

Paradise Lost

Gold Coins from the Underworld

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Abstract: In 2011, the Mongolian and Kazakhstan joint expedition, dates approximately to the seventh century (A.D. 650–670), excavated a tomb of Shoroon Bumbagar, decorated with a wall painting, in Bayannuur sum of Bulgan province. The structure of the Shoroon Bumbagar tomb, murals and burial objects clearly exhibit tastes of nomads who resided along the Silk Roads and the Steppe Route. Comparing to funerary art traditions in East Asia such as Chinese and Koguryo mural tombs, it represents nomadic culture as well as the broad interactions from Byzantine Empire to China. With wall paintings and burial objects, this newly excavated mural tomb in Mongolia reveals significant information about the cultural exchanges between nomads and settled people along the Silk Roads. The burial objects excavated from the tomb include male and female figurines, either standing or riding on a horse, two tomb guardian figures, two tomb guardian animal figures, animal figurines, gold and bronze objects, fragments of a golden floral crown ornament, and Byzantine coins of the Emperor Heraclius, dated around the 630s. It is certain that the remarkable new findings from the tomb would bring a new perspective in the study of the history of tombs and demonstrates cultural exchanges and transmissions of the funerary arts of Asia along the Silk Roads.

Keywords: Shoroon bumbagar tombs, Byzantine gold coins, Sassanid silver coins, imitations

Introduction

Researchers have paid great attention to the tomb discovered in 2011 at a place called Shoroon Bumbagar, on the territory of Bayannuur sum of Bulgan aimag, Mongolia. The tomb with murals, specific ritual settings, and rich artefacts has

been found without any damage. As this type of tomb has never been discovered before in Mongolia, it is necessary to comprehensively study all its artefacts. In particular, we need to study coins, important artefacts of the ancient east-west social and cultural relations. It has a great importance for a historical study of ancient states that established their statehood on the territory of Mongolia. A total of 41 gold and silver coins were discovered in the tomb, information on which is given below.

Even though we have not identified who was buried at this tomb, all the structure and composition of the burial place, the funeral custom and other valuable and unusual findings discovered from the burial place prove that they were among the top-ranking aristocrats of the time. Considering all its aspects, we can say in advance that this tomb was built in the second half of the 7th century.¹

The gold coins, which could have originated in the west, were found over the course of the excavation at the Shoroon Bumbagar site of Bayannuur sum. Not only have these findings attracted much interest from researchers, but they are also worthily considered valuable and unique artefacts for historical study. The gold coins, unearthed in the tomb's main chamber, have unique images on them. Furthermore, these types of coin have been found for the first time in Mongolia. The tomb consists of three chambers with the deceased buried in the main one. The wooden coffin has three layers of which the inner one had a silk bag containing the ashes of the deceased. The box containing ashes had gold and silver coins, accessories wrapped in silk at the bottom. In the archaeological excavations, 41 coins have been discovered which are imitations of Byzantine Empire gold coins as well as the imitation of Sassanid silver coins of Persia (“黄金”仿制品). There are 37 gold and four silver coins.²

- 1 Erdenebold, L., Preliminary “Excavation Finding from Shoroon Bumbagar Ulaan kherem Mongolia,” in *Interaction in the Himalayas and Central Asia: Processes of Transfer, Translation and Transformation in Art, Archaeology, Religion and Polity*, Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2017: 275-311; Erdenebold, L., “Uighuryn Shoroon bumbagaryn dursgal ba torgony zam,” [Uighur Shoroon Bumbagar Monuments and Silk Road], In *Nomads of the Great Steppe and Silk Road*, 2015.
- 2 Ochir, A., Erdenebold, L., Karjubai, and Jantegin, *Ertnii nuudelchdiin bunkhant bulshnii sudalгаа* [Research on Mounds of Ancient Nomads], Ulaanbaatar, Soyombo Printing, 2015.

After studying the gold coins found at the tomb, the Chinese researcher Guo Yunyan (郭雲艷) has classified them into the three following groups:

- Coins imitating the background design of Sassanid silver coins of Persia
- Coins imitating the Byzantine Solidus gold coins as well as imitations of the Byzantine style of coin
- Damaged coins which are hard to classify.

Furthermore, the coins in the Byzantine style and their imitations were classified into three further groups as follows:

- Semissis imitation of Byzantine gold coins
- Solidus imitation of Byzantine gold coins
- Imitations of a Byzantine Solidus or coin types of Solidus.

Among the gold coins discovered at Bayannuur sum, there are imitations of the Byzantine Solidus and Solidus coin-types which are relatively thick and have images on both sides.

If we sort all coins discovered in the tomb we can see as follows:

- ten coins that imitate the background of silver coins of the Sassanid Empire of Persia.
- four coins that imitate the Semissis Byzantine gold coin and the front of the Tremissis from the 6th-7th centuries.
- 17 coins that imitate the front of the 6th-7th-century Byzantine Solidus.
- four coins that have imitate the Solidus.
- nine small gold fragments (小金片) in their original form whose variety is difficult to identify. Generally, these fragments are 16-20mm in diameter and are the same shape and size as the Byzantine Solidus and Semissis.

It is clear that the coins were valued, as they were used as a personal adornment and for a symbolic rather than commercial purpose. Most of them have buckles for hanging objects but others have small holes, which were probably been used for nailing onto something or for hanging from a thread.³

3 郭雲艷,「論蒙古國巴彥諾爾突厥壁畫墓所出金銀幣的形制特征」,『草原文物』,2016年第1期。



Fig. 1 The Tomb of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold

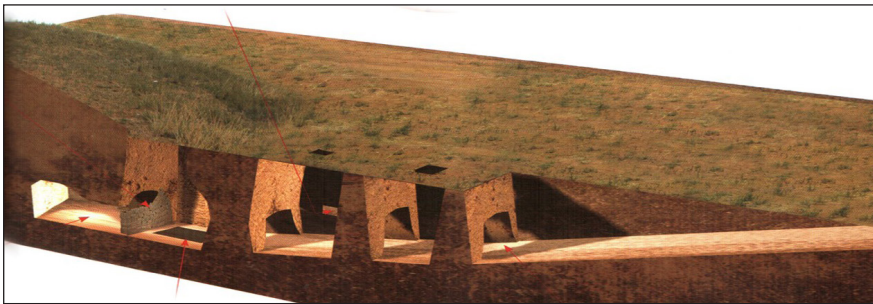


Fig. 2 The Tomb Structure of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 3 The entrance passage of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 4 Gold coins were found for the first time in the tomb. Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 5 Gold coin of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 6 Gold coins of the Sassanid Empire of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 7 Coin engraved with the image of Heraclius Solidus of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 8 Coin engraved with the image of Semissis and Tremissis of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 9 Coin engraved with the image of Phocas of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold



Fig. 10 Coin engraved with the image of human of Shoroon Bumbagar, Bayannuur sum, Bulgan province, 2011 © L.Erdenebold

Imitations of gold coins discovered at Bayannuur sum (sub-district) are usually thin. They imitate the front of a Byzantine gold coin and the reverse of a silver coin of the Sassanid Empire. There are many imitation gold coins with a portrait of Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor (610–641) on the front. An imitation coin with the Heraclius' portrait has two portraits of kings: a bigger one on the left and a smaller one on the right.

The ten intimation coins with the image of Heraclius imitate the original gold coin of Heraclius. However, the location of the two portraits is reversed, with a smaller one on the left and the bigger one on the right. This means that they depicted images in a different way than was conventional, which was typically to display the obverse to the left (or above) and the reverse to the right (or below). In contrast, the gold coin of Heraclius found in China had the larger image on the left.

The coin classified as a gold coin of Heraclius⁴ has different images on either side and on the front ring two persons' images are depicted at the top. On the front, there are full-face images of two kings but an image of the king on the left is larger. They show the king's crown with decorations on both sides. There is a cross on the crown and even a cross is shown between the two persons. It has letters on both sides but they are too small to read. At the back, there is a cross above the four stars and with the inscription "CONOB" as well as the inscriptions "VICTORIAAVIUI" on the left and right sides. According to the mass, design and form, the coin has special features of a Solidus related to the early period of a gold coin from Heraclius I's reign.

Another interesting coin found in the tomb is a gold coin with a full-face image of King Phocas. He is wearing a crown with a on the upper part on both sides. A cross is also shown on the top of the crown and the king is holding a ball-shaped item in his right hand. The coin has a buckle on the right side designed to set something in. The inscription "CAS — PEAPA VCT" is written on the front. On the reverse there is a cross above the four stars and below it the inscription "COHO". It has the inscription "B9 V?-NAIPO>THC" on both sides. It is known that the inscription

4 The coin is registered with numbers of XXM2012.5.142 and with a diameter of 20.44mm, thickness is 0.79mm, and the mass of 4,701grams.

“VICTORI –AVCCC” had appeared on the reverse of Byzantine Solidus coins since the 4th century.

The inscription at the back of the gold coin is extraordinary and has never been seen on a Byzantine coin. As we know, these two kinds of image did not appear together on a Byzantine Solidus. Although the image on the back was not spread during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Phocas (602–610), this type of method was used to imitate a Byzantine Solidus. Two images from different periods depicted together on an object shows us a real example of imitation.

Some researchers consider that these coins are related to imitations of a Semmissis or Tremissis in relation to observational evidence on form and design of the four-piece gold coin discovered at the tomb of Bayannuur sum.⁵ As for imitations of a Semmissis and a Tremissis among the Byzantine coins, there is no significant difference in its shape and design and these coins have the same profiles of a king. The shape and design of the Solidus at the core of the Byzantine monetary system had always changed. The king’s right-facing profile was depicted on the front of a coin from the fifth century. However, on early Byzantine gold coins of the 6th–7th centuries the king’s head was full face rather than in profile, and later in the middle of the 7th century the king was shown either alone or with somebody else. While form and design of the Solidus always changed, the Semmissis and Tremissis remained unchanged for a long time, i. e. from the beginning to the end, the profile depiction of a king was unchanged.

We think that some coins⁶ can be classified as Byzantine Semmissis. They produced the coin by piercing one side of it with a hummer (單面打壓). On the edge we can see a beaded pattern (聯珠式) and an upper part of the king’s portrait is in profile. He has a thick moustache and is wearing a crown and a long coat. The inscription around his head is illegible. From the shape and design of this coin, it seems that

5 郭雲艷, 「論蒙古國巴彥諾爾突厥壁畫墓所出金銀幣的形制特征」, 『草原文物』, 2016年第1期。

6 The coins registered with numbers XXM2012.5.122 (Diameter: 20.05-20.11mm, width: 0.08mm, weight: 0.138g); XXM2012.5.123 (diameter: 18.33mm, width: 0.14mm, weight: 0.171g); XXM2012.5.124 (diameter: 16.45-18.43mm, width: 0.08mm, weight: 0.115g); and XXM2012.5.127 (diameter: 18.2mm, width: 0.09mm, weight: 0.125g)

it is either an imitation of a Byzantine Semissis or of a Tremissis. At the centre of the gold coins, there are three to seven holes which were probably used for sewing onto knitted goods. It is shown that this kind of coin use was different from other gold coins. Particularly, an image at the front of a gold coin classified as a Semissis is hard to differentiate from a Byzantine gold coin or its imitation.⁷

The average weight of original gold coins of Byzantine discovered in China is 3.15 g while an imitation coin is at least 0.8 g and not less 1 g. These kinds of gold coins usually have one to four holes.

Here some examples of gold coins discovered in China are similar to the Byzantine gold coins found at the tomb in the Bayannuur sub-district. One piece of an imitation Heraclius gold coin was found in the second grave of Tomuni village in the western region of Xiani, one piece from Hezhiya village in southern region of Xian (related to the middle period of the XIII century), and one piece from a Tang dynasty grave (朝陽雙塔區唐墓에서) in the Shuanta region of Chaoyan city.

Imitations of Byzantine gold coins found in a graveyard of Badamu at Turfan, a graveyard of Munar, and a Sogdian graveyard of Gousi of Zhiohe have similar shapes and designs to gold coins from the tomb in Bayannuur sub-district. We therefore consider that imitations of Byzantine gold coins are likely to be used first among the Sogdians and even these kinds of gold coins may have been made by Sogdians. It is extraordinary that forty pieces of the Byzantine gold coins that were usually found in the grave of Sogdians only in one piece were buried at the same time in the tomb in Bayannuur *sum*. It is very rare to find a large quantity of Byzantine gold coins in one grave. There was one case to find five gold coins in northern Zhou in a Dyani Hun grave (北周田弘墓). Moreover, a large quantity of original Byzantine gold coins was found at once at Kubrat of Pereshpino in Ukraine. They consist of gold coins made during the reigns of Byzantine emperors such as Heraclius, his son (637–638) and Constans II (642–646).⁸

7 Saran Solongo, Ayuadai Ochir, *Chronology of Mural Paintings and Terracotta Figurines from a Royal at Ulaan kherem in Shoroon Bumbagar* (Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, 2016).

8 Vera Zaleskaya ed., *The Treasures of Khan Kubrat* (Saint Petersburg: The State Hermitage, 1997), 94-99.

Kubrat was the ruler of the Bulgars who established the Old Great Bulgaria. It is clear that a number of Byzantine gold coins were used as jewellery or to put in a grave, as we have seen from relations of the Byzantine Heraclius with the Avars and the Turks. However, it has a slightly different meaning from the funeral ritual of the Sogdians. Because the Sogdians only placed one coin in a grave, as payment to ferry the soul of the deceased to the next world.

Researchers assume that the imitation of Byzantine gold coins related to the 7th century found at a Sogdian grave in Turfan was probably made in Sogdian territory. As reported by Naymark on his study of a Sogdian grave related to the 6th and 7th centuries, a large quantity of Byzantine gold coins can be found in Sogdian territory, most of them one mm thick and weighing less than a gram. A few gold coins were found in a grave but others were discovered at a church offering (神廟) or at a place where people lived. We also consider that Sogdians not only used gold coins for monetary purposes but also as a symbol of wealth, prestige and power.⁹

The Byzantine gold coins and their imitations spread through China because of socio-economic, political, and cultural relations between the Byzantine, Western Turkic, and Sassanid Empires, as reported by Lin Yin (林英) in her research.

Yurii A. Prokopenko established that the Byzantine gold coin was used for the first time in this region in the early the 5–6th centuries. Imitations of Byzantine gold coins may probably have been produced in that region, as he reported in his study of the imitation of a Byzantine gold coin found in the territory where Kazakhs lived in the 5th-9th centuries. A lot of imitation golden coins related to the Byzantine Heraclius, Heraclius Constantine /613–625/, Constans and Constantine II /613–625/ were discovered in this region. We think that the Kazakhs imitated a Byzantine gold coin for war compensation (the Byzantine-Turkish war), a vivid appreciation showing the rank of a deceased person or as a charm. Moreover, it can be seen that they not only misspelled the inscription on a Byzantine gold coin but also, they

9 Aleksandr Naymark, *Sogdiana, Its Christians and Byzantium: A Study of Artistic and Cultural Connections in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages* (Ph. D. Dissertation. Bloomington: Indiana University, 2001).

engraved the Runic alphabet of Eurasia and mentioned its holder.¹⁰ Thus, like the Sogdians and Kazakhs, Tele Uyghurs have the same symbol. It is possible that a great number of imitation Byzantine gold coins could be buried in a grave.

Conclusion

Byzantine gold coins have not previously been found in well-known Turkic monuments such as the ritual places of Kultegin and Bilge Khan, the graveyard of ordinary people, or the Turkic grave of Ashina Chung in China. Hence this means that the tomb in the Bayannuur *sum* where Byzantine gold coins were buried is not associated with Turks. It is quite possible that it belongs to another ethnic group, i. e. the Tele tribe. They apparently used imitation Byzantine gold coins with many holes as costume jewellery or charms. Like a gold decoration with human and animal images, they were used in a symbolic context too.

The gold coins found in the territory of present-day China have varied in numbers and designs buried in the tomb. This shows that the nomads' introduction, distribution, access, methods of use, and symbolic meanings of the Eastern Roman coins are different from those in China. Perhaps it shows that there was a real relationship between the Sassanid of the Tele and the Eastern Roman Empire through political and trade ties in that period.

As for the distribution of Byzantine gold coins, we have taken into consideration the date for mintmarks, the period of their introduction into Central Asia and China and their usage as money, and the period of their use as jewellery. However, these are not important factors to determine the historical age of a tomb. The evidence shows that we can identify the owner's occupation and their funeral ritual at this tomb where gold coins were buried with the deceased.

Gold Heraclius coins have been discovered in remote areas such as Sichuan, Liaoning, and Chaoyang, which demonstrates that they had spread eastwards, i.e. to the territory of Liaoning county, near present-day Kogurio, far from ancient

10 Yuriy A. Prokopenko, "Byzantine coins of the 5th-9th century and their imitations in the Central and Eastern Ciscaucasus", *Moravia Magna*, vol. V. (2008).

tribes with of tradition of burying of the deceased accompanied by gold coins. It is possible that they conducted political, military and commercial activities.

As a result of analyzing the artefacts and plaster of murals in the tomb at Bayannuur sum, it is estimated between 670±70; therefore, the tomb is supposed to date from 675.

Although it does not give us much help in determining the age of the tomb, district by the peculiarity of the spread of Byzantine gold coins, we consider that it gives us an opportunity to ascertain cultural relations in the above-mentioned territories along the road of the west-east relations in comparing it with tombs of other places with similar findings.

The findings of over 40 Byzantine gold coins from the tomb in the Bayannuur sum are different from those found in China in terms of the numbers, methods and technology, and the accompanying ritual.

With regard to the tomb with the imitation Byzantine gold coin, we should take account of issues such as artefacts expressing a nomadic culture and the rank of the tomb's owner, the way in which gold coins spread in the region, what they were used for and the place they were minted. It is possible to restore and clarify west-east cultural relations more clearly. Furthermore, if we conduct complex research not only on the Byzantine gold coins but also on the funeral ritual at the tomb in the Bayannuur sub-district and the variety of accompanying artefacts and their location, it may be possible to identify the owner of the Bayannuur tomb, who, like the culture he represented, is still unknown.

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