

ERC Advanced Grant 2019
Research proposal (Part B1)

The Wall: People and Ecology in Medieval Mongolia and China

The Wall

Cover Page:

- Name of the Principal Investigator (PI): Gideon Shelach-Lavi
- Host Institution: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
- Proposal duration in months: 60 months

Summary

Why did some (but not all) Chinese dynasties invest huge amounts of resources in the construction of ‘Great Walls’? The proposed project will focus on precisely that question, in an attempt to unravel what is, perhaps, the most enigmatic episode of ‘Great Wall’ construction. Roughly dated to the 10th-13th centuries CE and located far to the north of other ‘Great Wall’ lines, this Medieval Wall System (MWS) is one of the longest walls ever constructed in world history, stretching over more than 3,500 km and including large auxiliary structures (Fig. 1). The amount of resources invested in this MWS must have been enormous, but historical sources are mute about its construction, and modern scholarship is unable to date it precisely or understand why it was built and how it functioned.

The motives behind the construction of the MWS, its political context and ecological implications, are highly relevant for the understanding of the complex history of China and Mongolia on the eve of Chinggis Khan’s rise to power. However, because in the past scholars have assumed that ‘Great Walls’ were fortified border lines designed to stop military incursions, such issues’ impetus and consequences were never addressed.

Hence, the proposed project will put forward novel hypotheses, analyse them by using advanced recovery and analytical methods, and examine them against a broad archaeological, historical, environmental, and

geographical background. The research hypothesis of the proposed project is that the MWS was not built as a defence against invading armies, but rather as a means to monitor and sometimes stop the movement of nomadic people and their herds. The large-scale movements of nomadic people towards more central areas of the empire happened, I would suggest, in times of ecological stress in the Steppe.

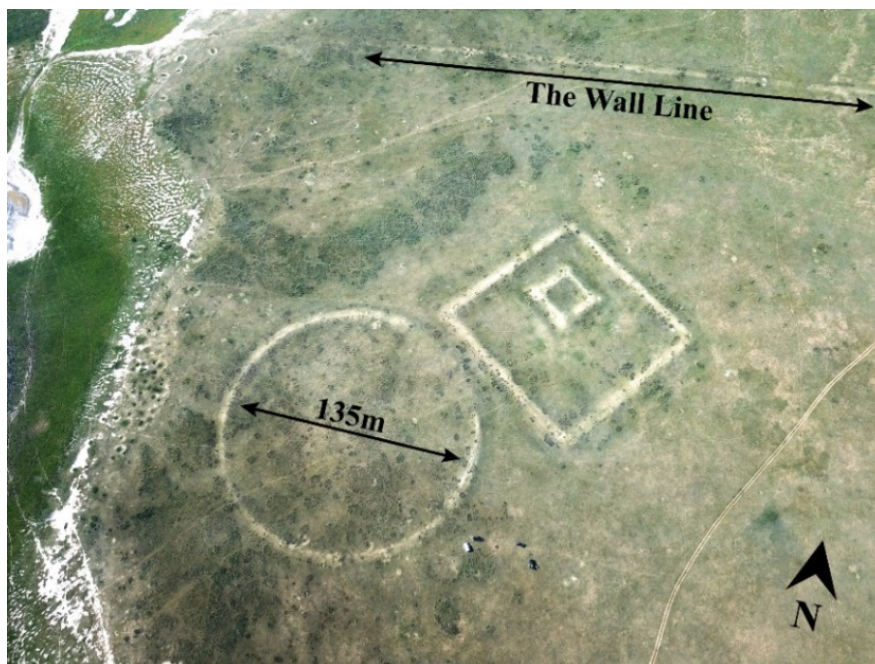


Fig. 1: The wall line in northeast Mongolia and a cluster of rectangular and circular structures south of it (a drone photo taken during my preliminary expedition).