

## **Buddhist Archeology in Mongolia: Zanabazar and the Géluk Diaspora beyond Tibet**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses a Khalkha reincarnate ruler, the First Jebtsundampa Zanabazar, who is commonly believed to be a Géluk protagonist whose alliance with the Dalai and Panchen Lamas was crucial to the dissemination of Buddhism in Khalkha Mongolia. Zanabazar's Géluk affiliation, however, is a later Qing-Géluk construct to divert the initial Khalkha vision of him as a reincarnation of the Jonang historian Tāranātha (1575–1634). Whereas several scholars have discussed the political significance of Zanabazar's reincarnation based only on textual sources, this article takes an interdisciplinary approach to discuss, in addition to textual sources, visual records that include Zanabazar's portraits and current findings from an ongoing excavation of Zanabazar's Saridag Monastery. Clay sculptures and Zanabazar's own writings, heretofore little studied, suggest that Zanabazar's open approach to sectarian affiliations and his vision, akin to Tsongkhapa's, were inclusive of several traditions rather than being limited to a single one.

**Keywords:** Zanabazar, Géluk school, Fifth Dalai Lama, Jebtsundampa, Khalkha, Mongolia, Dzungar Galdan Boshogtu, Saridag Monastery, archeology, excavation

The First Jebtsundampa Zanabazar (1635–1723) was the most important protagonist in the later dissemination of Buddhism in Mongolia. Unlike the Mongol imperial period, when the sectarian alliance with the Sakya (Tib. *Sa skya*) determined the Mongol rulers' preferences in Buddhist teachings, the question of sectarian affiliations and their role in Buddhist dissemination in the later period still remains open for study. Mongolian monks and lamas commonly view Zanabazar as an adherent of Géluk (Tib. *dge lugs*), and many scholars support this view by suggesting that Zanabazar never had non-Gélukpa views and practices. The main body of this type of inquiry includes textual sources of Zanabazar's hagiographies written at different times by different authors, with his Géluk

disciple Zaya Pandita Luvsanprinlei's (Jāya paṇḍita blo bzang 'phreng las, 1642–1715) biography constituting the earliest and most reliable source.<sup>1</sup> However, Zanabazar's corpus of artworks, which has been largely neglected in historical studies and left to the attention of art historians, opens up new perspectives for research. Moreover, his collected works—known literally as “scattered sayings,” from the Tibetan *gsung gtor*—which likely contain his oral teachings in addition to his writings, have yet to be explored by scholars in great detail.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of his art and some elements of his literary works suggests that Zanabazar's alleged adherence to the Géluk school was complicated by the intricacies of Géluk interventions outside Tibet.

One of the earliest *thangkas* made in a Tibetan tradition in Mongolia depicts Zanabazar (figure 1). This portrait, believed to be by Zanabazar's own hand, shows the teacher in the center as a monk who holds a sutra with his elegant fingers. The surrounding composition is filled with teachers, *yidam* (tutelary deities), and *dharmapālas* (protectors) associated with Zanabazar.

The topmost register contains Sita Saṃvara in the *yab-yum* (father-mother) position directly above Zanabazar's head, with the Dalai and Panchen Lamas at the two corners. Zanabazar's formal initiations and spiritual guidance were said to have been given by the Fourth Panchen Lama Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltzen (Tib. Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1570–1662) and the Great Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682), who appear to his upper left and right, respectively. Below them, to Zanabazar's right, Sarasvatī, the female bodhisattva of music, poetry, learning, knowledge, and speech, holds a lute and signifies his excellence in the arts, and to his left, Vasudhārā, the goddess of abundance, marks his fertile work as an artist, statesman, and religious leader.

In the bottom register, two forms of Mahākāla allude to a pivotal moment in the history of the Mongolian-Tibetan alliance. In 1578, Altan Khan (1507–1582) of the Tümed Mongols had a historical meeting with the head of the Géluk order, Sonam Gyatso (Tib. bSod nams rgya mtsho, 1543–1589), thus opening the way for the Géluk in Greater Mongolia and commencing a new alliance with the Dalai Lamas, a title used by Altan Khan at this very meeting. The Third Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso chose the White Mahākāla as the special protector of the Mongols (Stoddard 1995, 211), as is illustrated

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent study, Agata Bareja-Starzyńska (2015) argues that Luvsanprinlei's account should be seen as a biography, as it relates to events and historical people. Although it also contains some apocryphal narratives (such as auspicious miracles), in comparison with later texts it could well be seen as a biography. As written during Zanabazar's lifetime, Luvsanprinlei's personal voice and experience with his teacher make him an eyewitness to the events he describes and reveals his aim to present a biographical account.

<sup>2</sup> Zanabazar's *Collected Works* consists of one volume and is not referred as *sumbum* (Tib. *gsung 'bum*) but as *suntor* (Tib. *gsung gtor*). Although the former is unanimously known as “collected works,” the term's literal translation is “100,000 [numerous] sayings” and suggests a compilation of both writings and oral teachings (Kim 2016, 162–177).

in Zanabazar's portrait in the bottom register, where he appears together with the six-armed Mahākāla particularly favored by the Géluk order. In the center, next to the two forms of Mahākāla, stands the Guardian of the North, Jambhala,<sup>3</sup> alluding to the northern location of Mongolia relative to Tibet as well as Zanabazar's own practice inclusive of the wealth deities.



Figure 1. Portrait of Zanabazar, mineral pigments on cotton, ca. 1723. *Source:* Tsultem (1982b, pl. 47).

<sup>3</sup> Berger identifies the central figure as Vaiśravaṇa (see Berger and Bartholomew 1995, 123).

All of these elements, together with the images of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, suggest a strong Géluk presence and Zanabazar's adherence to Géluk masters. In fact, this is one of the earliest images of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas depicted together in the top register as revered teachers outside of Tibet proper and one of the earliest works with a specific Géluk sectarian affiliation in Mongolia. After Zanabazar, his successor Jebtsundampa Khutugtus (Tib. *sprul sku*, reincarnations) were consistent in including visual elements indicative of a Géluk affiliation in their portraits, thus reinforcing the indisputable association of the Jebtsundampas with the Géluk.

All textual sources yield the often-reiterated information that Zanabazar was identified as the reincarnation of Jonangpa historian Tāranātha by both the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. Tāranātha's previous incarnations, dating from the time of the Buddha Śākyamuni, and his fame as a lineage holder of all schools (Bareja-Starzyńska 2008, 52), ensured the young Khalkha leader's immaculate legitimacy. It was, however, paradoxical, as also noted by Bareja-Starzyńska, for Zanabazar's contemporaries to see a Jonangpa reincarnation become "the most influential Mongolian Gélukpa teacher" (2008, 54). Although Bareja-Starzyńska and other scholars are aware of the complicated political nature of this recognition, with E. Gene Smith being the earliest to suggest its political significance, these scholars limit their inquiries to the *rnam thar* (hagiographic body of texts) and do not consider other evidence that brings more complicated perspectives to bear upon the matter (Smith 1969, 3).

In this article, I first examine other textual sources, including Zanabazar's own writings, which either have not been considered previously or have been consulted only to a limited extent. Then I discuss Zanabazar's artistic accomplishments, paying particular attention to the current archeological findings described and illustrated in Sampildondovin Chuluun's photo essay in this special issue of *Cross-Currents*. The ongoing archeological expedition at the newly unearthed Saridag (or Saridagiin) Monastery built by Zanabazar has yielded impressive new material evidence of his life and work. Using this new evidence, I argue that the portrait of Zanabazar in figure 1, which has been regarded as his own work, is instead a Géluk rendition of his persona and his deeds, a rendition that was likely undertaken in his later years, intensified soon after his death, and continued under the later Jebtsundampa rulers. The sectarian indices in Zanabazar's portrait do not directly refer to his own Géluk affiliation; rather they point to some of the various strategies that the Géluk used to construct their dominion in Mongolia.

### Textual Evidence

Zanabazar did not exclude Géluk teachings from his practices. Luvsanprinlei writes that among the images Zanabazar made, there was also "a great hanging brocade image [which] was made and offered to the Jakyung monastery" (Bareja-Starzyńska 2015, 135–137). Several nineteenth-century writers, such as Agvaan Ishtüvden Ravjampa and Agwaan Luvsandondov, among others, suggest that "a great hanging brocade" was an image of Tsongkhapa (Agvaan Ishtüvden Ravjampa [1839] 1982, fol. 113). In Zanabazar's

collected oral and written teachings or *gsung gtor*, we find supplication prayers and praises to Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) that include the earliest *sādhana* text (visualization) of Tsongkhapa composed by a Khalkha Khutugtu, *Rje btsun Tsong kha pa la brten pa'i bla ma'i rnal 'byor*.<sup>4</sup> It contains a physical description of Tsongkhapa that became standard in all depictions of the master in Mongolia. The text describes Tsongkhapa in this way:

Pray to Mañjuśrī teacher Blo bzang drags pa [who appears] above my head seated on the sun and moon layers of a lotus treasure throne.... Blo bzang drags pa's body color is bright, he holds in his hands a sword of wisdom that cuts the foe of ignorance and a sutra that grants the highest of wisdom. He wears the three dharma garments and the golden pandita hat.... He appears so radiant, peaceful amidst rainbows, surrounded by peaceful and wrathful bodhisattvas, seated in the *vajra* posture, adorned by the syllables Om Ah Hūṃ...inviting all wisdom Buddhas with the light of the Letter Hūṃ. (Byambaa 2004, fol. 2–7)

Zanabazar's text presents a description of Tsongkhapa that became widespread and common in later depictions of him. However, Zanabazar wrote texts at the request of specific individuals; this *sādhana* text, for example, was composed for an *umzad tsorj* (Tib. *dbu mdzad chos rje*, lead chantmaster). Other similar prayers were written for specific individuals whose names are mentioned in the texts. As we shall see in the next section, he did not follow the particular iconographic forms, styles, and deities associated with Géluk practices in his art.

Zanabazar's association with the Jonangpas is indeed paradoxical and begs further inquiry. Hagiographies of Zanabazar never fail to mention his reincarnation lineage deriving from Tāranātha. The earliest biography, written in 1702 by Luvsanprinlei, points to the Dalai and Panchen Lamas as the source of that recognition.<sup>5</sup> According to this text, it was the Dalai Lama who first recognized the five-year-old Zanabazar as Jebtsundampa's

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<sup>4</sup> Chahar Geshe Luvsanchültem's (1740–1810) hagiography of Tsongkhapa, *Rje thams cad mkhyen pa tsong kha pa chen po'i rnam thar go slo bar brjod pa bde legs kun 'byin gnas zes bya ba bzhugs so*, dates to 1786 (see Bira [1960] 2001, 59–65); thus, this work by Zanabazar is the earliest text about Tsongkhapa in Mongolia.

<sup>5</sup> This biography was composed in Tibetan, and two old translations have been found, one preserved at Aginsky Datsan in Buryatia (date of translation unknown), and the second one made in 1925 by Gelegjamts at the Institute of Letters and Documents (Mo. Sudar Bichgiin Khüreeleen). Shagdaryn Bira published an annotated modern Mongolian translation of the Tibetan original (1995, 7–25), whereas Bareja-Starzyńska (2015) published an annotated English translation of the same text with added chapters on Tibeto-Mongol historical analyses.

reincarnation after Bensa Bürülgü<sup>6</sup> is said to have bestowed the name Luvsandambijantsan (lBo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan) and Mahākāla's *rjes gnang* (empowerment) on him (Bira 1995, 8; Bareja-Starzyńska 2010, 245). According to some other texts, Bensa Bürülgü also bestowed the ordination vows of *rabjung* (Tib. *rab byung*) on him (Bawden 1961, 43–45). The Panchen Lama is said to have confirmed the Dalai Lama's recognition and proclaimed Zanabazar as the reincarnation of Tāranātha (Bira 1995, 9; Bareja-Starzyńska 2010, 246). The same Panchen Lama later bestowed on him the vows of a *getsul* (Tib. *dge tshul*, monastic novice) (Bawden 1961, 44).

On the Tibetan side, hagiographies of both the Dalai and Panchen Lamas repeatedly refer to Zanabazar as Jamyang Tulku ('Jam dbyang sprul sku), suggesting a vision of him as embodiment of Mañjuśrī and mostly referring to his reincarnation of Jamyang Chöje ('Jam dbyangs chos rje, 1379–1449), the famous disciple of Tsongkhapa, who also was the founder and the first abbot of Drepung (Tib. 'Dras spungs). These Tibetan references to Zanabazar and the political alliances of the time led scholars Gene Smith, Miyawaki Junko, Christopher Atwood, and Bareja-Starzyńska to point out that Zanabazar's recognition as the reincarnation of Tāranātha was a complicated political construct (Smith 1969; Junko 1994, 50–53; Atwood 2004, 267; Bareja-Starzyńska 2010, 249).

Oral histories date Tāranātha's presence in Mongolia to the times prior to the Qing and Zanabazar, and they include the stories of Zanabazar's ancestral kin Abatai Khan (1554–1588)'s connection with the Jonangpa historian. According to these histories, which are recorded in Mongolian hagiographies of Zanabazar, Abatai saw him in Khalkha Mongolia at the site where the Tibetan teacher was burning incense, and where Abatai Khan built the Erdene Zuu Monastery later in 1586.<sup>7</sup> According to the other legend, Abatai paid homage to Tāranātha in person and invited him to come to the Khalkha, when the master replied to him with his famous prophecy: "I surely can come to the Khalkha. This time I can't as I am an old man. In future, I will come as a young man to the Khalkha" (Soninbayar 1999, 56). Moreover, what was believed to be Tāranātha's head was worshipped in Khalkha Mongolia for centuries in a special ritual called *böndgöriin takhilga* (the worship of the head) and was kept in the Bogd Khan Palace Museum (Soninbayar 1999, 65).<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Khalkha nobility's efforts to import a lineage of Jonangpa scholar Tāranātha among the Borjigid (Chinggisid) family line suggests their initial will to stay independent of the Géluk. That desire was soon altered by the Géluk-educated adherents, including Zanabazar's own disciples, such as Luvsanprinlei, who underwent long and substantial training in the Géluk institutions. The initial Khalkha po-

<sup>6</sup> Bensa Bürülgü (dBen sa sprul sku) in Mongolian sources refers to the Panchen Lama's disciple Khedrub Sangye Yeshe's (mKhas grub sangs rgyas ye shes, 1525–1590) second reincarnation Lobsang Tenzin Gyatso (lBo bzang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, 1605–1643/44). See Smith (1969, 12; Bareja-Starzyńska 2010, 244).

<sup>7</sup> According to Mongolian Tibetologist D. Dashbadrakh (1995), there are fifteen handwritten manuscripts of Zanabazar's Mongolian hagiographies. None of these sources have been studied.

<sup>8</sup> See more discussion on this ritual in Uranchimeg (forthcoming).

sition was also quickly maneuvered by clever actions of the Dalai Lama’s political establishment to elevate and establish his status among the Khalkha as a Géluk disciple akin to their strategic support of Galdan Boshogtu (1644–1697) bestowing titles upon him (Elverskog 2006; Schwieger 2015). As Luvsanprinlei received his full ordination from the Dalai Lama in 1664, the latter instructed him “to reject the teachings of the Nyingma which are said to appear in Mongolia and to spread teachings of the Victorious Tsongkhapa” (Bareja-Starzyńska 2015, 30). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Zanabazar’s hagiographers had to elaborate on a mysteriously speedy trip of Zanabazar to visit and conduct a long-life ceremony for an aged Panchen Lama in 1655 and 1656, receive from him initiations into Vajrabhairava, get instructions from the Dalai Lama in *Lamrim* and *Kadam Legbam*—both strictly Géluk works—and bring Géluk teachings and culture to Khalkha (Bareja-Starzyńska 2015, 125–126).

A short undated letter by the Fifth Dalai Lama, mentioned in Zanabazar’s later hagiography of 1839 by Agwaan Ishtüvden Ravjamba Ngaggi Wangpo (Ngag dbang ye shes thub bstan rab ’byams pa ngag gi dbang po), and which still survives in his volume of correspondences, is the single Tibetan text that mentions Zanabazar’s reincarnation of Tāranātha being recognized by Tibetan Géluk leaders in 1645, that is, when Zanabazar was ten years old (Dashbadrakh 1995; Khürelbaatar 2001; Bareja-Starzyńska 2010, 249). It is also the sole document that demonstrates just how the Khalkha’s initial interest in the following Jonang—and thereby non-Géluk (even anti-Géluk, given the Géluk hostility against the Jonangpas)—aspirations were transformed into a single Géluk vision. The text, titled *Scent of Malaya ascended to the ears of Vajra on the occasion of the birth of Khalkha Tūsheet Khan’s son, the reincarnation of Jonang reincarnate Kunga Nyingpo famed as the reincarnation of Jamyang Chöje Tashi Phalden* (Tib. *’Jam dbyang chos rje bkra shis dpal ldan pa’i skye bar grags pa jo nang sprul sku kun dga’ snying po’i yang srid khar khal thu she ye thu rgyal po’i bu byung ba la springs pa rdo rje’i rna bar ’thul ba’i ma la ya’i dri*), states the following:

From the ocean that possesses the ten powers (Buddha),  
the ocean of the Buddha of the ten powers  
Through its thousand light rays of fame,  
May your lotus wisdom bloom!

The joyful youth of all the Victors’ wisdoms,  
Mañjuśrī [*Zur phud lnga pa*] who took a human form,  
In the time of degeneration, the savior of all sentient beings;  
born in two reincarnations;  
Tsongkhapa, the display of magical net,

[You, the reincarnate] ascend the supreme ladders [of the Buddhas]  
[by] listening, pondering, and meditating  
equipped with wisdom for [your] duties

to elevate the teachings [of the Lord Tsongkhapa],

In that manner, in a youthful form,  
The manifestation of his birth is a new moon [Tib. *chu shil dbang*];  
Rises in the sky [*lha lam*] of the long-life *cakravartin* (universal emperor);  
There is no other but this.

Nature's countless knots of infinite phenomena,  
Unravel [all] at once the supreme teachings of the Buddha.  
It is crucial that he must attend to the responsibility of long toil  
In this unerring method to enter the stages [of spiritual practice] in this manner.

The iron hook of studies that is a long-term training,  
Gathering perfectly all the sutras and tantras like rivers of Ganges.  
He must also attend to the glorious fame of merit and  
skill in taking care of his disciples who are summoned.

Again, from the mouth is the broad forehead;  
Flowing an appropriate expression is the Ganges River;  
The messenger is Bhagīratha [Tib. *skal ldan shing rta*];  
Upon leaving, may it not be forgotten.

This letter is Gandharva;  
The poems of harp held by the hands and  
Embellished with the magnificent seal  
Of indestructible *vajra* ornaments.<sup>9</sup>

The letter, which is written as a set of instructions to young Zanabazar, also suggests a later date (Ngaggi Wangpo mentions that the letter was sent to Zanabazar at the age of ten) (Agwaan Ishtüvden Ravjamba [1839] 1982, fol. 610), and its title clearly emphasizes Zanabazar's association with Tsongkhapa's disciple Jamyang Chöje, as well as his mission to bring the Géluk teachings to Khalkha Mongolia.

Zanabazar's own writings, however, do not emphasize Géluk teaching over others, and he mentions protagonists and teachers of other sects, such as Nyingma scholar Rongzom Chozang and Sakya and Jonang lamas, including Tāranātha and Kunga Drolchok, among his masters (Byambaa 2004, fol. 26, 28–29). This list, which is provided by Zanabazar himself in his *gsung gtor*, demonstrates that Zanabazar, akin to Tāranātha,

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<sup>9</sup> This letter (TBRC W20448) has been fairly well known to the writers of Zanabazar's hagiography and is included in several of his hagiographies by Agwaan Ishtüvden Ravjamba ([1839] 1982), Agwaan Luvsandonov ([1874] 1995), and Davgajantsan ([1912] 1995). I thank Nancy Lin and Khenpo Yeshi for helping me translate this letter.



saw himself and was seen as a lineage holder in all sects for the Mongols (Bareja-Starzyńska 2008, 52).

This attitude is supported by Zanabazar's own art and writing, in which the selection of deities, their forms, iconographies, and styles suggest a ground-building, rather than sectarian, approach, and that he meant to found a specific tradition of Mongolian Buddhist practice. His writings also include a substantial number of texts dedicated to nonsectarian deities essential to Buddhist teachings, such as Prajñāpāramitā; he discusses Géluk views, such as the Three Principles of the Path—renunciation, enlightened mind, and wisdom— but also non-Géluk views, such as self-occurring gnosis, among others.<sup>10</sup> In keeping with his previous rebirths as masters of diverse schools, Zanabazar lists many non-Géluk lamas among his own teachers, suggesting that his sectarian affiliation was in fact complex and multifold. A popular belief based on some other Mongolian-language hagiographies spread the notion of the existence of a Sakya teacher named Samdanjamts, thus allying Zanabazar with the Sakyapa and identifying him as a follower of the Mongol imperial lineage of practice (Damdinsüren 1993). The Jonangpa was not entirely hostile to the Sakyapa, as Jonang lineage holders (such as Kunga Drolchok) were also Sakya masters. In his own writing, Zanabazar further mentions the founding masters of the Kagyu, such as Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa, and Pakmo Drupa, when he prays to the lineage lamas through whom he received teachings (Byambaa 2004). In other words, he echoes Tsongkhapa, also known for his open and inclusive attitude toward learning.<sup>11</sup> Zanabazar aligns himself with Tsongkhapa not by spreading Géluk practices but as a reformer and a builder of a new Buddhist tradition in Mongolia, where the focus was on the foundation of tantric practices shared by various lineages and traditions.

This nonsectarian attitude was the most critical reason for the Dzungar leader Gal-dan Boshogtu, himself a Géluk adherent and a follower of the Dalai Lama, to pursue Zanabazar with the goal of extinguishing his practices and his dharma seat. Both men were

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<sup>10</sup> Zanabazar, among others, uses the phrase “*Rang byung ye shes snang ba rgyas par shog*” (May the manifestation of the self-occurring gnosis be expanded!), which is more relevant to Jonang doctrinal teachings. The concept of a manifestation of the self-occurring gnosis is not commonly discussed in standard Géluk doctrinal teachings, and this vocabulary is just not used by Gélukpas. This is because, from the standard Géluk perspective, there can be the danger that a self-occurring or self-arising phenomenon may potentially imply some sort of independent self-existing reality. I thank Erdenebaatar Erdene-Ochir for indicating this point. See more in Zanabazar (2004, fol. 34).

<sup>11</sup> Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Géluk school, is known to be a devoted student of masters of various schools. Similarly, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and the Fourth Panchen Lama (1570–1662) were also known for their broad and open approaches to other schools, as noted by Gene Smith (1969, 3–4) and Samten Karmay (2014, 10). However, the Dalai Lama and his regent Desi Sangye Gyatso (sDe srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653–1705) were particularly intolerant to the Jonang school in Tibet. After the Géluk victory over the Kagyu school in Central Tibet in 1642, the Géluk were intolerant toward all other non-Géluk schools outside Tibet and purged those who proliferated non-Géluk teachings. See, for example, Kollmar-Paulenz (2008, 13–27).

blessed by the Dalai Lama, and Zanabazar was a noble descendant of the Golden Lineage (Mo. *Altan urag*) of imperial kinship, so the reasons for Galdan's incessant raids on Zanabazar have been a topic of discussion.<sup>12</sup> Galdan achieved his goal in 1689 when Dzungar armies discovered Ribogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling (Ri bo dge rgyas dga' Idan bshad sgrub gling) Monastery, locally known by its Mongolian name Saridag, well hidden in the dense woods and mountains, and obliterated the site. Zanabazar henceforth converted his encampment *khüree* into his main dharma seat and his mobile *khüree* moved constantly across Mongolia, allowing him to escape from Dzungar assaults and widely propagate the dharma among the nomadic population (Uranchimeg 2009). Zanabazar's single Géluk association came to be overly emphasized, silencing his other teachings in his hagiographies written by his followers who were Géluk monks trained in Géluk institutions. This was a strategy the Géluk deployed to dominate Khalkha Mongolia from the time of Zanabazar onward.

### Recent Archeological Findings and New Visual Evidence

According to Zanabazar's hagiographies, he built Ribogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling as his dharma seat soon after his first trip to Tibet in the Wooden Horse Year of 1654 on the site of the Khan Khentii Mountains (Bira 1995, 15). After the monastery was destroyed by Galdan Boshogtu, the site was abandoned and was completely covered by bushes and trees. The site, sometimes confused with Khentii province (Mo. *aimag*), is located in Erdene *soum*<sup>13</sup> of Töv *aimag* (Central province). The monastery, known to locals as Saridagiin Khiid, or khiitiin Saridag, appears to be the second major Vajrayāna complex built in Mongolia after Erdene Zuu Monastery, which was established in 1586 by Zanabazar's great-grandfather Abatai Khan.

The site was fairly well known to scholars and the local population, and brief expeditions were undertaken as early as 1915 and 1923 (Chuluun 2015a, 2015b).<sup>14</sup> During the socialist period, the site did not receive any scholarly attention. However, the restriction on Buddhism was lifted in 1990. In 1995, an archeological expedition visited the site, resulting in a first preliminary report that included a site map.<sup>15</sup> One of the difficulties of expanding the investigation has been the inaccessibility of the site, which is surrounded by mountains and completely covered by dense woods. In 2013, a new expedi-

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Schwieger states that Zanabazar's short stay in Tibet was insufficient to form a close bond with the Dalai and Panchen Lamas whereas Galdan Boshogtu, who maintained regular contact with the Dalai Lama, was a loyal Géluk defendant (2015, 74–75).

<sup>13</sup> A smaller administrative unit within a province.

<sup>14</sup> In 1915 and 1916, a Russian expedition led by P. A. Vitte conducted the first onsite research, followed by a Mongolian expedition from the Institute of Letters and Documents in 1923.

<sup>15</sup> This expedition and its report was conducted by another archeologist U. Erdenebat. The ongoing expedition released two reports: Chuluun (2015a, fn. 22) and a small color exhibition catalogue (Chuluun 2015b).

tion from the Institute of History and Archeology at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences under the leadership of Dr. Sampildondovin Chuluun began its work. In the first year of excavation, the expedition unearthed the foundations of several buildings, which led to the creation of a revised architectural plan of the complex.

The expedition revealed twelve buildings and three stupas protected by a stone wall. Although excavation of the main assembly hall, which Chuluun proposes was called Tsogchin Dugang<sup>16</sup> is ongoing, it clearly was surrounded by a protecting stone wall about 1 meter deep (Chuluun 2015a).<sup>17</sup> The main assembly hall (figure 2), a two-story limestone building on a platform 1.5 meters high, was 92 x 75 meters in size, with doors to the south, west, and east.<sup>18</sup> Chuluun's findings further suggest that each building was different in architectural form, design, and building structure.

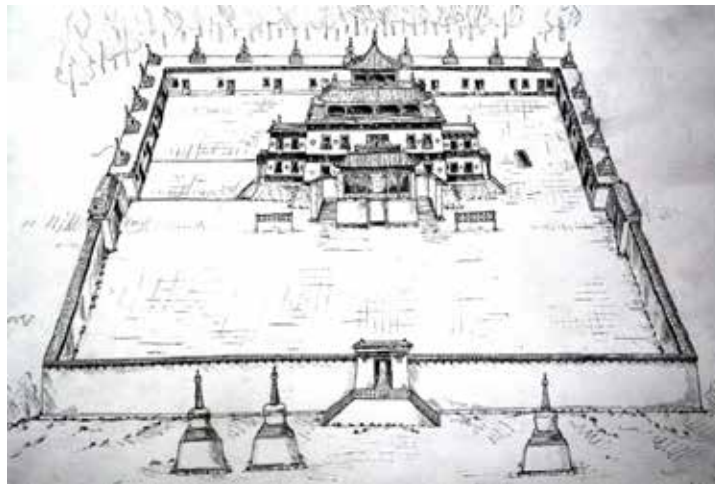


Figure 2. Approximate reconstructive drawing of the main assembly hall, Saridag Monastery, 1654–1689. *Source:* Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

The excavation of the main assembly hall has unearthed numerous clay Buddha statues approximately 15 centimeters in height (figure 3), as well as fragments of the fingers and feet of a large standing Buddha statue (figure 4).

<sup>16</sup> Tsogchin dugang (Tib. *tshogs chen 'du khang*) is likely a later term; it is highly plausible that in 1654 other Mongolian terms—such as *lkh Zuu*, *lkh süm*, *Baishing*—were used in the Mongol architectural constructions, as evidenced by other sites in Inner and Outer Mongolia.

<sup>17</sup> The defense wall also had fourteen small rooms built adjacent to the northern wall and five rooms along the western and eastern walls.

<sup>18</sup> The building construction consisted of rows of big stones sandwiching from two to four rows of thin stone slabs.



Figure 3 (left). Fragments of Buddha statues, clay, Saridag Monastery, 1654–1689. *Source:* Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

Figure 4 (right). Fragments of monumental Buddha statues, clay, Saridag Monastery, 1654–1689. *Source:* Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

There were several of these colossal Buddhas, with hands and feet measuring 130 and 120 centimeters, respectively. The statues originally stood on large lotus thrones along the walls at a distance of about 30 to 50 centimeters apart. The main assembly hall also had other equally monumental and most likely seated sculptural images of the Buddha. One remaining piece of a thigh from a large Buddha statue measured 1.4 meters in height and 80 centimeters in diameter. The lotus pedestal where it was positioned is 2.6 meters in diameter. Offerings to the deity—including grains, walnuts, fruits with large seeds, yellow grain, as well as the eight auspicious symbols were also found (figure 5).



Figure 5. One of eight auspicious symbols, clay, Saridag Monastery, 1654–1689. *Source:* Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

The most important findings in this complex are approximately three thousand clay Buddha statues of the Five Tathāgatas (figure 6) that are all similar in style, construction, and size. All of these statues represent the Five Buddhas with Vajradhātu Vairocana. The set of clay sculptures of the Five Tathāgatas was likely produced using a single mold, as the features of the statues are identical in size, shape, and detail. Their style and iconography do not represent any specific sectarian connections, and they do not follow seventeenth-century Géluk-favored models.



Figure 6. The Five Buddhas, clay, Saridag Monastery, 1654–1689. *Source:* Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

The clay images represent Buddhas seated on double-lotus thrones similar to those in Zanabazar’s gilt-bronze sculptures of the Twenty-One Tārās,<sup>19</sup> and they appear without much ornamentation, in the emanation-body (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*) form. Their bodies show the fine symmetry and robust character of the Buddhas, who differ only in their mudras, or hand gestures. The set has also survived in remarkable bronzes that Zanabazar executed “with his own hands,” as Luvsanprinlei states in his biography, at the same time period in the early 1680s and possibly at the same place (figure 7) (Bareja-Starzyńska 2015, 136–137).

<sup>19</sup> They belong to the set of Twenty-One Tārās, according to the Nāgārjuna and Atīśa of Suryagupta cycle tradition and are currently housed in Bogd Khan Palace Museum. For a longer discussion of Zanabazar’s Tārās, see Uranchimeg (2015, 123–126).



Figure 7. Amitabha, from the set of Five Buddhas, gilt bronze, ca. 1683. *Source:* Tsultem (1982a, pl. 26). Courtesy of the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar.

The same set, made in the form of large gilt bronzes, are significantly different and more sophisticated in style, decor, and modeling than the clay Buddhas. In the gilt-bronze set of the Five Tathāgatas, Vairocana (figure 8) is visually distinct, with a larger body and enhanced ornamentation that takes up a major part of his upper torso. These gilt bronzes of the Five Tathāgatas, White Tārā, and Amitāyus, and the set of Vajradhāra and Vajrasattva—all of which exhibit a similar style and high level of quality in their fabrication—are also believed to have been made at Saridag Monastery (Uranchimeg 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Zanabazar is also known for having made the Three Buddhas in addition to his two sets of Five Buddhas. Except for the Three Buddha Families, all of these statues are preserved and housed in



Figure 8 (left). Vairocana, from the set of Five Buddhas, gilt bronze, ca. 1683. *Source:* Tsultem (1982a, pl. 16). Courtesy of the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar.

Figure 9 (right). Vairocana, clay, Saridag Monastery, 1654–1689. There are several important differences between these two Vairocanas: style, iconography, material, and construction. Unlike the bronze in figure 8, this clay Vairocana is not the central figure in the set of Five Buddhas. *Source:* Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

The Five Tathāgatas are typically depicted in body-of-bliss (*sambhogakāya*) form—and the bronze statues follow that tradition. The central Vajradhātu Vairocana (figure 8), as is the case in the bronze set, refers to the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, a yoga tantra scripture and one of the seminal texts of Buddhist tantric practice. Yet the clay statues of the Five Buddha Families in emanation-body form (figure 9) only indirectly refer to the yoga tantra text and rather represent other configurations, such as the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, or it may well be that they are used for the Thousand Buddhas of the current eon (Skt. *bhadrakalpa*) as well.<sup>21</sup>

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different collections throughout Ulaanbaatar, such as the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Art, Gandan Monastery, and Choijin Lama Temple Museum.

<sup>21</sup> I thank Professor Christian Luczanits for his important insights and consultation on this iconography.

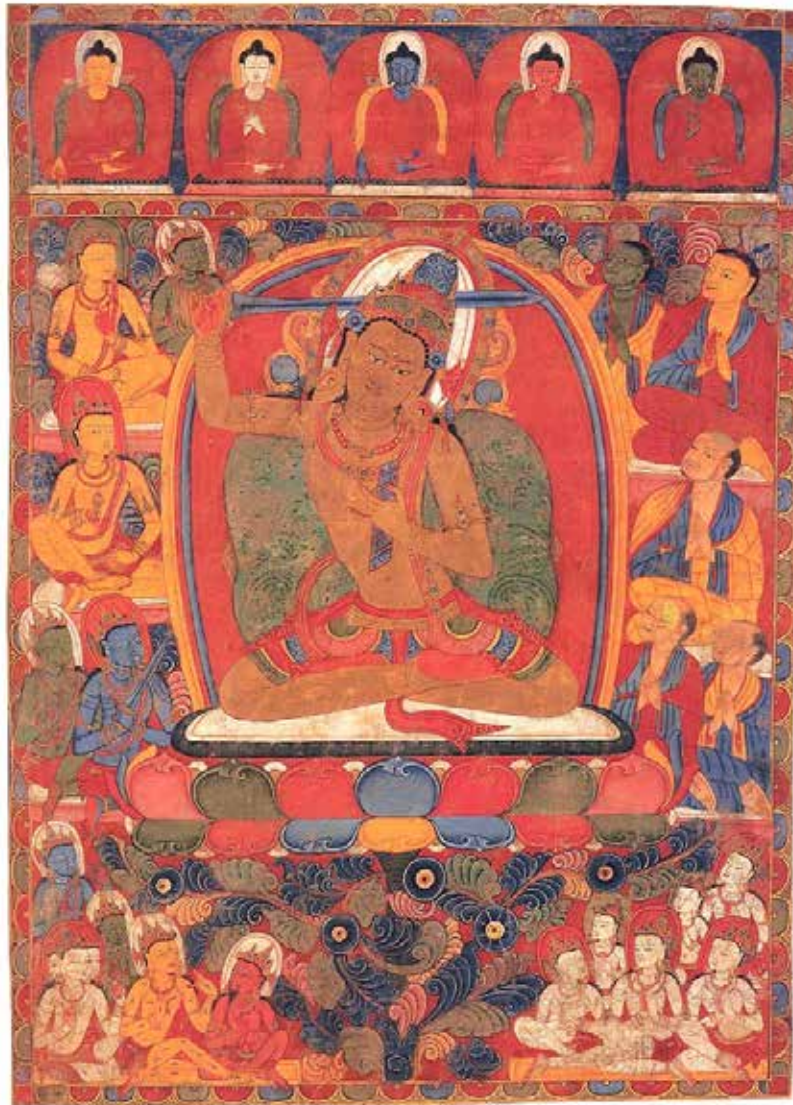


Figure 10. Mañjuśrī, *thangka*, Central Tibet, twelfth c. Source: Kossak and Singer (1998, pl. 7).

Zanabazar's reference to the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* and his clay Buddhas' *nirmāṇa* form is highly reminiscent of a similar approach and production occurring more frequently in early Central Tibetan art (figure 10). Consider, for example, an early Tibetan painted *thangka* of Mañjuśrī and Vairocana dated to about the twelfth century, in which the Five Tathāgatas are placed above the central deity and appear similar in form and shape, differing only in color. In this painting, Vajradhātu Vairocana does not refer to the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, as he is not central, but Akṣobhya appears at the center of the Five Buddhas. Akṣobhya here refers to Mañjuśrī in the center of the com-



position. Likewise, in the clay Buddhas, Vairocana is not central and is very different from Zanabazar's bronze Five Tathāgatas, where Vairocana is visibly distinct as the central deity, with his larger size and enhanced ornamentation.

All of these iconographies with Five Buddhas were popular in early Tibet and do not have any particular sectarian associations; they rarely appear in later Géluk art (Uranchimeg 2010; 2013, 2015, 2016). In seventeenth-century Tibet, the Mahāyoga and Yoginiruttara (formerly known as Anuttara) tantra teachings already dominated Géluk practices, and Zanabazar's art is distinctly silent about his contemporaneous Tibetan iconographies and doctrines.

In other words, the clay statues suggest Zanabazar's advocacy of the earlier non-sectarian forms that he had seen in Ü-Tsang (Central Tibet). My earlier hypothesis in 2009 that Zanabazar's aims were to establish collective practices of dharma that were common to all Buddhist lineages seems further supported by the evidence of this truly massive production of the Five Tathāgatas at the first dharma seat he established in 1654–1688 (Uranchimeg 2009, 2016, forthcoming).



Figure 11. Feet of bodhisattva statues, clay, Saridag Monastery, 1654–1689. *Source:* Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

The findings unearthed at Saridag Monastery include fragments that appear to have come from large bodhisattvas standing on lotus pedestals (figure 11). Thus far, broken parts of ten such statues have been discovered; they may have been part of the Eight (or Sixteen) Mahābodhisattvas, another popular set that often appears among pre-Géluk assemblages of images in Tibet. The Eight Mahābodhisattvas—Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya, Vajrapāṇi, Ākāśagarbha, Kṣitigarbha, Samantabhadra, and Sar-

vanivāraṇa-viṣkambhin—typically accompany a central Buddha, as is seen in early *thangkas* and at such sites such as the eleventh-century Kyangbu (Tib. *rKyang bu*) and Yemar (Ye dmar) (figure 12) in Central Tibet.<sup>22</sup> The central Buddha in these compositions is usually marked by his large size and accompanied by four bodhisattvas on either side. As broken parts of monumental Buddhas have also been discovered at Saridag, though they are as yet unidentified and currently impossible to reconstruct, the presence of compositions reminiscent of early sites at Ü-Tsang, with large Buddhas flanked by the Eight Mahābodhisattvas, is not only plausible but highly likely.



Figure 12. Remains of Buddha and bodhisattva statues, Yemar, Central Tibet, eleventh century.  
*Source:* Vitali (1990, pl. 22).

The mass production of the Five Buddhas suggests that they constituted an important aspect of the iconographic program at Saridag. However, their minor size in relation to the other statues, and their sheer mass quantity, suggest that they were not at the center of the program. Similar to an early Central Tibetan *thangka* of Mañjuśrī (figure 10), it is likely that they accompanied the central Buddha and occupied a large area on their own. At Shalu (Sha lu), a Tibetan Sakya monastery of the fourteenth century, the iconographic program centers on the Five Tathāgatas, which are depicted as a monumental set in the murals, and the wall flanking the Buddhas once included sculptures of numerous smaller *tsha-tsha* (small votive tablets), currently all lost (figure 13).

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<sup>22</sup> See images of the Eight Mahābodhisattvas at early Central Tibetan monasteries, such as Yemar and Kyangbu, in Vitali (1990, pls. 11b–12, 21–23).



Figure 13. Wall in Shalu Monastery, Central Tibet, fourteenth c. *Source:* Photo by the author.

The quantity of these clay Buddhas, and the fact that they were meant to be seen only frontally—the backs are plain and lack any ornamentation, unlike their counterpart bronzes—suggest the possibility that they also occupied entire walls surrounding the monumental Buddhas in the center (which might also have been the Five Buddhas). Or, as later nineteenth-century productions at Ikh Khüree suggest, these statues may have been placed along the back walls behind the main image.

The style of the clay statues is also interesting. Substantially different from the bronze Five Tathāgatas, they indicate the influence of Pāla Indian sculpture and subsequent early Tibetan art compared with statues at the eleventh-century Yemar. The clay sculptures and their style, iconography, size, and relation to the other deities forming the iconographic program all suggest the plausibility of Zanabazar's preference for early Central Tibet, where pre-sectarian practices of tantra were dominant, rather than an exclusive Géluk affiliation.

### Self-Portrait of Zanabazar and the Jebtsundampa Portraiture

Lvsanprinlei opens his biography of his teacher Zanabazar with a list of his ancestors from the Golden Lineage. Yet this list is soon abandoned in the later hagiographies, with the aim of focusing on Zanabazar's Géluk affiliation and his relationships with the Géluk Dalai and Panchen Lamas. Subsequently, these key figures of Géluk power are depicted in the only portrait of him that was made around the time of his death, a date evidenced by the small white sketches of two small stupas on either side of Zanabazar near the bottom of his portrait (figures 1 and 14). These stupas are identified as a Parinirvāṇa stupa (Tib. *myang 'das mchod rten*) (left), and an Enlightenment stupa (Tib. *byang chub mchod rten*) (right).<sup>23</sup>



Figure 14. Detail of Zanabazar's portrait showing two stupas, *thangka*, ca. 1723. *Source:* Courtesy of the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar.

The style of Zanabazar's portrait also suggests a later date. Chinese decorative elements of peonies, the silken embroidery on the back of Zanabazar's throne, and the triangular shape of the mountains suggest affinities with Buddhist artists at Chengde (Berger and Bartholomew 1995, 123–124). This work was likely done by his disciples and followers who—wishing to see him as a Géluk adherent—carefully included the Géluk-favored, six-armed Mahākāla among the protectors and both major Géluk leaders as part of Jebtsundampa's portraiture in order to complement similar textual statements.

Zanabazar's portrait (figure 14) is radically different from what I suggest was a public, unofficial (Mo. *engiin*) Mongol portrait (figure 15) based on an oral legend. Zanabazar's public portrait was specifically intended to be seen, owned, and worshipped by Mongol devotees—thus, the medium of woodblock printing was the best choice for the purpose of mass production. The legend describes Zanabazar as instructing his disciples that his “learned image” should show him seated in a Mongolian robe clasping a sword

<sup>23</sup> Haderer (2012), referring to Preschern (2011).

of knowledge in his right hand, akin to Mañjuśrī, and holding fat from a sheep's tail in his left hand, in keeping with an old Mongolian head-of-household tradition (Ichinnorov 1998, 49–50). According to this tradition, it is only the male head of the household who slices a sheep's tail for his family.



Figure 15. Zanabazar's Mongol portrait, woodblock print, eighteenth century. *Source:* Courtesy of the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar.

The vision of depicting Zanabazar as a Géluk adherent was continued and maintained in all of the diverse portraits of Jebtsundampa reincarnations produced in various media. The images of Tsongkhapa, Géluk-favored deities such as Guhyasamāja, Palden Lhamo, Vajrabhairava, and Yama, as well as the Dalai and Panchen Lamas typically accompany the Jebtsundampa rulers in their portraits, thereby indicating a clear Géluk presence. Unlike Zanabazar, who always appears without a hat, his successors are often depicted in the yellow *paṇḍita* hat of the Géluk school, or with a *vajra*-topped hat that

alludes to their relationship to the Third Dalai Lama and to Abatai Khan, thus claiming direct connections to both the Géluk and the Mongol hereditary imperial pedigree (Pozdneev 1880, 33).<sup>24</sup> It is, however, only in Zanabazar's portrait that *both* the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama are depicted together presiding over the new reincarnate ruler in Khalkha Mongolia, recalling both lamas' endorsement of his reincarnation early in his childhood. The painting follows the textual sources and is another piece of evidence demonstrating that the Géluk dominion was gradually and deliberately built up in Khalkha Mongolia in concert with the Jebtsundampa lineage.



Figure 16 (left). Zanabazar, Buddha, gilt bronze, late seventeenth century. *Source:* Courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 17 (right). Zanabazar, Mañjuśrī Buddha, gilt bronze, seventeenth century. *Source:* Courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

Both textual and visual materials, especially those from current archeological findings, suggest that Zanabazar recalled the renowned Tibetan reformer Tsongkhapa in his open attitude to practices and doctrines regardless of sectarian boundaries. With his hereditary imperial pedigree, Zanabazar's authority for rulership was secured, and thus Galdan's fight against Zanabazar cannot be seen only as a power struggle between the Khalkha and the Dzungar Mongols. Zanabazar's ability to build up his dharma seat Ri-

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<sup>24</sup> Jebtsundampa inherited this hat from Abatai Khan, who had received it from the Third Dalai Lama as a symbol of the Khalkha's supreme authority.

bogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling as the second Vajrayāna complex in Mongolia was clearly not limited to Géluk or any other sectarian preferences. New findings from the archaeological excavations at Saridag further reinforce our understanding of Zanabazar's preference for early Central Tibetan iconographic programs and deities, and his selection of their by-then-outmoded styles as the basis for his own new art. Galdan's incessant attacks on Zanabazar, which ultimately led to the destruction of his dharma seat, were due precisely to Zanabazar's independence from the Géluk order, which was undesirable from the perspective of the growing authority of the Géluk institutionalized church that Galdan supported. Zanabazar's own writings and his art, including the images he produced for the Qing court (figures 16 and 17), suggest the formation of his Buddhist identity as a genuine nonsectarian Buddhist leader, reminiscent of other similar cases in Mongolia and Tibet in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries (Kollmar-Paulenz 2008, 13–27).

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