 1220 (Tseveendorj 1999: 189-92). Chinggis’ successors, Ögedei, Güyük and Möngke, were responsible for
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Figure 7. Map of Kharkhorum showing the location of the palace complex built by Ögedei. At the southern edge of the city is the contemporary monastery of Erdene-Zuu (adapted from Kato 1997: 18 and Kiselev 1957: 98).

actually establishing and using Kharkhorum as a capital (Cleaves 1952). Under Ögedei the Wan-an (Qarši) palace was built and the city was surrounded by a wall and moat (in. 1235) enclosing an irregular rectangle of 1 sq km. Excavations revealed an exterior wall that may have originally stood 5-8m tall (Kiselev 1965: 138; Roth & Ulambajar 2002: 30). Eyewitness accounts by William of Rubruck, John of Plano Carpini (Dawson 1955) and ʿAla-al-Dīn ʿAta-Malik Juvaynī (Boyle 1958: 236-7) in the thirteenth century AD provide important information on the organisation of the city and the Mongol empire more generally. A series of archaeological expeditions, including the current joint Mongol/German project, have added greatly to our knowledge of the city (Kato 1997; Kiselev 1965; Roth & Ulambajar 2002; Tseveendorj 1999).

The wall surrounding Kharkhorum had four gates, located at midpoints along each wall. From each gate, major streets bisected the interior layout, as is common at other centres. Water was brought to the city by a canal connected to the Orkhon River. Areas between the city and the river were cultivated using additional irrigation canals and small reservoirs. In
1256, Khubilai (Kublai) ordered the construction of a new capital named Xandu (Xanadu) (Upper Capital), with the Mongol capital later moving to Dadu (Beijing) (Rossabi 1987: 31). Although Kharkhorum remained as a provincial centre for some time, it eventually lost its standing. On different occasions Chinese troops were garrisoned there and the city was eventually destroyed by Ming troops in AD 1380 (Shiraishi 1997: 121).

Throughout the period of the Mongol empire (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), many permanent settlements were constructed along major rivers in Mongolia and elsewhere. Among these is Khar Khul Khaany Balgas located on the Khanui River in Arkhangai Province (Figure 8). Recent excavations have established a sequence of occupation ranging from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century (Bayar 1999: 192-3; Enkhbat 1986). The site consists of ten enclosures scattered over an area of about 3 sq. km. At least seven of them are oriented on a north-east–south-west axis. Between the enclosures, there is almost no surface evidence for habitations or other activities. Although the site is near a river on a broad
plain, it is not known whether irrigation farming was practised. The largest of the enclosures (Complex 1) can be termed a citadel, with heavily eroded earthen walls currently standing 4-5m high. The Citadel is a rectangle measuring approximately 375 x 325m (Moriyasu & Ochir 1999: Plate 19b). It has four gates, one positioned at the midpoint along each wall. Aside from the Citadel, the other enclosures were not designed for defensive purposes. In each case the exterior walls are low, probably originally not more than 1-2m tall. Within each enclosure are the remains of what appears to be public buildings or elite residences, given the presence of glazed roof tiles, fired bricks and carved stone column bases.

Another significant example from the period of the Mongol empire is the settlement of Shaazan Khot, located on the Ongi River in Dundgov Province (Figure 9). The site is believed to represent a specialised trade centre, although a recent study has also suggested the site was a winter palace during the Mongol empire (Shiraishi 2002). While trade may have been the economic foundation for the community, the resident population naturally also practised a wide range of social and subsistence activities. This is the only site in our
sample that does not have evidence for an exterior wall, although low walls enclosed specific building complexes. Abundant porcelain fragments, coins, green glazed roof tiles and other artefacts recovered from the surface link the site with the period from the late eleventh century to the time of the Yuan dynasty (AD 1270-1368). The site is located along what may have been a major route between China and the Mongol capital at Kharkhorum.

**Discussion**

The urban centres developed by the steppe polities in eastern Inner Asia did not emerge from a gradual process of growth, but instead were founded to serve specific, predetermined functions. By the beginnings of the Xiongnu empire (200 BC to AD 155), the great majority of urban centres consisted of fortified rectilinear enclosures. Of the 23 settlements illustrated in Perlee's (1961) book, *A Brief History of Ancient and Medieval Period Settlements in the Mongolian People’s Republic*, 22 are quadrilateral enclosures. The one illustrated site not enclosed by a wall was Shaazan Khot, mentioned above (see also Kiselev 1965). In addition to the sites described in this article, our project team surveyed and prepared preliminary maps at four palace sites, a major cemetery near Khar Balgas, a temple complex and four other sites with large rectangular earthen enclosures. All of these sites are believed to date between about 200 BC and the Mongol empire and took the form of single or multiple quadrilateral enclosures. If the architectural review is extended beyond Mongolia to include surrounding regions of China and Russia the pattern is the same – unless the settlement served a special function, such as a palace or trade centre, it was normally enclosed by a wall. In China, for instance an ideal type of city plan emerged that incorporated a generally square outline oriented to the cardinal directions (Wheatley 1971: 423). Evidence from the Han (206 BC to AD 220) and later T’ang dynasties (AD 618 to 907) provides evidence for the long-term development of city planning principles based on rectilinear enclosures within enclosures (Boyd 1962: 49).

For the steppe polities, the planning principles offer parallels with China and other regions, but also incorporate several unique attributes. The most consistent characteristics include:

- A pattern of generally square defensive outer walls with multiple rectilinear inner enclosures. In some cases, sites are composed of multiple squares, associated with buildings used for different functions.
- Outer walls typically have gates positioned at mid-points along the wall connected to streets bisecting the interior, such as at Khar Bukhyyn Balgas (Figure 6) and Kharkhorum (Figure 7).
- Within the urban centre, principal buildings such as palaces and public buildings are often near one or another edge of the enclosed area. The citadel at Khar Balgas (Figure 2) and the Wan-an palace at Kharkhorum (Figure 7) are clear examples of this pattern.
- Large areas within the outer walls are typically devoid of architectural evidence, implying the presence of tent (ger) neighbourhoods, not unlike walled tent communities known from recent times (Hodges 1972: 525).
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Many sites are composed of clusters of widely spaced enclosures, such as Baibalyk (Figure 4) and Khar Khul Khaany Balgas (Figure 8), but also including a large number of sites not illustrated here (see Perlee 1961). The spacing between enclosures may allow for the presence of tented neighbourhoods, although archaeological evidence is not yet available.

All of the urban centres are located in major river valleys adjacent to permanent water sources and land suitable for pasturage and agriculture.

The characteristics listed above are part of the material expression of patterning at a more encompassing social and historical level. Specifically, there are three sets of significant perspectives: the spatial order in settlement planning and construction, landscape context and the social history of settlement. The first two factors reflect action-based choices, but are also bound by convention and the ideology of authority associated with state formation and maintenance. The third factor, by contrast, reflects the accumulated history of population dynamics, political expediencies, the shifting role of a particular settlement in trade networks and other responses to the specifics of time and place.

Studies of spatial order expressed through architecture have noted the many ways in which meaning is encoded in the landscape and built environment (Ashmore & Knapp 1999; Ucko & Layton 1999). The planning and construction of settlements is a cultural expression of spatial order and a representation of ideals reified through the built environment. Almost all of the sites discussed above give strong indication of having been planned and constructed over a relatively short period, given what is known about other sites in the region, it is reasonable to extend this observation to a much greater number of settlement sites in Mongolia.

Within the context of the steppe empires, the widespread occurrence of planned constructions has several implications. First, the planned buildings and fortifications imply the rapid emergence of a purpose-driven set of objectives, often associated with the relocation of an urban centre from one area to another or the formalisation of administrative functions following a period of initial political and military consolidation. The growth of complex administrative systems is associated with the collection and storage of tribute, conduct of international relations and the provisioning of large military operations. Although not all steppe polities did so, diverse administrative tasks were typically centralised in a capital that was also a population centre. Such was the case at all of the primary urban centres described above.

A further implication of the prevalence of planned constructions is the availability of resources necessary to undertake the often-monumental construction efforts. This makes sense when considering that steppe empires typically did not emerge from a city-state predecessor or from the accretion of a permanent series of settlements associated with an agricultural base, but instead from the consolidation of dispersed groups in the form of a political confederation (Barfield 1981, 2001: 13; Franke 1978; Moses 1974). Certainly, the existence of an architectural tradition that defined the parameters of 'appropriate' construction was also part of the equation. This relates to such things as the practice of using enclosures, both as defensive systems and as ways to segregate space into internal and external areas. It should also be noted that documentary sources refer to the importation of foreign workers and architects to complete the actual construction, such as the settlement
of Da-lee during the first Turkic empire (Perlee 1961: 47) and later at Kharkhorum (Boyle 1958: 236-7). Soghdian advisors at Ordu Balik (Khar Balgas (Barfield 1989: 158)) and the likely presence of Jurchid colonists at Khar Bukhyn Balgas (Scott 1975: 13-14) add to the ethnic diversity associated with the steppe tradition of settlement construction. Chinese workers and advisors were also major contributors to styles and principles of construction. Steinhardt (1988: 71-2), in particular, makes a compelling case for Chinese influence on imperial Mongol urban planning.

In parallel with the tradition of urban centres was the arguably even more important pastoral-nomad ideal that was indeed the foundation for a wide range of cultural practices, even by town dwellers. For instance, although kings spent part of their time in urban centres they also embodied the pastoral ideal through seasonal relocations of the royal residence (e.g. Boyle 1972). In addition to permanent palace constructions, there is also the well-known practice of using royal tents, even in urban centres, such as the golden tent described by Tamin ibn Bahr on his visit to the Uighur capital at Khar Balgas (Minorsky 1947: 295). Certainly, the differences between settled and nomadic traditions were not lost on the leadership of the steppe empires. Tonyukhukh, general and counsellor to the Turkic khans is quoted as saying, 'if we build castles and give up our old customs, we shall be vanquished' (Tkachev 1987: 114). Tonyukhukh may have been giving good strategic advice, but he spoke in the face of what was already a many centuries old tradition of fortified urban centres.

From the perspective of the formation of empires, the principles that guide the planned construction of urban centres and palaces are about defining parameters of inclusion and exclusion, both as practical function and as legitimisation of authority. As a practical function, urban construction serves to define activity spaces that serve the needs of concentrated populations. In the formation and maintenance of empires, inclusion and exclusion are techniques that allow legitimisation of authority to be articulated within a particular landscape. The second factor mentioned above relates to the importance of certain geographical locales, both strategically and symbolically. Primary urban centres are nearly always located in major river valleys that provide access to water, arable lands and grazing. There are, however, certain locales that over centuries transcend political boundaries and continue to play a central role in the succession of empires.

In Mongolia, the Orkhon River Valley (Figure 1) served perhaps as the most important focal area for the emergence and consolidation of several different empires. It was the location of important urban centres, perhaps as early as the Xiongnu polity, but certainly during the first and second Turkic, Uighur and Mongol empires (Allsen 1996; Kiselev 1965; Tkachev 1987). The construction in 1585-1586 of the important Buddhist monastery of Erdene Zuu (Kato 1997) adjacent to the ruins of Kharkhorum continues the association of the area with important cultural values extending to the present day. Each successive empire tended not to build on the urban centres of its predecessors, but they did build on the cosmological power and historical significance of this particular valley. Over time, the imperial traditions associated with the valley became an important point of legitimisation used by successive khans. This form of locational continuity, over hundreds of years, has much to do with parallel continuity in systems of belief and political culture. The Turks and the Mongols, and probably others before them, adapted to the diversity of cultural and religious practices encountered across the regions they conquered, notably incorporating
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a tolerance for multiple religions. The legitimisation of empire in eastern Inner Asia did not depend on the transmission of a single state religion as an ideology of expansion. Although, in some notable cases, such as the Uighur empire, a state religion was adopted (Manichaeism) after the founding of the empire, but even in this case it was not a significant factor motivating attempts to expand the empire (Mackerras 1972). The practice of religious tolerance did not mean, however, that there was no continuity in systems of thought. In fact, many of the steppe tribes held in common a set of religious ideals that included the principal deities Tengri the Sky God and Etügen (Ötügen) the Earth Mother (Golden 1982: 42; Lor-Falck 1956). These shared beliefs clearly formed part of the motivation for continuity in the significance placed on particular locales.

The third factor mentioned above – the social history of settlement – acknowledges the significance of events as they impacted what might be termed the ‘planning ideal’; in other words, the disjuncture between order and action or expectation and implementation. Essentially, even for settlements that were clearly established on a master plan, the history of site utilisation often adds layers of complexity to what might have otherwise been an easily interpreted organisation. In the development of urban centres throughout the world it is very common for original organising principles to be overwhelmed by the expediencies of successive periods of growth or decline. Eventually, urban centres often take on a much more organic pattern of growth as seen in many modern-day capitals, as well as in the ruins of ancient cities (e.g. Ashmore & Sabloff 2002). In contrast to this more common pattern of organic growth, the great majority of known urban centres, palaces and other settlements from Mongolia were constructed on a master plan that was maintained intact over the settlement’s life history.

The one partial exception to this pattern is the Mongol capital of Kharkhorum. Although there is substantial evidence that the decision to base the capital at Kharkhorum was carefully planned (Allsen 1996: 126-7), it is also apparent that a settlement already existed at that location for possibly as much as three hundred years (Kiselev 1965). Historical sources also point out that the royal palace and perimeter wall were added to an already existing settlement (Cleaves 1952; Rashid al Din 1959, vol. 2: 684-5). In reviewing the site plan for Kharkhorum (Figure 7) the perimeter wall approximates a rectangle, but is far less regular in orientation than most of the other known urban centres. It gives the impression of being a wall added to enclose an existing community.

With the exception of Kharkhorum there are no other examples of urban centres reflecting the expediencies of unplanned growth or change in site plans. Within the respective social histories of eastern Inner Asian empires, several factors account for the clarity of site plans. Sites were typically occupied for relatively short periods, although sometimes reoccupied at a later date. Urban centres usually represented core activity areas while population fluctuations were typically expressed through the expansion and contraction of associated neighbourhoods for gers (tents). Perhaps most important was the pattern of abandoning old centres and establishing new ones, especially with the successive replacement of empires.

The final component of the discussion specifically addresses issues of the relative significance of agriculture within the steppe empires and to what extent the available archaeological data helps reveal the role of this economic pursuit. Agriculture is an especially relevant issue because its environmental requirements would have affected decisions on
where to construct population centres. Many studies have under-emphasised the role of agriculture, although Di Cosmo (1994; see also T’ang 1981) persuasively argues for reassessing the economic foundations of the pastoral nomadic empires, as well as their general relationship to China. Through his review of both archaeological and documentary sources, evidence emerges for a long agricultural tradition operating along side the more dominant pastoral pursuits practiced throughout the region. Although his analysis concentrates on the Xiongnu, there is significant evidence that allows extension of the argument to include later empires.

The urban centres discussed in this study incorporate evidence for the practice of extensive agriculture, implied by their location in major river valleys, but endorsed through the presence of grain-processing equipment, agricultural tools and irrigation canals. Historical sources also provide many important clues (e.g. Dawson 1955: 100). Even with this general evidence there still remain many questions of scale and distribution of production, organisation of agricultural activities and the actual crops utilised within specific regions and time periods.

Although agriculture is discussed here primarily in the context of population centres, it did not necessarily need cities to prosper. Ethnographic research in the twentieth century (Röna-Tas 1959; Vreeland 1957; Vainshtein 1980) offers important comparative perspectives on the role of agriculture. Archaeological research in adjacent regions of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan (Chang & Tourtellotte 1998: 273; Rosen et al. 2000), the Minusinsk Basin region of southern Siberia (Savinov 1989: 814) and the long-term project at the Xiongnu site of Ivolga (Davydova 1995), also in southern Siberia, confirms the widespread presence of agro-pastoral economies. In Mongolia, recent archaeological and ethnographic work in the Egin River valley (Figure 1; Honeychurch 2004; Honeychurch & Amartuvshin 2002) provides a detailed regional perspective while also exploring the implications of crop cultivation as a routine part of subsistence practices. Findings show that local systems of mixed subsistence, including pastoralism and agriculture, were common from the Bronze Age to the modern era. Over time local production became integrated with the larger political structures. During the period of the Uighur state, in particular, there was evidence for local specialisation in pastoral production, complementing evidence for the expansion of agricultural production around the urban centres at Khar Bargas and Baibalyk.

Conclusions

The evidence for the physical layout of urban centres, trade centres and palaces reflect long-standing regional practice. The spatial organisation of Mongolian centres was part of ideological and cultural systems used by elites to emulate perceived sources of political power and to solidify deep-rooted cultural values. Architecture and the spatial organisation of settlements are often created as a purposeful representation of ideal order – especially in the construction of planned settlements. However, in practice this ideal order confronts a constantly changing array of uses and purposes. The physical solidity of place becomes both an anchor for continuity and evidence of the disjuncture between present action and ideal representations.
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It is widely held that the empires of the steppe regions of Eastern Inner Asia came into existence through interaction with existing states (Barfield 2001: 10; Irons 1979: 362; Jagchid & Symons 1989). While the steppe empires certainly carried on significant interactions with sedentary states, the complexity of internal social organisation, economic systems and trade with other regions raises the likelihood of a far more dynamic cultural sphere. It is not surprising that some of the most significant interactions took place between China and the steppe empires considering China's great power, relative stability and long tradition of statecraft. Even so, this interaction should not be used to define the importance of the participants or pre-determine, through exclusion, consideration of other influences.

When William of Rubruck visited the Mongol capital of Kharkhorum in the mid-1250s he was not particularly impressed, describing it as about the size of a large French village (Dawson 1955: 183). The irony of this observation emerges when considering that Kharkhorum was at that time the imperial capital of a vast empire. Indeed, Kharkhorum was not like the capitals of Europe or South Asia or China, instead it was part of a pattern of steppe empire development that integrated nomadic ideals with the requirements of imperial administration and strategies of control.

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References


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