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Religious, Ecological, and Historical Politics in Inner
Asia, followed by Varia

Ovoo-cairns and ancient funerary mounds in the Mongolian landscape. Piling up a monumental tradition?

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Accumuler une tradition monumentale ?*

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Ovoo-cairns and ancient funerary mounds in the Mongolian landscape. Piling up a monumental tradition?

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Introduction: discussing the origins of the ovoo monumental phenomenon

- 1 The cairns called “ovoo”¹ that are so ubiquitous in the Mongolian landscape are generally linked to the propagation Tibetan Buddhism in the 16th and 17th century A.D. (Atwood 2004, pp. 414-416; Charleux 2015, p. 26; Sneath 2014, p. 464). However, their transversal distribution and their widespread associated rituality might be difficult to understand univocally as a consequence of an imported Buddhist practice². The presence of ovoos in the pastoral and sacred geographies of Mongolia could have been driven by other factors, among which the influence of previous materialities and beliefs possibly played a prominent role. This paper particularly investigates whether any spatial and typological aspects of the ovoos could be connected with the Turkic and Mongol periods and even deeper in time, with the Late Prehistory (Bronze and Iron Age, ca. 1500-250 B.C.).
- 2 While the combined and syncretic nature of the religions of Mongolia has been extensively illustrated (Heissig 1980), the origins of the ovoo have been unfortunately neglected, particularly by archaeology, the discipline that should be best suited to approach the early stages of this extensive material phenomenon. Although ovoos are conceptually and symbolically related to the very idea of origins, as Brian Baumann

(2019) acutely pointed out, their chronological development is hard to identify. Due to the lack of archaeological data and direct information in the historical sources, their material genealogy is far less understood³. In this context, I propose to investigate them as a specific materialisation of agency in the landscape, which potentially connects with other aspects of the local monumentality. To do so, I will consider the information collected in the area of the Ih Bogd Mountain, and mainly in Bogd District, Bayanhongor Province, southern Mongolia (fig. 1), during my one-month fieldwork in 2006, 2009, 2010, and 2011.

Figure 1. Map of Mongolia with localisation of Ulaanbaatar (star) and the research area (pentagon) centred on the Ih Bogd Mountain-Orog Lake complex

© Cecilia Dal Zovo (Inkscape) after NordNordWest's Map using United States National Imagery and Mapping Agency data and World Data Base II Data, CC BY-SA 3.0 (See license terms at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4542726>)

An archaeology of the ovoos

- 3 I propose to introduce an alternative perspective to delineate the “ovoo phenomenon” beyond its rapid and expansive spread in Mongolia (Lindhøj 2010; Sneath 2007). Based on field research and the analysis of anthropological, historical, and linguistic sources, I investigate the specific features of materialities that could contribute to the progressive accumulation of cultural influences in the local monumental tradition (Rowan 2012). In particular, I explore from a long-term perspective the changing features of the ovoos in comparison with the Late Prehistoric mounds that can be often observed in the Mongolian landscape. This can contribute to reframing the issues related to the apparent lack of references to ovoos in early written sources.
- 4 Here, I examine the material and spatial dimension of the ovoos on the Ih Bogd Mountain (fig. 1), where they share the same ground of numerous Late Prehistoric funerary mounds (Dal Zovo 2016). This analysis does not rely, however, on common archaeological techniques, such as excavation, which have been seldom applied to ovoos in Mongolia and neighbouring regions so far (Davis-Kimball 2000; Evans & Humphrey 2003). Indeed, the destructive character of archaeological excavation can be a critical aspect of studying living ritual sites like ovoo-cairns. In the Mongol cosmology, the unnecessary perturbation of the earth surface, water sources, and sacred places can be seen as a polluting action that may alter the ecological balance and disturb the “master

spirits of the place” (Mo. *gazryn ezed*) that are associated with the ovoos (Erdenetuya 2005; Humphrey *et al.* 1993; Tatár 1984)⁴.

- 5 This study, based on landscape archaeology, survey, and surface observations, rather aims to answer to the ethical and methodological challenges posed when working on (past) materiality so closely connected with local rituals and heritage-making practices (see Gazin-Schwartz & Holtorf 1999; Smith 1999; Porr & Bell 2012). In this way, I can explore the intersection of material, spatial, and symbolic elements potentially accumulating at ovoo sites, which can be compared with relevant written sources and linguistic insights, as well as the results of my fieldwork observations and the conversations with the local herders. Through this interdisciplinary approach, I aim to delve into the multi-dimensional character and the potential ancient roots of these Mongol cairns. While a formal architectonic definition of the ovoo might have critically consolidated in the 16th and 17th centuries, during the second Buddhist wave, I hypothesise that some essential traits of these structures could be rooted in a much more distant past.

Ovoos and written sources

- 6 One of the most cogent arguments in favour of a relatively recent development of the ovoos is their apparent absence in the early written sources (Atwood 2004, pp. 414-416). In *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the word ovoo (Cl. Mo. *oboᠶa* or its variants, *oboo*, *obo*, *oboᠶaya*) seems to be unaccounted for⁵. Leaving aside the well-known issues about the origin, interpolations, and translation of this text⁶, it is interesting to note that it features no direct correspondence to words such as shrine, altar, or heap of stones, nor reference to the typical action of piling stones or circumambulating around cairns or other stone objects. The same crux apparently applies to the records by foreign travellers who were in the area during the Mongols’ rule, or shortly after. Yet, such a vacuum in the sources might not directly imply the material absence of ovoos in the local landscape. Whilst missing in those accounts, cairns could have been so widespread and perhaps so similar to analogous monuments across central Eurasia that they did not deserve a specific description. On the other side, ovoos are presently so tightly embedded in the sacred and pastoral geographies of Mongolia and neighbouring regions that it is difficult to explain why, if already in existence, they could be omitted in those vivid narratives. According to Atwood (2004, p. 415), heaps could be occasionally mentioned, but “only as markers”. Marking the landscape for orientation purposes, however, is one of the primary functions of the ovoos (Humphrey 1995, p. 146). They essentially relate to the movement across the landscape, which takes place within the complex system of spatial knowledge of the local mobile and semi-mobile communities (Beffa & Hamayon 1983; Baumann 2008, p. 338; Davaa-Ochir 2008; Glavatskaia 2011; Humphrey 1995; Lavrillier 2006; Kristensen 2004; Halemba 2006; Hamayon 2020; Pedersen 2009). At the same time, they interweave social and ecological values, ritual practices, and beliefs (Davaa-Ochir 2008; Erdenetuya 2005; Purzycki & Arakchaa 2013; Wallace 2015), as confirmed also by 18th-century sources (Endicott 2012, pp. 59, 78). The interconnection between the secular marking function of the ovoos and their symbolical values reveals, in my view, their multi-dimensional character, which I will explore in the next sections⁷.

Composition and special stones in *The Secret History of the Mongols*

- 7 First and foremost, the composition of ovoos is worthy of careful examination. As they are mainly made of stones, these cairns constitute strong and durable references in a dynamic landscape of movement. Stone, indeed, is a sturdy and long-lasting material, which symbolises strength and stability in the Mongol tradition⁸. While references to piled stones might be elusive in early written sources, in *The Secret History of the Mongols* we can trace several descriptions of individual rocks that are imbued with some special quality or magical power. Stones can be shining (Onon 2001, p. 74), have specific colours (*ibid.*, pp. 71, 126), and sometimes be used to bring rains and storms (*ibid.*, pp. 120-121). They can be also part of some supernatural event, like the huge white rock that fell from the sky and blocked Chinggis' way out from a thicket, thus protecting him from his enemies (*ibid.*, p. 71).
- 8 The importance of individual rocks can be documented also in modern and present times, namely in the case of Eezh Had, or "Mother Rock", in Central Mongolia (Gohen 2007; Humphrey 1993)⁹. Significantly, this sacred rock is locally assimilated to an ovoo and attracts comparable ritual practices, such as circumambulation and devotional offerings (Lindskog 2016, 2019). Likewise, conspicuous rocks are often considered the residence of master spirits of the place in central and northern Asia (Burkanov & Tsydenova 2014; Rozwadowski 2017, pp. 419-420)¹⁰.
- 9 In *The Secret History of the Mongols*, there seems to be no mention of a specific ritual behaviour related to rocks, neither in the form of individual boulders, nor in the shape of piled-up stones. On the other side, in the same text, there are several references to the ritual practices associated with the cult of mountains (the earth) and the waters, which will appear closely related to the ovoos in later epochs (Bawden 1958; Djakonova 1977; Lindahl 2010; Davaa-Ochir 2008; Tatár 1976). Moreover, a triple circular movement around a sacred mountain is described in the passage narrating the escape of Temüjin from his enemy: "they went three times round Burqan Qaldun, but they could not find him" (Onon 2001, p. 82). This episode appears especially intriguing in light of the common practice of performing a triple circular movement around ovoos, rocks, trees, and mountains or other elements alluding to verticality in the Mongol tradition (Charleux 2015, pp. 23-26; Pedersen 2006, p. 97; Tamirjavyn 2017).
- 10 Precisely after this event, the future Chinggis Khan instituted the cult of the Burhan Haldun Mountain to show his gratitude to the mountain for protecting him. On that occasion, Chinggis Khan performed kneeling, prayers, and food offerings to the mountain (Onon 2001, p. 82), as if it represented a monumental natural shrine. It is worth noting that food offerings, particularly meat and dairy products, are traditionally present in many ovoo rituals (Birtalan 2003; Lindskog 2016; Marchina *et al.* 2017). Likewise, burnt bones and animal remains have been also widely documented in the satellite stone circles that are usually located around the Late Bronze and Iron Age burial mounds and in funerary and ritual contexts of the Xiongnu and Turkic epochs (Broderick *et al.* 2014; Fitzhugh 2009; Miller *et al.* 2018; Turbat 2011)¹¹.

Heaps of bones in Marco Polo's travels

- 11 Bones and animal remains bring us to the analysis of a significant passage in *Il Milione*, the manuscript by the Venetian merchant Marco Polo, who travelled to the east and lived at the Mongol court of Khubilai Khan during his reign (1260-1294)¹². In the region of the Pamir Mountains (between modern Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and China), Polo observed cairns, used as markers, which were made of bones. In fact, there was “such an incredible abundance of animals, especially of male mountain sheep [...], [that] their bones and horns are used to build big heaps along the roads to point the way to wayfarers when it snows”¹³. A few centuries later, at the end of the 19th century, Curzon (1896, p. 59) too could count many cairns in the region, but they were made of stones.
- 12 Could we consider Marco Polo's observation as an early attestation of the presence of ovoo-like structures like in Central Asia? Could those piles of bones be genealogically connected with the cairns that can be presently recognised in Mongolia? The materiality of the ancient Pamir's heaps (It. *monti*: heaps, piles, mounds, mountains) certainly differs from the typical composition of the ovoos – stones, earth, and wood branches. Even though, according to the text, these heaps of bones correlate with the abundance of animals killed by wolves – a peculiar reasoning even for Marco Polo's account – this would not essentially alter their shape and function in the landscape. Bones and horns are piled up to form a conical heap, as it happens for the ovoos. Likewise, their orientation purpose is clearly underlined. In this sense, the *monti* or heaps of bones observed by Polo in the Pamir Mountains could be defined, like the ovoos, as piled up features, rising on the terrain and becoming reference points in the landscape.

Cairns, bones, and mountains: an ancestral connection

- 13 It is worth noting that bones are especially important also in the architecture and rituals associated with the ovoo. They can be placed over or inside the cairn as ritual offerings. The skull of an argali (*Ovis ammon*) was arranged on the ovoo at the entrance of Ovtyn Am, an inner valley that brings to the high pastures of the Ih Bogd Mountain (fig. 2). The integration of skeletal parts of the Mongolian wild sheep, horse, or yak in the rituality and materiality of the ovoo has been documented elsewhere in Mongolia and Central Asia (Birtalan 2003; Djakonova 1977). Early Buddhist manuals list animal horns (namely of Tibetan antelope) as indispensable items for ovoo foundation rituals. The skull and jaws of a sheep, as well as mutton meat and bones, are considered essential offerings in many ovoo rituals (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 61, 72; Dumont 2017).
- 14 In other cases, a clean horse skull is placed on the ovoo located on a hilltop, where the sky is closer (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 110). The horse, in fact, is viewed as a divine animal linked to the sky, but in the Altai Mountains it was also symbolically associated with the liminal world since at least the first millennium B.C. (Argent 2013). Presently, the deposition of a horse skull at an ovoo site has been interpreted as a sign of respect towards the master spirits of the place and the horse itself, and, at the same time, as an intentional appropriation of the landscape by the local herders (Marchina *et al.* 2017)¹⁴.

Figure 2. *Ovoo* with an argali skull, blue ritual scarves, and other offerings (steering wheel, cigarette box, etc.) at the entrance of the Ovtiin Am Valley

View to the east, with Orog Lake in the background on the left and foothills of Ih Bogd Mountain on the right

© Cecilia Dal Zovo, August 2011

- 15 In the examples above, the bones seem to participate of the symbolic and ritual connection that ovoo-cairns and other mound-like structures maintain with elevation, in terms of mountain mimesis, localisation, and symbolism¹⁵. In the local cosmology, mountains are the essential features of the landscape and are often compared to or identified through bones, as bones are structural elements of the body. In Central Mongolia, skeletal or bone metaphors appear to dominate the mountain terminology (Humphrey 1995, p. 144).
- 16 Moreover, in some languages of Mongolia and northern Asia, the word for bone (*yasun*) also indicates the patrilineal kinship, thus revealing its significance in the local conceptualisation of social identity (Atwood 2006, p. 629; Birtalan 2003; Golman 2006)¹⁶. Likewise, mountains may encompass the genealogy of an individual or family, while being associated, at the same time, with the spirits of the ancestors (Davaa-Ochir 2008, pp. 13, 31). As bones can allude to lineage, mountains and mountain ovoos can be used to link the family or the community to significant features of the local landscape, contributing to the territorial definition of a homeland and common past (Anikeeva 2006; Humphrey 1995, p. 148). Mountain ovoos are particularly important in terms of identity-building and heritage-making processes, both at the individual and community level (Namsaraeva 2012; Pedersen 2006; Tamirjavyn 2017)¹⁷.

Etymology and pastoral land

- 17 Besides composition, other aspects, especially the action of piling objects and the affinity to verticality, can concur to the core definition of the ovoos. According to Clauson (1972, p. 5), the word *obo*, which is widely attested in Turkic languages, is

originally Mongolian, especially with the meaning of “heap of stones, grave mound”¹⁸. In Tuvan, the verbal form *oboyi-* could be translated as “to form a conical pile or bump, rise in the shape of a cone” and could be connected to the verb *opay-* “to rise, to go up”, said also of objects such as haystacks (Khabtagaeva 2009, p. 139). Notably, the essential meaning conveyed here does not include a specification on the materials to be used to form such a pile. Also in Classical Mongolian, the semantic attestations relate more to the conic shape than the composition of the cairn (Khabtagaeva 2009, pp. 48, 184). Both in the Turkic and Mongolic languages, moreover, pastoral and funerary semantics associated with the word *ovoo* could be interpreted as a reference to a localised conception of ancestral land¹⁹. In particular, a western Turkic derivation of the word *ovoo*, *oba*, can indicate a plain, a tent, or a pasture area, but also a clan or small social or family unit (Clauson 1972, p. 5).

- 18 The semantic value of the word *ovoo* and its relationship with seasonal occupation and pastoral mobility seems particularly relevant in the light of the role of kinship as a mechanism of regulation of the land. In Mongolia, the usage of certain resources such as water springs, pastures, or camping areas is traditionally articulated through periodical occupation, legitimised by a systematic reference to a certain family or group identity (Fernández-Giménez 1999). It might be something more than a coincidence that the distribution of *ovoos* seems deeply intertwined with critical sections of the pastoral mobility such as mountain passes, crossroads, or fords (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 48). Likewise, many ritual practices performed at *ovoo* sites take place according to the seasonal displacements or periodical festivities of local pastoral communities or family units of herders (Hamayon 2020)²⁰.
- 19 The interconnection between seasonal mobility, periodical rituals, kinship, and access rights diversely stands today (Ahearn 2016; Sneath 2001), but it is probably rooted much deeper in time. In the Old Turkic and early Mongolian sources, land rights, like political power, are legitimised through the reference to royal or divine ancestors (Anikeeva 2006; Szyrkiewicz 1989; Sinor 1993). Likewise, the seasonal mobility of the herders is negotiated with the master spirits of the place and the ancestors presiding over *ovoo* sites with both a pastoral and ritual significance (Ahearn 2016; Delaplace 2008; Hürelbaatar 2006, p. 215 and footnote 16; Kazato 2005; Kristensen 2004; Pedersen 2009; Vitebsky 2005)²¹. The circumambulations and rituals performed by local herders at the *ovoo* located on a mountain pass, for example, can be interpreted as a declaration to the local deities, informing on the arrival to a new pasture and asking for permission and protection of the family and livestock (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 54)²².
- 20 In this sense, it seems reasonable to assume that the systematic incorporation of *ovoos* as territorial markers since the 19th century²³ could have relied upon older pastoral, territorial, and social values that were rooted in the local history. The possible attestation of the word *ovoo* in the Pre-Classical Mongolian that I will discuss in the next section could be interpreted as a supportive element for the hypothesis that the materiality and rituality associated with those cairns might pre-date the Buddhist integration of the *ovoos* since the 16th-17th century²⁴.

Piled stones and funerary sites: a contextual relational hypothesis

- 21 The semantic values of the word *ovoo* might be connected with an early ritual and funerary sphere. As we have seen above, *ovoo* can be also translated as “grave mound” (Clauson 1972). But how can we interpret this translation? Which could the funerary value of the *ovoo* be and when did it start? To answer these questions, the interpretation of an Old Turkic inscription of the 7th century as a very early attestation of the word *ovoo* can be particularly noteworthy (Tadinova 2006, p. 316). In this transcription, the form *opa* has been translated as “heap of sacrificial stones”. This interpretation, although uncertain, is especially relevant in the light of the hypothesis of an early origin of the *ovoos* and their potential connection with ancient funerary rituals and/or the ancestors. Moreover, several Turkic languages apparently incorporated the root **oba* to designate a burial (stone) or sacrificial mounds for the mountain spirits (Tadinova 2006, p. 315). This is also particularly relevant, if we consider that in modern Mongolian, the word *ovoo* designates a heap of stones specifically “built as a landmark or monuments in honour of the genius loci” (Lessing 1960, p. 598).
- 22 The semantic proximity of the word *ovoo* with both ancestral entities and ancient funerary practices seems to mirror the ambivalent nature of the master spirits of the place (*gazryn ezed*) themselves: they can be linked to specific sacred places in the local landscape but also to the world of the dead (Roux 1971). Significantly, the cult of mountains and waters that is celebrated at the *ovoo* sites has been interpreted as a form of the cult of ancestors (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 13; Tatar 1976)²⁵. In the local cosmology, ancestors are often much more than an abstract concept, they are predecessors of the family and the clan. The images of the immediate deceased relatives usually occupy an important place in the family shrine of every house, where they receive daily offerings, while they are periodically celebrated at *ovoo* sites (Davaa-Ochir 2008; Dumont 2017; Empson 2007, pp. 64-65; Namsaraeva 2012; Ozheredov & Ozheredova 2015; Pedersen 2001; Purzycki 2010). Like family pictures, the *ovoos* dedicated to the ancestors and master spirits of the place can be therefore interpreted as powerful tools of memory and identity (Hamayon 2020). Significantly enough, an analogous interpretation has been proposed for the monumental Late Prehistoric funerary mounds that attracted ritual practices over several centuries, possibly in the frame of a cult of the ancestors (Burnakov & Tsydenova 2014; Johannesson 2019; Miller *et al.* 2018). Similarly, the Old Turkic and Pre-Classical Mongolian written sources seem to confirm the importance of the cult of the ancestors in the first and second millennium AC (Belli 2003; Bemann & Brosseder 2017; Evans & Humphrey 2003; Osawa 2012; Roux 1963).
- 23 One could wonder, therefore, whether the monumental materiality of ancient stone mounds and the associated funerary and ritual values could have percolated in the local cosmology and architectonical tradition. Davaa-Ochir (2008, p. 13) suggests that the origin of mountain master spirits could be connected with the practice of burying shamans, group leaders, and elders on elevated mountain spots.
- 24 Heissig (1953, p. 501; 1980, p. 103) describes in detail the legend of the shaman of the Red Cliffs according to a manuscript possibly dating to the 17th century. In this narrative, a powerful man, who was an expert in ancient rituals, asked his son to bury him on a high mountaintop and be worshipped with specific rites after his death. With

the compliance of the son, he thus became a powerful master spirit, who protected and helped his shaman son and all his clan. In this legend, we can observe exemplified the potential genealogical connection between ancestors and master spirits of the place, but also an important reflection about the localisation of ovoos and burials in high mountain areas. Heissig (1980, p. 103) argued that the practice of burying high-ranking persons on mountain heights resonates with the principles of a local sacred geography hierarchically organised and controlled by ancestral spirits²⁶. More importantly, he compared the funerary ritual of the shaman with the ancient elite burials of northern China, which were generally located at panoramic and elevated places (Heissig 1953, footnote 147). In this sense, ancient mounds, ancestors, and master spirits of the place could be considered in the frame of a long-term comprehensive cosmology. Perhaps, certain cosmological aspects associated with those ancient funerary and ritual mounds could be progressively incorporated into the ovoos that monumentally vertebrate the Mongolian landscape.

Monumentality: ovoos, stupas, and ancient mounds

- 25 The idea that ovoos could be rooted in the monumental and funerary tradition that possibly intensified in Mongolia and central Eurasia around the second millennium B.C. (Evans & Humphrey 2003; Honeychurch 2015) certainly deserves further investigation. However, the potential integration of different monumentalities has been already considered with regards to the Buddhist stupa²⁷. In Mongolia, the stupas are often investigated in the frame of a Buddhist interaction with the materiality and rituality of the ovoos (Birtalan 1998). They may alternate or even merge in the local sacred geographies (Charleux 2006, p. 48; Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 49)²⁸. This process sometimes culminates in an architectonic syncretism that, on the Ih Bogd Mountain, is perfectly exemplified by the case of Gegeenii Ovoo. Locally understood and named as an ovoo, its square, three-layered stone structure is much closer to the architectonic principles of stupas than to the conical shape of piled stone cairns (see fig. 3 and compare with fig. 4). The material and architectonic interaction between the two types of structures, however, is certainly facilitated by their original similarities. Like ovoos, Buddhist stupas display a close affinity to verticality and the symbolism of a sacred mountain or world tree. Moreover, stupas have a strong funerary value (Snodgrass 1985). They have been archaeologically investigated in relation to the Late Prehistoric burial mounds of northern India and the Himalaya (Coningham *et al.* 2013).
- 26 The ancient origin of the ovoos, possibly in the Neolithic period, was first suggested by the Buryat Scholar D. Banzarov in the 19th century (Atwood 2004, p. 414) and often reiterated elsewhere (Birtalan 1998; Chuluu & Stuart 1995; Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 49; Evans & Humphrey 2003; Heissig 1980, pp. 101-110; Tatár 1976). However, while “some intriguing elements that seem to link current ovoos to monuments of the distant past” (Evans & Humphrey 2003, p. 199) have been often recognised, the precise position of the ovoo in the Central Asian monumental tradition has been never examined in detail through archaeology.
- 27 The hypothesis of a correlation between the ovoo phenomenon and ancient burial mounds is attractive, especially in the light of the persistence of certain monuments and ritual practices as early as the second millennium B.C. when ancient funerary mounds remained in use for several centuries or even longer (Davis-Kimball 2000;

Fitzhugh 2017; Johannesson 2011; Miller *et al.* 2018; Turbat 2011; Wright 2014; Zaitseva 2004). Unfortunately, however, ovoos and ancient mounds are generally considered from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives. In this sense, the excavation of an ovoo built over an ancient mound in western Mongolia by Jeannine Davis-Kimball (2000) is especially important: not only it provides a unique archaeological examination, but it also documents the long-term ritual practices associated with the site.

- 28 The structure contained various elements, including 4 000 votive-type artefacts distributed across the excavated levels. These were interpreted as a significant indication of a long-term – although possibly segmented – sacralisation of the same structure and spatial context from the Late Bronze Age until the 18th-19th century or even later (Davis-Kimball 2000, pp. 92, 93). As I will further illustrate, the material reinterpretation of ancient mounds, adapted or transformed into ovoos, can be documented elsewhere in Mongolia, and specifically in the research area of the Ih Bogd Mountain (see fig. 3 and compare with fig. 4). Moreover, ancient mounds have been actively reinterpreted as ovoos elsewhere in western Eurasia, such as in the interesting case of Kalmykia described by Valeria Gazizova (in this issue).

Figure 3. Gegeenii Ovoo, a monument showing a clear Buddhist influence in the high-pasture area of the Ih Bogd Mountain

View to the north-west and the Valley of Lakes

© Cecilia Dal Zovo, picture taken on the occasion of a trip on the mountain with people from Bogd village, August 2011

Figure 4. Stupa at the entrance of Bogd village

Small rocks are placed on the stupa basement, as if it attracted an ovoo-like ritual

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Round monuments within the landscape: ontological intersections

- 29 The ontology and phenomenology of the *ovoos* could be similarly understood as a gradual long-term process, rather than the product of a single foundational event in the past. At *ovoo* sites, stones are added to the cairn over and over by travellers and devotees and the structure continues to grow over time. In this sense, the *ovoo* cairns, like the persistent ancient mounds, can be considered as “round monuments”: ever-evolving structures that cannot be defined by a fixed initial and final chronology of use (Ingold 2010, p. 258).
- 30 The process of creation of round monuments involves a co-agency of natural and cultural aspects. Both conical, cairn-like structures made of stones, earth, and wood are produced by a human agency but, at the same time, they are also powerfully shaped by the forces of nature, such as gravity and the weather (Ingold 2010). Round monuments can also encompass significant aspects of natural mimesis (Bradley 2000). Like mountains, they look immutable, but, at the same time, they grow in size and meaning and are continuously re-signified (Ingold 2010). Like mountains, they can be used as orientation devices or territorial markers, but they also attract local rituals.
- 31 In this sense, the spatial and symbolical connection that the *ovoos* maintain with the cult of the mountains appears particularly meaningful (Bawden 1958; Birtalan 1998; Heissig 1980, pp. 102-105; Lindahl 2010; Tatár 1976). It is also noteworthy that the ambivalence of mountains, which, as we have seen above, can be sometimes conceptualised as bones but are made of rocks, seems to resonate with the diversity of materials used to build both *ovoos* and ancient mounds. The first are built using stones,

wood, and animal bones (Birtalan 1998, p. 199), while ancient mounds are made of stones, but contain the human remains of the deceased, as well as animal bones related to the ancient rituality.

Ovoos and ancient mounds: a comparative perspective

- 32 Before considering the details of their peculiar material intersection in the research area of the Ih Bogd Mountain, we can further compare the characteristics of Late Prehistoric mounds and ovoos. The latter can be usually found in proximity to significant natural features, such as commanding heights, mountain passes, springs, and river banks (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 49). Late Prehistoric burial mounds display comparable localisation patterns, especially in the case of those locally known as *hirigsüür*. These big individual mounds are made of rocks and earth piled over the tomb and have often a circular or quadrangular stone fence around the central mound, as well as many diverse satellite features (Wright 2007). They can be often documented in high and panoramic areas or near to mountain passes and springs, but also in large funerary clusters located at valley mouths or on lower mountain slopes, such as in the case of the necropolis between the Ih Bogd Mountain and the western shore of the Orog Lake (Dal Zovo 2016; see Houle & Erdenebaatar 2009 for comparison)²⁹.
- 33 Besides localisation, ancient burial mounds and ovoos share other essential characteristics. The mountain mimesis that has been mentioned above is equally reiterated in the architecture of both monuments, as well as in their emplacement at high or panoramic spots. Moreover, both structures have a central pile of stones, which are abundant and available in most areas of Mongolia, but also have important symbolic qualities (Burnakov & Tsydenova 2014; Rozwadowski 2017). Their vertical shape and elevation on the ground could be seen as a cosmological approximation to the sky (*tenger*), which is symbolically relevant both in the local beliefs and in several Old Turkic and Pre-Classical Mongolian sources (Baumann 2013; Heissig 1980, pp. 49-59; Pelliot 1944; Roux 1984). Similarly, the combination of ancient mounds and standing stone stelae (Fitzhugh 2009) could be compared with the usage of wooden poles on the ovoos and the ritualisation of trees with ovoo-like functions (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 17; Lindskog 2019; Smith 2015, pp. 67-69). These aspects could be additionally interpreted in relation to the alternation of a World Mountain or a World Tree as the central axis of the universe in many central Eurasian mythologies (Marazzi 1984, 2005; Chuluu 1996).
- 34 Furthermore, ancient burial mounds, like the ovoos, could be more accurately defined as ritual structures. Besides their primary funerary function, in fact, these monuments often display a long-term record of ritual practices spanning several hundreds of years (Fitzhugh 2009; Johannesson 2011; Miller *et al.* 2018). Likewise, the ovoo can be understood as a monument in the making, owing its growth to the stone deposition by worshippers and travellers who can perform periodical rituals, food offerings, and even re-foundation rituals over a considerable lapse of time. Moreover, as mentioned above, the animal sacrifices and/or bones and food offerings at ovoo sites seem to evoke the consumption and ritual use of certain animals, particularly of horses, archaeologically documented at Late Prehistoric mounds and Turkic funerary sites (Batsaikhan *et al.* 1996; Crubezy *et al.* 1996; Turbat 2011).

Ovoos and ancient mounds on the Ih Bogd Mountain

- 35 The most intriguing point of analysing the potential connection between ovoos and ancient mounds perhaps is its effective materialisation in the local landscape. In the sacred and pastoral landscape of the Ih Bogd Mountain, Late Prehistoric mounds and ovoos sometimes share the same spatial and material context, especially in prominent localisations, like mountain passes, as it has been observed in the case of the Beiram mound, in the western Altai Mountains (Davis-Kimball 2000). In a research area covering more than 6 000 km², I could document more than one thousand ancient burial mounds and other material structures and events, which have been inserted into a broad database (Dal Zovo 2016). This includes information derived from the analysis of historical cartography, satellite imagery, as well as from the fieldwork undertaken together with local referents, who supported the documentation process with their accurate knowledge of the mountain, local place-names, and ritual practices. On the Ih Bogd Mountain, I could also trace several living examples of interaction between ancient *hirigsüür* mounds and ovoos. In this context, the re-interpretation of ancient burial mounds as ovoos can be substantiated not only by material or architectonic action, but also expressed through the local micro-toponymy or the local narratives and practices associated with the monument. All these aspects are especially significant in the three case-studies that I will now illustrate.

Puntsag Ovoo

- 36 The most relevant example in terms of monumentality and complexity is certainly the site of Puntsag Ovoo, which has been previously explored with regards to archaeological palimpsests and archaeoastronomy (Dal Zovo *et al.* 2014; Dal Zovo 2019). The Puntsag Ovoo Hill (ca. 2 600 m. above sea level) provides a panoramic view over the high pastures of the Ih Bogd Mountain, and, in particular, over the pass that is most frequently used to cross the mountain in the north/south direction (see fig. 5). On the top of the hill, there is a characteristic and well-conserved large Late Bronze Age *hirigsüür* mound with a line of standing stones of the same epoch (see Fitzhugh 2009 and Wright 2007 for comparison). At the western foot of the hill lies also a row of fifty-four small cairns, locally called “the path of the spirits”, next to a cluster of boulders with ancient rock art engravings (Dal Zovo & González García 2018). The *hirigsüür* consists of a big stone mound, surrounded by a circular spoked stone fence that has a diameter of ca. 60 m.

Figure 5. Map of Puntsag Ovoo and Tsagaan Ovoo and the area of the mountain pass and elevated pastures of the Ih Bogd Mountain

Bronze Age mounds (yellow dot); rock art cluster (star); pastoral campsite (square). The red line indicates the main path crossing the mountain. The orange line indicates the GPS track of the detour made by Battogoo to show the funerary place of his grandmother

© map realised by Anxo Rodríguez-Paz, César Parcero-Oubiña, and Cecilia Dal Zovo (Autocad and ArcGIS) – using ESRI Base Maps, Mongolia 1:100000 Topographic Maps and own data

- 37 The site has been possibly re-arranged in the Turkic epoch, but other traces of past agencies have been accumulating over time (Dal Zovo 2019). As for the present analysis, one of the most significant aspects of the site is certainly the transformation of the Late Prehistoric mound into an ovoo. As the place-name itself suggests, both the mound and the hilltop are locally defined as *ovoo*³⁰. Moreover, rocks of different shapes and colours (including white quartz that does not seem so abundant in the surroundings) are distinctly piled in the form of an *ovoo* over the ancient mound, which is instead composed of smaller and homogeneous black stones (fig. 6). The cairn appears to benefit from the emplacement, composition, and monumentality of the ancient mound and, in time, this possibly influenced the rituality and symbolism associated with such a commanding site.

Figure 6. Site view (top), with a general (middle) and detailed (bottom) picture of the cairn built at the Bronze Age mound (*hirigsüür*) on Puntsag Ovoo Hill

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- 38 The place-name of Puntsag Ovoo is particularly interesting in the frame of a persistent local sacred geography. As noted by Tatár (1976, pp. 2-3), certain aspects of the Mongolian micro-toponymy could be connected with the long-term sacralisation of outstanding sites and natural features. Here, the first part of the toponym consists of a personal name of Tibetan origin (< Tib. Phun tshogs), which was often adopted by monks at the time of the active Buddhicisation of the Mongolian landscape (Cuevas 2003, pp. 303-311). Following a narrative widely applied elsewhere, and particularly in Tibet, it can be conjectured that this name might belong to one of those legendary lamas that could tame ancestral mountain spirits, especially those linked to ancient funerary and ritual places (Bawden 1958; Birtalan 1998; Bellezza 2005; Pedersen 2007; Torri 2015). Puntsag lama could have contributed to “purify” the hill, the Late Prehistoric funerary and ritual site, and the whole Ih Bogd Mountain from old entities and beliefs while establishing the material and cultic feature of the ovoo³¹.
- 39 The stone structures on the hilltop of Puntsag Ovoo seem to be quite significant to the local inhabitants. In 2011, on the occasion of my third visit to the place, I could observe an adult man, who deposited a yellow silk scarf around one of the little stone cairns at the foot of the proper mound/ovoo (fig. 7). Although the community ovoo of Bogd District is officially Gegeenii Ovoo, the three-layered squared monument located a few kilometres north-west (fig. 3), this private worship did not seem to surprise Baatar³², the expert herder that was my guide on the mountain, nor the notables from the village that happened to be with us at the time. The local devotion to Puntsag Ovoo is evident in many other aspects. Back to Bogd Village, I once met a boy named Puntsag among a group of young men. When he introduced himself, he proudly explained his name in

relation to the Puntsag Ovoo Hill. This hilltop is also where visitors and guests of Bogd are usually driven to enjoy the magnificent views of the Ih Bogd Mountain, the Orog Lake, and the Valley of Lakes.

Figure 7. Puntsag Ovoo funerary mound and stone fence, with a modern stone altar and a “modern” yellow ritual scarf in the foreground

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- 40 In 2009, Baatar told me that the lines of stones I observed on the ground at the north-western foot of Puntsag Ovoo Hill simply defined the square area for the wrestling competition of a local festival (Mo. *naadam*, “three manly games”) that was celebrated there the year before. Interestingly, this festival is usually an important part of the mountain cults seasonally performed at the main banner ovoo to amuse the ancestral spirits of the place (Lacaze 2010; Marazzi 2005, p. 4; Tatár 1976). As the *naadam* games of Bogd are usually devoted to Gegenii Ovoo and celebrated in the broad valley at the foot of the mountain³³, the record of such a celebration held in the high-pastures area at the foot of the Puntsag Ovoo Hill is, in my view, quite remarkable.

Tsagaan Ovoo

- 41 Tsagaan Ovoo is a Late Prehistoric *hiriḡsüür* mound located north-west of Puntsag Ovoo Hill, from where is clearly visible (fig. 8). Like Puntsag Ovoo, the mound is surrounded by a circular stone fence that is almost 60 metres wide and has four radial lines that are cardinally oriented, with a small twist of approximately 15-19° (Dal Zovo *et al.* 2014). Although the ancient mound seemed to bear no evidence of material adaptation nor traces of ovoo rituals, such as silk scarves, bones, glasses, etc., Baatar said that the site is locally known as Tsagaan Ovoo, which means “white cairn”. It is worth noting that white is an auspicious colour in Mongolia (Hamayon 1978). This encompasses white ritual tools and white food offerings in many ovoo rituals, especially on Tsagaan Sar, literally “White Moon/Month”, the lunar New Year festival (Davaa-Ochir 2008, pp. 123,

125). Moreover, white is frequently attested in the toponymical characterisation of mountains and hills, especially in the steppe and in the Gobi Desert region (Myagmar 2009). In this sense, this colour could have indicated a particularly holy aspect associated with the place, otherwise marked by the Late Prehistoric mound.

Figure 8. Top: Tsagaan Ovoo mound (red arrow), viewed from the top of Puntsag Ovoo Hill. Bottom: on-site view of Tsagaan Ovoo *hirigsüür* with Puntsag Ovoo Hill in the background (red arrow)

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- 42 Here, the integration of the ancient mound into a local and Buddhist sacred geography may appear subtler, relying simply on the transformation of the place name and the identification of the conic shape of the stone mound as an *ovoo*. Yet the redefinition of this particular mound expressed by the place name seems congruent within the typical localisation pattern of the *ovoos*, especially with regards to the emplacement and spatial proximity to significant natural features. Like Puntsag Ovoo, Tsagaan Ovoo (2 485 m) lies in proximity to the same mountain pass that allows crossing the Ih Bogd Mountain in a longitudinal direction, either by car or on horseback. Moreover, the paths that go west of Tsagaan Ovoo lead to the core of the elevated pastures of the mountain and to Gegeenii Ovoo, which represents the main community *ovoo* of the district of Bogd. The mound is also close to a freshwater source that could be particularly appreciated by the herders occupying the high-mountain pastures in summer and early autumn (fig. 5).
- 43 Moreover, according to Davaa-Ochir (2008, pp. 53-54), mountain passes are especially significant in the local cosmology. Reaching and crossing a mountain pass during a seasonal displacement not only represents a geographic shift but also a symbolic transfer from one state to another. I wonder whether this aspect could be related to the concept of liminality and funerary transition associated with natural places explored elsewhere in central Eurasia or western Europe (Argent 2013; Aubrey 2019; Bradley

2000; Lymer 2010; Rozwadowski 2017; Vandkilde 2014). Significantly, in several Turkic and Mongolian languages, the funerary transition is linked to an ascension to the sky or to high mountain pastures (Ragagnin 2013). It may or may not have been a pure coincidence that Baatar, while visiting together the site of Tsagaan Ovoo, mentioned that the funerary place of his grandmother and other people from the village was located nearby. Indeed, Tsagaan Ovoo is very close to the hollow hidden valley where he offered to drive shortly after. This modern funerary place in the middle of the elevated pastures is also close, yet hidden from view, to an area of summer campsites (see the track of the elongated deviation from the main path in fig. 5).

- 44 Another important spatial element is that Tsagaan Ovoo, like Puntsag Ovoo, is located on the watershed of the Ih Bogd Mountain, which presently constitutes the border between Bogd and Bayangov' Provinces. This is particularly interesting both in terms of territorial and pastoral boundaries as well as of the emplacement of the ovoos. The allocation of grazing areas traditionally followed the watershed line of the mountains, as observed by Owen Lattimore in the early 20th century (in Lindskog 2010, p. 56). On the other side, the practice of building ovoos on territorial borders flourished in the 19th century, precisely in connection with the administrative effort of defining and controlling the pasturelands of Mongolia by the Qing power (Pratte 2019).
- 45 It might be difficult to verify whether the transformation of the ancient mounds at Puntsag Ovoo and Tsagaan Ovoo could be directly connected also with that historical phase, but it is interesting to note how the present administrative division of the Ih Bogd Mountain between the territories of Bogd and Bayangov' could, at least to some extent, reflect previous practices of control and shared use of the elevated pastures of the mountain. The area of elevated pastures marked by Puntsag Ovoo and Tsagaan Ovoo possibly attracted herders from both Bogd District, located north of the Ih Bogd Mountain, and Bayangov' in the south. Once I met two young herders from Bayangov' with their herds of goats and sheep grazing on the eastern slope of Puntsag Ovoo Hill (fig. 9). On the other side, Baatar, who is from Bogd, reported that his family used to camp in that area too. That had been the reason why, as I mentioned above, his grandmother's funerary place was located nearby.
- 46 Considering the accumulation of monumental features and the outstanding characteristics of the landscape, both Tsagaan Ovoo and Puntsag Ovoo might have constituted a convergence point of pastoral interests of different groups also in the past. This could contribute to explain the adaptation and stratification of ancient and more recent funerary and ritual features in a high mountain environment that also is a persistent node of the local pastoral mobility.

Figure 9. Young herders from Bayangov' with their herd of cashmere goats on the southern slope of Puntsag Ovoo Hill, late August 2011

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Ovoo-mound at the entrance of the Ih Bogd Mountain Natural Park

- 47 The Buddhist resignification of the area around Puntsag Ovoo and Tsagaan Ovoo could be further understood in the frame of the persistent sacralisation of the mountain as a whole. Significantly, “Ih Bogd Uul” could be translated as the “Great Sacred Mountain”, but also “Great Buddha Mountain” (Laufer 1916, p. 394). As I mentioned above, in Mongolia, many mountains are considered intrinsically sacred and essentially function as identity elements, both at community and national level (Sneath 2014). They are seen as inhabited by master spirits of the place and ancestors, which are often worshipped at ovoo sites. This feature, attested elsewhere in central Eurasia, such as in Himalaya and Tibet, possibly has an early origin that might have been equally incorporated into the Buddhist sacred cosmology (Charleux 2015; McKay 2015). Since the 18th century, remarkable sacred mountains of Mongolia were progressively protected in the local legislation (Chimedsegee *et al.* 2009). In 2007, the Ih Bogd Mountain became a Regional Natural Park and was classified as a natural sacred site (Schmidt 2006). This status guarantees environmental conservation but also recognises the local spiritual and religious understanding of the mountain as a sacred entity.
- 48 In 2011, I documented an ovoo with recent traces of ritual exactly at the valley mouth that demarcates one of the main northern “gates” to the Ih Bogd Mountain Natural Park (fig. 10). The peculiarity of this cairn is that it has been built, like Puntsag Ovoo, directly over an ancient funerary mound. The designation of the pile of stones as an ovoo is provided by a peculiar column-like reshaping of stones with an upside-down bottle of vodka and fragments of glass. The ancient mound below does not belong to the category of large *hirigsüür* mounds with wide stone fences. It is a small mound ca.

3 m in size, which is likely connected with the large clusters of Late Prehistoric burials located between the northern slope of the Ih Bogd Mountain and the Orog Lake (Dal Zovo 2016). In this case, the localisation does not offer a particularly panoramic view, as it lies at the foothills of the mountain. However, similarly to the ovoo-mound sites analysed above, its emplacement is particularly significant for the local and regional mobility. Not only this place marks the entrance to a narrow inner valley that gives access to the elevated pastures of the Ih Bogd Mountain, but it is also set close to the road that cuts through the middle slope of the mountain in an east-west direction, providing the most suitable route to cross the whole Valley of Lakes.

Figure 10. Ancient mound with an ovoo-like rearrangement and offerings (bottle of vodka) at the northern entrance of the Ih Bogd Mountain Natural Park

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- 49 It is worth noting that the offering of vodka is often employed in practices of mountain worship and private prayers for the protection of livestock. Although leaving empty bottles or fragments of glass on the land has been recently defined as a polluting and inauspicious action by the Buddhist clergy in Ulaanbaatar, this idea seems not so common in the countryside (Wallace 2015, p. 232). It is possible, therefore, that the ancient mound at the entrance of the valley could have been transformed into an ovoo in the frame of a popular, non-institutional ritual practice. This was possibly linked to the daily or seasonal rituals of the local herders, rather than a major Buddhist adaptation and administrative re-organisation of the landscape such as the one that might have involved the Puntsag Ovoo and Tsagaan Ovoo case studies I examined above.

Conclusion

- 50 Through an analysis of archaeological, historical, and linguistic sources, in this essay I explored the hypothesis that the ovoos could have had early roots, particularly in

relation to the ancient monumental tradition of piling (stone) mounds documented in central Eurasia since the Late Prehistory. Specifically, I combined the examination of written sources such as *The Secret History of the Mongols* and the travel account by Marco Polo, with a linguistic exploration of the etymology and semantics of the word *ovoo* and the field documentation of the local materiality. The potential intersection between *ovoos* and ancient funerary and ritual monumentality has been considered not only in a theoretical perspective but also through the analysis of specific case studies: three Late Prehistoric mounds transformed into *ovoos* in the research area of the Ih Bogd Mountain. As there is no absolute chronology available for the *ovoos*, the analysis of this syncretic materiality might provide, in my view, a useful model for an alternative approach to the study of the *ovoo* phenomenon, bypassing the poor references in the early written sources.

- 51 As elsewhere in Mongolia, the entanglement of these cairns within the local monumental tradition is possibly connected with the Buddhist-inspired transformation of sacred geographies (late 16th-17th century) and the cultural and material intensification of the *ovoo* materiality for political and administrative purposes in the Qing epoch. However, had *ovoos* actually appeared in Mongolia only at that time, their colonisation of the landscape would have been unusually fast and pervasive. I argue that this process possibly succeeded thanks to an active and systematic adaptation of more ancient materiality, rituality, and symbolism. In particular, I suggest that the multidimensional character of the *ovoo*, encompassing land, mountains, pastures, and ritual practices, could have been modelled after the much older symbolical and material correlations over time. Such interconnections become then embedded in the local sacred landscape, especially at outstanding elevations and persistent nodes of the local pastoral mobility: mountain passes, crossroads, water springs, etc. Accordingly, these features of the landscape continuously concentrated both pastoral conspicuousness and funerary and ritual significance, which could be reflected in the accumulation of materiality and meaning over time. This may contribute to explain why certain structures accumulate at the same site and several architectonic aspects, localisation patterns, and ritual practices, namely the use of stones and bones, can be documented for both *ovoos* and ancient mounds.
- 52 It is worth noting, however, that similarities or even analogies between ancient mounds and *ovoo* cannot be simply understood in causative and chronological terms. Approaching the *ovoos* as a direct evolution of ancient funerary burials and beliefs would be far too simplistic. While they could be used to actively reinterpret and sacralise (or exorcise) strategic pastoral areas and old ritual sites, and such as ancient tombs, they would have materialised and legitimised a new religious or political context not only at an institutional but also at a local, popular level. In this sense, the *ovoos* represent an exciting opportunity to analyse how the local communities progressively engage(d) with their past and how this relationship was and is negotiated in the local landscape over time.

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NOTES

1. In this paper, I use this word to refer to those structures that have been described by Davaa-Ochir (2008, p. 48) in the following terms: “The central features of sacred landscapes in Mongolia are the oboos constructed to mark the sacred ritual place. The oboo functions as a shrine for territorial divinities and as a sacrificial altar on which to make offerings. Some places with oboos indicate that they are gathering places for divinities of the mountains and waters. Oboos are built on mountain peaks and at mountain passes, as well as at the source of springs, at the shores of rivers and lakes, and by solitary rocks and trees. Construction materials depend on the locality: stones are widely used, while oboos constructed of trees can be found in forested areas. One can find hut shaped wooden cairns in the northern Mongolian forests. Snow oboos can also be erected during the Mongolian New Year, which celebrates the new spring according to the lunar calendar. [...] Oboos are not regarded merely as heaps of stones or trees among Inner Asian people. Their belief in the spirits of ancestors (elders, shamans and ancient warriors) who transformed into local protective deities and in these deities enshrined in oboos engenders the ‘sacredness’ in these heaps of stones. Thus an oboo is a landmark of the sacredness and a mark that distinguishes the ‘sacred’ from the ‘mundane’”.
2. See for instance the case of the Buddhist rituals associated with the Tibetan cairns called *la btas*, whose chronology is, similarly, not very well understood.
3. Evans and Humphrey’s (2003) pioneering study laterally explores the chronology and historical development of the oboos associated with a Buddhist monastery in Inner Mongolia. Likewise, the excavation of an ovoo by Davis-Kimball (2000) at Beiram Pass, in western Mongolia, is tangential to the investigation of the Late Prehistoric burial underneath. The considerations regarding the ovoo are often speculative precisely because of the lack of systematic archaeological studies
4. Altering the local ecological balance can be in contrast with the rituality practised at ovoo sites to ensure the harmony of all local forces in the landscape (Lindskog 2016, p. 3).
5. Based on the comparison between the translated versions by Cleaves (1982), Rachewiltz (2004), and Onon (2001).
6. See introduction and notes by Rachewiltz (2004).
7. On the variability of secular and sacred characters in the mountain landscapes of central Eurasia, see for comparison Ramble (1995).
8. Chinggis Khan’s toughness was related to the fact that he had “an iron-like father and a solid stone-like mother” (Onon 2001, p. 30). These qualities were relevant also for the construction of oboos in later times. Davaa-Ochir (2008, p. 57), citing Bawden (1994, p. 8) reports that the instructions by Mergen Diyanchi Lama (1717-1766), recommended stone for the construction of oboos as a sign of longevity, being stones the embodiment of strength.
9. Significantly, in the case study illustrated by Lindskog (2016 and 2019), the Lhachin Bavuu Dorjee Ovoo equally designates a single individual rock that is ritualised as an ovoo, as the name itself suggests.
10. On the concept of ovoo as a possible abode or meeting point for the local master spirits of the place, see the exhaustive description by Davaa-Ochir (2008, pp. 27-28) and a recent interesting discussion by Tamirjyavyn (2017, p. 263). Rozwadowski (2017) equally provides a summary of the Russian ethnographic sources that explore sacred stones in the traditional rituality and cosmology of western and eastern Siberia. Burnakov and Tsydenova (2014) illustrate ritual behaviours linked to individual rocks and stone cairns in the Republic of Khakassia, Russia.
11. On the practice of burning food offerings in the ground, especially for the ancestors, as recorded in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, see Mostaert (1950, pp. 300-302).

12. For this reference, I am deeply indebted to Professor Elisabetta Ragagnin (August 2019), who, at the time of our conversation, was completing the translation of the Rasmusian version of *Il Milione* to Mongolian (Bat-Uchral *et al.* 2019).
13. This is my tentative translation of the text from the ancient Italian used by Rasmusius. For an original version of the text, see volume 1, book 28, 6th paragraph (I/28 [6]), which is available online on the web page of the project “Digital Marco Polo” of the University of Venice: http://virgo.unive.it/ecf-workflow/books/Ramutio/commenti/R_I_28-main.html [accessed 15 July 2020].
14. Interestingly, according to Davaa-Ochir (2008, p. 111) “an oboo is called ‘horse fortune oboo’ (*aduunii buyan khishigtei obo*) if the horse is a favourite animal of the oboo deity, or ‘yak fortune oboo’ (*arlagiin buyan khishigtei obo*) if yaks are preferred by the deity”. Thus, the variability of animal sacrifices would account for the preference of the local spirits themselves. More significantly, the same author suggests there might be a sort of correlation between the number of certain animals in a specific area and the preferences of the local deities (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 211; see also Hürelbaatar 2006, p. 214).
15. The connection between mountains and ovoos is well documented not only in the ritual practice but also in the local cosmology (Bawden 1958; Tatár 1976). In particular, the idea of a world mountain and the association between ovoos and the mythical Mount Meru are often to be found in the Buddhist sources relative to the ovoo ritual (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 72).
16. For an anthropological analysis of bones, and, in particular, sheep tibiae, and their symbolism in terms of family genealogy and kinship, see also Szykiewicz (1989).
17. Similar rituals are associated with mountain ovoos and are linked to fundamental clan and ancestral values that can be equally traced in the Old Turkic world (Anikeeva 2006, pp. 20-21).
18. Interestingly, according to Basu (2012) the semantic values associated with the Gaelic word *cairn*, which later entered the English language, encompass equally natural and cultural landscape features, meaning both “rocky hill or mountain” and a “heap of stones”. As a cultural form, Scottish cairns have been raised as a boundary way or summit markers, but also as grave markers and memorials (Basu 2012, p. 118).
19. See also the study of the term *obok* in Golman 2006.
20. In the Mongolian landscape, for example, the patrilineal ovoos are located where ancestors lived and their worship is generally restricted to the members of the same patrilineal or family (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 51). Significantly, these *cairns* are located on the hills and mountains near to the winter and summer camps where these communities say they have pastured their herds for generations. Similarly, the same ovoos are worshipped by people using “the same water source” (*neg gol usnyhan*) (Davaa-Ochir 2008). For a vivid narrative about an ovoo ritual at a family level, see also Ahearn (2016).
21. Similarly, in other anthropological accounts from neighbouring areas from northern Siberia, we can see that the connection between identity, landscape, and ancestors is materialised and perpetuated in the daily and seasonal practices of small pastoral communities (Haakanson & Jordan 2011). On their seasonal migration routes, Nenets perform animal sacrifices and offerings at the sacred sites that are the burial grounds of their clan, and in doing so, they consider that they follow their ancestors’ footsteps within the local pastoral and sacred geography (Haakanson & Jordan 2011, p. 216).
22. The localisation of ovoos in proximity to water sources and high mountain pastures might contribute to indicate their importance in the local ecology also in modern times. Davaa-Ochir (2008, p. 14) argues that the cosmological values associated with the ovoo have been presently reframed in relation to the safeguard of local resources, such as in the case of cairns built at mining sites (High Mette 2017).

23. The massive construction of new ovoos for territorial and administrative purposes in the Qing period has been confirmed by the preliminary results of Pratte's (2019) investigation and ovoo mapping, particularly in the 19th century (see also Charleux' article, this issue).

24. Compare with the analogous discussion on the Buddhicisation of the Tibetan cairns (*la btsas/la btse*) found in a mountain environment – and likely equivalent to Mongol ovoos – by Wang Xinxian in Blondeau (1997, p. 14). On Tibetan cairns, see also Bellezza (1997, pp. 141-142 and 149) and G.yu 'brug & Stuart (2012, pp. 109-111). According to Bialek (2018, p. 478), *la btsas* would be semantically associated with the concept of bringing forth, bearing, or fare. Perhaps this idea could fit in a potential ritual environment where offerings are presented to the local master spirits.

25. In the local animated ecology, the conceptualisation of an “inherited landscape”, which would be the result of a practical ancestral agency (of deceased family or community members) applies to the pastoral landscape and winter campsites, as recorded by the Japanese anthropologist Mari Kazato (2005, p. 244): “People told me that it takes 50 or even 100 years to create the dung heat-insulating soil (*buuts*) and that their ancestors originally created it. The *buuts* is formed when people repeatedly take their animals to a certain place and use it as a campsite for many years, building corrals to protect the livestock from the wind, snow and erosion [...]. According to one herdsman, the *buuts* is a sign of the lives of our predecessors, which their domestic animals printed on the ground and although it can be revived, it cannot be created in a single day. The *buuts* is historic stock because people share the memories of those who revived and took care of it”.

26. For another analysis and interpretation of the same legend, see also Roux (1963, p. 97).

27. Interestingly, the etymology of the word stupa can be also compared with the original meaning of the word ovoo. It possibly derives from the root *stup*, which means “to accumulate, to gather together” (Snodgrass 1985, p. 156). Stupa may be synonymous with the word *caitya*, which derives from *ci*, “to pile up, to accumulate” and applied to the piling up of a fire altar or a funerary pyre (Snodgrass 1985). Likewise, stupas originally incorporated a strong funerary value: they functioned as tombs and reliquaries of the physical remains of Buddha (Snodgrass 1985, p. 353) and often contained the relics of important Buddhist figures. This burial constituent seems reiterated also at the Buddhicised ovoos, whose foundational rituals begin with making a hole in the ground to house the copper vase with an image of Buddha (Wallace 2015, p. 231).

28. To understand the complexity of potential syncretism and interaction of diverse Central and South Asian traditions, it could be useful to compare the ovoo phenomenon with the incorporation of ancient Brahmanical deities or Christian materiality in the iconography and architecture of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia (see Halbertsma 2008; Lo Muzio 2019).

29. As we have seen above, ovoo cairns can be equally documented in proximity to important nodes of the local mobility or water sources. In the future, it would be interesting to compare the localisation pattern of ancient mounds with the traditional hierarchical organisation of ovoo according to the mountain levels studied by Sneath (2007).

30. Tamirjavyn (2017, p. 263) highlights that mountain ovoos can be conceived as identical to the mountain or the place itself. Thus, the same name may indicate the cairn, the mountain spirit, or, by extension, the whole elevation, as significantly happens in Tibet (G.yu 'brug & Stuart 2012, p. 193).

31. Both this interpretation and chronological attribution could be compared with the information derived by the excavation of the ovoo associated with a Late Prehistoric burial mound (Davis-Kimball 2000). At the bottom of the cairn, the archaeologists found in situ a “Manchu” wooden box that also contained a bamboo piece with an inscription (Davis-Kimball 2000, fig. 9). This may help to determine a specific chronological frame for the deposition of the box and the construction of the ovoo over the mound. This specific inscription was developed

from the ca. 1648 A.D. by Naihaizhamtsan, a Buddhist lama born in 1599 in western Mongolia (Davis-Kimball 2000, p. 92).

32. A pseudonym is used to protect his privacy.

33. I owe this information to Kate Moore, who published an excellent description of the event on her travel blog (Moore 2011).

ABSTRACTS

The so-called ovoo-cairns of Mongolia display a variety and pervasiveness that stimulated a rich anthropological analysis. However, their ancient history remains a challenging and scarcely frequented research topic. This paper introduces an archaeological focus combined with linguistic, historical, anthropological considerations to provide an alternative approach to the genealogy of the ovoos. Their multi-dimensional nature and persistent temporal aspects are investigated through the analysis of early written sources, local narratives, and the archaeological landscape. This is to substantiate the hypothesis that the origin of ovoos could lie far deeper in time than the Buddhist intensification of the 16th and 17th centuries. It could be connected with the ancient monumental tradition of piling (stone) objects in significant places of the sacred and pastoral landscapes of Mongolia. In particular, the possible intersection between present cairns and ancient funerary monumentality is investigated, taking into account three specific case studies of Late Prehistoric mounds that have been locally transformed into ovoos in the area of the Ih Bogd Mountain, in southern Mongolia (Bayanhongor Province). The “ovoo phenomenon” emerges as an exciting opportunity to analyse how people materially engage with and negotiate the local past within the landscape both in ancient and present times.

La variété et l’omniprésence des cairns mongols appelés « ovoo » ont stimulé de riches analyses anthropologiques. Cependant, leur histoire ancienne reste un sujet de recherche délicat et rarement abordé. Cet article présente une perspective archéologique combinée à des considérations linguistiques, historiques et anthropologiques pour fournir une approche alternative à la généalogie des ovoo. Je propose d’étudier leur nature multidimensionnelle et leurs occurrences persistantes dans des sources écrites, dans les discours locaux et dans le paysage archéologique. Il s’agit d’étayer l’hypothèse selon laquelle l’origine des ovoo pourrait être bien plus ancienne que l’époque d’expansion du bouddhisme aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles, et pourrait être liée à l’ancienne tradition monumentale d’empiler des objets (en pierre) dans des sites importants du paysage sacré et pastoral de Mongolie. En particulier, j’analyse l’intersection possible entre les cairns actuels et la monumentalité funéraire ancienne, à partir de trois études de cas spécifiques de tumuli anciens transformés en cairns dans la région de la montagne Ih Bogd, dans le sud de la Mongolie (province Bayanhongor). Le « phénomène ovoo » est ainsi l’occasion d’analyser comment les Mongols ont interagi matériellement avec le paysage local et ses monuments anciens, à la fois dans les temps anciens et présents.

INDEX

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