

**Ninth International Congress of Mongolists
“The Mongolian Statehood: Past and Present”**

*Devoted to the 800th Anniversary of the Yeke Mongol Ulus
Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia – August 8-12, 2006*

**The joint Italian-Mongol geoarchaeological project in the Valley of Lakes
Gobi Altayn region (Bayankhongor aimag, Bogd soumon)**

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Abstract

A first exploratory mission, done in September 2000 with the financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) in the frame of the “Cultural Protocol” between Italia and Mongolia, leads to the signature of a “Memorandum of Understanding” for scientific cooperation by National Research Council of Italy (CNR) and Academy of Sciences of Mongolia (MAS).

Following to that, in April 2002 an international symposium on the cultural relations Italia-Mongolia has been organized by CNR at the Research Area in Padova, with the participation of Prof. B. Chadraa, President of MAS, and Prof. D. Tseveendorj, Director of MAS Archaeological Institute. In this occasion bases have been placed for a joint geo-archaeological project in the Valley of Lakes in the Gobi Altayn region, a strategic cross-road region of nomadic and cultural migrations particularly rich in natural resources and archaeological evidences.

Then, thank to the financial contributions of MAE/Dept. of Cultural Cooperation and Veneto Region/Dept. of International Relations, annual geo-archaeological expeditions to the field have been realized starting from 2002 and regularly conducted till present, to evaluate resources consistence. Understanding the tight relationships man-environment through time helps very much to develop a correct action of protection either for nature or for cultural heritage. In this picture, ethnographic studies are also inserted, particularly the analysis of nomadic popular traditions focussed to preserve cultures and economies deeply integrated in the delicate equilibrium of the investigated area.

These geo-archaeological missions in the Valley of Lakes (Gobi Altayn region, Bayankhongor aimag)), done by a joint Italian-Mongolian team³, intend to realize the first step of an organic project of recovery of the cultural and natural heritage of an area lying between northern Khangay plateau and the southern Gobi Altayn chain. Since ever, this stretch of land plays the role of commercial and cultural corridor connecting Mongolia to Central Asia, Caspian and Mediterranean basins.

At present, after four expeditions so far done during summer 2002-‘03-‘04-‘05 and with a fifth one under accomplishment (July-August 2006), it is possible to recognize the tight relations between settlement patterns of environmental resources in the past and today.

The field survey has been prepared and oriented by preliminary bibliographic researches and collection of topographic and thematic maps. Moreover, various satellite data (Landsat 7ETM

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multispectral and ERS-SAR radar images) have been analysed to describe the main geomorphological features of the area. This propaedeutical work contributed to reduce time and costs of the exploration phase, mainly performed in a very broad physiographic context with scarce roads network.

Many groups of “khurgan” and other tomb structures, locally called “khirigsuur”, belonging to Bronze and Iron age, have been localized at the foot of the Gobi Altayn range. Similarly, numerous sites with petroglyphs depicting zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and symbolic features have been found and recorded. Morphological observations and ethnographic interviews have been also made.

At the end of this first five-year period of the joint CNR-MAS geoarchaeological project, clearly emerges the richness of the selected test area in terms of cultural and natural resources and then the opportunity to go deeper into the exploration for accomplishing a coherent and complete study. Different scientific competences must converge through a strong cultural exchange for the achievement of all the items of this project, mainly based on the application of advanced technologies for the reconstruction of the environmental evolution.