



THE SILK ROAD CULTURE AND ANCIENT TURKISH WALL PAINTED TOMB

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Abstract

In 2011, the research team of Mongolia and Kazakhstan has excavated a wall painted tomb at Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, Mongolia. The tomb is approximately dated to the 7th century.

The tomb structure and murals but also the burial objects from the Shoroon Bumbagar Tomb clearly exhibit the tastes of the nomadic people residing along the Silk Road and the Steppe Route.

The stylistic analysis of wall paintings and burial objects from the Shoroon Bumbagar Tomb also suggests that the tomb can be dated to around 650s-670s. The funerary art tradition of East Asia as we can see in comparisons with Chinese and Koguryo mural tombs, but he certainly embodied his nomadic taste and culture into his burial, which brought the extraordinary manifestation of the broad interactions from Byzantine to China.

Shoroon Bumbagar tomb is closely located to Ulaan Kherem, a Turkic earthen walled city. It was the first time to discover a wall painted tomb in Mongolia. The tomb is approximately dated to the 7th century during the Eastern Turkic period. In terms of a tomb structure, murals, and artifacts, the tomb yields interesting mixtures of the cultures of the nomads, the Byzantine, and China. With the rare examples of wall paintings and burial objects, this newly excavated mural tomb in Mongolia provide us with significant information about the cultural exchanges among the nomads including the silk road culture. It is certain that the remarkable new findings from the tomb would bring a new perspective in the study of the history of wall painted tombs from the 6th to the 8th centuries in Asia and in the study of the cultural exchanges and transmission of the funerary arts of Asia in the Silk road.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Eastern Turkic, funerary art, cultural exchanges and transmissions.*

I. THE FEATURE OF TOMB WALL PAINTING

There are paintings of 24 people figures painted with different colors, a white tiger, a blue dragon, two saddled horses with two grooms, two Buddhist temple, a jeweled lotus flower,



and a monster mask, two flags and seven trees with dense lease leaves care basket on the two sides of entranceway of the tomb. The wall paintings are grouped as below;

- Entrance way wall painting
- Northern wall painting
- Western and eastern wall painting
- Lateral wall painting of auxiliary chamber`s door
- Wall paintings in the tomb chamber

Before drawing the paintings, the earth of entranceway and tomb chamber were well leveled, fixed up and surfaced with mud, moreover, in order to make the main paintings to be seen more clearly, the painting was outlined with natural black color and painted dim red, dark blue and gray colors.

The wall paintings on the sloping tomb entranceway are the Blue Dragon and the White Tiger as shown in Fig.1. as well as eight male figures in a procession and six red flags hung on a flag stand. The north wall of the tomb path has a painting of a gate tower building. On the walls of the first vertical airshaft are two horse grooms dressed in a Central Asian costume and two saddled horses. The upper parts of the north walls of the vertical airshafts have a painting of a lotus flower (first vertical airshaft), a monster face (second vertical airshaft), and the gate building (third vertical airshaft). Paintings in the main chamber have not well preserved. The remaining murals show six male and female figures standing under seven trees. Drawn with a rough and thick brushwork, the paintings of the main chamber appear a little crude and different from the more sophisticated paintings of the sloping tomb path.

The actions of people described in wall paintings were different in the dresses, faces and decorations they wore. It makes us to think that images of the people could be real people that period of time.





Fig.1. White Tiger

The burial objects excavated from the tomb include male and female figurines, either standing or riding on a horse, two tomb guardian figures, as shown in Fig. 2. two tomb guardian animal figures, animal figurines, gold and bronze objects, fragments of a golden floral crown ornament, a golden ring with a filigree decoration, and a miniature horse saddle.



Fig.2. Tomb guardian figure

The tradition to create a guardian beast and to place it next to burial vault was early emerged in Asian countries such as China. The guardian beast with a bird's beak and the lion which found in *Shoroon Bumbagar* tomb of *Ulaan Kherem*, have special features and which is drawn special attention from researchers. For an instance, a couple of guardian beasts which found near to burial

vault in China before had dual images. Other words, one had a face as a beast and another one had a face as a person. The guardian beast which we have found in *Shoroon Bumbagar* tomb, has a face as a bird's beak but something loose from the base of his neck, as shown in Fig. 3.



Fig.3. Animal figure

We have not known images just like a beast from *Shoroon Bumbagar* tomb yet even though a beast with a bird's beak has been found before. We should underline that the guardian beast which looks like a lion has own special features too. Especially his face, ears and mane have the shape of a lion which was in Central Asia. This kind of special images above mentioned shows us that nomadic art and their artistic thoughts reflected on it in some extend.

Byzantine coins of the Emperor Heraclius, dated to around 630s, were also excavated and it is assumed that they were used as a gift or an ornament. These small holes or handles of the coins are clear shown us the usage of these coins, as shown in Fig. 3. Most of the coins had images of something and several coins portrayed images of aristocrats of the Byzantine period. Thin and light golden coins were discovered from here too. It shows us that a golden coin had been fabricated and used in an ancient time and others depicted ritual fire offerings which is the main rite of Manichaeism. This religion spread amongst Turkic nomads in some extends and it was influenced on the world view and funeral ceremony that period of time.



Fig.3. Byzantine coin (Manihaeism rithual)

Of particularly attention were some coins which had letters and it significantly attracted the attention of scientists and researchers. Even though we have not completely interpreted these letters but most of them had Latin letters. These coins which the first coins discovery found in the territory of Mongolia are not only opened up for new sources in the research of history and culture of Central and Eastern Asian countries but also it makes possibility to widen the scope and source-base of art historical research.

Moreover, golden and silver objects represent that ancient Central Asian nomads had known the Western countries, specially Greece and Rom and even they had a relationship with them in some extend and it opens up for us a new page to research. Therefore, the discoveries proved that the nomadic tribes inhabiting Mongolian territories had a foreign relation and we need extensive research on this matter.

Researchers have found out that the Tureg Empire had a relationship with Middle Asian countries and the Byzantine then. Now, we can see from the findings of *Shoroon Bumbagar* that the Eastern Tureg Nomads were also in contact with Middle Asia and other parts of Asia including the West in the 6th and 7th Centuries.

If an extension of mural paintings of the tomb has been limited by countries such as Japan, Korea and China before, now mural paintings at *Shoroon Bumbagar* tomb of *Ulaan Kherem* has been stretched it out till *Khangai* mountain range, West. It gives a new opportunity to consider Mongolia and Central Asian plateau as region of mural paintings of the tomb. Before we considered that *Qidans* who was one of the nomadic tribes inhabiting in Central and Eastern Asia first painted mural paintings but now it has become a new discovery that mural paintings were spread amongst Turkic ethnic nomads inhabiting in Mongolia since hundreds of years ago. The findings from *Shoroon Bumbagar*

prove that mural paintings was not only used by people who had settled civilizations in Eastern Asia and China but also it was used by ancient nomads of Central Asia.

II. THE ACCULTURATION OF THE FUNERARY ARTS IN THE BORDER REGIONS

Those tombs not only yielded similar wall paintings but also contained burial objects including foreign accessories favored by northern nomads that reflect the cultural exchanges on the Silk Road and the Steppe Road.

It is interesting to note that tomb figurines from the Bayannuur Tomb and the Pugu Yitu Tomb share comparable features with the clay and wooden figurines excavated in large numbers from the tombs in Astana, Turfan, Xinjiang. A fragment of a golden floral crown decoration excavated from the Bayannuur Tomb has a comparable example in the attending Bodhisattva sculpture at the Fengxian cave temple at Longmen Cave, Luoyang, Henan, China constructed in 675 and patronized by Empress Wu and Gaozong. The necklace of the Bodhisattva is known to be influenced by the Central Asian jewel ornament actually used by the patrons. Thus, the crown ornament might belong to the Central Asian style. Based on the style of the crown ornament, the Bayannuur Tomb can be dated to around 650s to 670s. Inlaying ornaments with filigree technique and accessory made of Byzantine coins from the Bayannuur Tomb bear a resemblance to the relics of the Kubrat of Bulgar who was submitted to the Avars and the Western Turegs and allied with the Byzantine Empire. It is known that he was close with the Emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641) whose coins were discovered in the Shoroon Bumbagar Tomb.

As mentioned above, the regional acculturation of funerary art demonstrated in the Shoroon Bumbagar tomb is observed in another border region. It is the tombs at Astana in Turfan, Xinjiang, China built during the Xizhou period (640-907) of Tang. The similarities in terms of a tomb structure, clay and wooden figurines, and tomb guardian animals and warriors all prove that in the 7th century, both border regions shared the conventional tradition of Asian funerary arts.

The mid 7th century was the period when the nomadic peoples (the Turegs, the Tiele and Koguryo) and the Central Asians (the Sogdian) as well as the Chinese had active diplomatic and cultural exchanges. This international relationship is well expressed in the famous murals found in the palace of Sogdiana in Afrasiab, Uzbekistan drawn in between 651-657 where a Sogdian King received audience of the Chinese and Koguryo envoys.

It is said that the Korean envoy probably traveled to Afrasiab through the Steppe Route which was used by the Turegs to reach the Central Asia in order to avoid the trouble with Tang China. These foreign relations of the Turegs including the Tiele with China and Koguryo might have inspired the construction of mural tomb in today's Mongolia region. It is known that the Eastern Tureg Empire was



the major place where Koguryo refugee escaped after its collapse and until the establishment of Palhae.

The territory that is today Mongolia was inhabited by the nomadic tribes in the 7th century and they had known about states of Middle Asia in West, Greeks and Rom in East, China in South, Tibet and India in South-West and *Balhae* /ancestor of Korea / in East and also they had communicated in a direct and indirect way with them which it proved by the findings from *Shoroon Bumbagar* tomb. The wall paintings has never been discovered not only in Mongolia but also in the region of nomadic tribes of Central Asia too.

Even though we have not still known the owner at this tomb but structure and composition of burial place, its funeral custom as well as very rich, valuable and unusual findings discovered from the burial place proves that the owner was one of the top ranking persons in that period of time. By considering all aspects of it, we can say it in advance that this tomb was built in the second half of the 7th century.

As bridge of West and East was the territory of nomadic tribes of Central Asia, nomads were greatly influenced by lifestyle of settled civilizations from two sides and also nomadic tribes spread it to other countries too. Anyone who wants to research a relationship between Western and Eastern countries, they should also research the territory of ancient nomadic people which is located between these countries. Not only nomads were received the other culture's influences but also they spread their own culture and achievements to others.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The *Shoroon Bumbagar* tomb is the tomb constructed on the Steppe Road in the 7th century where the East and West cultural changes were carried by northern nomads. Due to this special geographical and temporal characteristics and background, various cultural transformations are observed in the structure of the tomb, the placement and expression of mural subjects, and the types of burial objects. The stylistic analysis of wall paintings and burial objects from the *Bayannuur* Tomb suggests that the tomb can be dated to around 650s-670s. The *Pugu* ruler governing Today's *Bayannuur* region certainly embodied his nomadic tastes and culture into his burial exhibited by the burial practice and rich gold and silver ornaments, which were the result of the broad interactions from Byzantine to China.

It is interesting to notice that the cultural absorption and transformation shown in the *Shoroon Bumbagar* Tomb on the Steppe Route are observed in the *Astana* tomb complex in *Turfan* on the Silk Road. Diverse cultures in the East and Central Asia have met and mixed through these cultural roads



and these cultural fusions were largely led by the nomadic people who had no barriers in accepting heterogeneous cultures.

The researchers were fascinated by this unique discovery, preserved untouched such as structure, composition, murals and its location, skillful crafted artifacts, rare art objects and it makes us a great impression that only ancient nomads' art could be shown in such way.

The findings of *Shoroon Bumbagar* of *Ulaan Kherem* is given to us to further research on ancient nomads' tomb construction, funeral custom, their aesthetics, artistic thoughts, development of a craft skill and their world view which is definitely enriched the scope and base of historical and archeological research by new materials. We think that ancient nomadic tribes inhabited in current Mongolian territory, given to us a great possibility to close study of their socio-economic situation, their intellectual development and foreign relations.

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