

Case Studies

Xiongnu Identity from Mortuary Practices

Identity

- In archaeology material culture = various people and historical groups
- Genealogies have been created to connect modern societies with their assumed primordial origin
- Nature of identities is multivalent and dynamic depending much on historical situation
- Mortuary sites cannot be directly attributed to specific ethnic or people

Via mortuary remains

- the identity of the deceased, as well as that of the surviving community, can be reaffirmed or transformed.
- Choices of
 - 1) in construction of graves
 - 2) placement of accompanying objects, and
 - 3) arrangement of human remains

However

- Mortuary context is always have an inherent symbolic nature that renders straightforward explanation and assessment of identity problematic

Xiongnu

- Not ethnonym, but
- Manifestation of social structure, ideology and politics
- Social actions, not 'social beings'

Previously

- Early Iron Age burials were diverse in construction and placement
- Require significant investments in labor (focused on monuments themselves)
- Natural landscape used to maximize their visual prominence = commemorative devices

Xiongnu material culture

- Two primary burial types,
 - a) the squared ramped “terrace” tombs and
 - b) the more common circular tombs.

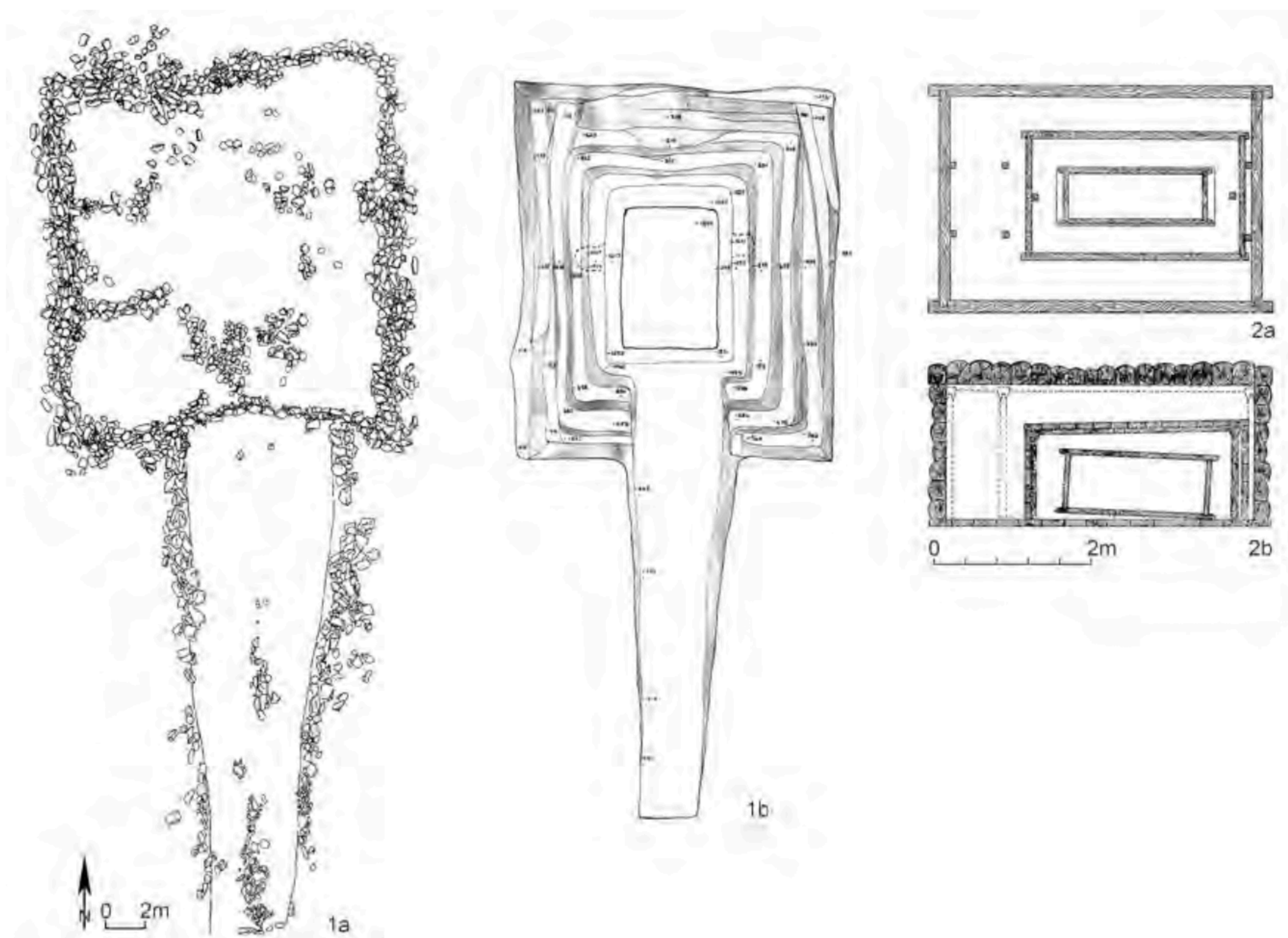


Fig. 1. Noyon Uul. 1 Surface plan (after Polos'mak et al. 2008b, Fig. 4); 2 plan of the stepped pit (after Tseveendorzh et al. 2008, Fig. 4).

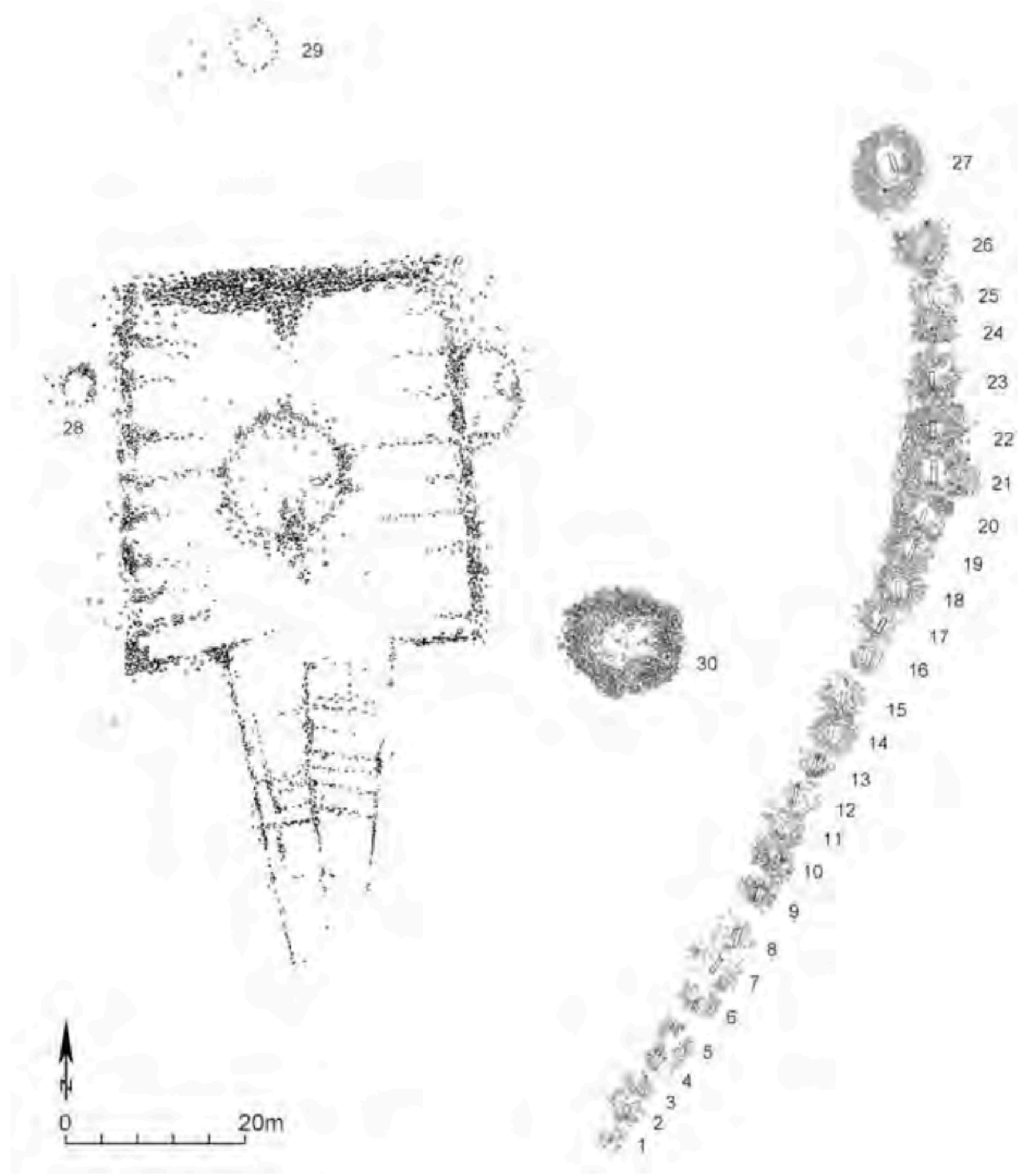


Fig. 2. Gol Mod 2. Tomb 1 complex with satellite burials (after Miller et al. 2006).



Fig. 4. Baga Gazaryn Chuluu. Xiongnu circular tomb around which the topsoil has been removed. Additional tombs can be seen in the background illustrating their low visual impact on the landscape.

Xiongnu burials

- Typically occur in clusters
- Lack of visual prominence as the preceding monument types
- More investment on the funerary assemblage within the burial
- Burials are found specifically in areas where preceding monuments are absent
- Graves also exhibit a significant standardization in orientation, structure, and placement of objects within the burial

- Large number of funerary artefacts
- Specialized treatment of faunal remains (northern niche holding crania and hooves of sheep, goat and cattle)
- Small secondary stone features located to the south of the grave, which consisted of a buried stone cist containing disarticulated goat and sheep remains

Xiongnu Identity

- Previous diversity in construction and placement of burials suggests that identities and social ideologies were expressed locally
- At the same time they contributed to regional homogeneity
- Alternative mortuary practices show flexibility in how identities could be expressed through mortuary practice

- The Xiongnu material culture reflect a complete disruption of previous mortuary traditions.
- Overall expression is one of sameness
- The entire repertoire of funerary practice is completely transformed, from the visibility, placement, and orientation of burials, to the size and nature of their accompanying assemblage
- Xiongnu political identity – an identity expressed in mortuary practice and monuments that symbolically incorporated local communities and local leaders into a regional Xiongnu political economy

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