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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3gk2k6cp>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(31)

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Publication Date

2019-06-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3gk2k6cp#supplemental>

Photo Essay

In Search of the Khutugtu's Monastery: The Site and Its Heritage

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Chuluun, Sampildondovin. 2019. "In Search of the Khutugtu's Monastery: The Site and Its Heritage." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (e-journal) 31: 244–256. <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-31/chuluun>.

Introduction

About 70 kilometers northeast of Mongolia's capital of Ulaanbaatar, in the Saridag Mountains of Khan Khentii, a range that includes Chinggis Khan's sacred Burkhan Khaldun,¹ lie the ruins of a seventeenth-century monastery. The site was first reported by Russian scholars in the early twentieth century, and in 1915 a Russian expedition conducting the first Mongolian population census visited this site; however, they did not explore it. Since then, no excavations have been made at this site (figure 1)² due to the inaccessible nature of the landscape that requires substantial technical and human resources. In addition to being discouraged by the size and physical difficulties of the terrain, scholars generally were not much interested in the research of seventeenth-century city planning and architecture of Mongolia.

Since 2010, despite scarce funding, I have excavated and studied this site, and for the past two years I have also collected and studied the oral history of the area, which credits Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar (1635–1723) as the founder of the complex.³ Discovering the timeline of this site became my primary goal. Thus, we began our project titled "A Seventeenth-Century City" in 2013 and made a record of about ten sites of city ruins from this time period. On October 15, 2013, we decided to start off

¹ Burkhan Khaldun is the mountain site where Chinggis Khan is believed to have been born. It is also believed to be the site of his tomb. This site is mentioned in the thirteenth-century Mongolian literary work *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Mo. *Mongolyn nuuts tovchoo*). Numerous English translations of this work are available (see, Urgunge 2001).

² All images in this photo essay have been provided by S. Chuluun and are used with permission of the Institute of History and Archeology at the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia.

³ Conversation on October 15, 2013 with N. Enkhbayar, a local herder at Môngönmorit *soum* (district) of Töv *aimag* (province).

with the first, and most difficult, site on the list, Saridag Monastery (*khiitiin Saridag*).⁴ Since that decision, we have conducted three excavations, each ranging from two weeks to three months, and we will continue this work for another year or two. In this essay, I report the initial findings from our excavations.

Sources about the Khutugtu's Monastery and Previous Expeditions

We find information about this monastery in a manuscript titled *Bogd Jivzundambyn ankhny törliin new oshivoi* (Cl. Mo. *Oḡda jibjundamba blam-a-yin anḡqan töröl-ün ner-e orusibai*) (Bogda Jebtsundampa's first incarnation): "The eleventh year of the Blue Horse Year of the Shunzhi Emperor (1654), Bogd Jebtsundampa established his Dharma Ikh Khüree Ribogejai-Gandanshaddublin [*ribogejaiyangdanšaddubling*] to proliferate the Yellow Faith in the land of Khalkha in the Khentii Mountains."⁵

In Ikh Khüree's 1925 *bca 'yig* (monastic regulations), the year 1654 is also mentioned as the foundation of the First Jebtsundampa Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar's monastery, which was built with stone, bricks, and wood in the Khentii Mountains. In his construction work, Zanabazar had assistance from the Tibetan Dalai and Panchen Lamas. Zaya Paṅḡita Luvsanprinlei's hagiography of Zanabazar contains several pieces of information pertaining to this monastery. This hagiography states (original spelling):

Later from the main [office] [an order was issued] that the Namgyel College's preceptor (*slob dpon*) was made the [Jetsundampa's] college lama. He was [the one who was] bestowed [the title] of abbot of [the monastery of] Jayul, the Sharkhang Kukye.

The manager responsible for the common funds of Drepung [Monastery] was made the [Jetsundampa's] college treasurer. And a chant master from the main assembly hall of Drepung was made a cantor of this college.

And His Highest Honor's chamberlain Kharnag Chodze [was made] a general manager.

The reincarnation of Jampa Lingpa as a household official (*gsol dpon*) [and] a lama physician Dagpo Drungtsoba [were sent].

[And] a painter from Chenye and others, altogether as many as fifty Tibetan monks, were ready to offer themselves in service. [When] this was noticed by the great lama, he paid them back with unsurpassed rewards.

⁴ Local people call this site *khiitiin Saridag* (literally, "Saridag of Khiit"), as the river to the southwest is called Khiit. The Khiit River flows into the Tuul (Tola) River. The site is also known as Saridagiin Monastery.

⁵ *Bogda jibjundamba blam-a-yin anḡqan töröl-ün ner-e orusibai* (28/96, vol. 12).

He was invited to nominate the throne master of the Lord [Tsongkhapa's] chief spiritual advisor (*chos rje*) Dondub Rinchen's monastery Jakhung Drag. In winter of the Hare Year (1651), he went to [his] encampment. (Bareja-Starzyńska 2015, 120–122)

From this passage, it is evident that Zanabazar returned from Tibet accompanied by fifty Tibetans. In this text, as well as in other sources, such as a hagiography written by Agwaan Ishtüvden Ravjamba, we find some information that mentions Zanabazar discussing with the Dalai Lama the possibility of building a monastery and the Tibetan teacher's supportive response to this idea. Yet, we do not find any information about how that monastery was built. Agwaan Ishtüvden Ravjamba writes:

When Zanabazar reported to the Victorious One [the Dalai Lama] about building a monastery, he rejoiced and said, "Dharma will be of great benefit for all sentient beings." He further gave elaborate instructions on how to accomplish the deed. The Dalai Lama recognized him as a reincarnation of the Jetsundampa and [appointed] fifty people to accompany him [to Khalkha], including a reincarnation of Shireet Rinpoche Sanja Rinchen; Agwaanluvsandanzan, a teacher from Namgyal Monastery who was well-known as a reincarnate of Jayul's Khenpo Nanbai Shargan; an accountant of Drepung's *jas* [Tib. *spyi gsog*] to manage the finances; Jambalinbaenba's reincarnation to serve as *soivon* [assistant]; his own administrative assistant Garnagchoizod to serve [Zanabazar]; Dagvadrunchabo as his doctor; Drepung *dukhang's umzad* [chant master] now to be his monastery's *umzad*; and a painter Jan-Yaibaeinba. (Agwaan Ishtüvden Ravjamba [1839] 1982)

This passage essentially says that the Dalai Lama provided Zanabazar with not only important teachers and lamas from Tibetan monasteries but also Tibetan artists. Zaya Paṇḍita, a witness to the events, clarifies for us two important dates in relation to Ikh Khüree: in the Iron Monkey Year of 1680, the external walls of Ribogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling were finished, and in the Fire Tiger Year of 1686, the buildings were complete and art production finished, followed by a ritual (*mashid orshikh khemeekh yoslol*). This passage tells us that the construction work at Ribogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling continued for thirty-two years from the Wooden Horse Year of 1654 until 1686. Zanabazar's Mongolian hagiography translated and annotated by Charles Bawden provides similar information: "They [the Dalai and Panchen Lamas] said: "It would be best if you [Zanabazar] were to go back and establish temples and monasteries in the land of the Khalkhas" (Bawden 1961, 45).

In addition to Mongolian primary sources about the site, a Russian archival document also contains information about this monastery, albeit its author, a Russian

envoy, did not actually reach the site as Zanabazar did not accept him (Slesarchuk 1996, 132).

Yet, none of these sources provide any information about how Ribogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling was built. Very limited information can be found about Zanabazar's sculptures, including the Five Buddhas. Because the Five Buddhas are essential in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zanabazar's choice of these deities in establishing Ikh Khüree comes as no surprise.⁶ With regard to the artistic production at the site, Zaya Paṇḍita further writes:

From Ü-Tsang precious Kanjur [canonical Buddhist texts] pressed in the type of bronze that comes from Jang was brought.

In the encampment, where he stayed, the original manuscript of the Kanjur was taken as a model and it was again written down at least two times. Moreover, the Vajradhāra [Buddha image] was made by the Lord with his own hands and numerous golden cast images starting with those of the "five great families" of the Victorious [One] were well produced under the Lord's direction

and, moreover, eight beautiful great silver stupas of the Enlightened One and very many of the three kinds of relics. (Bareja-Starzyńska 2015, 136–137)

These textual sources tell us that Dorjechang, or Vajradhāra, was made by Zanabazar's own hands and was, and remains to be, the primary deity in Ikh Khüree. As such, it is currently worshipped as the most important image in Gandantegchinling Monastery in Ulaanbaatar. It should be noted that Zaya Paṇḍita Luvsanprinlei's text is bereft of tales and legends typical in later hagiographies of Zanabazar and thus is more reliable. The fact that major artworks were completed and consecrated during the summer of 1686 demonstrates that the site was a center of Buddhism and art at the time. However, this situation did not last long, as scholars suggest that Galdan Boshogtu and his armies reached the Khentii Mountains in 1688 and completely destroyed the monastery (Khurelbaatar 2009, 76–77).

Zaya Paṇḍita suggests how the monastery fell victim to civil war:

In the second month of the Earth Dragon Year of Namjun (*rnam 'byung*), Boshogtu raised his soldiers from his own lands and conquered about two principalities (i.e. noble's divisions) called Eljigen of the right wing of Khalkha. Then, gradually, he [Galdan Boshogtu] arrived at the land of Khalkha majority. Owing to his advanced merits all Khalkha fled. The Erdeni Juu monastery and other famous temples and monasteries were

⁶ Uranchimeg Tsultemin has written extensively about Zanabazar's selection of deities and his pantheon. See Uranchimeg (2009, 2010, 2015).

damaged one by one. Some were destroyed and at some [monasteries] images, both great and small, were destroyed, while the monastery Ribo Gegye Ling was demolished completely and many other wrong deeds were done. (Bareja-Starzyńska 2015, 150–151, original spelling)

It is clear from this document that the dharma seat Ribogejashaduvlin burned down, a fact also revealed by our excavations as we unearthed theretofore untouched burned wood and charred clay statues from the main assembly hall. Oral histories about the burning of the monastery add validity to the textual source and our excavation results.

In 1689, Galdan Boshogtu's armies crossed the Kherlen River in their search for Zanabazar and Tüsheet Khan, as stated in a document written for Russia.⁷ All of this proves that Zanabazar's dharma seat was active from 1654 until the late 1680s.

In 1915, Russian scholar A. C. Kozin led an expedition into the Khan Khentii Mountains and visited the remains of Saridag Monastery. A government report dated May 23, 1922 described a plan for a follow-up expedition:

It was approved that the member of this institute and its secretary, Bat-Ochir, would send a Russian scholar [V. I.] Lisovskii, who was to draw the map, and the interpreter Buryat Dorj to hire horses and chariots to visit ruins of Saridagiin Monastery, complete the preliminary map that shows the variety of buildings, and record the diversity of plants and botany.⁸

In accordance with this decision, the team completed preparations that included securing an armed guard for this trip within a month, as reported to the government in the following:

The member of our institute Bat-Ochir, the cartographer Lisovskii, interpreter-scribe Buriad Dorj, added by one armed soldier, one man to take care of horses and cattle, two weapons for self-defense, five horses, one chariot, one tent, to explore and make the rough mapping of the ruined Saridag Monastery in the territory of Darkhan chin van Puntsagtsereng Khoshuu.⁹

Upon examination of the site, Lisovskii concluded that it dates not to the period of Zanabazar, but to Chinggis Khan's times as attested by the Russian journal *MONTA* ("Монгольский телеграф агент," Mongolian Telegraph Agency, edition unknown).

⁷ Russian State Archive of Ancient Papers. Repository of Irkutsk, 1121, op. 1, no. 202, fol. 16.

⁸ Mongolian State Central Archive, vol. 23, issue 1, fol. 3.

⁹ Mongolian State Central Archive, vol. 23, issue 1, fol. 1.

In 1990, when the taboo on religious beliefs was lifted, the local museum of Töv Aimag initiated a new expedition to the site conducted by archeologists from the Institute of History and Archeology at the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia (Erdenebat 1995). Twenty-three years after that expedition, in October 2013, the institute launched the current expedition to the site to begin new research on the monastery.

The Khutugtu's Monastery and the Khan Khentii Mountains

In the seventeenth century, the territory of Zanabazar and his brother the TüsHEET Khan Chakhundorj (1634–1698) stretched east from the Kherlen River. Öndör Gegeen moved seasonally in the area between Erdene Zuu Monastery and the Khentii mountain belt, and his dharma seat was built in the easternmost part of this land within the Khan Khentii range. In modern-day Mongolian administrative divisions, this is 85 kilometers north of Töv Aimag's Erdene *soum* in the cradle of the Artsad Saridag Mountains that branch off of the Khan Khentii range (Chuluun, Urtnasan, and Enkhtuul 2015). The landscape here is dominantly taiga forest with tall grassy plants and several riverbeds; travel is thus difficult and possible only by horse (figure 2). Our expedition employed wood and forestry specialists from the National University's School of Biology and Biotechnology, who were able to determine that the wood used in the construction of the monastery was *Larix sibirica* L.¹⁰ Tree-ring dating showed a date of 1465 for the central rings; the outermost rings of the cut wood indicated a date of 1652.¹¹

The monastery is bounded by Songino Mountain to the south and Bukh Yan Mountain to the east. About 8 kilometers to the west lies Khagiin Lake. The Khiitiin River starts from the valley formed by the Saridag, Bukh Yan, and Songino mountains and merges with the Tuul River. The monastery sits about 120 kilometers southwest from Burkhan Khaldun Mountain and can be accessed only from the south and west. Our investigation revealed an old path to the monastery that led through a bridge across the Tuul River and entered from the south.

Excavation: The Discovery of the Khutugtu's City

Eager to delve into the project's primary goal of researching monasteries of the seventeenth century, we neglected the potential climatic hardships and headed to the site in October 2013 before it snowed. Our delay was due to the late date of the permissions issued by the Ministry of Environment. Our team, led by myself, included fourteen historians and archeologists from the Institute of History and Archeology, and we rented horses from Töv Aimag. It took us two days to arrive at our destination.

¹⁰ The study was conducted at the laboratory of tree ring research at National University of Mongolia by Prof. S. Byambagerel and student G. Sainbayar.

¹¹ The dendrochronology was conducted by Prof. N. Baatarbileg and student S. Bayarbaatar at the Department of Forest Studies at National University of Mongolia.

We conducted fieldwork at Saridag Monastery three times from 2013 to 2015, excavating fourteen areas (three areas in 2013, five in 2014, and six in 2015) under the supervision of the archeologist E. Urtnasan, with each visit lasting from two weeks to three months.¹² During our 2015 expeditions, we also cut down trees, cleaned the areas near the enclosing wall, and built protective wooden fencing around the ruins.

Since 2013, our excavation has yielded the dimensions of the compound, which we marked by positioning its four corners as follows: northwest corner, $48^{\circ} 27' 48.1 \text{ N} / 107^{\circ} 59' 33.7 \text{ E}$, southwest corner $48^{\circ} 27' 32.9 \text{ N} / 107^{\circ} 59' 33.7 \text{ E}$, northeast corner $48^{\circ} 27' 48.1 \text{ N} / 107^{\circ} 59' 52.2 \text{ E}$, southeast corner $48^{\circ} 27' 32.9 \text{ N} / 107^{\circ} 59' 52.3 \text{ E}$. The site dimensions are 380 meters wide by 470 meters long by 17.86 meters high.

Urtnasan made a reconstructive drawing of the site, which includes twelve buildings, three stupas, and two stone ramparts (figure 3). Each building that we excavated suggests its own unique structure.

In the southwest, building 1 consists of two sections with staircases on two sides and a middle door. Each section has four rooms, making a total of eight rooms in the building. The highest wall measures 5 meters, and the building is much deteriorated due to natural causes of decay. The measurements of each room are: (1) 11 x 3 meters; (2) 8 x 3 meters; (3) 6 x 2 meters; (4) 7 x 2 meters; (5) 8 x 3 meters; (6) 9 x 7 meters; (7) 8 x 15 meters; (8) 6 x 5 meters.

To the north, adjacent to this structure, is building 2, built on a polished and elevated foundation and containing two small and two big rooms. There is also a flat platform to the right side where a *ger* (yurt) or other type of portable structure was probably erected. Likewise, building 3 is constructed on an elevated asymmetrical platform about 10 meters high on its southern side. The building has a central spacious room and six smaller adjacent rooms on two sides (three each on two sides), making a total of seven rooms.

Building 4 is a central building surrounded by a wall and was possibly the main assembly hall or the temple “Tsogchin Dugang” (figure 4). This spacious temple or the main assembly hall has many rooms to its right and left sides. On both sides of the prominent southern door, we discovered the remains of additional, possibly T-shaped, doors. However, the original shape of the doors is unknown.

Building 5 is located in the northern part of the compound and built on a specially prepared double platform. Building 6, with three rooms, is in northeastern corner and is also placed on a platform. These two buildings face southeast.

In the southeast corner of the site, building 7 is different from others in that its construction stretches from northeast to southwest. Buildings 8 and 9 follow the same design yet, similar to building 10, are heavily deteriorated. Building 11 is built about 300

¹² The funding for the excavations in 2013 and 2014 was provided by the Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences, Mongolia, and Ulaanbaatar’s City Mayor’s Office supplied \$70,000 toward the fieldwork.

meters southeast of Tsogchin Dugang, and its size is 7.5 x 11 meters. The southernmost area also has a platform for a building 12 or possibly a tent.

There were also three stupas erected in a row along the southern wall of the compound. The stupas have never been excavated, but they were likely round in shape with long narrow tops. The two stupas stand together, while the third stupa stands at a distance of 20 meters and appears to be of the same structure. In 1994, U. Erdenebat did some digging near the third stupa. He discovered that the entire compound was surrounded by a 2-meter-wide stone rampart (figure 5) that had gates to the east, south, and west and was protected against rain and flood by trenches to the north and west.

The Khan Khentii belt, where the Saridag Monastery site sits, is one of Mongolia's "Strictly Protected Areas." Therefore, entering, hunting, or building in this zone without special permission is prohibited. In addition, Burkhan Khaldun Mountain and its neighboring territories were registered as UNESCO heritage sites in 2015, so the Mongolian government appoints a designated environmental inspector for this area. The monastery of Chinggis Khan's descendant Zanabazar is the only such site that rests near the great Khan's sacred Burkhan Khaldun Mountain in the Khan Khentii belt, and it has remained virtually unstudied for more than three hundred years.

In 2014 and 2015, our excavation concentrated on Tsogchin Dugang's northern part and yielded numerous Five Buddhas and about ten clay Buddhas 1.5 meters in height (figure 6), with two consecration items known as *shunshig* (Tib. *gzungs gzhus*). When we discovered burned flooring and roof beams, it became clear that the statues had suffered destruction by fire.

Excavations of four layers of the southwestern section of Tsogchin Dugang in 2015 yielded ceramic roof tiles, seven pieces of vertical wooden poles, and many other wooden pieces, the use of which remains unclear. About 60 centimeters into the ground, we discovered a pillar of 24 x 18 centimeters, west of which six wooden poles showed traces of fire damage. The rightmost pole stood 3 meters from the western wall and measured 28 x 28 centimeters, suggesting a possible pillar. In the southwestern corner, amidst many wooden pieces, about 1.5 meters underground, large metal pieces suggested a structure reminiscent of a box, likely a door. In the third layer, there was a conglomeration of roof tiles, in total measuring 4.5 meters, and wooden poles along the western wall, with three thick wooden poles and short, wooden sticks 50 centimeters long. The fourth layer yielded a wooden floor (figure 7). There were large piles of wood, three main pillars, and a wooden staircase darkened by fire with the steps spread at 30-centimeter intervals and angled at nearly 40 degrees. The dig covered an area of 9.2 x 9.3 meters and revealed twenty-eight bases of apparent columns suggesting that the main assembly hall had fifty-six columns. Other findings included a wooden trough 80 centimeters in length, wooden hammers with five heads, and an *arag* (traditional Mongolian basketlike container). In terms of its architecture, we think the main assembly hall was of Tibetan style based on the textual information indicating that

Zanabazar was accompanied by more than fifty Tibetan lamas and artisans (Bira 1995, 9).

One of our most important digs took place from 2014 to 2015 at the southern gate, because it provided information about the wall structure. In 2014, our excavation revealed that the structure had a stone floor and a newly discovered platform 15 centimeters in depth. With further digging, we were able to unearth and determine the structure of the entire southern gate, which suggested its size as 14.5 meters (length) x 4 meters (width), including a staircase 3.5 meters high with sixteen steps. The southern gate was made of wood and measured 2.2 meters (height) x 2.2 meters (width); its front part was built of stone and polished with white chalk. The gate opened in both directions and had metal hinges and railings and a rounded metal handle. Entering through this gate, one walked down a corridor of 3.5 meters (width) x 3.5 meters (length) and faced an interior door of 9.25 meters (width) x 6.25 meters (length). We suggest that this door had ten pillars and a clay roof reminiscent of a stupa.

Our excavation findings can be divided into Buddhist items and architectural construction pieces that open new areas of research into seventeenth-century Mongolian Buddhist culture as well as weaponry and other material culture of the time. Heretofore, Zanabazar's works were not thought to include clay or ceramic pieces; this project demonstrates the existence of other themes and materials in his works. Among our most prominent findings are about three thousand Five Buddhas (figures 8 and 9), a clay ornament with *ratna* (jewel), eight auspicious offerings made of clay (figure 10), a Buddha statue cast in copper (figure 11), clay Buddha *tsha tshas* (small votive tablets) (figure 12), and cloud-shaped ornaments for an offering table (figure 13).

A monumental Buddha statue was unearthed in the northwestern corner of Tsogchin Dugang (figure 14). The *shunshig* consecration insertions include an eight-legged fireplace with a bronze cauldron (figures 15) that contained ceramic cups (figure 16), a silver bowl, two mandalas of Jambhala and Vasudhārā made of silver (figures 17 and 18), prayer beads (figure 19), and tile ornaments (figure 20). Other interesting items excavated to the north of the statue include a helmet, plated leather-soot armor, a metal sword of European design (probably from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries), spear tips, and a rifle (figure 21).

This type of *shunshig* was found in two places, the second being to the northeast side of the Tsogchin Dugang, which suggests, as we understand it, a presence of two monumental Buddha statues. The other items that were added to the *shunshig*, in addition to the bronze cauldron on the fireplace (only one-third of which survived) and the abovementioned items, include coins with Arabic script, two sundials made of stone, and small items made of gold and silver. Weaponry and armor similar to the first statue's *shunshig* were also found.

These discoveries further prove statements by historians that sixteenth-century Mongols had political, economic, religious, and cultural relations with Russia, the Middle East, Tibet, and Ming China. We were able to identify a coin with an Arabic inscription that we excavated in 2014 due to its similarity to coins made in India from 1526 to 1857

under Mughal Khan Shah Jahan (1628–1658).¹³ It appears to have been minted in Nepal and used in Tibet, but we have not yet determined its precise date. The two stone sundials from Saridag Monastery have Arabic and Roman numerals, respectively, and appear to be the earliest findings of this kind in Mongolia.

The *shunshig* contained two flintlock muskets that resemble the muskets made in fifteenth-century Russia.¹⁴ There are many texts in the Russian Central Archive that document seventeenth-century Mongolians, and Öndör Gegeen in particular had regular correspondence with tsarist Russia (Chuluun 2015, 31–40); these muskets are material testimony to those relations. Many Russian envoys were sent by the Russian tsar to meet with Zanabazar, and it must have been they who gave the weapons to the Khutugtu. Thus, these items excavated from Saridag Monastery—the coins, clocks, and muskets—confirm seventeenth-century Mongolian relations with the Middle East as well as Europe.

We conducted new excavations in 2014 and 2015 in the northern part of Tsogchin Dugang (figure 22), where we unearthed the remains of what we believe was a 4-meter-high clay statue seated on a 50-meter-high lotus throne atop a 50-meter-high platform. We uncovered a number of items, such as ceramic shards and fragments of armor, which all could have been a part of a consecration *shunshig*. Also, pieces of a horn-shaped clay ornament suggest a part of a Buddha throne. This statue was possibly among the items destroyed by the Dzungar armies in 1689.

The rear of the temple revealed ten columns measuring 40 x 40 centimeters spaced at distance of 3.5 to 4 meters. Two of these columns are placed on a square stone pedestal. We unearthed a stone floor in the southeastern area that stretched up to 2.5 meters long. Within another 2.8-meter distance from the southern wall, a wooden floor was discovered. We discovered a pile of broken pieces of clay bowls and vases of different sizes as well as shards of blue and white ceramic cups that tentatively date to the Ming dynasty (figure 23). In this area, we discovered more 40-centimeter columns placed 2.5 to 3 meters apart and all showing fire damage. At the time of the Dzungar attacks, no monks were present; they had likely taken with them the most significant sculptures, as the rear of the temple site was devoid of such items. Another hypothesis is that the area may have been looted before being burned.

The fortified wall, made of stone and pounded earth, was built on a stone foundation 1.1 meter in height, was 3 meters high, and had rows of rooms where piles of *tsha tsha* were found. The discovery of a 4-meter long, 30-centimeter thick stone structure on the wall suggests that the rooms possibly had stupa-shaped roofs made of pounded earth. One room in the fortified walls had an interior space and, based on the piles of *tsha tsha*, was likely used for ritual purposes. Another room revealed a space 2.3 meters wide, where we unearthed pieces of a cast-iron cauldron.

¹³ See the CoinIndia website (<http://coinindia.com/galleries-shahjahan.html>).

¹⁴ See similar items from Russia here: (<https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Пистолет>).

In 2015, we also discovered building materials. Two different kinds of tiles were used to make the roof of the Tsogchin Dugang temple. Some were large orange tiles that had wheel ornaments; the smaller yellow tiles had oxen ornaments. The tiles with Tibetan script reading *rnam bcu dbang ldan* (“Tenfold Powerful One,” the seed syllable of Kālacakra) were used on the roofs (figure 24). In addition, we unearthed hump-shaped clay hooks that were used for fixing tiles. We could not determine an architectural term for them, so we called them “camel hooks.” The builders also used metal items, which included various kinds of nails, hammers, metal sheets, hinges, rails, and door ornaments. Another interesting find from the 2015 excavation was evidence of onsite clay preparation. At the northern part of the fortification wall, we excavated a cauldron of 1 meter (width) x 1.3 meter (depth) x 3 meters (length) inserted into the ground. This discovery proves that clay statues and other clay objects were all made at the site. The chemical elements of the items we unearthed were identified by our partners from the Center of Cultural Heritage. These substances include iron, calcium, phosphorus, gold used on the front facade tiles and sculptures, and, where metal was used as the foundation and then gilded, copper.

Four excavations from July through mid-August of 2016 focused on a building to the east of Tsogchin Dugang. As the weather and terrain conditions did not cooperate, our work, led by an archeologist, Ch. Enkhtuul from the Institute of History and Archeology, was quite limited. The most interesting find was a temple built using wooden construction. Whole pieces of wooden architectural elements with cloud ornaments were unearthed. Mongolian-style locks were found with the wooden door. Thus, we think the site featured Tibetan-style buildings incorporating Mongolian ornaments. These findings suggest that Zanabazar’s works also included wooden pieces, opening other venues for future research.

Our excavations from 2013 to 2016 have thus proven that the site at Saridag is Zanabazar’s dharma seat Ribogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling, which he built from 1654 to 1689. Our work also confirms information included in historical sources and oral histories about the way the site was destroyed during the civil war between the Khalkha and Oirat Mongols. This project has also revealed another important aspect of Zanabazar’s works: the presence of a fully developed workshop for making clay statues. This research will continue to develop expertise about the items discovered and define Zanabazar’s independent art style. Our expeditions also allowed us to make a reconstructed drawing of the complex (figure 3). These findings comprise the result of our discoveries and research of monasteries and temples associated with Zanabazar’s name. The ongoing excavations should further help scholars to study Mongolian Buddhist art, temple architecture prior to annexation to the Qing, and other research questions of Mongolian history.

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