Place Names in the Mongolian Altai: Cultural Shifts and Sensibilities

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When we first went into Bayan Ölgiy *aimag*[1] in northwestern Mongolia, available maps of the region were few, and those that existed were uninformative. On those we were able to obtain, only *sum*[2] centers and boundary lines designated the aimag's political divisions. Just a few of the major rivers were named; the rest formed thin, noncommittal lines on an uninflected background. In the official aimag atlas of 1990 (1:500,000),[3] those roads that led out of the aimag, to north or to south, were designated by long double or single lines, but the few tracks that led into the interior of the aimag and to its western borders with Russia and China were reduced to broken dotted lines; in fact, the number of such tracks in this vast region could be counted on the fingers of two hands (Figure 1). On the later aimag map of 1992 (1:1,000,000),[4] large blotches of dark yellow indicated physical relief, punctuated occasionally by the names of mountains and their elevations, or sometimes only by elevations without names. In other words, in 1994 our study region was almost a blank slate.

Before the onset of the Late Holocene, northwestern Bayan Ölgiy aimag was inhabited by populations dependent on hunting and gathering. If rock art offers an accurate reflection of their lives, they moved along rivers, even in the higher valleys, and they hunted wild cattle (aurochs), argali, ibex, wild horses, and elk (*Cervus elaphus sibiricus*). Beginning in the early second millennium BCE, these people turned increasingly to herding—primarily of small animals but also—especially later in the Bronze Age—of domesticated cattle and horses (Figure 2). We do not know the ethnicities or languages of these early people, but they were clearly related to archaeologically known cultures attested in regions to the north and west. Many scenes of caravans of yaks loaded with family goods and children and surrounded by animals indicate that during the Bronze Age pastoralism was already based upon regular movement up and down the valleys, probably following the seasons. By the Late Bronze Age, mobile pastoralism had given way to mounted nomadism. The people who made that transition are often referred to as the Early Nomads of North Asia; their successors in the Early Iron Age are occasionally called Scythians.[5] Their successors, in turn, were Türks and Uighurs, followed by a number of Mongolic speaking peoples. In the modern period, northwestern Bayan Ölgiy has been inhabited by Kazakhs, Uriankhai, and other, smaller populations of Mongols (Figure 3). They all share the same way of life, dependent on herding, on the use of portable summer dwellings and fixed winter dwellings, and on seasonal movement with their flocks from lower elevations to higher pasture.

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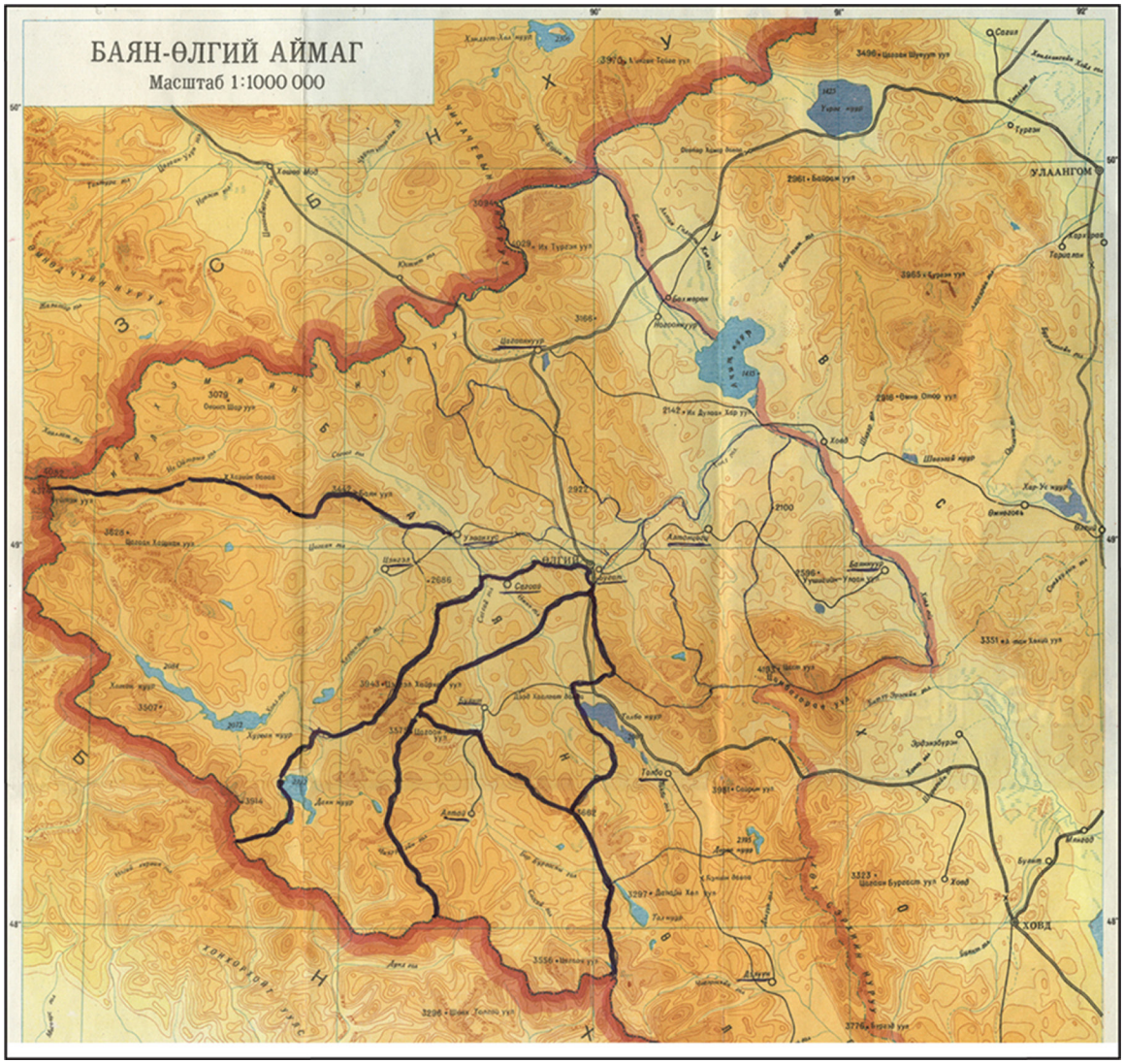

Figure 1. Bayan Ölgiy *aimag* reference map. 1992.

Our original purpose in Bayan Ölgiy had nothing to do with place names. The first part of our project (1994-2004)—at that time a collaboration involving a team of Americans, Mongolians, and Russians[6]—was concerned with the identification and documentation of rock art in northwestern Bayan Ölgiy aimag and, for Jacobson-Tepfer, the clarification of the ecology of ancient culture in that region. The second part of our project (2004-2009), involving Jacobson-Tepfer, Meacham, and Gary Tepfer (photographer) and assisted by local Kazakhs and Uriankhai,[7] was committed to the expanded identification and documentation of all ancient surface archaeology in an area of approximately 22,000 sq. km. and to the analysis of the relationship between archaeology and the larger physical context. This study resulted in the publication of an atlas, and in the development of a related interactive website (http://mongolianaltai.uoregon.edu).

Figure 2. Herder and Horses. Late Bronze Age. Upper Tsagaan Gol. Photograph by Gary Tepfer

Figure 3. Khazakh summer encampment. Photograph by Gary Tepfer

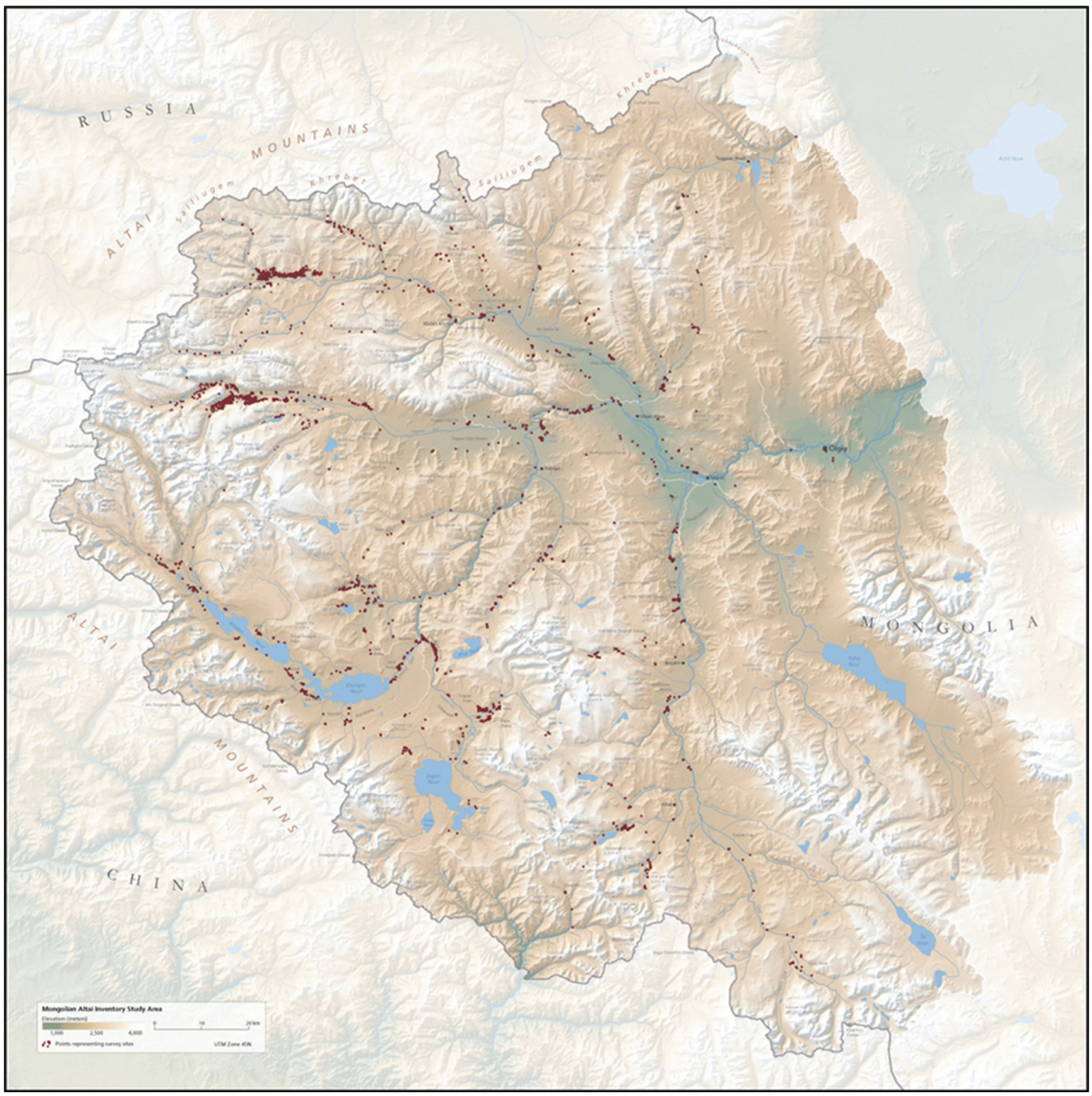

Figure 4. Reference map from *Archaeology and Landscape in the Mongolian Altai: An Atlas* (ESRI Press, 2010).

From even before 1994, however, when she was working with Russians in what is now known as the Altai Republic, Jacobson-Tepfer was frustrated with the traditional Russian-Mongolian way of indicating locations: by reference to some unknown village ("so many kilometers east of…")—a village that could not be found on any existing maps—in some large *oblast* or region. As a result, she began to work with Meacham to develop the use of locational data and GIS technologies for the display of newly identified sites. Those approaches certainly clarified concentrations of archaeology by reference to large, known features—e.g., major settlements, large rivers, international boundaries; but as we worked in the field and tried to convey our material to others, we found that site identifications and notations of latitude/longitude are, to say the least, bloodless ways

of designating places of intense cultural significance. Thus began our more conscious investigation of place names as a way of not only saying "where we were" but also as a means of rooting the sites in known, lived space. The result, found in *Archaeology and Landscape in the Mongolian Altai*, included the most detailed map yet available in English for any significant region in Mongolia (Figure 4) and the only comprehensive listing of place names, their references, and their variants (Figure 5).

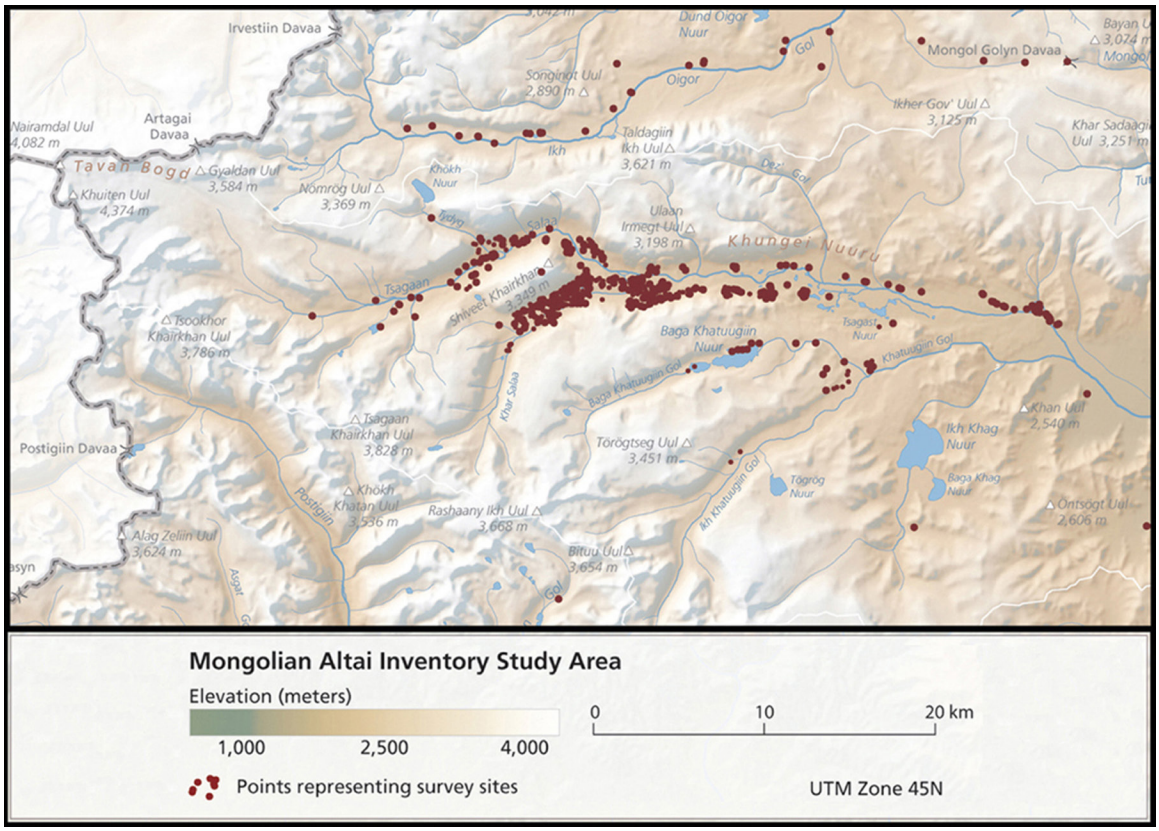

Figure 5. Section of reference map from *Archaeology and Landscape in the Mongolian Altai: An Atlas* (ESRI Press, 2010).

In beginning to develop our knowledge of place names, we turned to old maps and currently available maps. The information gleaned from old maps was, as could be expected, limited in value except in so far as it indicated the general lack of information for this large region up to a very recent time. On a map of Mongolia, of uncertain date but labeled with classical Mongolian script (Figure 6), two rivers (Tsagaan Gol and Sogoo Gol) join a strangely elbowed river (Khovd?), and the Sagsay Gol flows from the south to join the Khovd. Within our study area, neither mountains nor lakes were indicated. Another map, tentatively dated to 1912-1914[9] and illustrating the lands of the Altai Uriankhai (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uriankhai), shows our study region bordered on the west and broken by several fanciful rows of mountains. Tree-lined rivers, some roads, several passes over the mountains, and two temples fill the space bordered on the east by a broad river.[10]

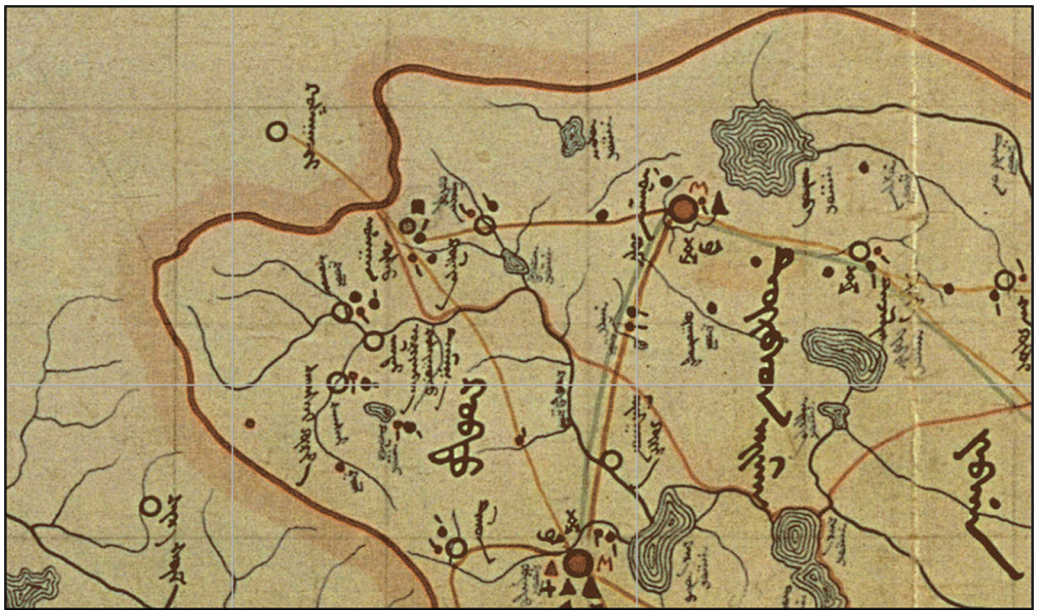

Figure 6. Map of northwest Mongolia with classical Mongolian script; uncertain date. Centre for Documentation & Area-Transcultural Studies, Tokyo University (http://mongol.tufs.ac.jp/landmaps/[a portion of map number 15]).

Non-Mongolian maps were hardly any better: indeed, most don't even include a region recognizable as our study area. On a map of Asia published by *Harpers Gazetteer* in 1855,[11] the only recognizable feature is a settlement referred to as Ouigour. Herbert Mueller's *Map of All Mongolia*, published in 1939[12] does show three large lakes, two of which are (redundantly) called Khobdo Nur (now Khoton and Khurgan Nuur), and Daingol Nur (Dayan Nuur); Sagan Gol (Sogoo Gol?), Khobdo Gol (Khovd Gol), and Sagsain Gol (Sagsay Gol). No mountains are named except the ridge known as Sailiugem at the boundary between Mongolia and Russia, and only a few settlements and roads are indicated. The map of the routes taken by the Russian botanist and explorer, G. N. Potanin, between 1876 and 1880, is almost silent regarding our study area. It mentions only Khobdo Gol, Ulegei (Ölgiy), Dayan Nuur, and Saksai (i.e., Sagsay Gol); in this case, his map shows the great lakes from which the Khovd flows, but names neither them nor any other rivers and doesn't show any of the major mountains.[13] The explorations of the Russian botanist and geographer, V.V. Sapozhnikov (1861-1924), in northwestern Bayan Ölgiy (1905-1909), began to fill in the map of that region.[14] His work was reflected in the U.S. War and Navy Department map of Mongolia and adjacent regions, published in 1942.[15] Even though boundaries and relative distances in the U.S. War map are incorrect and place names reflect Sapozhnikov's naming, we do see the Ak-su (Tsagaan Us), the Upper and Lower Kobdo lakes (Khoton and Khurgan Nuur), Kobdo (Khovd) Gol, Tsagaan Gol, and Suok (Sogoo?) Gol as well as a few passes and settlements (e.g., Suok, Bor Burgazi [?], Buleu [Ulaan Khus], Ulegei [Ölgiy]); and high mountains are indicated in the region of Tavan Bogd.

Of course, the region's apparent emptiness could not have reflected the experience of herders who roamed within its valleys and moved with their herds up to high mountain pastures. For them, most of the features that composed their world—the rivers, streams, lakes and springs, mountains and passes—must have been named and known and that knowledge must have been handed down from one generation to the next. So, also, was the knowledge of routes; but since up to a very recent past most movement was still by horse or by camel and yak caravans, passage

through the region occurred along tracks known to local inhabitants but not necessarily visible to outsiders. Moreover, the Buddhist temples that dotted northern Bayan Ölgiy, creating their own network of pilgrimage routes and centers of intense religious and intellectual activity, were all destroyed during the Socialist period.[16] Like the valleys, basins, and terraces marked by great stone monuments, the indicators of human passage and congregation may not have left traces in the official narrative.

Place names are records of the people who lived in or passed through a region; and in that respect they are invaluable documents of cultural and social history. It is useful, then, to consider somewhat more closely what we know of Bayan Ölgiy's ancient and more modern periods. Up until the middle of the first millennium CE, this region was part of a larger world now encompassing Russian Tuva, Russian Altai, and northwestern China: the region, in other words, marked by the Sayan and Altai uplifts. It is probable that until the middle Bronze Age (c. 3500 yr BP), this region of mountain-steppe may have supported only a thin population of hunters, whose ethnicity and languages remain uncertain. According to at least one recent theory, at some point in the late Bronze Age (3200 yr BP), climate change may have encouraged the development of good pasture in previously thinly settled regions, and the Sayan and Altai mountains became inhabited by newly mobile populations probably coming down from the north and northwest.[17] Again, we know neither the ethnicities nor the languages of these people, just as we have no knowledge of how they named their world. We are only certain that by the late Bronze Age, a variety of cultural groups—probably representing a diversity of languages—on both sides of the Altai and Sayan uplifts had developed a shared way of life that has persisted up to the recent past: horse-dependent, semi-nomadic, moving with their animals between lowlands and high pastures, using portable summer dwellings and fixed winter huts, and with a lifestyle reflective of their dependency on herd animals (cattle, horses, camels, sheep, and goats).[18]

By the end of the Bronze Age, newly mobile populations were transforming life across the steppe and mountain-steppe of Central and North Asia. In the succeeding centuries, as steppe empires emerged from the great grassland of central Mongolia and spread west and south, our study region seems to have been a remote outpost, included in the larger political arena only because it was *en route* to imperial domination of Central Asia. The many Turkic stone images in our study area and the hundreds of Turkic altars indicate that northwestern Bayan Ölgiy was included in the Türk khanate (540 – 745 CE), in the late Turkic Uighur khanate (745-840 CE), and in the Kirghiz khanate of the ninth-tenth centuries. Thereafter the region was dominated by a group of tribes known collectively as Oirat,[19] which migrated to the Altai from the Baikal region by the beginning of the thirteenth century.[20] With the rise of the Eastern Mongol tribes in the late twelfth century and the subsequent expansion of the Mongol armies under Chinggis Khan, western Mongolia was incorporated into the Mongol Empire. As the empire subsequently began to crumble in the fourteenth century, all western Mongolia gradually reverted to the control of the Oirat Confederacy, its power center located in Dzungaria, in northern China. The regional power of the Oirat Confederacy lasted from 1635 to 1758; it was brought to an effective end by the expansion of Chinese Qing hegemony over much of western Mongolia and eastern Kazakhstan.[21]

The web of Mongolian place names across the Altai mountain region seems to reflect the period of Oirat domination of a huge area encompassing western Mongolia, present-day northern China and eastern Kazakhstan. Simplifying the complex history of the Oirat in present-day Bayan Ölgiy is extremely difficult, but for our purposes it is important to realize that Oirat Mongol differs in several respects from the primary Mongolian, Khalkha dialect; these differences were codified in a writing system called Todo or Clear Script, developed by the Oirat monk, Zaya Pandita, in the seventeenth century.[22] While Todo script is no longer in use, its history and that of the Oirat may account for the occasional inability of Khalkha speakers to translate some of

the place names we have encountered. (An example of this is offered by the term, Khöltsöötiin, applied to a river and a rocky plain within the Sagsay Basin.) In effect, these place names and all others of Mongolic character—Khalkha or Oirat—exist as a kind of linguistic memory of an earlier, pre-Kazakh period, when the Altai Mountains formed the eastern bulwark of the powerful Western Mongolian Oirat Confederacy.[23]

Adjoined to the northern edge of the Oirat world and located at the far western edge of Mongolian culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, present-day Bayan Ölgiy was gradually forgotten. This changed, however, and radically: in the late nineteenth century, social and political upheaval in northern China caused Central Asian Kazakhs to flood over the mountains into the Mongolian Altai, in places driving remnant Oirat tribes south into present-day Khovd aimag. According to one of Sapozhnikov's informants, the valley of the Tsagaan Gol formed a principle route from Russia into Mongolia. At some time in the late nineteenth century, Russian merchants joined with people Sapozhnikov called Kyrgyz to bribe the Manchu regional authority in Khovd; as a result, the Uriankhai were driven out of the Tsagaan Gol valley and the valley reverted to a Kyrgyz population. Only after complaints were taken all the way to Peking (Beijing), were the Uriankhai allowed to return to their valley.[24] However, in the early twentieth century, the instability attendant on Mongolia's revolution caused the flight of Uriankhai again out of our study region and over the Altai Tavan Bogd ridge into Russian Altai and northern China.[25] Later in the century, groups of Uriankhai gradually returned; their numbers were slightly enlarged in the 1990s by the immigration of a small group of Tannu Uriankhai from north-central Mongolia.[26] In the 1950s and '60s, Chinese persecutions in North China again caused Kazakhs to flee out of Xinjiang in great numbers; but in the last several decades of the twentieth century, the government of Kazakhstan has successfully lured many Kazakhs out of Bayan Ölgiy and back to their ancient homeland.[27] At this point, the population of our study region is now primarily Kazakh, and the Uriankhai[28] population in Bayan Ölgiy has been reduced to a small fragment (7.2 percent) located primarily in Tsengel', Sagsay, and Buyant sum. Dörvöd and Khoshuud Mongols, at one time two major tribes within the Four Oirat, are now fragmentary populations in northwestern Mongolia.

As a result of the population changes just described, it is certain that place names in Bayan Ölgiy have a deeply layered history: while the primary names may have been Mongolic, the very complexity of that language family—and specifically in northwestern Mongolia—often makes it difficult to determine the genesis or meaning of many words. Adding to that complexity is the fact that place names have frequently been overlaid by modern Kazakh and Uriankhai variations. On a very practical level, the resulting stew of place names created an unusual challenge for us: we had neither the intention nor the linguistic and ethnographic skills to sort out these names and their origins. On the other hand, we did consider it useful and even essential to gather place names for as rich an array of physical features as was possible and to try to rationalize the resulting list. At the onset of our work in Bayan Ölgiy, the assembling of place names was incidental to our larger project of discovery and documentation; the names we learned were usually related to the sites in which we worked. Within two seasons, however, it became clear that in order to understand and discuss the interconnection between sites and intervening routes, we had to be able to name rivers, mountains, passes, and locales.

We did not then know that there existed a Soviet map (Figure 7), published in 1987 and based on coordinates from the 1942 Pulkovo datum (1:500,000); like all such documents from that period, this map was available only to border police and the military. However, in 1998 we were able to obtain a copy. In 1999, through a chance conversation with a visiting geographer from the University of Washington, we were made aware of a recent acquisition to the UW Map Library of a stack of Soviet 1:200,000 topographic quads published in 1984. We were fortunate to

secure the sheets for our study area; they contributed topographic contours and a more detailed hydrologic network for the development of our area map. They also provided refinement for the Soviet compilation of the region's place names. Later in Ulaan Baatar we found a 2003 copy of the Mongolian version of the 1:500,000 Soviet map: thinner in content, paler, both literally and figuratively, but with more place names given in Mongolian. These documents greatly furthered our inquiry. With our acquisition of the two parallel 1:500,000 maps and the 1:200,000 sheets, the challenge to organize the region within which we worked became both simpler and more complex: on the one hand, we had to reconcile Russian, Mongolian, and Kazakh names for specific places; on the other hand, we had to fill in the names of unnamed features and of locales rich in archaeology and local memory but almost invisible on any of the existing maps. In the beginning, our progress was somewhat haphazard, but over time and as the extent of our surveyed region was enlarged, our process for ascertaining place names became more organized. It involved designating specific survey areas in advance of our field season, listing those place names that were either questionable or inconsistent in our several maps, and marking the features that as yet had no names and needed to be identified. In the field, Jacobson-Tepfer worked with Kazakh and Uriankhai informants[29] to resolve conflicting names and to seek out local herders who could provide missing information. Our concern to clarify names was driven in large measure by our desire to use the Mongolian variants wherever possible. At the same time, we felt it was important to honor the alternate names given by local inhabitants or used on the official Soviet map. This is the primary reason we decided to develop the list of place names found in the atlas and to include, wherever possible, variant forms including those preserved in the notebooks of Sapozhnikov.[30]

Place names have a habit of changing unexpectedly and, sometimes, inexplicably; this has certainly been the case in our study region. For example, in 1990, among the administrative (sum) centers noted in the official Bayan Ölgy atlas were included Bilüü, Uzhim, and Khöshööt. By 1992, these had been renamed, respectively, Ulaan Khus, Sagsay, and Tsengel'. In many cases, on the other hand, double place names continue to coexist. An example is offered by the river called Khara Dzhamat on the definitive Soviet map and Khar Yamaa on the Mongolian map; we chose to use Khar Yamaa and list the Kazakh name as a variant form. Another example is offered by a river in the southern section of the Sagsay basin, clearly named for a nearby mountain of the same name: on the Soviet map it is given its Kazakh variation (Dzhalangashiin Gol), on the Mongolian map it is not named, but we gave it the Mongolian version known to the local population—Nutsgenii Gol. In both cases, the name means "naked" and surely refers to the character of the large mountain on the river's left bank. East of Khurgan Nuur there is another mountain, also called Dzhalangashiin Uul on the Soviet map; we gave it the name it has on the Mongolian map—Nutsgen Uul. A tributary to Khoton Nuur from the northwest was known to Sapozhnikov as the Ak-Su, and so it was repeated in the U.S. War and Navy Department map of 1942; we chose to call it Tsagaan Us, formed from the Rashaan Gol and Postigiin Gol. The small administrative center (*bag*) now referred to as Khökh Khötöl was at one time called Dzhalgaz Tolgoi; we chose to use the former, Mongolian, name.

Figure 7. Soviet map published in 1987 (1:500,000 scale), based on coordinates from the Pulkovo datum.

In many cases, we found that the same physical feature could be given different names depending on the local informant. For example, a small lake that flows into the Khatugiin Gol and usually known as Ikh Khag Nuur is also called Kak-kul by many Kazakh speakers. A cluster of small lakes in the upper Oigor Gol basin, known in Mongolian as Olon Nuur (Many Lakes) or Esön Nuur (Nine Lakes), is called Togyz Köl (also, Nine Lakes) in Kazakh; more confusingly, the principle river in that area, which we followed local herders in calling Tsagaan Salaa, is named the Olon Nuuryn Gol on the official Mongolian map and Olon Kurin Gol on the Soviet map. As if those different names were not enough, at the beginning of our work in the same Tsagaan Salaa basin, some herders told us that the river was named—fittingly, we found—Olon Boroon (the River of Much Rain). We decided to refer to the otherwise unnamed sources of the larger river by their Kazakh names, Usei and Aksei, and to retain Tsagaan Salaa for the primary stream. Another, smaller stream that became the route of one of our more memorable explorations—in

part because it offers a route out of the Tsagaan Gol basin and into that of the Ikh Oigor—has no name on either the Soviet or Mongolian map but local Uriankhai assured us that it is called Tydyg, Duttu, or (with a Kazakh twist) Tydyk.[31] We used the first of these names and gave the others as variants in the Place Name list. For some reasons we could not clarify, there are two Khuren Khairkhan Uul, one (3,154 m) overlooking Sogoo Gol and the other (2,814 m) east of Ulaan Khus and overlooking Khovd Gol. Khuren refers to a color shifting between brown, maroon, violet, and chestnut; and, indeed, both mountains are stunning kaleidoscopes of color throughout the changing light of the day or when the setting sun breaks dramatically through storm clouds.

There are a few Russian place names in our study region all bestowed by Sapozhnikov on glaciers draping ridges of Tavan Bogd and its neighboring peaks.[32] The largest of these glaciers he named after the great nineteenth century explorer, G. N. Potanin (1835-1920)[33]; it forms the headwaters of the Tsagaan Gol and is joined—following Sapozhnikov's naming—by the Alexander, Grane, and Krylov glaciers. The explorer further identified several large glaciers forming the headwaters of the Ak-Su (Postigiin Gol) and the Kanas, the major river flowing off Tavan Bogd into North China. These, also, recall noted Russian scientists and explorers: Przhevalskii, Kozlov, and Obruchev. With the exception of Potanin—whose travels took him no further into our study region than the south shore of Dayan Nuur[34]—none of the individuals honored by Sapozhnikov ever saw or even came near the glaciers in question. According to that explorer, local inhabitants had no special names for the glaciers.[35] Perhaps they were simply known to the herders of those mountains by the names of the mountains themselves or by the names of the indwelling masters or mistresses of these towering peaks. At this point in time, the only name given by Sapozhnikov that appears to be within local common knowledge is that of the Potanin Glacier, the largest of them all.

Within our study area, place names mark not only clearly defined physical features but also what we may call "locales". These locales appear in space as discrete terraces or plains of a limited extent, bordered by mountains and rivers. The locales were at first somewhat mysterious designations, almost always absent from available maps but the means by which local herders referred to places. Good examples include Tsagaan Asgat, the plain on the right bank of the Tsagaan Asgat Gol and the site of one of the largest and finest archaeological complexes in the region. When we identified hardly less impressive concentrations on the left bank of the river, we learned from local herders that these locales were known as Akh Töbei and Khara Zharyg. Just as the knowledge of these archaeological concentrations was, until we recorded them, unknown to outsiders, so the names of their places were unrecorded on any existing maps. A rich concentration of surface monuments occurs on a narrow terrace on the right bank of Godon Gol before its confluence with the Khovd; that place is called Maikhan Tolgoi. We named the oldest rock art complex in the region, located on a sharply defined hill, after the name of the plain from which the hill rises: Aral Tolgoi. The word, *tolgoi*, refers to a head or the top of something or a specific place (e.g., *ullyn tolgoi* = the head of a mountain, i.e., summit); *aral* is an island, *maikhan* is a tent, and *akh* refers to an older brother. While literal translations of these locale names are awkward, they each convey something about the way in which the specific character of the place was captured by local nomenclature. An example of the occasionally perfect tone of locale names is found in the upper reaches of Sagsay Gol (Figure 8). Here a triangular plain between Sagsay Gol and Turgen Gol is called Khany Shiree—the Khan's Table—after a huge boulder (Figure 9) standing at its center and locally known as Khany Chuluut—the Khan's Stone. The khan in this case is a strange and large "deer stone" with human body and face that now leans back against the boulder, facing to the north and the flow of the Sagsay.

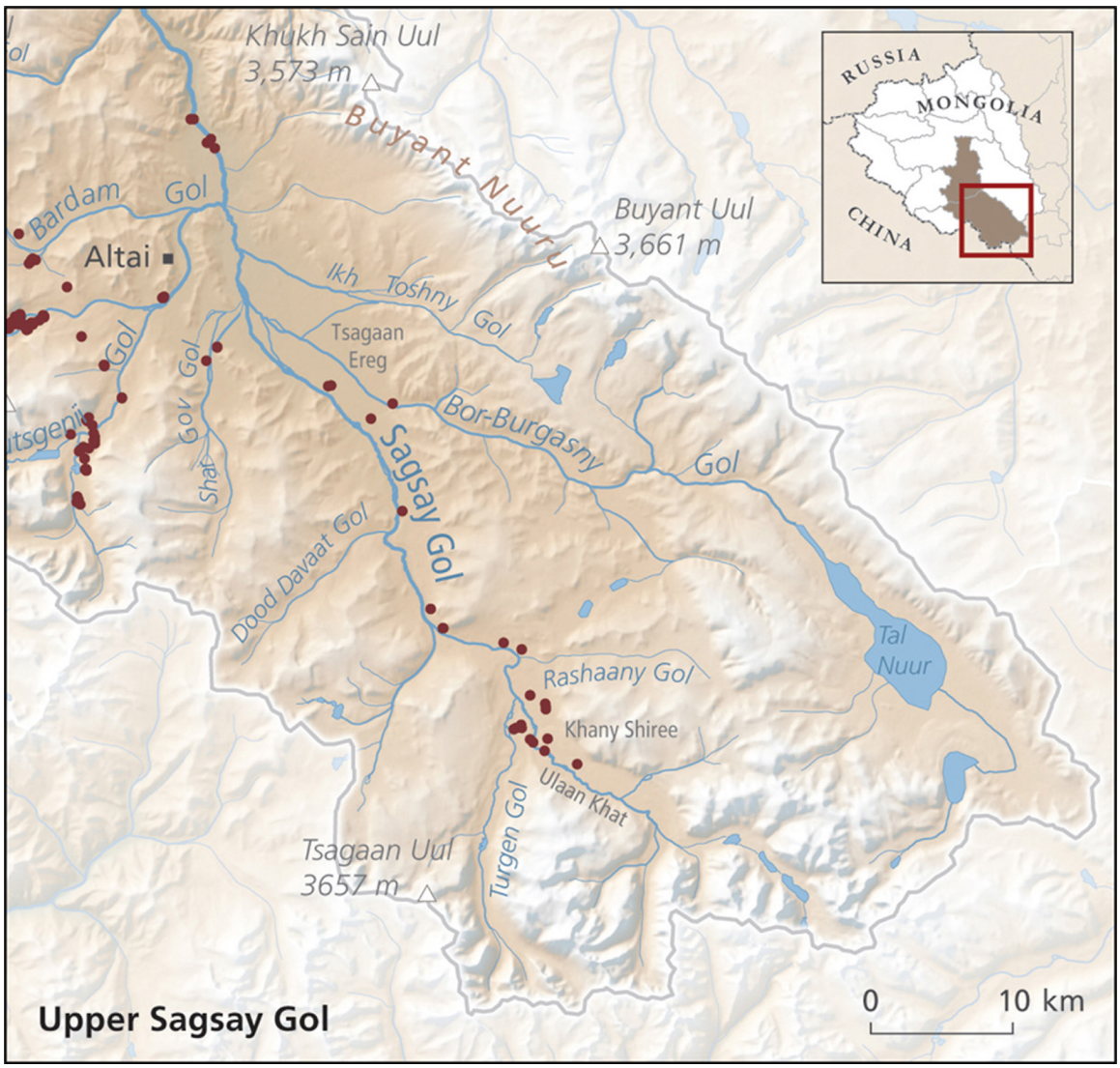

Figure 8. Upper Sagsay Gol map from *Archaeology and Landscape in the Mongolian Altai: AnAtlas* (ESRI Press, 2010).

The names were certainly given to this plain and boulder by generations who lived here long after the "khan" was carved; but the names revealed to us an almost intimate contact between a place and the people who live in the isolated valleys in this upper basin. A final example of the way in which history and local color may be embedded in a locale name is offered by Apin, an enclosed valley at the entrance to the gorge known—again locally—as Alkham Khavtsal (Step Canyon). According to local Kazakhs, apin refers to the marijuana grown in the valley by imported Chinese laborers at some point in the nineteenth century; whether that is correct, we cannot say.

Although locales have been almost entirely overlooked in any "official" mapping of the region, we chose to investigate them because they gave us a way of naming significant concentrations of archaeology. At the same time, their names seemed to reveal to us, foreigners, a local perception of place, the way in which place was experienced, perhaps over decades, by herders who moved up and down the valleys.

Figure 9. Khany Chuluut (the Khan's Stone), Upper Sagsay Gol. Photograph by Gary Tepfer

But we also became interested in the names of mountains since they are so often linked to rivers and, frequently, share their names with those of the rivers that flow from their slopes. These names, therefore, help to clarify webs of physical relationships within the landscape. In addition to the examples given above, of Dzhalangashiin or Nutsgenii Mountain or River, there is Ikh Turgenii Uul with the same name applied to the lakes in its highlands and to the river that flows down to the east. Rashaany Ikh Uul gives its name to Rashaan Gol—its name indicating its source in warm mineral springs—flowing south to join the Postigiin Gol and form the Tsagaan Us.

Above we mentioned the two mountains named Khuren Khairkhan Uul. *Khairkhan* refers to a sacred mountain. There are at least eight peaks in our study area that have acquired that designation. As in the case of both Khuren Khairkhan, these mountains frequently dominate a valley or can be seen from great distances, functioning like beacons in a world often bewildering in the number of its ridges and valleys, a world that is frequently wrapped in blowing rain and snow. We cannot say, of course, whether the sacred mountains' names—or the names of any mountains, for that matter—go back deep in time. But the age of the standing stones and khirigsuur that so often appear to be oriented to great peaks or ridges suggests that mountains still considered sacred by local inhabitants were also considered sacred in a distant past. One of the highest mountains in this region is known as Öndör Khairkhan Uul—the Tall Sacred Mountain. It rises 3,914 m. on the southwestern border of the region, flanked by other high peaks. Together they form a striking glaciered presence separating Mongolia from North China. Tsengel' Khairkhan Uul (the Sacred Mountain of Joy) is one of the most visible mountains in the region, rising 3,943 m.; time and again we found that it lay within the view shed of monument complexes, its great glacier covered head towering over intervening ridges.

One of the most famous sacred mountains, Shiveet Khairkhan Uul, is less notable for its height (3,349 m) than for its relationship to two rivers and their confluence. The river on the

north is called Tsagaan Salaa (the White or Milky Branch) and that on the south of the mountain is called Khar Salaa (the Black or Clear Branch). They join on the east side of Shiveet Khairkhan to form Tsagaan Gol (the White/Milky River), which flows east into its confluence with Khovd Gol. Except on the west end of the boat-like mountain, the slopes are precipitous and covered with rock falls. Nobody but local herders in the valley are allowed to climb this mountain, and no one is allowed to hunt the wild ibex that live on its grassy summit. One might ask how we can possibly know that this mountain was, also, considered sacred in antiquity. Obviously, we cannot be certain but we can make some educated guesses.

Behind Shiveet Khairkhan, to the west, rises Tavan Bogd (the Five Masters) to form the highest and most glaciated ridge along the Altai border between Mongolia, Russia, and China. The upper Tsagaan Gol valley surrounding Shiveet Khairkhan includes the largest rock art and surface monument complex yet identified in North Asia and many of the stone monuments are oriented to the mountain or to the Tsagaan Gol. At the top of the moraine falling down from the mountain's east nose is a large and elaborate *oboo*[36] with altars extending in the four directions. If one looks very carefully through the accretions of stones and branches that make up the oboo, one can spy a standing stone at the very center, a stone of the type used in the Bronze Age. Perhaps most suggestive of the ancient power of this mountain is the way in which it separates the two streams and oversees their confluence and the stream of Tsagaan Gol to the east, the directional source of light and spring. The color symbolism of the two rivers and their confluence together carry rich overtones of color symbolism found in both Lamaistic Buddhism and native shamanic cults; the colors of the rivers and their flow to join on the east may have originally dictated the sacred status of the mountain. This complex offers an opportunity to consider how our awareness of the integrity of the valley was developed over several years of clambering up slopes to get distant views and noting the sheer density of archaeological points and their character. Our ability to comprehend the significance of the complex was directly related to our understanding of the association of specific physical elements, names, and directionality.

One last physical feature—passes (*davaa*)—should be mentioned because they reflect the way in which this mountainous region served as a passage for thousands of years into the steppe lands of present-day North China, Kazakhstan, and Russian Altai. There are many named passes along the length of the border and these mark potential routes over the rugged Altai Ridge. As could be expected, they almost always coincide with the sources of rivers flowing down from the uplands and are frequently named after the nearby mountains or rivers. Thus, for example, the Ikh Turgenii Davaa is named after that mountain, just as Sumdairagiin Davaa derives its name from the river that flows down into Khurgan Nuur. At this time, almost all passes are closed except at special times of the year. Ulaan Davaa, at the head of Shetya Oigor Gol, used to be a major truck route out of Mongolia and into Russia's Ukok Plateau, but with the end of the socialist period, that commerce collapsed and the pass fell into disuse. Dörbet Davaa is now the only constantly open pass; it marks the main truck route between the Kosh Agach Region in Russian Altai and the city of Tsagaan Nuur.

Many of us—and certainly the Russians and Americans who have worked and traveled in Mongolia—live in worlds where rivers, mountains, or other significant features of the landscape are named after people who may never have seen the place in question: the name is imposed with little regard for the character of the feature or for the relationship—or non-relationship—between the named feature and the honored individual. The names that had been given to the physical world by its original inhabitants are generally lost under the web of appellations reflecting the histories, religious beliefs, and values of settlers and immigrants rather than of the region itself. The same impulse lies behind the naming of many glaciers in the Mongolian Altai, and specifically in our study region (Figure 10). In his account of his exploratory travels in the Mongolian Altai,

Sapozhnikov wrote:

> I have described the glaciers of the Mongolian Altai on the basis of my own explorations, since earlier not one of the several travelers in Western Mongolia had visited or even seen the glaciers from a near distance… As they are new discoveries, I have named the most impressive glaciers after outstanding travelers in Mongolia in order to demonstrate my respect for their work.[37]

Elsewhere, speaking of the fact that the local inhabitants had no names for the glaciers, Sapozhnikov comments: "…for that reason, I was determined to make use of the right accruing to me (of having been the first to record the glaciers) and to christen them…"[38]

By contrast to our traditions, in northwestern Mongolia (as throughout the whole country)—and with the exception of the glaciers named by Sapozhnikov—place names evolved from among those who have lived there for generations. They convey a concrete sense of the place itself—its color, its relative size, or its association with some local tradition. Outsiders may be puzzled by the number of times the words *tsagaan* (white or milky), *khar* (black or clear), *nogoon* (a green or turquoise color), or *ulaan* (red) repeat themselves in place names, in one form or another; but they are apt descriptors in a world where the background coloration is often a buff tan, even gray, broken by vivid blues, greens, whites, reds, or violet browns that turn burnt orange at sunset. It is not difficult to imagine one herder describing to another the stream up which he has to travel as the milky stream, *tsagaan salaa*; or the mountain on which his flocks were grazing as "that mountain, the naked (*nutsgenii*) one" or "the sacred one—that tall (*öndör*) one"; or the place where his family have their summer encampment as on the shores of the lake with the most extraordinary turquoise water—*nogoon nuur*. That sense of immediacy, even of a kind of intimacy with a particular place, is well reflected in the names of three seasonal streams that flow into the Bor Burgasny (Willow Thicket) Gol. The northern most of the streams comes out of Zuslan Bulag, a spring for "summer encampment"; the middle stream is simply Baga Bulag, the "small" spring; and the south-most stream is called Örtöön Bulag, referring to a spring for stopping by, a temporary stage. Together the names of the three streams and their sources suggest the gradual passage of a herding family up to their summer encampment along the Zuslan Bulag. To that sense of immediacy may also be added sensibilities that derive as much from the Lamaistic Buddhism that once flourished here and across Mongolia. Perhaps it is Buddhism that helps to explain the frequency of names referring to places of wealth and abundance (*bayan*), or to a protective cradle of abundance (Bayan Ölgiy), or to a place of joy (*tsengel'*), or to a place having merit (*buyant*). We would be surprised to find descriptors like these in our place names, but Mongolians do so name the features in their landscape; and in so naming the landscape they convey values and beliefs deeply embedded in their understanding of the relationship of humans to the natural world.

We spoke of the way in which place names allow us to identify locations that goes beyond the uninflected objectivity of GPS coordinates. Place names began to reveal to us the unique character of places and the way they were understood by people who had lived in the region for generations. One name—*oigor*, as in the river name, Oigor Gol—probably goes back over one thousand years to when the Uighur controlled this region as a part of their short-lived empire. Most references, however, may be more recent. Some names seem to convey the particularistic character of a place: Khoton Nuur—Pelican Lake—for example, was apparently visited by great numbers of migrating birds in the not distant past; or Khar Khad Uul—Black Cliff Mountain—or Chuluut Bulag—Stony Spring—a rushing stream that comes down off Öndör Khairkhan Uul.

Figure 10. Glaciers on Tavan Bogd, seen from the north. Photograph by Gary Tepfer

Many names seem to reflect a locally known story: Khar Yamaa Gol—Black Goat River—is an example; Shar Nokhoit Uul—Mountain of the Yellow Dog is another. A large terminal moraine at the east end of Khurgen Nuur is called Khar Böörög—Black Kidney. That appellation perfectly conveys the curved shape and dark, stony aspect of the region and suggests a local and long-lived way of verbally pointing to that place. Even humor sometimes enters into place names, along with the sense of a very particular perception. For example, the bent entrance to the deep canyon through which flows Khovd Gol after its confluence with Tsagaan Gol is locally called Bota Moin, referring to the crooked neck of a camel.

As our project in northwestern Bayan Ölgiy progressed, the concrete, experiential character of place names increasingly impressed us. Not only did they reflect cultural shifts embedded in Uighur, Oirat, Uriankhai and Kazakh names; the names also revealed to us—outsiders—the almost personal experiences of individuals who had moved through the land

with their families and flocks—as well as a sphere of values that gradually permeated even our vision of the ancient monuments themselves. To be able to speak of the hundreds of mounds we found on Zoost Ereg, or of the fine khirigsuurs (Figure 11) and burials high above Kulunda, or the great monuments on Deed Khalga, or the muted shapes of old altars at the mouth of Tydyg Gol—all names previously absent from any maps: this seemed to uncover relationships and understandings that had been in place for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, even if they were not conveyed on official documents. Of course, we are acutely aware that the collection and documentation of place names in this study region of approximately 22,000 square km is only a beginning: it can certainly be enlarged and corrected. We lay no claim to an authoritative listing of place names and their variants or to the accuracy of information we received from local herders. We do believe, however, that this kind of study immensely enriches the potentially dry display of ancient monuments; it is worth pursuing, we would suggest, in other contexts.

Figure 11. Khirigsuur, Mogoitiin Gol. Photograph by Gary Tepfer

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NOTES

[1] An *aimag* is the name of the largest regional administrative unit in Mongolia, roughly similar to a state.

[2] *Sum* (сум) is the name of the largest administrative unit under the aimag.

[3] *Bayan-Ölgii aimgiin Atlas* (Ulaanbaatar 1990).

[4] *Bayan-Ölgii* (Ulaanbaatar 1992).

[5] The names given to the nomads of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages vary considerably, depending on the researcher's perspective. Some refer to them as the Pazyryks. Within the Minusinsk Basin and the Sayan Uplands they are known as Tagars. Both groups represent cultures of the Eurasian Scythian Period, sometimes referred to, also, as the Scytho-Siberian Period. Subjects and styles in rock art imagery from our study region indicate that it was inhabited by people of both the Pazyryk and Tagar cultural groups.

[6] The team was composed of Esther Jacobson-Tepfer, Damdinsurenjin Tseveendorj, currently Director of the Institute of Archaeology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences (Ulaanbaatar), and the late Vladimir D. Kubarev, Senior Researcher from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Russian Academy of Sciences (Novosibirsk). Gary Tepfer was the project photographer and our field documentations were supported by a number of Mongolian and Russian assistants.

[7] We are especially grateful for the assistance rendered by a few specific individuals. These include Ayatkhan Atai, Ayatkhan Dagys, Khalamzhavyn Bayanda and Zhukei Baatarzhav. Within the Tsagaan Gol valley, we were greatly assisted by a number of local herders including Mantai, Oktiabre, Olonbayar and their families. Without the knowledge and generosity of these people, our whole project would have been considerably more difficult.

[8] E. Jacobson-Tepfer, J. Meacham, and G. Tepfer, *Archaeology and Landscape in the Mongolian Altai: an Atlas* (ESRI Press, 2010). Readers interested in a full list of place names and their variant forms in the study region should consult the Atlas, pp. 144-151.

[9] Centre for Documentation & Area-Transcultural Studies, Tokyo University (http://mongol.tufs.ac.jp/landmaps/).

[10] See Akira Kamimura, "A Preliminary Analysis of Old Mongolian Manuscript Maps," with sixteen old manuscript maps of Mongolia including three which apply to our study area. Kamimura argues that these maps were made to serve state power, particularly that of the Qing Dynasty and of the Bogd Khan of Mongolia: "…the landscape can be considered to be a process of negotiation between human beings and the land, and not merely a set of visual features." In Futaki Hiroshi and Kamimura Akira (eds.) "Landscapes Reflected in Old Mongolian Maps." (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Centre for Documentation and Area-Transcultural Studies, 2005) (http://mongol.tufs.ac.jp/landmaps/ Kamimura's article (PDF 3M).

[11] Map Library, University of Oregon.

[12] Herbert Mueller's *Map of All Mongolia*, Sheet 1; reprinted by the Mongolia Society, 1966. Map Library, University of Oregon (G 7895 1939. M8).

[13] G.N. Potanin, *Rezul'taty puteshestviia ispolnennogo v 1876-1877 godakh* (Results of exploratory travel in 1876-1877), 1881. Republished as Putoshestviia po Mongolii (Travels in Mongolia) (ed.) V.V. Obruchev (Moscow: State Geographical Literature Press, 1948).

[14] V.V. Saphozhnikov, "Po Mongol'skomu Altaiu (Through the Mongolian Altai)," from his *Mongol'skii Altai v istokakh Irstysha i Khobdo* (The Mongolian Altai at the sources of the Irtysh and Khovd rivers) (Tomsk: 1911). Republished as *Po Russkomu i Mongol'skomu Altaiu* (Through the Russian and Mongolian Altai), edited by V. V. Obruchev (Moscow: State Geographical Literature Press, 1949).

[15] Produced by the Army Map Service, U. S. Army, and drawn "…from Topographic Surveys by the Central Asiatic Expeditions of the American Museum of Natural History, 1922-28. Other information from all available sources up to 1935." Map Library, University of Oregon.

[16] According to Rinchen's atlas, there were six monasteries in our study region; all had disappeared by the end of the Socialist period. See B. Rinchen, *Mongol ard ulcyn ugsaatny sudlal, khelnii shinzhleliin atlas* (Ethno-linguistic atlas of the Peoples Republic of Mongolia), (Ulaanbaatar: Academy of Sciences PRM, 1979), map #24.

[17] See B. van Geel, et al. "Climate change and the expansion of the Scythian culture after 850 BC: a hypothesis," *Journal of Archaeological Sciences* 31 (2004): 1735-1742. There is another way of considering the relationship of climate change to the movement of populations into and across the Eurasian steppe at the end of the Bronze Age. This proposes that the onset of a dryer, cooler climate beginning about 4,000 yrs BP together with the emergence of the mastery of horse-riding by the late Bronze Age pushed herding societies into horse-dependent semi-nomadism. In this scenario, the possibility offered by horse riding to control larger herds of animals encouraged a much more extensive use of open steppe and mountain steppe regions. See E. Jacobson-Tepfer, "The Emergence of Semi-Nomadic Pastoralism in the Mongolian Altai: Rock Art and Paleoenvironment," in Hans Bernard and Willeke Wendrich (eds.), *The Archaeology of Mobility*, (Los Angeles and Cotsen Institute of Archaeology: University of California Press, 2008): 200-229.

[18] This description is well substantiated by the vast pictorial resource available in petroglyphic complexes of the Altai-Sayan uplifts.

[19] The Oirat were a grouping of four major tribes (Dörben Oirat) and several smaller ones. They differ from the Eastern Mongols by distinctions in language and by the fact that they were not descended from the line of Chinggis Khan. See Stephen A. Haklovic, Jr., *The Mongols of the West*, Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, Vol. 148 (Indiana University, Bloomington: 1985); and Nicholas Poppe, *Mongolian Language Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970).

[20] Haklovic, 1985: 2.

[21] For a comprehensive discussion of the complex history of the Oirat, see A. I. Chernyshev, *Obshchestvennoe i gosudarstvennoe razvitie Oiratov v XVIII v*. (Social and political development of the Oirat in the eighteenth century) (Moscow: Nauka, 1990).

[22] James Bosson, "Scripts and Literacy in the Mongol World," in Patricia Berger and Terese Tse Bartholomew (eds.), *Mongolia: the Legacy of Chinggis Khan* (Asian Art Museum, San Francisco and Thames and Hudson, 1995): 92-93. Zaya Pandita was born in 1599 into a high-ranking Khoshuud (Oirat) family living in the Altai Region. He entered the Buddhist priesthood, spent many years in Tibet, and became a noted scholar and Buddhist leader. See D. Kara, *Knigi mongol'skikh kochevnikov* (Books of the Mongolian nomads) (Moscow: Nauka, 1972): 77-84).

[23] The article on Oirat language found in Wikipedia argues convincingly that the various dialects included in Oirat are essentially endangered. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oirat_language

[24] Sapozhnikov, [1911] 1949, 273. The "Kyrgyz" to whom Sapozhnikov referred were probably Kazakhs.

[25] This was described to Jacobson-Tepfer by Uriankhai still living in the upper Tsagaan Gol valley. See, also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altai_Uriankhai

[26] Personal communication and observation.

[27] Personal observation by Jacobson-Tepfer when she was working in the Russian Altai (1989-1993), confirmed by local Kazakh communications in Bayan Ölgiy.

[28] Within Bayan Ölgiy, Uriankhai are often referred to as Tuvans.

[29] See note 7, above.

[30] Jacobson-Tepfer, Meacham, Tepfer, 2010: 146-151. We recognize that this list is only a beginning for what could be a significant ethnographic and linguistic study.

[31] Sapozhnikov named this stream "Prokhodnii" ("Passage"), since it served as the route out of the valley of the upper Tsagaan Gol and into that of Ikh Oigor Gol; the explorer called that river by its Kazakh name, "Dzhirgalant" (Sapozhnikov, [1911] 1949: 272).

[32] Saphozhnikov, "Po Mongol'skomu Altaiu," [1911] 1949.

[33] Sapozhnikov, [1911] 1949: 274.

[34] Potanin, [1881] 1948.

[35] Sapozhnikov, [1911] 1949: 274.

[36] An oboo is a pile of stones or stones and branches built up by pilgrims and passersby over time and indicating a sacred place.

[37] Sapozhnikov, [1911] 1949: 446. Translation: Jacobson-Tepfer.

[38] *Ibid*.: 274. Translation: Jacobson-Tepfer.