

# TÖWKHÖN, THE RETREAT OF ÖNDÖR GEGEEN ZANABAZAR AS A PILGRIMAGE SITE

Zsuzsa Majer

Budapest

The present article describes one of the revived Mongolian monasteries, having special significance because it was once the retreat and workshop of Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar, the main figure and first monastic head of Mongolian Buddhism. Situated in an enchanted place, it is one of the most frequented pilgrimage sites in Mongolia today. During the purges in 1937–38, there were mass executions of lamas, the 1000 Mongolian monasteries which then existed were closed and most of them totally destroyed. Religion was revived only after 1990, with the very few remaining temple buildings restored and new temples erected at the former sites of the ruined monasteries or at the new province and subprovince centers.

The monastery and pilgrimage site described here is called Töwkhön (Fig. 1). Surrounded by a forest, it is situated at the peak of Shiweet-Ulaan uul or Shiweet-Ulaan Mountain (N 47°00.745', E 102°15.447', elevation 2245 m) belonging to Khangai nuruu or Khangai Mountain range, in Bat-Ölzii subprovince of Öwörkhongai province, about 500 km from Ulaanbaatar and 60 km from the important Erdene zuu monastery in Kharkhorin subprovince of Öwörkhongai. It is the most easily reached from Kharkhorin, by going southwest up the valley of the Orkhon River; it can also be approached from the Orkhon waterfall (Orkhon khürkhree, better known as Ulaan tsutgalan, 'red confluence'). The final part of the road from the foot of the Shiweet-Ulaan Mountain

up to the site is not always passable even by jeep, especially in winter or after rain. Visitors can reach the site on horseback or on foot even when it is not possible to drive up to the monastery. In 2004 Töwkhön was included on the list of the World's Cultural Heritage Sites thanks to its cultural importance and the natural beauties of the Orkhon River Valley area.

Information on the monastery is to be found mainly in books on Mongolian architecture and historical sites, although there are also some scattered data on the history of its foundation in publications on Öndör Gegeen's life. In his atlas which shows 941 monasteries and temples that existed in the past in Mongolia, Rinchen marked the site on his map of the Öwörkhongai monasteries as *Töwkhön khiid* (No. 818), with the place name given as Orkhon gol (Orkhon River, which is a very rough location). In the old times when the area of the Khalkh Mongols was divided into four big areas (*aimag*) of the four *khans*, again divided into smaller units (*khoshuu*, 'banner, battalion'), the site was situated in Tüsheet khanii *khoshuu* of Tüsheet khan *aimag*. It is among the ruined Mongolian temple sites which were revived after the democratic changes, and still now functions actively, even though there is only one lama permanently in residence. The author visited the site in 2005 twice (once when it was covered by snow) and in summer 2007, when B. Shagdarsüren, the hermit lama of Töwkhön monastery (who has the rank *lowon*; T.: *slob-dpon*, 'master') (Fig. 2), provided information as well.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. The peak with Töwkhön monastery.

Fig. 2. Shagdarsüren lama.



## Historical background and the foundation of the site

The monastery has been known by variant names apart from *Töwkhön/Düwkhān* or *Töwkhön khiid* (*khiid* means monastery or smaller temple site in Mongolian), a name given it only later. The word *Töwkhön* is of Tibetan origin. The term *sgrub-khang* means “house/dwelling for practice” or “place of meditation” and is used for meditation halls as well as dwellings, even caves for intensive contemplation. The pronunciation of the word became distorted or modified as *Düwkhān* or *Töwkhön* in Mongolian, the latter being the variant used today. In its Mongolian translation, this name was rendered as *Büteeiin süm*, “Temple of practice.” The original Tibetan name given by Öndör Gegeen himself for the monastery was *E Wam gachillin* (T.: E-wam dga'-khyil gling), meaning “Monastery of the purity of method and wisdom.” Another Mongolian name for it in earlier times was *Bayasgalant aglag oron*, “Joyful isolated place,” or *Arga bilegiin aglag bayasgalant Töwkhön khiid*, “Töwkhön, the joyful isolated monastery of method and wisdom.” Töwkhön came also to be called “The *Utai* of Outer-Mongolia,” *Utai* being the distorted Mongolian pronunciation of Wu-t'ai-shan (T.: ri-bo rtse-lnga, “mountain with five peaks”), one of the most important monastic and pilgrimage sites in China, thus indicating the importance of Töwkhön as a place of pilgrimage.

The establishment of this meditation retreat or hermitage is connected to Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar (1635–1723), the first head of the Mongolian Buddhist church. Öndör Gegeen is a title, meaning “His Holiness the Bright One,” while his other name, Zanabazar is being derives from Sanskrit *Jñānavajra*, meaning ‘vajra wisdom’. He was born in 1635 in today’s Yesön Züil subprovince of Öwörkhāngai province. A descendant of Chinggis Khan, he was the son of Tüsheet khan Gombodorj and grandson of Awtai khan (1534–1589) who founded Erdene zuu, the first monastery in Mongolia in 1586 near to Ögödei Khaan’s capital, Karakorum (present Kharkhorin). According to legend, when he was only three years old his ability and talent for memorizing religious texts amazed everyone. He showed

an outstanding capacity for acquiring the Teaching in the three ways of listening, thinking and meditating, the main methods of Buddhist studies. At the age of five he was enthroned at Shireet tsaagan nuur (Lake), in present Bүрд suprovince of Öwörkhāngai. Becoming a Buddhist lama, his first ordination name was Ishdorj (T.: ye-shes rdo-rje) and later he became known as Luwsandambijaltsan (T.: blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan (dpal bzang-po)), which was also an ordination name. After studying in the biggest Tibetan monastic universities, he received initiations from the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the 4<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. The 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama recognized him as the reincarnation of the Tibetan master *Jonon Darnad* (Tāranātha, 1575–1634), a famous writer and historian and the last great representative of the Tibetan Jonangpa sect, and in 1651 granted him the title *jewtsündamba khutagt* (T.: rje-btsun dam-pa). He thus became the religious and political leader of Mongolia.

In Mongolia, local customs were absorbed into the Tibetan form of Buddhism, since the faith had always had the ability to integrate its teaching with local deities and practices and to adapt it to a different culture. It was Zanabazar himself who established unique features for Mongolian Buddhism. These included lama robes differing somewhat from

Tibetan lama robes, special melodies of chanting, and a particular ceremonial system which included new elements or modifications of traditional ceremonies either in the melodies or by the introduction of new prayer texts which he composed. He was a real polymath, compiling volumes of Tibetan texts, and by creating unique works of art – mainly sculptures cast in gold, bronze, or copper, but also paintings – established a new, Mongolian school of fine arts (Fig. 3). His main art works can be seen in a number of monasteries today as well as in the Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum and the Chojin Lama Museum in Ulaanbaatar. He also developed two new writing systems, *Soyombo* (S.: svayambhū; T.: rang-byung, the “self-existing” script) in 1686 and *Khewtekh dörwöljin* (the “horizontal square” script), both intended to enable with their



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Fig. 3. Sita (White) Tārā. Sculpture attributed to Zanabazar, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum, Ulaanbaatar.

special characters the writing down of all sounds not only of Mongolian, but also of Tibetan and Sanskrit, the sacred languages of Mongolian Buddhism. Neither of these writing systems came into everyday use, but rather are used as decorative scripts. He also founded important monasteries such as *Baruun khüree* or *Shankh* (also known as *Tüsheet khani khüree*) in 1647 and *Ribogejigandanshaddüwlin* (T.: ri-bo dge-rgyas dga'-ldan bshad-sgrub gling) or *Nomiin ikh khüree*, "Great monastic city of the Teaching" at Khentii khan uul in 1654. This latter was also known as *Sardagiin khüid* and as *Züün khüree*, 'Eastern monastery' in relation to the previously founded *Shankh* or *Baruun khüree*, 'Western monastery'. It was later ruined in the Khalkh-Oyirad wars in 1680 but is considered to be the origin of the later Ikh khüree, moving to different locations before settling down at the site of today's Ulaanbaatar.

Töwkhön retreat was founded by him in 1653, initially as a meditation cave and then with a temple. He first discovered the site in 1648, when at the age of 13 he was traveling on horseback to meet the Dalai Lama (Daajaw 2006, p. 38). It was a perfect site, surrounded on all sides by dense forests which concealed it and with a specially shaped rocky peak "designed" to hold a temple as in a nest, or resembling an armchair. Some sources call the mountain (otherwise known as Shiweet uul) Shireet uul, "Mountain with a throne," Töwkhön shireet uul, or Shireet Ulaan uul, "Red mountain with a throne" after its shape. According to Daajaw (2006, p. 40), the site had been occupied as early as the Bronze Age. Probably a watchman or guard was stationed there, as the peak is highly suitable for sending signals in case of any danger. Daajaw bases this opinion on the fact that the flat area at the peak (where the ritual stone mound for the local spirits called *owoo* is situated) had been enlarged by a stone retaining wall and leveling of the surface, and has the remains of two stone foundations.

Recognizing it as an auspicious site, Öndör Gegeen started to meditate on Shiweet Ulaan uul, after returning from his first Tibetan stay in 1651 when he was named *jewtsündamba khutagt*. Usually 1653–1655 is given as the date of foundation of the retreat, initially with the erection of a stone-walled meditation hut (Daajaw 1999, p. 263). According to Choinkhor (1995, p. 17), on his return from Tibet, when the Mongolian nobles and princes promised to build a meditational dwelling for him, Öndör gegeen said that Shiweet Ulaan uul was waiting for him. Ölzi (1992, p. 85) adds that in 1653 for the 19<sup>th</sup> birthday of Zanabazar a *Bat orshil örgökh* or *Danshig ikh naadam* (T.: brtan-bzhugs, "strengthening of the feet") ceremony for his longevity was held in Erdene zuu, at which he asked that the Khalkh nobility build at Shiweet uul a temple and retreat where he could make his art works.

So Zanabazar settled there for a while, contemplating, composing texts and making his sculptures. The *Düwkhān / Töwkhön süm* or *büteeliin süm*, 'place of practice', the first temple, was built and named *E Wam gachillin*. In 1656 at the age of 21 he left to further his studies with the Dalai Lama (Daajaw 2006, p. 39). On his return in 1657 the Khalkh nobility again had a *Bat orshil* ceremony performed for him. He then returned to the Töwkhön retreat and later hid there from the attacks of the Oyirad Galdan Boshigt during the war between the Oyirad Mongols and the Khalkh Mongols. When in 1688 the army of Galdan Boshigt invaded Erdene zuu, they also attacked the small temple of Zanabazar at Töwkhön, but he managed to flee from them. Since he spent the subsequent years traveling, his retreat was abandoned.

During the years while Öndör Gegeen was meditating there he composed several prayers, including "Giving the greatest blessing" (*Jinlaw tsozsol*; T.: byin-rlabs mchog-stsol); the short text of the Medicine Buddha (*Baga Manal*; T.: sman-bla; S.: Bhaṣajyaguru); and the "Incense offering for strengthening and reviving people's spiritual strength" (*Khiimoriin san* or *Lündai san*; T.: rlung-rta'i bsangs; also known as *Madjün jinlaw*, rmad-byung byin-rlabs, after the beginning words of the text meaning "Excellent blessing"). These texts retain special importance in Mongolian Buddhist readings today. *Jinlaw tsozsol* and *Khiimoriin san* have been recited from his time on in all Mongolian temples as part of the daily chanting. While at Töwkhön, he also created many of his famous art works, including sculptures of deities cast in gold such as *Makhgal* (Mahākāla, T.: mgon-po), now in Baruun khüree; *Ochirdar'* (Vajradhara, T.: rdo-rje 'dzin-pa), now in Gandan or Gandantegchenlin monastery (T.: dga'-ldan thegs-chen gling) in Ulaanbaatar; the twenty-one *Dar' ekh* (Tārā, T.: sgrol-ma); the five dhyāni buddhas or the five transcendent buddhas (*yazguuriin tawan burkhan*, T.: mgon-po rigs-lnga); and *Tsewegmed* (Amitāyus, T.: tshe-dpag-med). It was here in 1686 that he designed his Soyombo alphabet, its first character now the national Mongolian symbol (*soyombo süld*), appearing even on the national flag.

Several of the sights at the monastery are connected with Öndör gegeen himself. They include the *Bogd* temple, originally built in his time; his contemplation cave; his handprint; the footprint of his boots; his stone throne and the joined tree where he used to tie his horse (see details on these below).

The retreat was re-discovered in 1773 by hunters who found the abandoned site where the stone meditational building had already collapsed (Daajaw 2006, p. 39). It was reconstructed as a hermitage in 1786, following which it became commonly known



as *Töwkhön*. The structures erected in the 18<sup>th</sup> century included two temples – an assembly hall (*khurliin dugan*) and a “residential temple” (*lawran/ lawrin dugan*; T.: bla-brang, “residence”) – a storage house or financial unit building (*jasiin bair*), a contemplation yurt (*nügneer sakhidag ger*), a bödhi stupa or “stupa of enlightenment” (*janchüw chodin*; T.: *byang-chub mchod-rten*), a fence (*khashaa*) creating a temple compound where on three of the sides the peak towering above the complex fences it off, and an entrance gate (*daman khaalga*). These were built on the initiative of *Luvsandagwaadarjaa* (T.: blo-bzang grags-po/ bdag-po dar-rgyas, 1734-1803), the enthroned lama (*shireet lam*), bearing the title “the learned wise lord of religion” or *nomch mergen tsorj* (T.: chos-rje) of the nearby Erdene zuu monastery. According to the leaflet of the monastery, the third temple, standing separately on the southwest of the other temples, the “summer palace” or “bedroom temple” (*Serüiin dugan* or *Semchin*; T.: gzims khang), was established at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Sain noyon khan T. Namnansüren in honor of the 8<sup>th</sup> *bogd*. Daajaw says, however (2006, p. 40), that when the *bogds* visited the monastery, they were accommodated in this temple, which would mean it existed earlier than the time of the 8<sup>th</sup> *bogd*. In its heyday the monastery consisted of an assembly hall (*Khurliin dugan*), with a separate part for the images of the protector deities attached to it at its north side, the *Bogd* temple or *Büteeliin süm* with a temple for burning eternal butter-lamps (*Mönkh zuliin süm*) built in front of it, the temple standing separately, named *Semchin* or *Lawran*, two or three stupas, a prayer-wheel, and outside the fence a storage or *jas* building, another building for a kitchen, and yurts for a kitchen and visitors. There were two wells here, too. Two meditational caves and other caves were situated at the site. The main idols of the monastery became

*Gombogür* (T.: mgon-po gur, an aspect of Mahākāla) and *Ochirwaan'* (Daajaw 2006, p. 40) or *Ochirdar'* (Daajaw 1999, p. 263). According to Shagdarsüren lama, the main worshipped deities were Tsongkhapa (*Zonkhow* or *Bogd lam*; T.: tsong-kha-pa), Buddha and Mahākāla (*Makhgal*).

At least four monks had to reside in the place, but from the number of the buildings of the site it is clear that it did not have more than a handful of lamas at a time. All of them were fully ordained, having taken the *gelen* vow (T.: dge-slong; S.: bhikṣu). However, many monks visited the place on special occasions to celebrate the great days. Furthermore, old monks of Ikh khüree, the then monastic capital of Mongolia (situated once at the site of today's Ulaanbaatar), withdrew to the temple, living and meditating here. Among the lamas who came to meditate at the site was the famous Jamiyaan *gelen*, who spent 11 years here at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His small meditation cave can be seen here as well.

When the Chinese *Gamin* army (the Chinese Nationalist army of the Kuo-min-tang or Chinese Nationalist Party, which came to Mongolia in 1919) went through this area at the beginning of 1920s, it devastated the site. Later *Töwkhön* monastery was closed and totally destroyed in 1937 with the purges and monastery destructions.

#### Reopening and restoration of the site

In 1970 the area was taken under the protection of the Öwörkhongai *aimag* local administration. The rebuilding of the temples and reopening began in the early 1990s, replicating their original form as determined from an old picture (Figs. 4, 5). Since that time until now only one monk, the “monk of *Töwkhön*” (*Töwkhönii lam*) called Shagdarsüren (aged



Fig. 4. View of the temple complex from the right side



Fig. 5. An old picture from the same viewpoint (after: Maidar 1972, Ill. no. 121).

around 50), resides here permanently. He became a monk in his twenties, and studied in Kharkhorin, Erdene zuu monastery, whence his teacher sent him to this holy place to revive the meditational retreat. At the time he arrived nothing remained of the previous temple complex, but its buildings were rebuilt afterwards one by one. Töwkhön as a pilgrimage site was reopened on 27 October 1993, and regular worship ceremonies started. In 1994 the site was taken under state protection.

The main temple (*Tsogchin dugan*; T.: tshogs-chen, “main assembly hall” or *Khurliin dugan*, “temple for ceremonies”) was rebuilt and reopened in 1997 and the statue of *Makhgal* was placed in it as the main protector deity of the retreat. At that time, accompanied by Mongolian monks, Gurudeva rinpoche consecrated the revived temple. Gurudeva rinpoche (1908–2009) was a highly esteemed lama of Inner-Mongolian origin who, having escaped the purges of the Chinese, studied for decades in Tibet and Nepal and contributed greatly to the revival, restoration and reopening of temples in Mongolia. In 1998 the bōdhi stupa (*choden suwraga*, *suwraga* being the Mongolian word for stupa), the biggest of the three stupas at the complex, was rebuilt, and in 1999 the small *Lusiin dugan* (Nāga temple). In 2001 the other temples of the complex were rebuilt, namely the

Fig. 6. The stairs leading up to the temples.

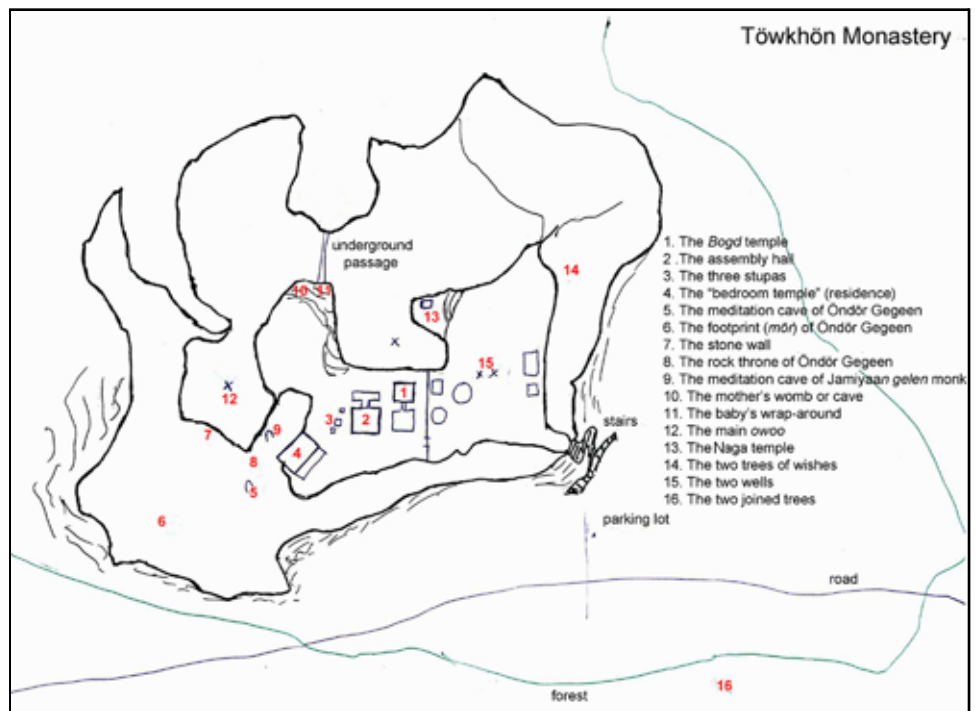


Fig. 7. Sketch of the site with the sixteen sanctuaries marked.

*Bogd* temple (*Bogdiin dugan*, the “bedroom temple” (*Semchin dugan*) or “summer palace” (*Lawran dugan*), and the offering temple (*Takhiliin dugan*) or “temple of the eternal butter-lamps” (*Mönkh zuliin dugan*). The two smaller stupas were erected in the same year, as were the fence and the entrance gate.<sup>2</sup>

Töwkhön today looks the same as it did before 1937. Young novices from Yidgaachoinzinlin datsan (T.: yid-dga’ chos-’dzin gling grwa-tshang), which is one of the monastic schools of Gandan main monastery in Ulaanbaatar, come from time to time for major ceremonies and also for several months (4–5 lamas per season) to practice and help the work of Shagdarsüren monk. Apart from the everyday chanting and several monthly readings, in summer *Maan’ büteel* (T.: ma-ṇi) or mantra contemplation is performed, on the occasion of which many lamas gather here. They also come to celebrate the great days of the ceremonial year.

### The sixteen wonders along the pilgrim path

On arriving at the monastery, from the base of the peak, where there are a parking lot and several smaller wooden buildings and yurts, one ascends a stone staircase (Fig. 6) to the fenced-off area with the temples. The staircase is said to have the shape of the magic HÜM syllable. Therefore while approaching the temples “one can purify his or her body, speech and mind before taking refuge and entering the sacred place.”



At the top of the stairs, when one enters the first gate, finds a wooden house and a *ger* (yurt) of the residing monk, as his summer and winter dwellings and an additional storage building. The entrance of the temple complex itself is on the left. Entering through the main gate, one sees a court with the wooden temple buildings reconstructed in their original style in reddish-brown color with green roofs and golden top ornaments. The meditation caves and other sacred sites are to be found around and above the temple complex on the hillsides, where on the rocks mantras like OM MANI PADME HŪM, OM BADZRA PĀNI HŪM PHAT, OM ĀH HŪM are painted in Tibetan and *Soyombo* script, as well as the *Soyombo* symbol itself. There is a path in Töwkhön which helps visitors to discover all these sanctuaries (*byasalgakhuin oron*) or miraculous sights of this holy place, of which there are sixteen (Fig. 7).

They include the following: The first one, the *Bogd* temple (Fig. 8), which stands right at the entrance of



Fig. 8. The assembly hall on the left and the Offering temple or Temple of eternal butter-lamps in front of the *Bogd* temple on the right.

the complex in front of the rock wall bordering the complex from the north, was originally founded by Öndör Gegeen as a meditational shrine (*byasalgaliin süm* or *büteeliin süm*). It is closed to laymen. In front of it is another temple building, *Mönkh zuliin dugan* or *Mönkh zuliin süm*, “temple for (burning) eternal butter lamps.”

The second of the sanctuaries is the assembly hall *Tsogchin* or *Khurliin dugan*, “ceremonial temple” (Fig. 9) on the left of the above two. Today it is called the *Gandanpuntsoglin* (T.: *dga’-ldan phun-tshogs gling*). Here people can enter and place offerings. Shagdarsüren lama (with other lamas if any are in residence) holds here the daily chantings. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of the lunar month he holds the ceremony in honor of the Medicine Buddha (*Manal*), and on the 15<sup>th</sup> he reads the *Guhyasamāja tantra* text (*Sandüin jüd*; T.: *gsang-’dus rgyud*; S.: *Guhyasamāja tantra*). The temple can accommodate about ten monks. As in



Fig. 9. Inside the *Tsogchin* temple (*khurliin dugan*).

every temple, there is a throne beside the door for the disciplinary master (*gesgüi*; T.: *dge-bskyos*) even if the place does not have one. The main protector of the temple is *Makhgal*. This temple has a separate chapel built on its north and connecting by a corridor. This “temple for the protectors” (*gonkhan*; T.: *mgon-khang*) is where the images and sculptures of these deities are held. On the altar in the *gonkhan* are many old sculptures and painted scrolls or *thangkas*, such as that of Buddha, Tsongkapa, the Medicine Buddha and different wrathful deities like *Makhgal*, *Namsrai* (Kuvera/Vaiśravaṇa, T.: *rnam-sras*), and (*Baldan*) *Lkham* (Śrīdevī, T.: *dpal-ldan lha-mo*). There is also a small statue of *Zanabazar* and a large rock piece with an impression resembling a human hand, said to be the handprint of *Zanabazar*.

To the west of this temple are three stupas (*takhiliin shüteen*, *choden*, T.: *mchod-rten*) re-erected in their ancient style, the one in front originally made by Öndör Gegeen (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10. The three stupas.







Fig. 11. The Semchin or Lawran temple.

The third, separate temple building on the left is the “bedroom temple” (*Semchin dugan*) or “residence” (*Lawran*), containing the thangka of *Jigjid* (Fig. 11). The building is used as an accommodation when monks and novices of Gandan monastery arrive. Originally this temple would accommodate visiting *bogds* and other high lamas.

Following the path from the Semchin temple to the west up the hillside, one comes to the meditation cave (*byasalgaliin agui*) of Öndör Gegeen, used later by other practitioners as well (Fig. 12). There is a small altar inside. Nearby on a sloping rock the footprint (*mör*) of the boots of Öndör Gegeen and his disciple can be seen marked with the Tibetan inscription *zhabs* (“feet”) painted above it (Fig. 13). According to legend he left it as a memorial in 1723 before his journey to Manchuria. Inside his footprint is visible a smaller footprint, said to be either his bare foot as

Fig. 12. The meditational cave of Öndör Gegeen.

(right) Fig. 13. The footprints of the boots of Öndör Gegeen and his disciple.



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Fig. 14. The retaining stone wall

a small boy, or of that of one of his main disciples, Luwsannorowsharaw (T.: *blo-bzang nor-bu shes-rab*).

Fig. 15. The rock throne of Öndör Gegeen.



The man-made stone wall (*örmöl chuluun khana*) is the “co-creation of human beings and nature” (Fig. 14). It was built as a retaining wall around the highest peak towering above the temples, making it possible to form the flat area in the middle of which is the main *owoo*.

The next sanctuary is the rock seat or throne (*sentii*) where Öndör Gegeen used to sit (Fig. 15). It is marked by the Tibetan inscription *bla-ma'i seng-khri* or the “lion-throne of the lama”. Nearby is another small cave (Fig. 16) where one of the later practitioners withdrawing to Töwkhön, *Jamiyaan gelen* monk, meditated for 11 years. It also has a small altar inside.

The above sites can all be found on the west of the temple buildings up on the rocky hillside. If one leaves the temple compound on its east one can reach the other holy sites on the mountain from the north of the foreground area.

The mother’s womb (*ekhiin umai*) or mother’s





Fig. 16. The meditational cave of Jamiyaan gelen.



(right) Fig. 17. The 'mother's womb cave'.

cave (*ekhiin agui*) is a small cave, which can be found halfway to the main *owoo* on the left (or alternately from behind the main temple upwards the hillside, but that way is more dangerous). There are two different caves here in the rock (Fig. 17), one for women (with the Tibetan inscription: *OM SHRĪ GU HYA rdo-rje btsun-ma'i bhak*, "ōm, glorious secret vajra nun"), one for men. When one crawls in and turning back crawls out, all his or her sins are said to be cleared away, as if

(below) Fig. 18. The secret underground corridor leading to the other side of the peak.

(below right) Fig. 19. The 'baby's wrap-around rock'.

(right) Fig. 20. The main *owoo* above *Töwkhön* temples



being reborn. Here one can also think of every sentient being as his or her beloved mother. The third cave is decorated with the Tibetan syllables *E WAM*, which means "method and wisdom" or the unity of the principles of man and women. Actually it is an underground passageway leading to the other side of the peak (Fig. 18), where there are many large stones and rocks heaped, an *owoo* and a Tibetan inscription *bde chen sgo*, which means "the gate of great bliss." This is the secret passage route *Öndör gegeen Zanabazar* used to escape from the army of *Galdan boshigt* in 1688.

Next to the caves is a rock formation called baby's wrap-around (*ölgii khad*) (Fig. 19). It is indicated with



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the inscription: *E WAM dga'-khyil rdo-rje brag ... rdzong gling*, "vajra rock of the purity of method and wisdom, fortress monastery." By standing inside this vertical crack in the rock wall, one is "wrapped around" like a baby; this experience is said to help in obtaining enlightenment by the merit of having gained a precious human birth.

The "main *owoo*" (*goliin owoo*) is situated at the top of the hill (Fig. 20), in the middle of the relatively big flat area (called *naadmiin talbai*, "field for traditional national Mongolian *naadam*





Fig. 21. The Nāga temple.

games”) created with the support of the retaining walls. Encircling the *owoo* in the traditional way three times is said to strengthen and revive people’s spiritual strength, but as usual, women are forbidden to go up there.

The next sanctuary, the Nāga temple (*Lusiin dugan*) or the temple of the spirits of water (alternately, called *Lowonjalbiin süm*) (Fig. 21) is reached when one descends from the *owoo*. Here *Lowonjalba* (T.: *slobdpon rgyal-ba*), the king of the nāgas (*lus*; T.: *klu*) or water spirits is worshipped.

To the east on the separate smaller mountain peak, above the wooden building of the residing lama, are the two trees of wishes (Fig. 22), in which respectively are embodied the wrathful deity Mahākāla and the goddess Tārā. One can express his wishes there, taking refuge in the Mahākāla tree (*Makhgal(iin) mod*) and receiving a blessing from Tārā at the Tārā tree (*Dar’ekh(iin) mod*). From these trees or the nearby rock is a perfect view of the temples themselves from the east.

Visiting the trees brings one close to the end of the pilgrimage route of *Töwkhön*. On descending to the foreground area of the temple level one reaches the fifteenth sanctuary. The two wells (*khudag*) are found here (Fig. 23), between the buildings and yurts,

Fig. 22. The two trees of wishes.



Fig. 23. The two wells.

in the middle of the flat area or field. They are said to be miraculous, since it is very rare that wells can be dug at almost the summit of a mountain peak, where one would not expect to reach underground water. The water in the one on the right is blackish in color and used for the offerings (*takhiliin us*, “water for the offerings”), while the water in the other well is clear or yellowish and used as “drinking water” of the lamas (*undnii us*). This is strange, too, to have wells with different types of water so near to each other. These wells, which are the ones originally used by the lamas of *Töwkhön*, were restored in 2004.

The last of the sixteen sights or miraculous places in *Töwkhön* is at the bottom of the peak; so one has to descend on the stone stairs, and cross to the other side of the field and the parking area, to the south. The two joined trees (*kholboo mod*), which have grown together in an unusual way, are the ones in the forest to which *Öndör Geegen* used to tie his horse (Fig. 24). The trees of this area of the forest are decorated by *khadags* (ceremonial scarfs of mainly light-blue color) and prayer flags (*lündaa*, T. *rlung-rta*, ‘wind horse’) hanging on strings tightened between them.

The holy place of *Töwkhön* and its surroundings has a special atmosphere. Visitors are supposed to maintain silence and help to keep this pure place clean. Pilgrims and tourists

Fig. 24. The joined two trees.



come to worship at this retreat of Öndör Gegeen from May until October, weather permitting, and especially in summer. The lama in residence is helpful to all explaining how the sanctuaries can be reached, as some of them are not easy to find, though there is an information board. The calm and peaceful atmosphere evokes an earlier century in this, one of the loveliest places in Mongolia.

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### About the Author

**Zsuzsa Majer** received M.A. degrees in Mongolistics and Tibetology (2002, 2003) and defended her Ph.D. in Mongolian Linguistics in 2009 at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. She wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on the revival and ceremonial system of Mongolian monasteries and temples (*A Comparative Study of the Ceremonial Practice in Present-Day Mongolian Monasteries*). She has conducted research six times since 1999 in Mongolia for extended periods, studying the past and present of Mongolian Buddhism. Her present research concerns the history of the main Mongolian monasteries that existed before the purges. E-mail: <zsumajer@yahoo.com>.

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Tsültem 1988

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Leaflet of Töwkhön monastery in Mongolian.

Information board of Töwkhön monastery.

### Notes

1. The author conducted field research on the sites of old but destroyed monasteries of different sizes and types in Mongolia between 2005 and 2009. This included a survey executed in 2007 summer together with Krisztina Teleki on all monastic sites in Öwörkhangaï, Dundgow' and the south part of Töw province in the framework of the Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries project of the Arts Council of Mongolia. The documentation of the sites included recording GPS data, drawing plans of the visible arrangement of monastery buildings, taking photos, and collecting all the available oral history regarding the sites from the very few still living informants, old lamas who had been lamas before the 1937 purges. Regarding this research, see Krisztina Teleki, "Building on Ruins, Memories and Persistence: Revival and Survival of Buddhism in the Mongolian Countryside," *The Silk Road* 7 (2009): 64–73.; Zsuzsa Majer, "Buddhism in Mongolia Today: Continuation or Disjuncture with the Past and the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition," *The Silk Road* 7 (2009): 51–63; and Majer and Teleki, "On the Current Condition of 190 Old and Present-Day Monastic Sites in the Mongolian Countryside," *Zentralasiatische Studien* 39 (2010): 93–140. The homepage of the project may be accessed at <<http://www.mongoliantemples.net>>.

2. In his book on Mongolian architecture published in 1992, before the site was revived (pp. 85–86), Ölzii describes it the site as having one small wooden temple, with foundations of three other temples around it, and, outside of the once existing fence, foundations of a bigger and a smaller yurt. In his book on Mongolian architecture Daajaw published some photographs, in one of which (p. 40) can be seen the *Tsogchin* and Bogd temples, the two rebuilt first. Another picture (p. 43) shows the *Mönkh zuliin dugan*, the third one re-erected, in front of the Bogd temple, but the fence had not yet been built.