Late Prehistoric Mounds, Old Turkic Sources and Materiality, and Persistent Funerary Geographies in Mongolia: a Comparative Analysis

Cecilia Dal Zovo

Abstract
The archaeological, historical, and sacred landscape of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain, located in the Gobi-Altai mountain range, has been studied as part of an Italian-Spanish-Mongolian international project that aimed to investigate this little-known area of Southern Mongolia. In this paper, the persistent features of the local Late Prehistoric (2nd and 1st millennia BC) funerary geography are illustrated in the light of the possible connection with architectonic, spatial, and cosmological elements of Old Turkic materiality and sources (1st millennium AD). Accordingly, a description of Late Prehistoric and Old Turkic archaeological sites documented on the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain is provided and comparatively discussed. In particular, the relation of spatial proximity between Late Prehistoric mounds and Old Turkic features is explored. The archaeological record is also analysed according to the information provided by Old Turkic inscriptions, which represent the oldest written sources available in Mongolia. In this comparative perspective, an archaic correspondence between movement, funerary rituals, and certain sacred places, such as mountain heights, hilltops, and river terraces seems to emerge both for
Late Prehistoric burials as well as Old Turkic funerary sites. As a result, the *longue durée* of the local sacred and funerary geographies is identified as a potentially essential aspect of the monumental landscape of the Ikhd Bogd Uul Mountain.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Ikhd Bogd Uul Mountain, an outstanding massif (3957 m) of the Eastern Altai range, in the region of Bayankhongor, Southern Mongolia, became the focus of an interdisciplinary project that incorporated both international cooperation and scientific research. The project was realised thanks to an agreement between the Institute of Heritage Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council (Incipit-CSIC, Santiago de Compostela) and the Institute of Applied Geology of the Italian National Research Council (Irpi-CNR, Padova). Irpi-CNR had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Institute of Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Science and also worked in close collaboration with the Mongolian Fund for the Empowerment of Rural Women (FERW). The research activity of the author of this paper was included into this broad geo-archaeological project and international cooperation programme under the direction, respectively, of Bruno Marcolongo and Giovanna Fuggetta, and in collaboration with the local community of Bogd.¹

In particular, the author of this paper carried out four fieldworks in the heart of the Ikhd Bogd Uul Mountain, recording archaeological and anthropological data, thanks to the support of local experts, guides, and herders. Many features of the local tangible and intangible cultural heritage were accordingly investigated in the following years.²

II. RESEARCH, CONTEXT, AND AIMS

The research encompassed archaeological investigation and survey, mapping and spatial analysis, as well as elements of historical, linguistic, and anthropological analysis. In this way, the material

¹ Fuggetta 2006; Marcolongo 2005.
² Dal Zovo and Marcolongo 2012.
and immaterial features related to the area of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain were combined into an original database. The database incorporated the mapping and documentation of pastoral paths and campsites, prehistoric mounds, rock art sites, Buddhist toponyms and altars, and traditional Mongolian obo cairns. All these features are distributed across an arid mountainous area of more than 6400 km². They belong to a wide chronological spectrum that spans from the 2nd millennium BC to present times.³

The research project originally aimed to shed light on the monumental Late Prehistoric funerary record of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain, which can be compared to the burial features documented elsewhere in Mongolia and neighbouring regions of Central Eurasia.⁴ In the research area, 1181 Late Prehistoric funerary mounds have been documented through field surveys and the analysis of satellite imagery, but the figure would probably increase in the event of further extensive fieldwork. The historical and archaeological interpretation of such wide archaeological information certainly requires further study at a local and regional level, as well as in terms of additional archaeological research in Mongolia. However, this paper is aimed at showing that a full understanding of the variegated elements of the material culture of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain cannot be reached without a broad, long-term, and comparative perspective. Here, I propose to explore the Late Prehistoric funerary traditions and cosmology in relation to the information of the Old Turkic inscriptions that have been produced around the second half of the 1st millennium AD and thus represent the earliest written sources of Mongolia.⁵

III. MONUMENTAL FUNERARY LANDSCAPES IN LATE PREHISTORY

The Late Prehistoric funerary geographies of Mongolia display a marked monumentality that can be recognised in the architec-

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⁵ Golden 1993; Osawa 2012; Ragagnin 2013; Zieme 2005.
tecture, emplacement, and even the exceptional conservation of the local materiality. Researchers have particularly focused on mounds locally known as *khirigsuur*. These funerary features are generally individual burials, which are isolated or, most often, grouped in small or large clusters. They vary in dimension and architectonical characteristics, from small cairns to impressive barrows of earth and stones that probably involved great collective construction efforts. This monumental funerary tradition apparently stretched over a thousand years, from the Mongolian Late and Final Bronze Age (1400–700 BC) to the end of the Iron Age (750–250 BC), although it probably persisted in various forms also in the Xiongnu epoch and in the following Turkic period.

The funerary mounds documented on the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain are likely to belong to this chronological frame. Other Late Prehistoric features, such as slab tombs and rock art engravings have been documented in the area.

As elsewhere in Mongolia, the Late Bronze Age *khirigsuur* burials documented on the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain have a central mound that is normally surrounded by a circular or square stone fence. Satellite features, such as engraved *stelae*, locally known as Deer Stones, and cairns, often containing burned remains of horses and other animals, can be documented at the most monumental sites.

In Mongolian archaeology, smaller funerary mounds with absent or simple stone fences and scanty satellite features are not usually called *khirigsuur*. They are normally attributed to a later chronological phase, possibly the Late Iron Age or the Turkic period, although typological classification can often be problematic.

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7 Littleton et alii 2012; Wright 2014.
8 This chronology is provided after the unified and updated chronological table for Mongolian archaeological periods elaborated by Honeychurch (2015, 112).
9 Turbat 2011.
10 Dal Zovo 2016.
11 Fitzhugh 2009; Wright 2007; Wright 2014.
12 Honeychurch 2015; Turbat 2011.
It is worth noting that “not-khirisuur mounds” still seem to display a long-term cohesion of architec tonic and formal elements, as well as patterns of localisation and funerary practices, such as the presence of horse bones, which has been consistently documented in the Late Iron Age and in the Turkic burials.  

IV. LONGUE DURÉE: FROM THE BRONZE AGE TO THE TURKIC PERIOD

In analysing the outstanding landscape of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain, one may equally recognise elements of a significant long-term monumental and ritual persistence apparently encompassing both material and immaterial features over time. As we will see in detail in the following paragraphs, this seems to be the case, for instance, of Puntsag Oboo (See Figs. 1 and 2). The hilltop site overlooks a mountain pass that is still highly relevant for present pastoral mobility in the high-pasture area of the mountain. On the top of Pun tsag Oboo hill (2550 m), the Late Prehistoric khirisuur mound coexists with a linear arrangement of standing stones that is probably ascribable to a Turkic funerary tradition. The place name of Pun tsag Oboo apparently incorporates elements of a later Buddhist phase and the traditional Mongolian folklore.

The history of this site, as I will further argue, seems to illustrate a long-term adaptation of ancient cosmologies and rituals.

However, in the archaeology of Mongolia, articulation of the persistent monumental and funerary phenomena represents an intriguing but elusive matter, especially in terms of analysing changing rituality and symbolism over time. In fact, while the materiality of Late Prehistoric sites has been carefully investigated, the ancient cosmologies that are possibly associated with the funerary mounds, as well as their potentially persistent value in the local tradition, have received far less attention. Yet, investigating long-term funerary landscapes, mythologies, and beliefs is equally sig-

13 Brosseder and Miller 2011; Crubézy et alii 1996.
14 Otsawa 2011; Ramsted et alii, 1958.
15 Dal Zovo 2016.
16 Dal Zovo and González García 2018.
17 Tatár 1976; Evan and Humphrey 2003.
significant in order to understand past and present worldviews and
rituality.\textsuperscript{19} In this sense, it is worth noting how the persistent reinter-
pretation of ancient funerary materiality, cosmology, and sacred geography tends to condition the local narratives and the
creation of cultural heritage and identity over time.\textsuperscript{20}

In the research area of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain, ancient
monumental funerary sites appear entangled in the local sacred
geography, while the mountain as a whole is regarded as sacred.\textsuperscript{21} It
is probably not by chance, then, that the Ikh Bogd Uul has been
recently declared a Natural Regional Park.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, the transfor-
mation of sacred mountains into natural parks has a long history
in the Mongolian culture.\textsuperscript{23} Interestingly, the Ikh Bogd Uul is par-
ticularly venerated by locals in relation to its peculiar flat moun-
taintop,\textsuperscript{24} which seems to be a characteristic attribute of holy
mountains in the Turkic-Mongolian tradition.\textsuperscript{25}

In this frame, I think that a trans-chronological analysis of the
Ikh Bogd Uul landscape may contribute to a broadened under-
standing of the relevance of the Turkic interface documented in
Mongolia and its role in shaping an original adaptation and active
reinterpretation of more ancient materiality, rituals, and cosmo-
lologies. As Meskell\textsuperscript{26} suggests, in historical and archaeological
research it is important to consider also the idea of the past in the
past. It seems likely that the construction of Bronze and Iron Age
monumental funerary sites, as well as smaller burial mounds, had
a considerable impact on the local sacred and funerary geogra-
phy. In this sense, I propose to undertake a comparative and trans-
chronological analysis of the funerary monumentality and cos-
moologies of Mongolia through the lens of Old Turkic sources and
materiality (7th–13th cent. AD), particularly the Old Turkic inscrip-

\textsuperscript{19} Bradley and Nimura 2013; Insoll 2004; Kristiansen 2006; Tilley 2017.
\textsuperscript{20} Baird 2014; Marazzi 2005; Pedersen 2001; Roux 1963.
\textsuperscript{21} Sukhbaatar in Davaa Ochir 2008.
\textsuperscript{22} Schmidt 2006.
\textsuperscript{23} Chimedsengee 2009.
\textsuperscript{24} Dal Zovo 2010.
\textsuperscript{25} Ejin 1988.
\textsuperscript{26} Meskell 2007.
tions of Mongolia (8th cent. AD). In fact, they not only constitute the earliest autochthonous written sources available in the area, but also, like the Bronze and Iron Age mounds, they consistently belong to a funerary and ritual context.

V. Persistent Ancestral Landscape and the Turkic Sources

In Mongolia, traditional sacred geographies and associated ontologies of genii loci and spirits of the dead, as well as shamanistic practices, especially related to the Turkic world, have been extensively investigated, but their origin and development, or the possible reverberation of ancient beliefs and materiality in the local tradition, have been far less explored. However, Rintchen first underlined the connection between ancient funerary mounds, mountains, and the traditional Mongolian concept of an ancestral landscape controlled by master spirits of the place, as corroborated by Heissig. Elements of continuity in Mongolian symbolism and funerary materiality were also remarkably addressed by Roux, who analysed the funerary rituality of the ancient Turkic populations and its possible correspondence with more archaic worldviews and rituals.

I argue that the cosmologies of the Turkic populations of Mongolia could provide relevant information, not only on the worldviews held at the time of the original inscriptions, but also on the history, and possibly the Late Prehistoric roots of certain local

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27 Ragagnin 2013.
28 Barthold and Rogers 1970; Alyilmaz 2006; Osawa 2006; 2011; 2012. This is true also for another typical significant element of the Turkic material culture: the so-called balbal, anthropomorphic statue of individuals with typically folded arms, which have been documented in Mongolia as well as elsewhere across Central Asia and can often incorporate inscriptions on the stone surface (Bayar 2005). Thanks to the study of the associated inscriptions and Turkic written sources, scholars consider that they represent the dead. Balbals were often documented in funerary contexts, in spatial association with burial mounds (Barthold and Rogers 1970, 198).
30 Rintchen 1959.
31 Heissig 1980.
rituals and beliefs. Here, I propose to address the problem from an archaeological perspective. In this way, I hope to be able to answer crucial questions, such as why Turkic tombs and stelae are often documented in spatial correspondence with more archaic ritual and funerary sites.\textsuperscript{33} In order to understand the possible correspondences between these different material and cultural contexts, in the following paragraphs I will explore selected aspects of Old Turkic sources that are relevant in funerary and cosmological terms and compare them with the archaeological database of Late Prehistoric funerary mounds documented on the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain. As I mentioned before, Old Turkic inscriptions of Mongolia are especially significant, as they represent the oldest examples of the wider corpus of the Old Turkic scripts that have been documented in a variety of graphic and linguistic forms in Central Asia until the 13\textsuperscript{th} century AD.\textsuperscript{34}

VI. LATE PREHISTORIC BURIALS AND OLD TURKIC SOURCES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

I would like to first clarify that in a comparative analysis the primary aim is not to equate different social and symbolical systems that clearly took place in different cultural and chronological contexts.\textsuperscript{35} Late Bronze and Iron Age populations of Mongolia built funerary and ceremonial sites between 1700–250 BC,\textsuperscript{36} while the Old Turkic inscriptions of Mongolia on standing stones date to the 8\textsuperscript{th} century AD.\textsuperscript{37} In this sense, the inspiration provided by the Old Turkic sources for a more effective approximation to the symbolic system and the ritual behaviours associated with Late Prehistoric funerary mounds does not originate from the assumption of a uniform historical continuity. It rather emerges after tracing the contextual persistence of funerary rituals and cosmological concepts possibly associated with features of the material culture and the local landscape over time. Thus, in my view, the Late

\textsuperscript{33} Osawa 2012.
\textsuperscript{34} Brose 2017; Drompp 2017 and 2018; Golden 1992; Amitai and Biran 2005.
\textsuperscript{35} Candea 2016; Ienau and Moya 2015.
\textsuperscript{36} Fitzhugh 2009; Honeychurch 2015; Günchinsuren 2017.
\textsuperscript{37} Bayar 2005; De la Vaissière 2017; Ragagnin 2013; Zieme 2005.
Prehistoric funerary context and the Old Turkic inscriptions could be reciprocally illuminated by a comparative historical analysis based on three significant elements of correspondence.

The first correspondence is the spatial continuum that can be detected both on a regional and on an in-site scale. The two cultural phenomena and their archaeological records display a deep spatial correlation, as they take place, in the true sense of the term, in the same geographical and physical setting: the plateaus, mountains, inner valleys, and steppes of what is now modern Mongolia. Besides the two major areas where Old Turkic inscriptions on stone *stele* have been located, (along the Tuul and Orkhon Rivers in Central Mongolia), many features of the Turkic material culture with an apparent ritual and funerary function have been documented in recent years. The second element that is worth taking into account as a suggestive correspondence between the Late Prehistoric burial mounds and the Old Turkic sources of Mongolia is precisely their comparable funerary context and function. In fact, the Old Turkic corpus of Mongolia essentially consists of inscriptions on standing stones set in a ceremonial and funerary context. These inscriptions usually celebrate the actions of important deceased figures on the occasion of their death. In this sense, both Old Turkic and Late Prehistoric burial mounds refer to death and are likely associated with complex ritual practices and cosmologies.

The third element of correspondence encompasses the location choice of Old Turkic monumental funerary features and its potential symbolism. Although the Turkic funerary cosmology has to be further explored, the emplacement of Turkic sites reveals a deep interest for the Late Prehistoric funerary monumentality.

Turkic ritual sites are often in spatial and symbolical connection with Late Prehistoric mounds and other ancient funerary features, which were apparently re-used and re-interpreted, perhaps in the sense of an ancestral connection that could further dignify and legitimise the figure and the power of the deceased individuals cel-

39 Barthold and Rogers 1970.
40 Alyilmaz 2006.
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ebrated on the inscribed stones. This spatial connection, as I will further illustrate, can be detected in Late Prehistoric sites of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain area or nearby, but has also been documented elsewhere in Mongolia.41

VII. LATE PREHISTORIC AND TURKIC SITES ON THE IKH BOGD UUL MOUNTAIN

On the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain, at the above-mentioned site of Puntsag Obo Hill (see Figs. 1 and 2), one may observe diverse material elements that likely belong to distinct chronological periods.42 The Bronze Age materiality is especially outstanding: the great khirigsuur mound has a round, spoked stone fence, with a diameter of sixty meters, and several satellite features, like the Late Bronze Age khirigsuur mounds of Central and Northern Mongolia.43 On the eastern side of the mound, there is a north-south oriented row of thirteen small cairns; on the central cairns are inserted two Bronze Age stelae, oriented to the east,44 with characteristic carvings that can be typologically ascribed to the Late Bronze Age West Eurasian group.45 However, one standing stone presents a visible tilt, while the second one is broken with only the upper part conserved. This probably indicates some secondary use, which has been documented for Late Prehistoric Deer Stone stelae elsewhere and generally attributed to the Turkic period.46 In fact, while satellite cairns associated with Bronze Age standing stones are most often scattered around the main mound, or on its eastern side, they are not usually aligned in a single row,47 as it happens at the site of Puntsag Obo. Conversely, rows of standing stones and balbals, generally oriented to the east and located at the east side of the main feature, have been documented at Turkic

41 Alyilmaa 2006; Crubézy 1996; Osawa 2006; Ramsted et alii 1958; Rinchen 1959; Turbat 2011.
42 Dal Zovo 2016; Dal Zovo and González García 2018.
43 Fitzhugh 2009; Wright 2007.
44 Dal Zovo et alii, 2014.
46 Alyilmaa 2006; see pictures; Fitzhugh and Bayarsaikhan 2010, 9.
47 Fitzhugh 2009.
funerary or ceremonial sites. The Tonyukuk memorial monument of Bayan Tsogt in Central Mongolia displays two exceptional stelae with Old Turkic inscriptions. A row of 289 standing stones, cairns, and balbals goes from the eastern entrance of the enclosure in an eastern direction for more than one kilometre, as if to suggest a prominent directional intentionality to the east (see Fig. 4). In the Turkic world, the main cardinal direction was indeed the east, both for orientation and symbolical purposes.

Another example of a possible reinterpretation of a Late Prehistoric funerary site in the research area was originally recorded in a remote inner valley of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain in late October 2010 (see Fig. 3), thanks to the support of the local guide D.B. A row of basaltic standing stones that are likely typologically ascribable to the Turkic period can be observed in spatial proximity to a cluster of Late Prehistoric funerary mounds, as well as a present pastoral campsite. The pastoral campsite and the ancient funerary area are located on a terrace overlooking a ford, at the confluence of two mountains streams. A well-maintained stone fence for the animals and a felt ger tent seem to emphasise the relevance of the location for local herders also in present times.

Interestingly, this localisation pattern has been observed for several Turkic sites elsewhere. River terraces, or the combination of mountain and aquatic elements in the same spatial context, were

49 Exhaustive information on Old Turkic inscriptions and their spatial location can be found on-line on the page of Türk Bitig, promoted by the Language Committee of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The section for the Tonyukuk memorial monument (Bayan Tsogt) includes translation and transliteration of the Old Turkic inscriptions, maps, pictures, and references (http://bitig.org/?lang=r&mod=1&tid=1&oid=17&km=0).
50 Interestingly, this was likely the case also in Late Prehistoric times (Allard and Erdenebaatar 2005; Dal Zovo et alii 2014; Turbat, 2011). In the Old Turkic inscriptions of Köl Tegin in the Orkhon Valley in Central Mongolia, the orientation in relation to the rise of the sun is clearly expressed: "en avant vers le soleil levant, à droite au midi, en arrière vers le soleil couchant, à gauche au minuit" (Kotwicz, in Ferret 2006). Thus, in Old Turkic, the word ög would mean both east and front (Ferret 2006).
51 Barthold and Rogers 1970; Charleux 2006; Kotwicz 1927; in Yoshida 1933; Turbat 2011.
52 Osawa 2012.
apparently highly valued also in the emplacement of Turkic funerary sites.\textsuperscript{53}

A final example of \textit{longue durée} in the location patterns of possible Turkic sites can be observed north of the research area, at the outskirts of Narjinteh, in the Ovorkhangai province. This village is located at the foothills of the Khangai Mountains, along the road that leads south. The site was documented in 2010, during the trip to our base camp in Bogd village. Here, Turkic funerary features and standing stones can be observed in close spatial proximity to Late Prehistoric burial mounds and to the main road (see Fig. 5). Also, the reuse of Late Bronze Age features, especially the typical Late Bronze Age Deer Stones, is particularly extensive: the finely engraved \textit{stelae} appear tilted, standing upside down, or inserted both vertically or horizontally in a variety of quadrangular structures, possibly tombs, which can be related to the material and funerary culture of the Turkic period.\textsuperscript{54} As I will further argue, I believe that the recurrent location pattern and systematic reuse of ancient materiality detected in the research area cannot be considered as purely utilitarian, but rather the expression of intentionality, perhaps rooted in the cult of the ancestors that can be consistently traced in the Old Turkic texts.\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{VIII. Sacred places, ancestors, and funerary geography}

In fact, besides the narration of historical events related to the life of powerful dead individuals, the Old Turkic sources, such as the Bulgut inscriptions in Arkhangay province, often contain an explicit reference of their gratitude to “the God, the ancestors, and the ancestors’ souls”.\textsuperscript{56} Along with an essential funerary function, then, the Turkic sites were places to worship God and the ancestors.\textsuperscript{57} As the cult of the ancestors apparently permeated the Turkic cosmology of the time,\textsuperscript{58} it seems worth noting that in the

\textsuperscript{53} Barthold and Rogers 1970; Roux 1963.
\textsuperscript{54} Alyilmaz 2006; Crubezy 1996; Osawa 2011.
\textsuperscript{55} Roux 1963.
\textsuperscript{56} Alyilmaz 2006, 17.
\textsuperscript{57} Alyilmaz 2006, 18.
\textsuperscript{58} Roux 1963, 119; Heissig 1980.
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Altaic world the ancestors were usually conceived as animals,\textsuperscript{59} while the most common Bronze Age elements incorporated into Turkic sites are the so-called Deer Stones. In my view, this could explain the special interest of Turkic peoples for these ancient steles that are typically engraved with zoomorphic motifs.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, the Turkic cult of the ancestors interwove the familiar cult of the dead with other significant clanic and power aspects.\textsuperscript{61} In order to celebrate the death of powerful figures in an appropriate clanic and ancestral manner, the emplacement of the funerary site and its history as a sacred place might also have been extremely important.

As observed by Roux,\textsuperscript{62} Turkic funerary areas were often localised at places charged with numen, such as river banks and terraces, hilltops, mountaintops, and grooves. In the Old Turkic sources, the word often used to identify those places was \textit{iduq}, which is attested in the 8\textsuperscript{th} century AD Orkhon inscriptions of Central Mongolia.\textsuperscript{63} It can be translated as ‘sacred’ in the sense of ‘dedicated to the deity’.\textsuperscript{64} Indeed, the word \textit{iduq} usually qualified forested mountains, river springs, and freshwater sources, or the combination of the earth and the water, which were subject to the control of specific genii loci and ancestral spirits.\textsuperscript{65} These places, charged with divine qualities, were also suitable for funerary purposes, perhaps because their intrinsic qualities could be extended to the burials and thus protect the souls of the dead.\textsuperscript{66} In particular, mountains or elevated areas could be especially significant, as they also incorporated the concept of an \textit{axis mundi}, through

\textsuperscript{59} Roux 1963.
\textsuperscript{60} Volkov 1995.
\textsuperscript{61} Roux 1963, 131.
\textsuperscript{62} Roux 1963, 153.
\textsuperscript{63} Roux 1966, 169.
\textsuperscript{64} Clauson 1972, 371, 440.
\textsuperscript{65} Roux 1966, 171. In the Mongolian folklore, sacred places are equally controlled by master spirits of the place (Davaa Ochir 2008) that are often related or equivalent to ancestral spirits. In the long-term, the cult of ancestors has probably merged with the cult of master spirits of the place and thus influenced also the emplacement of funerary areas (Davaa Ochir 2008; Heissig 1980; Rinchen 1959; Roux 1963 and 1966; Tatár 1976).
\textsuperscript{66} Roux 1966, 174.
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which the ascension to the upper world would have been possible. Interestingly, this description applies quite well to the possible Turkic sites of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain area illustrated above, but it is also valid for many elements of the localisation patterns of Late Prehistoric funerary mounds. In this sense, the emplacement of the potential Turkic sites documented on the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain, such as the re-arranged row of stelae at the site of Puntsag Oboo, located on an outstanding hilltop, or the standing stones documented at the confluence of two streams, apparently displays an intriguing correspondence with the iduq places described in the Old Turkic sources.

IX. OLD TURKIC SOURCES, DEATH, AND THE PASTORAL LANDSCAPE

While mountaintops and hilltops were possibly regarded as sacred and liminal places, probably because of their proximity to the sky, they also innervated the pastoral geography of the local nomadic herders in their seasonal movements to high pasture areas. Significantly, the ambivalence of pastoral and funerary elements in the same mountain landscape can be traced also in the early linguistic record. In the Old Turkic inscriptions of Köi Tegin, in Central Mongolia (see footnote 49 in this paper), the expression to indicate death is uča bar- ‘to pass away’, although it was apparently used only for notable figures, namely khans of the local khaganates. I suggest that this formulation may be deeply imbued with the idea of movement, probably in connection with the local mobile tradition of seasonal pastoral shifts. In fact, the verb uč- mostly occurs combined with the auxiliary verb bar- ‘to move away’. Similarly, in the later classic Mongolian epic and foundational text, the Secret History of the Mongols, death was also associated with the idea of movement, as it was expressed by verbs such as nökhi- ‘to nomadise’, but also unduutq/galdutta qar- ‘to go to the heights’. These linguistic items

67 Marazzi, 1984; Roux 1963, 101, 184.
70 Ragagnin 2013, 52.
71 Ragagnin 2013
72 Ragagnin 2013, 55.
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seem to encompass the idea of ascension, elevation, or transition in connection with certain places or movement across the landscape, thus disclosing the potential interrelation between funerary places and seasonal pastoral displacements in the articulation of the Old Turkic and classic Mongolian cosmologies.

X. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this exercise of comparative analysis, I have explored a working hypothesis: that in the persistent sacred funerary geographies of Mongolia consistent longue durée aspects can be recognised and analysed. This longue durée seems to materialise especially in the archaic and intrinsic connection between movement, funerary rituals, and sacred natural places such as mountain heights, hilltops, and river terraces. This connection has been analysed by taking into account the symbolism and localisation patterns of both Late Prehistoric burials and possible Turkic materiality documented in the research area of the Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain. Furthermore, selected linguistic elements of Old Turkic inscriptions on funerary stelae, as well as spatial characteristics of their archaeological context, have been examined. In order to provide an original understanding of both Late Prehistoric and Old Turkic funerary cosmologies, I have also analysed the concept of death in Old Turkic and classical Mongolian written sources. In particular, I have preliminary defined their symbolism in connection with the relevance of the seasonal movement in the pastoral and funerary landscape of Mongolia over time.

In addition, the funerary destination of both Late Prehistoric monuments and Old Turkic stelae has been comparatively explored to highlight the consistent spatial proximity of potential Old Turkic sites to Bronze and Iron Age funerary places of the research area. This correspondence has been tentatively interpreted in the frame of a persistent symbolical significance. It seems likely, in fact, that Old Turkic cosmologies, funerary rituals, and beliefs indeed obeyed more ancient cosmological principles, which partly transcended into successive sacred geographies, as well as specific ways of being in the local pastoral and funerary landscape over time. This idea certainly requires additional investigation, but a further interpretative hypothesis naturally follows:

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that the Old Turkic groups possibly made a conscious and active use of Late Prehistoric cosmologies and materialities. In selecting a ceremonial place in proximity to more ancient funerary sites, the Old Turkic people possibly aspired to offer the most suitable and sanctified setting for the celebration of corresponding ritual practices, but also to legitimise and magnify the power and significance of the deceased in a symbolical ancestral perspective.
Fig. 1. Bronze Age khirigsuur mound and a (possibly Turkic) row of thirteen cairns, on the hilltop of Puntsag Obo (2550 m), Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain, Southern Mongolia.
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Fig. 2. Late Bronze Age Deer Stone with the khirigsuur mound in the background, inserted in a row of thirteen cairns. Puntsag Oboo, Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain.

Fig. 3. Row of (possibly Turkic) standing stones on a river terrace, next to a Bronze Age funerary area and pastoral campsite: Inner valley of Ikh Bogd Uul Mountain.
Fig. 4. Row of east-oriented standing stones at the Turkic site of Bayan Tsogt (Tonyukuk Memorial), Central Mongolia. Photo by Yolanda Scoane, Fieldwork 2011.

Fig. 5. Rearranged Late Bronze Age Deer Stone stelae at (possible) Turkic site near Narjintech, Khangai Mountains. Ovorkhangai, Central Mongolia, Fieldwork 2010.
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Clauson, G.

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Davaa Ochir, G.

De la Vaissière, É.
Cecilia Dal Zovo

Drompp, M.


Esin, E.

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Ferret, G.

Fitzhugh W. and J. Bayarsaikhan

Fitzhugh, W.

Fuggetta, G.

Golden P.


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