

Being-in-the-field: Ethnographic Observations on Archaeological Fieldwork in Central Mongolia

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Abstract: In the last two decades, new intersections between archaeology and ethnography have emerged, creating subdisciplines such as ethnography of archaeological practice (Edgeworth 2003). Rather than defining archaeology as dealing exclusively with the past, such subdisciplines interrogate how archaeological knowledge is produced in the present (Davidovic 2009). Reversing the traditional dynamic of the ethnographer going “abroad”, “into the field” – which is paralleled by archaeologists visiting the foreign country that is the past (Lowenthal 1985) – here archaeologists themselves become the group under study and archaeology a field that is embedded in larger societal dynamics (Meskell 2005; Castañeda 2008). Building on two fieldwork seasons (2023 and 2024) in the Upper Orkhon Valley, on the border between Arkhangai and Övörkhongai provinces in central Mongolia, as well as the interdisciplinary theoretical background developed as part of previous research, this article develops the notion of ethnography of archaeological fieldwork in a Mongolian context. It explores knowledge production at the excavation site, daily life at the archaeological camp, and the author’s reflexive perspective as an insider and outsider. The aim is to understand how an archaeological dig inserts itself into the pastoral landscape and existing infrastructures, and how the ethnography of fieldwork can contribute to conducting more ethical archaeological research in the future.

Keywords: Fieldwork; archaeological excavation; ethnography; Upper Orkhon Valley

Introduction

Archaeology has long been defined as the study of past human groups and their material culture. Increasingly, attention has been drawn to the discipline’s historical ties with imperialism and colonialism (Trigger 1984), and its socio-political implications in the present (Shanks & Tilley 1987). As part of a wider ethnographic turn in archaeology (Castañeda 2008), many new intersections between archaeology and ethnography have emerged in the last two decades, such as archaeological ethnography (Hamilakis 2011), ethnographic archaeology (Castañeda 2008) and ethnography of archaeological practice (Edgeworth 2003; Davidovic 2009)¹. This paper is concerned with the ethnography of archaeological fieldwork, which includes the excavation site as well as the archaeological encampment². The recognition that researchers are not just observers of cultural practices, but themselves part of the social setting they are observing, is

now widely acknowledged in ethnography³ (De Neve & Unnithan-Kumar 2006). In archaeology, disciplinary self-awareness and reflexivity are growing, but not yet fully established⁴. The repositioning of the researcher – from objective observer to subjective participant – has been paralleled by the redefinition of the “field” and a reversal of the colonial dynamics of traditional ethnography (Marcus & Fischer 1986). This paper proposes to explore the ethnography of archaeological fieldwork in a Mongolian context, building on two fieldwork seasons (2023, 2024) in the Upper Orkhon Valley, on the border between Arkhangai and Övörkhongai provinces. Fieldwork was conducted within an archaeological dig of the Horsepower project⁵, which excavated the satellite features of a khirigsuur (burial mound) dating to the Late Bronze Age [ca. 1200-1000 BCE], containing horse skulls and hooves. Additionally, the author draws on archaeological field experience cumulated since 2016 as well as an extensive theoretical background regarding archaeo/ethno intersections and Mongolian cultural dynamics. This paper asks what insights can be drawn

¹Other subfields which call for a greater, critical engagement of archaeology with people in the present are community, public, Indigenous and decolonial archaeologies.

²This approach was developed as part of my master’s research conducted in southern Siberia (Conte 2024, unpublished, PDF on request).

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³Here ethnography is defined both as a method and a component of anthropology. The author acknowledges that the classification as ethnography, ethnology and anthropology varies depending on the academic tradition.

⁴A seminal exception is the work conducted in Çatalhöyük (Türkiye), see Hodder 2000 (Ed.) and Atalay 2010.

⁵For further information, see <https://www.horsepowerproject.org/>

from studying archaeological fieldwork in Mongolia ethnographically. In order to contextualise current research, an overview of historic and recent developments in Mongolian archaeology and ethnography is provided. Then, three fieldwork sites are analysed: the road, the excavation site, and the archaeological camp. Extracts from the author's fieldwork journal notes, in italics, are used to reflect on her own position and give the reader a sense of being-in-the-field. Finally, various inside/outside dynamics, questions of access and data, as well as the wider implications of archaeology in Mongolia, will be discussed.

Historic Overview of Archaeology and Ethnography in Mongolia

The viewpoint of this paper is that science is only one form of knowledge production and transmission, defined by its institutionalised set of practices, which should be viewed in historical, social, and political context (Trigger 1984; Shanks & Tilley 1987). Other forms, especially non-written, such as oral history and crafts, equally produce and transmit knowledges – although, historically, from a Western scientific perspective, they have not been granted equal status (Bruchac 2014). Sciences such as archaeology and ethnography, by their very structure, (have) contribute(d) to upholding colonial-imperial dynamics and the myth of modernity (Smith 2012; Latour 1991). Looking back at the 19th century, the disciplines that now study the past and present human societies, respectively, did not have strong disciplinary boundaries. The first (attempts at) scientific studies coming from Europe, including the Russian Empire, combined observations on living peoples, their traditions, and material culture (Golovnev 2018), with the cataloguing, or state-licensed plundering, of ancient burial mounds (Trigger 1989). Despite their contributions to the study of regions such as Siberia and Mongolia, these multidisciplinary scholar-explorers often viewed past and present forms of Other⁶ cultures as belonging to a civilisational level lesser than their own. Furthermore, the role of local collaborators, informants, and fieldworkers – knowledge-bearers themselves – was obscured (Bruchac 2014: 2070-2072). As such, archaeology and ethnography are both a product of their time, and a means through which people and cultures are classified in time.

In order to understand how archaeology and ethnography are conducted in Mongolia today, we must review their historical development. The first archaeological-ethnographic expeditions in Mongolia took place in the Orkhon Valley in the late 19th century, when the Russian imperial scholars Nikolai M.

Yadrintsev [1842-1894] and Vasily V. Radlov [1837-1918] respectively documented⁷, the Mongol imperial capital Karakorum and the Turkic Orkhon inscriptions (Gunchinsuren 2017: 59). The second phase of research was initiated by Soviet scholars, marked notably by the excavation of the Noyon Uul Xiongnu period cemetery [1924-5] by the accidental archaeologist Pyotr K. Kozlov [1863-1935] (Atwood 2004: 19). The historian András Róna-Tas highlights the early 20th-century ethnographic contributions of two Mongolians: the painter Sharav Baldu [1869-1939], who described the societal transformations undergone in early socialist times through his paintings, and the rail worker Lubsangchondan [ca. 1875-1928], who reported on Mongolian societal organisation, pastoralism, law, and religion (Róna-Tas 1972: 6-7). Vasily V. Kozlov collaborated with the Buryat Mongolian scholar Tseveen Jamsrano [1881-1942], founder of the Institute of Sutra and Scripts, which would later become the Academy of Sciences (Returning Heritage 2024; Gunchinsuren 2017: 60). The first generation of Mongolian archaeologists, such as Perlee Khödöö [1911-1982], was trained by Soviet academicians, who then conducted their own expeditions as well as collaborations (Gunchinsuren, 2017). In terms of ethnography, Tseveen Jamsrano, who researched Mongol oral literature and shamanism, and later Sandagsuren Badamkhatan (1934-), should be noted as key figures. The archaeological and ethnographic traditions of the short 20th century were of descriptive character and dominated by socialist questions regarding class and societal stages, but also set the foundation for contemporary research (Atwood 2004: 19; Wright 2021: 434).

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union starting in 1989 and the complex political changes which ensued (Buyandelger 2008), Soviet-funded institutions across former member and satellite states collapsed (Klejn 2012). The Soviet academic void was filled by collaborations with countries west and east of Mongolia – notably the USA, Germany, France, Korea and Japan. Archaeology now includes more heritage-oriented approaches and cultural resource management, including documentation, digitalisation, and preservation (Enkhbat, 2016). In 2004, the former Department of Ethnology was restructured into the Department of Anthropology by Munkh-Erdene Lkhamsuren (Montero 2011), marking a shift towards more critical and theoretical scholarship (Baatarnan Tsetsentsolmon 2023/08/01, lecture communication). Mongolia's institutional landscape is also being reshaped through the opening of the new Chinggis Khaan National Museum in 2022. While “new museums need to be filled” (Maria-Katharina Lang and Baatarnan Tsetsentsolmon,

⁶ The capitalised form “Other” refers to E. Said's work on *Orientalism* (1978).

⁷ “Document” is intentionally chosen instead of “discover”, as local inhabitants usually know the monuments, ruins, old stones which exist in their area before they are first documented by scientists.

2024/11/25, paper presentation), this leaves the National Museum of Mongolia, which formerly hosted archaeological and ethnographic artefacts, with a more purely ethnographic function (Bilguun Erkhemjargal 2024/08/19, pers. communication). Mongolia is also requesting the return of artefacts from Russia and the UK, which were dubiously left in the country during the 20th century (Returning Heritage 2024), notably during excavations (Atwood 2004: 19). Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the collapse of official Russo-Euro-American scientific relations, Mongolia has been hosting many foreign archaeologists and anthropologists who formerly worked in Russia. While in the Soviet tradition, archaeology and ethnography were connected historical sciences (Klejn 2012; Golovnev 2018), now the two disciplines are classified as distinct, dealing with ancient and contemporary societies, respectively. This paper, through methodological reflexivity and the recognition that the (scientific) past conditions the present, proposes to reconnect archaeology and ethnography in Mongolia.

On the Road | *Zam Deer*

Day №1, Tuesday 2024/08/13. After a layover of almost 12 hours in Istanbul, I arrive at Chinggis Khaan International Airport in the morning with [a] 3h30 delay. Turbat bagsh [teacher], Amraa & Bilguun picked me up and we started driving in the direction of Karakorum immediately. Around this time of the day, the traffic jam (I learn: zamyn түгирел) is not too bad, and we get out of Ulaanbaatar relatively quickly. We stop at a canteen for lunch, and later at a tourist camp, where Jan Bemmann's archaeological team is staying. Bemmann and Turbat, the two lead archaeologists, exchange news on their families and work. Bemmann enquires whether we are going back to the same site for more material, upon which Turbat bagsh replies jokingly, yes, on orders of the French geneticist! The final part of the journey, although short in kilometres, feels like an eternity. We have to take the mountain road instead of crossing the river. It is fully dark when we arrive at our camp. We have some tea upon arrival, then I go [and] pass out in my tent.

Where does the field begin? An archaeologist and an anthropologist will give radically different answers to this question. As an archaeologist, people often ask me how we choose where to dig – the general answer is a mixture of survey and historical sources, if they are available. More often than not, archaeologists will not mention when the site they are excavating was actually made known to them by inhabitants of the area. When a site is decided upon, artificial borders with string and nails are set up, limiting the field of enquiry and forming the edge of what will become the trench (Hamilakis 2011: 406). For an

anthropologist, “Where does the field begin?” will elicit a more complex answer. Instead of a fixed location, situated abroad, the ethnographic field can also be comprehended as multiple sites (Marcus 1995) or be at home (Marcus & Fischer 1986). Instead of only studying disenfranchised Others, the geo-politically powerful can become research subjects (Nader 1972). Increasingly, the location of the field coincides with the position of the anthropologist (Günel & Watanabe 2024). Infusing some anthropological thought into archaeological fieldwork, I ask again – where does the field begin? How is it accessed? The field might already begin at the personal or institutional home, where fieldwork material is assembled; or with the organisation of excavation permits, which give official access to the field⁸. It might start with the journey, be it two hours on a regional train or twelve hours on a plane.

Networks & Infrastructure. Here, I have chosen the journey as the starting point, which was accompanied by discussions of Ulaanbaatar's well-known traffic jams and how to avoid them. We did not stop in the city but got on the road immediately, with a longer stop at a fellow archaeologist's team staying in Karakorum in a tourist ger⁹ camp. Archaeologists tend to know who-is-where-when, forming their own social networks across extensive landscapes (Ingold 2000). It is not uncommon for archaeological teams to make use of tourist infrastructure for research purposes. If the field location is more remote, as in our case, the archaeological team has to set up their own camp (Figure 1) – often tents, or in Mongolia, ger. The question of whether it is possible to cross the Orkhon river to access the site, or whether we will have to take the longer road across the mountains, is a recurring one across field seasons – information is exchanged with colleagues and neighbours to assess the situation before every journey (field notes 2023; 2024).

Team & Positionality. The Horsepower team of the 2024 season in the Upper Orkhon Valley was led by two project directors, Tsagaan Turbat on the Mongolian side and Ursula Brosseder on the German side, who were not in the field during the entire excavation. There were also two field directors, who alternated the supervision on site, as well as one additional supervisor. Around 15 students worked on the excavation, some of whom had already participated in the 2023 season. Over these one to two seasons, the students became exceptionally experienced in digging khirigsuur satellite mounds (Ursula Brosseder 2024/09/01, pers. communication). The above exchange between the two archaeologists as to why the Horsepower team was returning to the same location reveals a certain hierarchy amongst the project's scientists: the geneticist, who does not “go to the field”, needs more bones, thus

⁸“Official access” serves to point out that access is granted by the government and not local communities.

⁹Mongolian circular felt dwelling, yurt in Turkic languages.



Figure 1 Aerial view of the site OOR 396 (centre left), the archaeological camp (centre right) and neighbouring ger (below). 46.952285°, 102.509843, elevation 1580m. Map created from Google Earth Pro. © 2025 Airbus

an entire group of archaeologists produces said bones. In 2024, as opposed to 2023, only students were excavating – all the available workers were already employed by the other German-Mongol archaeological team we visited (Tsagaan Turbat 2024/08/14, pers. communication). My position in the Horsepower team was somewhat fluid: archaeologist by training, with a second degree in Mongolian Studies, ethnographer in becoming, somewhere in-between student, supervisor, and specialist of my own niche field. A considerable part of the 2024 field season consisted of finding a rhythm between [I] participant observation with the archaeological team, [II] conversations with neighbouring herders about horses and archaeology, and [III] documenting the satellite features and post-excavation duties (cleaning, sorting, sampling horse bones). This paper primarily reflects on [I] while also drawing on [II] in the discussion to contextualise the findings. As an archaeologist conducting ethnographic work with archaeologists, I possess insider knowledge (Meskell 2005: 85); as a foreign researcher in Mongolia, I have a form of cultural distance, which I simultaneously try to overcome by learning the language and cultural specificities.

On Site | *Maltlagyn Gazart*

Day №6, Tuesday 2023/07/18. Cloudy and some sun, 17° — rain and wind. Morning: some more documentation (a bit at a loss on what to say about another stone pit, to

be honest), some more pictures. Opened many satellites this morning (54, 55?). Learned how to make labels. Afternoon: the weather seemed fine, waited for some clouds to go. Then we took 3D pictures. Diluvium started, we took shelter under the white sheet, and ran to camp. Spent all afternoon de-flooding the office ger and around it.

Day №8, Thursday 2023/07/20. Sunny, 25° degrees. Cleared out to level 2-3 with D. & A. Soil is very wet still after the heavy rains. Clean trench edges are always welcome. More and more gravel, which means we are reaching the pit bottom. Some skulls with different orientations – usually about 110-115°, in the south section found 128°, 140°, 150° (more variation). Took out the skull from “my” pit with help from B. bagsh. It looked badly preserved at first, but was actually pretty complete (left and right mandibulae and maxillae, 4 hooves with phalanges, 1 vertebra). Maxilla is still together in situ. We tried to take out as many skulls as possible in case of rain. Felt good to reach level 2 to 3 with documentation as well.

How does an archaeological excavation site work? Going on an excavation might sound adventurous for some, but in reality, it is mainly routine: waking up early, digging-cleaning-documenting, food breaks, sleep – repeat. The 2023 and 2024 field seasons of the Horsepower project were dedicated to excavating the satellite mounds surrounding a central khirigsuur mound, in order to



Figures 2-4. Satellite №192, Level [0] → Level [1] → Level [3]. Arkhangai/Övörkhngai Province 2024. © Horsepower project.

extract the horse skulls and hooves buried underneath¹⁰. This regular rhythm was punctuated by minor surprises, such as a skull orientation that differed from the average, or sudden changes in weather. For this excavation, the concept of *chaîne opératoire*, which describes the life cycle of objects from their production, (re)use to their discard (Leroi-Gourhan 1965), seems particularly appropriate (Figures 2-4). For each satellite, the earth was removed following layers or levels – from the intact satellite [level 0]; the topsoil, until the mound’s stone structure is fully visible [level 1]; cover stones are then removed to reveal the inner stone fence [level 2]; and then the horse remains at the centre, often in a shallow pit [level 3]¹¹. Each layer had to be documented through textual description (context sheets), camera and drone photographs, as well as GPS points. This process was repeated over and over, with 90 satellites excavated each year in the space of a month. As the excavation progressed and the students became familiar with the workflow, supervision became less and less close – something which the German excavation director referred to as “the excavation running itself”

¹⁰For archaeological research on *khirigsuurs* see, e.g., Allard & Erdenebaatar, 2005.

¹¹ In 2023, we documented layer 0-3; in 2024, due to time constraints, [0], [1] and [3].

(Ursula Brosseder 2024/09/06, pers. communication). Simultaneously, as I had already become familiar with the archaeological workflow in 2023, this allowed me to focus on the excavation ethnographically in 2024.

A Lab in the field. The weather is an essential aspect of digging conditions: if it rains, the soil is harder to dig; excavated features such as pits might fill with water; if artefacts happen to be exposed, they will be damaged. July 2023 was marked by the sudden weather changes: a cold sunny morning might be followed by a hot midday, then a small storm with hail three hours later. The supervision team spent a lot of time inspecting the sky, comparing weather apps, and making almost divinatory prognostics for the day. Such outside factors, which seem anecdotal and are hardly ever mentioned in publications and talks, play a major role during the excavation. Studying archaeology ethnographically differs from typical Science and Technology Studies (Edgeworth 2003; Davidovic 2009), which explore confined, sanitised spaces such as laboratories to reveal the social relations involved in the production of scientific knowledge (Latour & Woolgar, 1979). As discussed in the previous section, the excavation site needs to be artificially delimited, as if cut out from the landscape, to create laboratory-like conditions. Waiting for the clouds to go away on day №6 reveals how, in order to take good documentation photographs, which show the different elements without shade, ideally, it should not be too sunny, nor too cloudy. Otherwise, uniform shade can be created by holding up a large sheet (Figure 5). Tools, without which the excavation could not be conducted, should be made invisible for the picture (Edgeworth 2003: 222). The clean trench edges I refer to on day №8 indicate the limit between natural soil and excavated soil, which are artificially created by the archaeologists. By convention, a trench is usually rectangular, or in our

case, circular, as commanded by the shape of the mound. The gravel indicates the bottom of an archaeological feature, in this case, a pit with a horse skull. While the feature exists – the traces of the actions of a past human – it also has to be revealed by the present archaeologist (Edgeworth 2003). Not only the role of non-human agents – tools, the weather – but also the role of human agents is obscured in the process to make it appear objective. This is almost ironic given that most documentation tasks, such as photographing and measuring, need at least two people and things (Figure 5; Davidovic 2009: 54-55).

Translations. Both Edgeworth’s ethnography of archaeological practice in England (2003) and Davidovic’s ethnography of German-speaking archaeology (2009) refer to the concept of translation between natural and cultural, human and non-human, and object and text, developed by Latour (1999). But what happens when the field (here: the excavation site) is multi-lingual, and linguistic translation is necessary? This is by no means a rare occurrence, given the many international projects that are run across the world, conducted in places where multilingualism is prevalent. The language chosen for communication on site and with the local community, and later interpretation and publication, is bound to reveal certain views, values, and political or ethnic dynamics (Rodriguez 2006: 165-166). On-site, there can be different languages and levels of communication between the

supervision team and students, and within the respective groups. At OOR 396, the supervision team spoke English and Mongolian; amongst the students, and supervisors with them, Mongolian. The German excavation director has, over many seasons in Mongolia, acquired a good level of practical Mongolian understanding, what is going on site and at camp, and communication with the neighbours regarding lost goats. A typical supervisor-to-student request on site is “Can you clean this?” The German excavation director and myself would often use “*jookhon tseverlekh, tii(m)?*” which literally translates as “clean a little, yes?” – entirely understandable, if not the most grammatically accurate. G. Delaplace, reflecting on his early days as an ethnographer in Mongolia, uses the term “ethnographic pidgin” (2023: 150) to refer to his own awkward formulations. I suggest that archaeologists do not only have language forms such as technical vocabulary, which indicates insider knowledge (Davidovic 2011: 57-58), but also use archaeological pidgin, which is specific to a multilingual team in a given place.

Life at Camp | *Arkheologiin Khot Ail*

Day №4, Friday 2024/08/16. I went to warm up in the kitchen ger. Tried to talk to Naraa, the driver. He is originally from Övörkhongai aimag, his parents were herders and had 5 herd animals. Here we are at the



Figure 5. Students holding up a sheet fixed to shovels to create shade. Arkhangai/Övörkhongai Province 2024. © Conte.

border between Arkhangai and Övörkhongai (the river is the border). It seems to be funny to Naraa and Saruul, the cook, that I am sleeping in a tent. I tentatively called our camp “arkheologiin khot ail”, the archaeological encampment. Turbat bagsh says khot ail is at least two ger. Then our neighbour Tumennasan came by and asked how my questions were doing. This year, the camp is further away from the river to avoid flooding (not from the river itself but from rain washing down and accumulating).

What does daily life at the archaeological camp look like? Going to the “kitchen ger” is a good strategy to warm up by the stove, fetch hot water or sweets, and get a sense of what is going on at camp. There, the talented cook Saruul Naranjargal works her magic – creating ever-different meals with the same basic ingredients such as potatoes, meat, and flour. The previous year (2023), the kitchen ger was also the eating space. Saruul has worked with various archaeological expeditions over the last 15 years, many organised by the Mongolian and German excavation directors leading this excavation. On day №4 in the kitchen ger, I also encounter Naraa (whose last name I do not know), the driver, without whom the camp would not function – he knows the area best and is responsible for getting water and groceries as well as newly arriving team members. I tell them it is well-known amongst archaeologists that a good cook and a good driver are the key to a successful expedition. Just like supervisors and students, they are essential members of the archaeological team who are rarely given the credit they deserve in official reports.

The Archaeologists’ ger. Besides the kitchen ger, the archaeological camp consisted of six to eight gers for sleeping (Figure 1) – some of which were rented from the neighbours, and some owned by the archaeological institute. The archaeological ger are shared according to gender, age and status: the directors each have their

own ger with beds; supervisors are more likely to sleep in a less crowded ger, on beds; the “girls” (students) are also afforded more comfort and privacy; meanwhile, “the boys” all sleep together on mattresses on the floor. Who sleeps where is likely to shift during the season, especially amongst the students, to accommodate new arrivals and departures. The office ger is another particularity of the archaeological camp: besides housing the German director or supervisors, the technical equipment and bones are stored there (Figure 6). It is a working space rather than a social space, where the bones are drying near the stove, then cleaned, sampled, and packed away – activities which fall under the category of post-excavation. It is also a space which reveals how the archaeological team adapts to fieldwork conditions – illustrated by the bone-drying rack Naraa built in 2024 (Figure 7). In Ursula’s absence, one of the supervisors moved into her ger, and finally, in both their absences, I moved in. Tents played a more complementary role in the camp, e.g., to temporarily accommodate a younger person. During the 2024 season, for organisational reasons, I started sleeping in a tent – which miraculously withstood the first nights’ storms – and then moved three times between gers. I believe my sleeping in a tent was perceived as somewhat funny by Saruul and Naraa, because tents, although they technically fall in the category of mobile dwelling, do not compare to a “real ger”.

The Herders’ ger. The Mongolian ger, traditionally, is a core element of nomadism, not only as mobile housing and centre of social life, but also as a representation of gender relations, economic organisation, and wider cosmology (Altangerel 2020: 249-250). Despite profound transformations Mongolian pastoralism has undergone during the socialist and “post-socialist” periods, the ger remains the main form of housing in the countryside (*khödöö*) and also appears on the outskirts of cities



Figure 6. Office ger with horse bones drying in recipients and a total station. Arkhangai/Övörkhongai Province 2024. © Conte



Figure 7. Bone-drying rack built by Naraa. Arkhangai/Övörkhongai Province 2024 © Conte

(Taraschewski 2008). But what makes a ger “real”? Ger are closely associated with tradition and authenticity – especially for urban Mongolians and foreigners, the latter of which are often surprised to see TVs, solar panels, and freezers in a “traditional” yurt! Drawing on the time spent in our neighbours’ ger as well as with the students in the archaeological ger, the “dos and don’ts” differed. In an authentic ger, I was taught you should not walk between the wooden beams (*bagana*) or even pass an object in between (field notes, 2024/08/17). Similarly, you should not throw trash in the fire – rude behaviour which can be associated by the older generation, both with city dwellers and foreigners (Altangerel 2020: 252). In the students’ ger, these rules did not apply in the same way – the others would point out how I should do things, but not always follow the rules themselves. Interestingly, the two students who grew up exclusively in the city seemed to be following the rules most keenly, as opposed to one girl who grew up in the countryside, who taught me the rules, but would not always follow them herself (field notes, 2024/08/20).

From Camp to Khot Ail. Even though ger can be quickly disassembled and reassembled by experienced people, they are mostly stationary. Tents, on the other hand, are, in a European sense, used for camping. During the national festivities of Naadam, one can see cars and tents dotting the landscape, set up for a short amount of time. At our archaeological camp, besides individual tents, there were tents used for storing the excavation tools and a large tent for eating. The location of the archaeological camp changed in 2024, to avoid the heavy floods we experienced in 2023. The location of the camp is not only dependent on proximity to the archaeological site, but also on environmental factors, such as closeness to a water source, like *khot ail* are. *Khot ail* refers to a group of at least two ger belonging to related families herding together (Bold 1996). To complement the bulk food bought in the nearest market town, the archaeological team would buy fresh milk products and meat from the people living in nearby ger (Figure 1), and exchange information regarding river crossing. Tumennasan, one of our neighbours, regularly stopped by the kitchen ger to chat with Saruul or share a meal in the food tent, as did other neighbours on occasion. It seems that animals registered the archaeological camp in the same way as a *khot ail*: goats would gnaw and climb on the tents in our absence or in the morning before we awoke; the neighbouring puppy quickly understood our camp was a good source of leftovers – but would never enter any of the ger, as a well-trained dog should. The ethnographer C. Marchina describes similar goat behaviour (2019: 157) and the case of a dog who took up camp with the archaeological team she was staying with (2019: 177). One day, I was sent to the neighbours to inform them about an injured goat close to the excavation site (field notes, 2024/08/29). Watching

your neighbour’s animals is part of good neighbourly relations (Marchina 2019: 152) – whether you are a herder or an archaeologist. While the archaeological camp is clearly not a *khot ail* in its original sense, it is inserted into existing social networks, infrastructures, and the wider landscape, including animals.

Discussion

Inside-Outside. By describing being on the road, working at the site, and living at camp, I have attempted to give the reader a sense of participating in archaeological fieldwork and being-in-the-field. The journey to the site touches upon the personal connections, infrastructures, and legal procedures which need to converge to be able to enter the field. At the excavation site OOR 396, the workflow was routinised due to the excavation targeting multiple, structurally identical features – but despite attempts to replicate a laboratory-like setting (Latour 1999), external conditions such as the weather can interfere. Turning an ethnographic lens onto this archaeological *chaîne opératoire* reveals the dynamics in-between the object-to-text translation (Edgeworth 2003), the role of people and the tools which aid them (Davidovic 2009), and the linguistic peculiarities of the archaeological team. Looking beyond the excavation site, the archaeologists’ camp also constitutes both an archaeological and an ethnographic fieldwork location. By analysing the socio-structural organisation of the archaeological camp, I have attempted to emulate traditional structuralist ethnographic studies. The office ger acts as a location complementary to the excavation site, where post-excavation work is conducted, archaeological knowledge is produced, and important technical material is stored. The office ger is a hierarchical space: it is inhabited by directors and supervisors and only entered by students to drop off equipment or occasionally clean bones. The kitchen ger is open to all: it caters to basic human needs, socialising, and is regularly occupied by the unofficial core of the excavation team – the cook and the driver (for comparison see Randisi, 2024). Excavation sites can act as contact zones between archaeologists and non-archaeologists, e.g., local inhabitants and tourists (Hamilakis 2011: 406). During the 2024 season at OOR 396, we did receive several visits from tourists, but not inhabitants, except on the occasion I explicitly invited one family (field notes, 2024/08/27). At the archaeological camp, neighbouring herders would regularly stop by, eat lunch, or spend time in the kitchen ger, as you would at a non-archaeological ger camp. Potentially, archaeological camps could be better locations for scientific outreach than the archaeological sites themselves, which, in the case of ancient burials, often have a negative connotation for herders.

These observations are, for now, limited to two seasons in one site, and reflect my individual position rather than larger categories such as “the archaeological discipline” or “Mongolian culture”. Other studies have taken under observation excavation and archaeology in the context of their country and language of origin (Edgeworth 2003; Davidovic 2009), more closely aligned with an ethnography of excavation/archaeology at home. As an archaeologist studying other archaeologists in Mongolia, my position was simultaneously that of an insider and an outsider, in my “academic home” but abroad. My task was to render archaeology unfamiliar, looking at practices and people with distance, but Mongolia familiar. By virtue of having studied Mongolian culture and language to a deeper extent than the average foreign archaeologist, I was already somewhat familiarised with phenomena such as pastoralism, the ger, and landscape spirits. This brings me to the discussion of who is a so-called “local” and larger city-countryside dynamics. In some cases, for pastoralists, especially of the older generation, foreigners and urban Mongolians might fall in the same category (Altangerel 2020: 252) – that is, perhaps foreigners are even excused for not knowing better, as it is not their culture. One student, Khaliun, who acted as my translator when visiting the neighbours, told me how much she, as a city-kid, enjoyed being on the excavation because she was experiencing the countryside (field notes, 2024/08/22). Generally, students who grew up in the city would refer me to students from the countryside when I had questions about herding (field notes, 2024/08/22). According to Ingold, “the practice of archaeology is itself a form of dwelling” (2000: 189-190). It would be worth developing whether for Mongolian students’ archaeological excavations strengthen the ties to one’s *nutag* (place of birth, homeland) or create a sense of attachment to the land if you grew up as a city-dweller.

Access & Data. Doing ethnographic work with other scientists or with institutions, in a field that is one’s academic home, considerably impacts the power dynamics between researcher and researched inherent to traditional ethnography. The researched, themselves researchers, are more aware of what is at stake. I did not interview the German director, who expressed that she did not want to be a research subject, and one of the Mongolian supervisors, who expressed reticence. Within the structure of science, the research subjects are able to talk back officially, e.g., in the form of publications – “such feedback changes the nature of ethnography itself, forcing it into a re-evaluation of its own conditions of production” (Edgeworth 2010: 60-61). Concurrently, as an ethnographer of science, working in science, the afterlife of such studies can have a direct influence on one’s career, which might push ethnographers of science to work covertly, publish anonymously or censor oneself.

This begins before or while entering the field with the question of access – finding an archaeological project that is willing to take on an ethnographer. Davidovic describes the initial suspicion archaeologists expressed to her when contacting them for interviews, fearing she would classify their work as problematic (2009: 71). Despite having the same scientific background, trust needs to be built. My perception is that for the members of the archaeological team, both German and Mongolian, my research was equally strange; the students even considered it “not really working”. Over the course of the excavation, as I was easing into my role as an ethnographer, I also gradually became accepted into the “community” I was studying. While the students seemed to care less and less, the German director took increasing interest in my work, encouraging me to write something down or noting that something was indeed, “ethnography of excavation!” (2024/08/26).

Archaeologists sometimes express their doubts towards the nature of ethnographic data, as if orally constituted data are not real data (Davidovic 2009: 71) – a conception we also find in traditional archaeologists’ attitudes towards Indigenous knowledge (Bruchac 2014: 2073). Archaeological data are understood by archaeologists to be tangible, extractible from the archaeological record. By making the implicit processes of archaeological knowledge production explicit, archaeologists lose their absolute authority over the past (Hamilakis 1999). In the course of my own research – and the very writing of this text – the question of data constantly reappeared. What data are produced by ethnographies of archaeology, and what archaeological data are also ethnographic? Nader suggests that anthropologists, when studying “up” (institutions, agencies, bodies of law, etc.), also draw on official reports (1972: 306-307). In ethnographies of archaeology, researchers have turned towards field reports and diaries (Wilmore 2006). As in “traditional” ethnography, much information comes from informal conversations – in archaeological terms, “off-site” conversations at camp or in the car. Are such anecdotal data valid sources? If traditional ethnography follows the lines of “what people say, what people do, and what people say they do”, the ethnography of archaeology equally needs to scrutinise the statements of the researched researchers to discern their personal positions from larger tendencies within the discipline.

Pastoral & Political landscapes. The “*arkheologiin khot ail*” did not exist in a vacuum – it was inserted into existing social networks and infrastructures created by archaeologists and herders. In the sense of neighbourly relations, the archaeological team rented ger, purchased animal products, and returned injured animals. But how should archaeological teams engage with so-called local communities, going beyond neighbourly relations?

Especially in regard to Mongolia's archaeological boom (post-1990s and post-2022), and the growing city-countryside divide, both foreign and Mongolian archaeologists need to conduct research that, while investigating the material past, is relevant to people in the present (Honeychurch 2010). Discussing the economic potential of archaeology in Mongolia, Lisa Randisi asks why members of local communities are not commonly hired as excavation staff (2016, unpublished). Archaeological excavations usually take place between late May and early September – a temporal restriction dictated by weather and the university calendar. Simultaneously, it is the busiest season for herders, who tend to care for young animals and prepare for the cold season. Given the already pressing lack of pastoral labour in the countryside, as city life overall becomes more attractive to young people, should archaeological teams be employing local workers? Furthermore, given the increasing effect of climate change, resulting in less abundant pastures and water, archaeological projects need to account for their potential ecological impact.

On an economic, ecological, and spiritual level, the wider implications of the act of digging itself should also be considered (Tsetsentsolmon & Lang, this issue). In 2024, mining generated 30% of Mongolia's GDP (Renchindulam 2025). Mining companies are increasingly becoming involved in the conservation of tangible and intangible heritage (Oyu Tolgoi 2015), while also destroying pastures, polluting water and air, and disturbing the *gazriin ezen*, the spirits which inhabit the land. How does archaeology differ from mining? Despite the general Buddhist rule regarding the non-disturbance of the land, exceptions can be made, e.g., to plant a hitching post. The reactions towards archaeological excavations vary greatly depending on the region, the local community, family and individual perception, and ethnic affiliation. Archaeologists often lack an understanding of traditional practices. While science and education might make digging the ground acceptable, who is benefiting from the holes archaeologists make? By comparison, subsistence looting – the unsystematic and undocumented excavation of ancient graves to extract valuable items – is illegal. But why would local people be less entitled to gifts of the land than scientists (Hollowell 2006)?

In Mongolia, it is unlikely that archaeological excavations – and mining – will stop altogether. It is the responsibility of archaeologists to respect local concerns instead of dismissing them as superstitions. Here, the ethnography-archaeology interface comes into play, as ethnography can help understand how people's lifeworlds function, which in turn can help archaeologists to adapt their research practices (Castañeda 2008). But with the recognition of archaeology's responsibility towards communities also comes the recognition that

“communities” are composed of groups and individuals with differing views and interests, partially determined by age, gender, ethnic background, and occupation (Meskell 2005). In ethnography, the ethical consensus is that as a researcher, you should not only take – or mine – information but also give back. The Indigenous scholar K. TallBear has developed an ethical/political research position of standing with (2014), which calls for researchers to be actively engaged in, and fight against, the issues that affect the community they are working with. While ethnography has a direct impact on how societies are presently depicted, archaeology, via excavation, represents a physical intrusion into the land. Ethical archaeological practice in spirited landscapes, when taking from the land (artefacts, knowledge), not only needs to give back (outcomes of research, acknowledgements), but also stand with the land (mobilisation against mining, climate change mitigation).

Conclusion

Although at their inception, ethnography and archaeology had weak disciplinary boundaries, they have evolved into sciences that view themselves as studying the present and the past, respectively. Ethnographers have increasingly acknowledged their own role within larger societal dynamics via discussions of positionality, reflexivity, and the notion of field. Archaeologists, although already invested in how the archaeological past is used for present political purposes, are beginning to research how they are themselves participants in the present. This ethnography of archaeological fieldwork narrates the process of entering the field, working at the archaeological site OOR 396, and living in the archaeological camp of the Horsepower project. Archaeologists are, in multiple ways, actors of the present – as people producing archaeological knowledge through object-to-text translation, and as temporary inhabitants of a landscape otherwise inhabited by herders, animals, and spirits. From my own position as an archaeologist-turned-ethnographer, and as a foreign student of Mongolian culture, I have reflected on the dynamics of being both an insider and an outsider. Studying fellow archaeologists also highlighted problematic aspects inherent to traditional ethnography, namely, how the field is accessed and who has power over the ethnographic data. Finally, the potential impact of archaeological projects on local economies and the parallels between excavation and mining were questioned. Looking in and out of the excavation site, and between disciplines, this paper calls for the growing field of archaeology in Mongolia to make valuable contributions to people's lives in the present.

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