

The Great Wall of Mongolia

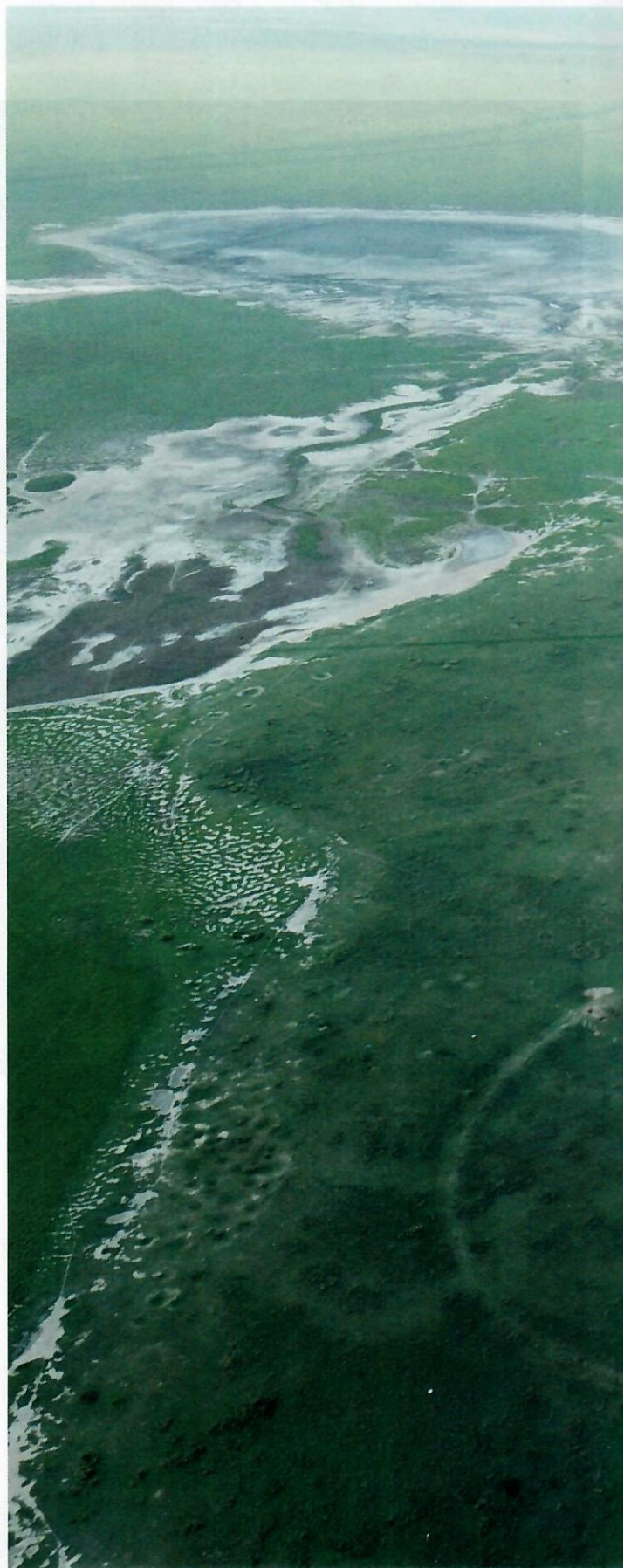
A nomadic medieval dynasty constructed a 450-mile barrier to help manage their sprawling empire

by DANIEL WEISS

IN THE EARLY TENTH CENTURY A.D., the Khitan, a coalition of nomadic tribes native to eastern Mongolia and parts of China, took advantage of political instability in the region to establish an empire. They conquered a vast swath of northern Asia, stretching from the border of the Korean Peninsula across large portions of northern China, southern Siberia, and Mongolia. Included in their realm, which came to be known as the Liao Empire, was a significant area of traditionally Chinese territory inhabited by settled farmers, as well as great expanses occupied by various other nomadic tribes, who raised herds of horses, sheep, goats, and camels on the grassy steppe. The Khitan elite themselves continued to follow a nomadic lifestyle, honing their skills as mounted warriors and tending their own herds. The Liao emperors and their courts moved among five different capitals, where they lived in tents, and spent a good deal of time at seasonal hunting and fishing camps.

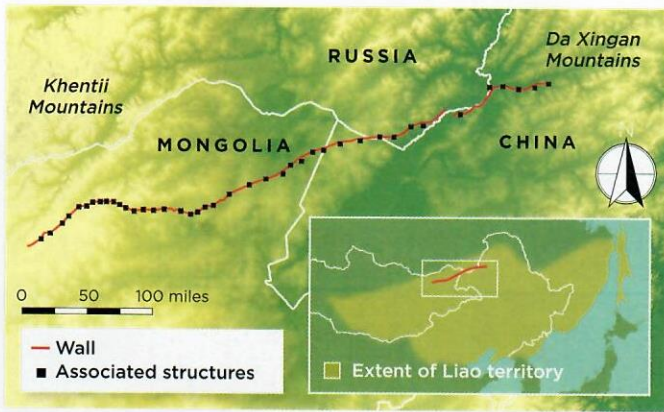
Starting with the empire's founder, Abaoji, who united the often fractious Khitan tribes, the Liao operated an unusual hybrid government that consisted of a southern administration responsible for the heavily Chinese parts of their empire, and a northern administration that dealt with tribal areas. The former was modeled on Chinese dynasties of the time and was staffed by ranks of civil servants, many of them Chinese, selected through an exam system. The latter followed traditional Khitan practices, and those who rose to power were generally members of the royal clan, who inherited their positions. "The Liao approach was to control everyone according to what they were used to," says Michal Biran, a historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. "They controlled the nomads as nomads did, and the Chinese as the Chinese did. It worked quite well because it kept them in power for two centuries."

The Liao had conflicts with the major powers to their south—the Goryeo Kingdom in Korea and the Song and





Remains of a 1,000-year-old wall cut across the steppe in northeastern Mongolia's Dornod Province. Earth-and-stone structures south of the wall are believed to have been constructed at the same time.



Western Xia Dynasties in China—but eventually reached a wary detente with each of them. Managing relations with the non-Khitans living within their territory and beyond, however, frequently posed confounding challenges. These tribes were required to pay taxes to the Liao, which were often delivered at assemblies where their chieftains were expected to dance for the emperor in a display of obeisance. The official history of the Liao Dynasty (907–1125), the *Liao Shi*, which was written during the later Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), goes into particular detail about the relationship between the Liao and the Jurchens, a group of tribes based in Manchuria in northeastern China. The Jurchens reportedly resented their treatment at the hands of the Liao, in particular the expectation that they would provide the emperor with special gyrfalcons used in hunting, which necessitated dangerous forays into enemy territory. At the First Fish Feast in 1112, the *Liao Shi* relates, a Jurchen chieftain named Aguda refused to dance for the emperor, who considered executing the upstart but was talked out of it by an adviser. Inspired by Aguda's defiance, the Jurchens banded together and went on to overthrow the Liao and establish the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234).

A loose affiliation of nomadic groups based in northern Mongolia called the Zubu is also known to have fought back against Liao rule. According to Chunag Amartuvshin of Mongolia's Institute of Archaeology, the Zubu chafed at Liao demands for an ever-greater contribution of herd animals, skins, furs, and leather. Throughout the eleventh century, the Zubu mounted a series of rebellions against their imperial rulers. "It is likely that the primary cause of tensions between the Khitan state and Zubu groups was the increase with each coming year of the proportion of holdings expected as taxes,"

Ceramic sherds with comb-pattern decorations discovered during surface surveys of structures near the wall are known to date to the Liao Dynasty (A.D. 907–1125).

Scholars have concluded that Liao rulers built the wall.



says Amartuvshin. While Liao military prowess surely helped subdue the Zubu, new research suggests that a wall stretching 450 miles across the sparsely populated steppe in the far northern reaches of Liao territory played an important role as well.

THIS EARTHEN BARRIER, which runs from the Khentii Mountains in the west to the Da Xingan Mountains in the east, through the border area of present-day Mongolia, Russia, and China, is popularly known as the Wall of Genghis Khan. There is, however, no evidence it was built by the founder of the Mongol Empire. Earlier scholars suggested the wall was hastily constructed by the Jin Dynasty in an attempt to block the southward advance of Genghis' army. This is unlikely, though, as the Jin never controlled territory so far north and west. The Liao did rule the wall's region, and modern scholars agree that they likely built it. However, solid evidence of this—much less a convincing explanation of why they built it—has, until recently, been lacking. "People often think of walls as forming borders or to stop armies, but does that make sense in this case?" says Gideon Shelach-Lavi, an archaeologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. "This is an extremely remote area, so why would anybody build a wall there?"

In two recent field seasons focusing on a section of the wall in Dornod Province in northeastern Mongolia, a team led by Shelach-Lavi that includes Amartuvshin and William Honeychurch of Yale University has found some answers. By radiocarbon dating charcoal excavated from a ditch that runs alongside the wall and from nearby structures built of compacted earth and crushed limestone, the archaeologists have confirmed that the wall does indeed date to the Liao Dynasty, and was likely used sometime between 1000 and 1100. They also found gray ceramic sherds with comb-pattern decorations known to date to the Liao period in surface surveys, and unearthed bones of large mammals, most likely horses, in one of the structures near the wall.

Shelach-Lavi's team has studied high-resolution satellite images of the entire length of the wall and determined that the structures built alongside it are grouped into several dozen clusters that are all on the southern side of the wall and are more or less evenly spaced out along its path. The

distance between groups of structures is generally less than 20 miles, which would have taken just a few hours to cover on horseback or by oxcart. These structures include circular enclosures measuring nearly 450 feet across and rectangular enclosures in a range of sizes, with the largest measuring up to 350 feet wide and frequently including a smaller inner rectangular enclosure. Near a number of these groups of structures, the archaeologists identified



Excavation of a section of the wall (above left) has revealed that it was made of compacted earth. An archaeologist (above right) unearths bones of large mammals, likely horses, in a structure near the wall.



openings in the wall that they believe represent ancient gates.

A team led by archaeologist Nikolai Kradin of the Russian Academy of Sciences has done similar work on the section of the wall that lies in present-day Russia. “This confirms that our observations from eastern Mongolia are consistent with his from neighboring Siberia,” says Honeychurch.

As they considered their findings, Shelach-Lavi’s team concluded that it made little sense that the wall had been built to serve for military defense. The remains of the wall, which was made of compacted earth, stand around three feet aboveground today. The wall likely measured just over six feet high when originally built—hardly a formidable impediment to a determined force. “It’s a barrier, but it’s not something that would stop an army for a long time,” Shelach-Lavi says. “The Mongol army could come, remove a section of it, and then ride on through.” Likewise, the structures near the wall were built on low ground, failing to take advantage of higher spots that would have offered clear lines of sight from one group to another or a commanding perspective on the landscape.

Shelach-Lavi believes the actual purpose of the wall was to regulate the movement of nomadic people in the area—and quite likely to make it easier to collect taxes from them. He points out that the groups of structures, and the gates near them, appear to have been built at points along the wall where it is easiest to travel from north to south. “We now think they channeled people through these gates and stopped them as they crossed to take some of their herds as taxes,” Shelach-Lavi says. The large circular structures, he adds, may have been used to corral the confiscated livestock, while the large rectangular structures could have served as base camps for those who staffed the crossing points. The smaller inner enclosures, which seem to have been raised above the other structures, may have been watchtowers.

ONE ENDURING MYSTERY of the wall is that it is not mentioned in the *Liao Shi*. “Why would you build such a great big thing and not document it or recognize

it?” wonders Shelach-Lavi. According to his team’s estimates, it would have taken about 20,000 workers four years to complete the wall. Biran says that building such an enormous, stationary structure was an unusual strategy for a nomadic people such as the Liao, and the great expenditure of labor it required suggests that the other nomadic groups in the area must have been more important to the Liao than has been previously appreciated—whether in terms of the

threat they were deemed to pose or the wealth of their herds.

Shelach-Lavi believes the wall was built in response to pressure from nomadic people who were migrating south to escape spates of unusually cold weather known to have occurred in the late tenth to early eleventh centuries, and again in the late eleventh to early twelfth centuries. A Liao record from the year 1118, for instance, states that people in some regions of the empire were so hungry that they ate bark from elm trees and at times resorted to cannibalism. “Very cold winters and springs can cause a lot of damage to the pastureland and force people to move south to look for better places to graze their animals,” says Shelach-Lavi. “We think this is what happened: There was climatic pressure that forced the nomadic population to move southward, and the Liao wanted to control or stop them.” Biran suggests that climate may help explain the movement of people during the Liao period, but another important factor was that the area south of the wall, which had earlier been home to various Turkic tribes, was depopulated after the Liao took it over. “We know that people from southern Siberia were coming into Mongolia during this period,” she says, “not necessarily because of the climate, but perhaps because many of the Turkic people who were living in Mongolia had migrated westward after the Liao conquest.”

After being conquered by the Jin, the Liao themselves were also forced to migrate many hundreds of miles westward, where they established the Western Liao Dynasty (1124–1218), based in present-day Kyrgyzstan. A book written in the Liao script that was discovered there in the 1950s is known to refer to dates in the eleventh century. Its contents have not yet been deciphered, but they may hold further insights into the wall and its purpose. For now, at least, understanding of the Liao and their great wall will have to come from archaeological exploration of the remains that still snake across the remote landscape of the northern steppe. ■

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