

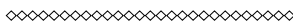
Yesön Züil

Birthplace of Zanabazar

Location: N46°24.608 – E103°48.930, in Övörkhangai Aimag. At N46°50.596 – E103°23.893 on the Ulaan Baatar–Avaikheer Highway is a sign-posted turnoff to a road leading to Yesön Züil, twenty-eight miles as the crows flies east of here.

Not long after the dedication of the first temple at Erdene Zuu Avtai was out hunting with his entourage on the steppes about sixty miles southeast of Kharkhorum. From the middle of a wide plain bounded on the east by saw-toothed ridges Avtai saw a thin plume of smoke rising from a fire of a lone camper. “Go and see what sort of man that is, whether a hunter or a mendicant,” Avtai ordered one of his men. The man came back and reported that the stranger wore a blue gown but had a shaved head. Avtai noted that the color of the gown made no difference, but since the stranger had a shaved head he must be a lama. “When formerly I made obeisance to the Dalai Lama I took an oath that I would make obeisance to the lamas I saw, since priests of the clergy are rare in our land,” said Avtai. To the amazement of his entourage Avtai went up and bowed to the simply-dressed stranger. “What a fortunate qayan [khan] you are,” said the man, “to be the only one to make obeisance when today so many men have not done so.”¹¹ He then offered some of his simple food that he had prepared to Avtai, who ate it with relish. Avtai offered what was leftover in his own bowl to members of his entourage but they refused to eat it, shocked that their Khan should be consorting with such a lowly man. Then the stranger said, “This place where we have met is possessed of great significance. Erect a monument here.” An ovoos was erected at the place, which was known as Yesön Züil. The traditional account of this meeting concludes, “The mendicant took a most blessed object from his load and offered it to the Qayan, and this is how the Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso, in accordance with his having said at an earlier date, ‘I shall go later,’ met with him [Avtai] in the guise of a mendicant.”¹²

Of course it is highly improbable if not impossible that the Dalai Lama actually traveled to Mongolia in the guise of a mendicant, particularly in the last year or two of his life—he died in 1588. Some might

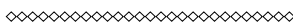


here. According to legend, a white flower appeared out of the ground in the middle of the space where he had set up his ger and promptly bloomed, even though the nearby ground was covered with snow and the rivers already frozen.

On the morning of the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month of the year 1635 Khandjamts felt birth pangs. At the same time milk started exuding from the breasts of a sixteen-year-old serving girl who was attending Khandjamts. The girl was deeply ashamed, but Khandjamts explained to her that when a woman of noble family gave birth it was common for her female servants to produce milk. Later that morning Khandjamts gave birth to a boy. As Khandjamts's own breasts were dry, a council was held and it was decided to wash the servant girl's breasts with holy water blessed by lamas and let her suckle the little nursling. The Gegeen Setsen Khan, in anticipation of the birth, had sent the family a fine cradle decorated with jewels. The baby, who was later to be given the name Zanabazar, was placed in this cradle and servants watched over him day and night.

Yesön Züil, where Avtai met the mendicant who was thought, at least by some, to be the Third Dalai Lama in one form or another, and where Zanabazar was born, is located in what is now Övörkhangai Aimag, about twenty-seven miles south of a village of the same name. The geographical center of the current country of Mongolia is about thirty miles north of here, near the town of Bürd. At Yesön Züil—Zanabazar's birthplace and not the village—were nine springs which never froze over in winter (according to locals these springs have since gone dry), and it was these which give the place its name (*yesön* = nine; *züil* = types or kinds). Eventually a temple was built on the site where legend maintains that Avtai built the ovoos to commemorate his meeting with the mendicant-lama he believed to be the Dalai Lama. Because it was surrounded by eight large stupas it became known as the Eight Stupas Temple. It was destroyed in the 1930s by the communists, who were particularly keen on erasing any memories of Zanabazar, the first of the Bogd Gegeens, the figureheads of Buddhism in Mongolia. Local people and pilgrims later heaped up rubble from the ruins into a large ovoos which stood as a replacement for Avtai's original monument and the Eight Stupa Temple. When I first visited here in 1997 the stone bases of two of the stupas were still visible.

Some locals claimed that Zanabazar was born on this spot while others maintain he was born just behind a small pond about a mile and



half to the northeast—there is no actual marker to show the place—and that his umbilical cord was buried here at the ovoo. Locals also say that about a mile to the southeast is a spot where Zanabazar's baby clothes were burned, as was the tradition, after he no longer needed them. When I returned to Yesön Züil in 2003 I discovered that the year before a small white temple had been built about a hundred yards from the ovoo. This temple now commemorates the birthplace of Zanabazar.

A little over a mile away, on higher ground, Dashgungaa Dejid Monastery had also been established to honor Zanabazar. It too was destroyed during the anti-religion campaigns of the 1930s. In 1997 the ruined walls of some of the buildings of this monastery still stood, but by 2003 they had been torn down for building materials. In the early 1990s a small temple and a white stupa were constructed next to the ruins. In 1995 a painting and a near-life-sized statue of Zanabazar were placed in the otherwise sparsely appointed temple to commemorate the 360th anniversary of Zanabazar's birth.

