May 2012

Postmortem violence? Identifying and interpreting postmortem disturbance in Mongolia.

Judith H. Littleton
University of Auckland, j.littleton@auckland.ac.nz

Bruno Frohlich
National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC, FROHLICH@si.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.7275/R55Q4T17
Available at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol2/iss2/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Landscapes of Violence by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Postmortem violence? Identifying and interpreting postmortem disturbance in Mongolia.

Abstract
Deliberate violence to remains can be inflicted post-mortem but archaeologically distinguishing the source of disturbance is hard enough while interpreting motive may be impossible. We present the results of excavation of 37 Bronze Age mounds, northern Mongolia. Based on detailed analysis of burial structure, patterns of articulation, damage to elements and movement of bones within and outside the burial space, we argue there is evidence of human activity distinguishable from that of animals. Alternative hypotheses of disturbance incidental to robbery versus intentional post-mortem violence are evaluated in the context of the graves themselves, the archaeological context and ethnographic studies.

Keywords
Mongolia, desecration, taphonomy, khirigsuurs

This article is available in Landscapes of Violence: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol2/iss2/7
POSTMORTEM VIOLENCE?
Identifying and interpreting postmortem disturbance in Mongolia

Judith Littleton and Bruno Frohlich
1University of Auckland and 2Smithsonian Institution

Introduction
It is common to find during excavation that Bronze Age burial mounds (khirigsuurs) have been disturbed after burial has taken place. Disturbance is evidenced by removal of capstones over graves as well as disarticulation to the human remains themselves. Yet material goods are rarely, if ever, found in khirigsuurs, whether disturbed or not, so why would there have been attempts to disturb them? Three hypotheses have been proposed: grave robbery (Dickson 2010); deliberate desiccation of graves by local groups (Frohlich et al. 2012); and deliberate desiccation by a later replacement culture (Cybillstone 2003). Before testing any of these hypotheses, however, it is necessary to determine what disturbance to the structure and to the human remains is due to deliberate human action and what is due to animal disturbance.

Background
While there is a debate about their primary as well as ultimate function (Dickson et al. in prep.), khirigsuurs served as burial mounds in an area across north and western Mongolia and southern Siberia. The mounds discussed here date to between approximately 3500 – 2800 BP (Frohlich et al. 2009). The mounds share a common form: a pile of stones surrounded by an external fence surrounding an above-ground stone chamber, or a pit cut into the ground surface, or a semi-subterranean structure. This creates a burial chamber which is closed after use by one or two layers of capstones. The stones used in the construction are local. The variation in size and elaboration has been interpreted in the light of status or other social differentiation within these early pastoral groups (e.g. Alland and Erdenesambuu 2005, Honeychurch, Leight et al. 2007, Hoad 2009, Wright 2008).

The 23 mounds analysed here were excavated 2007 – 2008. Preservation of human remains can be extremely poor (Dickison et al. in prep.), but more than 70% of the tombs contained some skeletal elements. No material goods were found.

There are two indications of potential deliberate human disturbance to the graves: the removal of capstones and what appears to be a response to that activity – elaborate measures to disguise the location of the burial chamber (double layers of capstones, burial below the chamber floor, construction of a false floor). But why would this be necessary if there are no material objects within the graves?

Methods
We have analysed the excavation records and the human remains seeking evidence of deliberate human disturbance as opposed to animal disturbance. In this area of Mongolia marmots are common. As a large burrowing rodent (marmots may weigh between 10-25 kg) they can be expected to have some impact upon burials. At the same time scavenging carnivores such as dogs and wolves can also be expected to be present within this environment. While they cannot be assumed to be responsible for removing large capstones (often more than 1 m square), they could follow upon any human disturbance.

We categorised disturbance as follows: Deliberate human disturbance:
Animal Marks on Bone
Mounds 12, 18, 24 = 3/23

Small Elements Moved
Mounds 12, 18, 24 = 3/23

Movement of Large Elements
Mounds 8, 46 = 2/23 (both had disturbed capstones)

Results
Undisturbed burials
Capstones removed/disturbed
Scavenging

Animal Marks on Bone
Mounds 8, 10, 17, 25 = 4/23 (includes one without capstones)

Small Elements Moved
Mounds 8, 10, 14, 16, 17, 23, 25, 41, 46 = 11/23

Problems of Interpretation

Mound #8

Mound #16

Mound #6

Interpretation:
The three undisturbed tombs give a clear indication of the original burial position. In all instances the body is lying nearly fully extended close to one wall of the chamber (frequently on their left side). Legs were lying one over the other and it seems possible that the ankles were tied together. Hands commonly in front of the pelvis palms together.

In contrast the six tombs with capstones removed give a very confused picture. In two instances the body has been dragged from the chamber after capstone disturbance (#8 and #46) possibly by a scavenger (although no evidence of violence has been found). The degree of articulation of #8, #16, and #41 suggests only limited disturbance at the time of first disturbance. For example, #8 it was pulled out of the chamber at a time when the head was still articulated (it subsequently fell backwards) along with the vertebrae column and the arms were only starting to disarticulate from the shoulder girdle. The burials of both adults and children were disturbed and there is no clear bias although a possible preference for males (3 males, 1 female, 27).

The difficulty in identifying what humans were doing is the degree of animal disturbance. Within these graves there is extensive displacement of elements both small and large away from where they could have been expected to fall. Of the 11 tombs where small elements had been moved, five had evidence of animal damage to the bones.

Counts of elements and long bones are too different for considering it, however, in a symposium on post-mortem violence is the sense of a un-condoned act, an act of grave robbery, this evidence suggests that the grave was left intact and the elements were moved. One option is that this is a response to a potential disturbance, i.e. deliberate exposure to the elements, and the possibility of violence to bodily integrity through moving of particular elements (though more evidence is needed before this can be confirmed). If the group where there are at least two instances of severe postmortem violence [multiple sharp force blows to the head] the disturbance of graves seems anything but a benign activity.

Conclusion
Given attempts to avoid disturbance, the activity does not appear to be socially condoned [at least by those constructing the burial]. However what people were doing once they opened a tomb remains a mystery – the rotation of elements seems suggestive of some sort of deliberate disturbance of the body itself but this evidence is hard to evaluate given the extensive animal activity and the highly variable nature of preservation. The reason for considering it, however, in a symposium on post-mortem violence is the sense of a un-condoned act, an act of deliberate exposure to the elements, and the possibility of violence to bodily integrity through moving of particular elements (though more evidence is needed before this can be confirmed). In a group where there are at least two instances of severe postmortem violence [multiple sharp force blows to the head] the disturbance of graves seems anything but a benign activity.

References cited