

Sometimes SSARG's most distant members end up going just a little bit further to do their archaeology.

Part of summer 2014, for me, was spent in the Altai mountains of far Western Mongolia. Accompanying an international team lead by Jean-Luc Houle (Western Kentucky University), I joined them on a walk over survey at altitude and on a grand scale in Tsagaan Asгаа (valley of white rocks).

Teams were spread out, each person 20m apart, and set off in a straight-line for a few kilometres at a time criss-crossing the valley, recording stone structures as well as trying to collect the rare fragments of lithic tools and pottery left on the surface. This was like no field walking I had done before.

Previous archaeology of the wider region has tended to focus on funerary and monumental structures and it was important to record both the large and small stone mounds, circles and square 'boxes' to look at the areas of the valley where people had been active and regularly moving through. The main aim was to locate possible Bronze and Iron Age habitation sites.

After a week of walking up and down the valley a very likely looking ring of stones with entrance and possible hearth was identified in one of the more sheltered valley draws a few kilometres from the project's camp. All went well and we await the interpretation of the structure soon but I will never complain about a lack of finds on a SSARG site again; these people left almost nothing behind.



Here are the students and staff having a well earned break from survey. When the sun is out, it's not a bad place to work.

However, one of the main parts of the project I was involved with was a series of ethnographic interviews with the local nomadic herders living in the valley now. Many were in the process of moving from their spring camps in the very valley draws where we found our ancient habitation sites, up to the high mountain pastures and in most cases they left their wooden huts and animal shelters behind; living in the local versions of gers (yurts) they had a great home from home bringing everything else with them, including the stove and the cat - tied up with a bit of string.

We were particularly asking questions about their herds, hunting and fuel use. When you live in a mountainous steppe region where there are so few trees, fuel generally means burning animal dung (as an archaeobotanist this can be interesting as the seeds of plants animals eat have the potential to be preserved by carbonisation when the dung is burnt, giving information on both the economy and the environment) and it is surprisingly smell-free being mostly compacted grass.

Even though the Kazakh people of the region only moved in from Kazakhstan in the 19th century, the aim was to gather information from the herders to inform archaeological interpretations of people that appear to have lived in a very similar way for millennia.



A ger set up at a summer campsite complete with animal pen and the four post cheese drying rack just outside, have you seen this pattern of posts in excavations like South Cadbury?

Horses are traditionally essential in Mongolia, think Genghis and his mounted hordes riding into China, but increasingly a motorbike seems to do the same job (and horse dung burns too fast to be a useful household fuel!).



That's no giant sheep she's milking but a verified yak, the producers of the undoubted best fuel for when unexpected guests arrive at your ger and you need to make very weak salty tea in a hurry (the milk goes into the tea too). Ethnoarchaeology requires an awful lot of tea drinking just like down on the farm; well it would be rude to say no.

And last but not least, some very artistically shot piles of pooh drying for fuel



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