

# Khoshut Ablai Taiji and his Fortified Monastery on the Upper Irtysh<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that until 1680s, the Oirat political culture in the upper Irtysh area was based on the leadership of Khoshut clan rather than Jungars, as it is believed nowadays. Ablai Taiji of the Khoshut nobility, the founder of the Buddhist monastery Ablai-kit, inherited and pursued a policy of cooperation with Muscovy in an attempt to profit from its trade with China. Over the course of 1670s, under pressure from his brother, Ablai lost his domains and was defeated by his enemies. To construct this narrative, this paper engages in critical analysis of diverse archival sources and existing historiography.

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## KEYWORDS

Ablai-kit, Oirats, Khoshuts, Jungars, Buddhism, Ablai Taiji, monastery

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**Fig. 1.** A birch bark manuscript found at Ablai-kit site in 2017

Since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ruins of the Buddhist monastery Ablai-kit, also known as Ablai-süme, in eastern Kazakhstan (70 km south of Ust'-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan) and other nearby finds have intrigued researchers (Müller 1747: 420–468; Gmelin 1751–1752; Spasskii 1818a: 59–73; Ritter 1860: 127–138). The remains of the abandoned Oirat monastery and parts of its library were brought to the attention of European scholars thanks to the explorations conducted under orders of Siberian Governor Aleksei Cherkasskii (Zorin 2015: 32).<sup>2</sup> The finds from Ablai-kit proved of no little interest to the Russian emperor himself, who commanded that a page from the manuscripts found there be sent to Western Europe for study. The discussion that emerged from the translation of that text was a key stimulus that drove the development of Tibetan studies in Europe and Russia (Ritter 1860: 134–135; Zorin 2015: 32).

Unfortunately, those early finds discovered at Ablai-kit, as well as later discoveries of other scholars, have not survived, with the exception of two hundred manuscript pages now held in collections in St. Petersburg and Paris. The ruins themselves became a source of construction materials for nearby guard posts, villages, and cemeteries since the first arrival of Russian settlers in the area. Travelers' and scholars' descriptions from the 18<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries note the gradual destruction of the ruined monastery. De Hennin, writing in the 1730s, noted that the main temple of Ablai-kit still had walls covered with a tile roof, and that inside these walls were statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas (De-Gennin 1937: 341), but a century later, the temple walls were no longer standing and only the building's foundation remained (Ibid).

<sup>2</sup> Recently Borodaiev (2011), followed by Zorin (2015), have shown that the earlier attribution of the discovery of Ablai-kit to the Russian officer Likharev (Kniazhetskaia 1989) was wrong. In their view, most likely the site was discovered by a squad of Russian soldiers in 1720.



In the Soviet era, Ablai-kit was protected as an archeological site but remained practically unstudied. Renewed interest in the site and its archeological potential only began in recent years. Thus, in 2016, the *akim* of Ust'-Kamenogorsk D. K. Akhmetov supported an initiative to restart archeological digs at Ablai-kit, which continue to this day.<sup>3</sup> Archeologists found Oirat birch bark manuscripts, decorative elements, and objects made of metal and bone.<sup>4</sup>

Ablai-kit is not only of interest to archeologists, however; it is of no less importance to the historians focused on the political and cultural history of the Oirat khanates and Buddhist monasteries on the Kazakh steppes (Kitinov 2004; Kukeev 2014). In particular, the many years of research conducted by the Kazakhstani Research Institute for the Problems of Cultural Legacy of Nomads into issues related to the cultural heritage of nomadic peoples have served to enrich our understanding of the Buddhist religious geography in Eastern Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite the focus of past and present scholars on the largest and best-preserved Buddhist monastery in Kazakhstan, there is still a great deal of analysis and organization of existing knowledge about its history left to be done. One of the less considered sides of its history is the life of its founder, the Oirat nobleman Ablai Taiji, whose name the monastery bears to this day.

It would be wrong to say that Ablai Taiji has been ignored by scholars of Oirat history. On the contrary, Ablai comes up not infrequently in both early sources on Oirat history and in contemporary works.<sup>6</sup> Yet these references to Ablai are episodic<sup>7</sup> and do not convey his significance in Oirat history and in the establishment of the Jungar Khanate. However, historical sources do allow us to compile a more complete description of his character and importance. Indeed, Ablai Taiji played a major role in the history of the Oirats in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is named in all of the main sources of Oirat historiography, such as the biography of Zaya Pandita Namkhaj Jamtso, *Moonlight*, written by his student Radnabhadra<sup>8</sup>, *The History of the Oirats* by Gaban Sharab (KILP 1969: 140–158), and *The Account of the Derben Oirats* by Batur Ubashi Tümen (Ibid: 17–48). A key set of sources on Ablai's acts and deeds in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century are numerous reports, petitions, and account transcripts made by Russian voivodes and plenipotentiaries; the orders and declarations of Siberian and Ambassadorial Prikazes; and letters from Ablai himself, from his brother Ochirtu Setsen Khan, from the Jungar Khuntaiji Erdeni Batur, and from his sons and foster sons Senge and Galdan.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://yk-news.kz/news/v-vostochnom-kazahstane-aktiviziruyutsya-arheologicheskie-issledovaniya> (last visit in 19.06.2018). A push for local tourism motivated the new round of excavations. In 2017, Ablai-kit was included in a republic-wide program for increasing public awareness 'Rukhani Zhangyru', under the sub-program 'The Ancient Treasures of Eastern Kazakhstan'.

<sup>4</sup> Detailed description of discovered artefacts was published in Baipakov et al. 2017. An identification of some of the manuscripts was recently suggested by Natal'ia lampol'skaia (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Most important results of this project are published in Erofeeva 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Important information about the life of Ablai Taiji can be found in the works of I. Ia. Zlatkin (1964: 120, 182, 190, 197–199 etc.) and Tepkeiev [2012: 347–348, 353–355].

<sup>7</sup> The only exception is an article by Slesarchuk (1987: 133–139). Some important facts about Ablai Taiji can also be found in an article by Borodaiev and Kontev (1999a: 12–22). Their article has a priority in identification of the only portrait of Ablai Taiji from the Remezov chronicle (Ibid: 18). The best reproduction of this image can be found in one of the editions of this chronicle. See fig. 1 (Remezovskaia letopis' 2006: 208).

<sup>8</sup> There are several translations of this work into Russian (KILP 1969: 159–200; Norbo 1999; Radnabhadra 1999). This article uses the last of these referenced works, which includes a facsimile and transliteration of the Oirat original.

<sup>9</sup> This rich material was published in three document anthologies on Russian-Mongol relations (MIRMO 1959; MIRMO 1974, MIRMO 1996). Most of the material regarding Ablai Taiji was found in the last of these referenced collections.



This article aims to systemize the scattered information on Ablai Taiji, using existing materials and scholarly research to define his place in the network of relationships among the Oirat nobility, as well as in the Russian-Oirat relations of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It will also analyze the purpose and importance of the Ablai-kit monastery he built in 1654. Finally, it will examine the reason for its decline. To this end, I will briefly give an overview of early Oirat history up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which will offer insight into the role Ablai Taiji played in this particular stage of Oirat society's development.

## THE OIRATS OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Historian Junko Miyawaki (1997: 41) divides Oirat history into three main stages:

1. From becoming a part of the Great Mongol Ulus in 1208 to the fall of the house of Khublai in post-imperial Mongolia in 1388.
2. From the formation of the Dörben Oirat tribal confederation at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the decline of its influence in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century as the Oirats are pushed out of central and eastern Mongolia into the Upper Irtysh region.
3. From the early 17<sup>th</sup> to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when the power of the Khoshut tribe fades and the Jungars (Ölöts) form a state under their leadership, but then face full decline under attack by the Qing Empire.

This article deals exclusively with the early part of the third period, namely from 1600–1680, when the Oirat confederation was moving gradually toward greater centralization under the power of a single ruler. In existing historiography, beginning with the works of Müller (1747) and Pallas (1776), the Jungars, or Ölöts, are invariably understood as leaders among the Oirats in this period.<sup>10</sup> Jungar tribal leaders are often referred to as khans, and their position in the Oirat confederation is described as dominant beginning from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. This perception managed to make its way into later historiography as well.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Hyacinth Bichurin in his work, *Istoricheskoe obozrenie oirat* called Khara Khula 'the Khan of the Choros,' and his son Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji 'the Supreme Head of the Kalmyk Union.' All in all, Father Hyacinth's estimate of Jungar leaders' significance and authority seems clearly exaggerated: 'Khara Khula, tirelessly reforming the style of governance, finally succeeded, as can be judged from the circumstances, in uniting the Oirats into a single political entity...' (Bichurin 1834: 45).

This notion of undisputed Jungar leadership in the Oirat confederation and that the Jungar Khanate even existed in the time of Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji became generally accepted after the publication of the most complete and highly influential work on Oirat history, I. A. Zlatkin's *Istoriia Dzhungarskogo khanstva*. Zlatkin chose 1635 as the khanate's founding date, when Khoto Khochin came to power, who was later honored with the title of Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji (Zlatkin 1964). Later scholars repeated this assumption, including A. I. Chernyshev (1990: 49),

<sup>10</sup> Miller (1941: 92), for example, calls Khara-Khula "the most prominent among the Kalmyk princelings."

<sup>11</sup> The authoritative scholar of Oirat history, Nikolai Pal'mov (1926), for example, attributed an insatiable lust for power and the desire to conquer all of Mongolia to Batur Khuntaiji.



V. I. Moiseiev (1991), and Hiroshi Wakamatsu (1983: 74–117).<sup>12</sup> Even today, one can still see the phrase ‘ruler of the Jungar Khanate’ used to describe Batur Khuntaiji (Kukeev 2014: 26). Clearly, this opinion was shaped by later sources that recounted the rise of the house of the Ölöts and convinced scholars to project their eventual success retrospectively onto an earlier time.

Japanese scholar Junko Miyawaki presents the most thorough and well-argued critique of this perspective. In a series of scholarly papers, she demonstrates that in this historical period, the Oirat tribal confederation was not strictly centralized and was ruled by both the Khoshuts and the Jungars. Based on scrupulous analysis of a variety of 17<sup>th</sup>-century sources, mainly Oirat ones, Miyawaki concludes that the clan of the Jungars, later led by Khara Khula, Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji, and Senge, were some of the main participants in the confederation but could not presume to be its unconditional and undisputed leaders until Galdan Boshoktu Khan came to power, receiving the title of khan from the Fifth Dalai Lama. He was in fact the one who ended Khoshut domination of the Upper Irtysh region once and for all. Until that moment, Miyawaki argues, the Oirat union could not be called Jungar, forget a khanate (Miyawaki 1992: 72).<sup>13</sup>

The cornerstone of Miyawaki’s reasoning is her argument that Mongol and Oirat ruling elites in the 17<sup>th</sup> century strictly followed the post-imperial political tradition that only direct male descendants of the Borjigid clan could hold the title of khan. The Jungars’ prestige among the Oirats stems from the past deeds of Togon Taishi and Esen, who in the second period of Oirat history (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries) achieved the successful unification of the Oirat tribes. However, this prestige seems to have faded by the era in question, apparently when the Khoshuts, a tribal group from southern Mongolia, joined the Oirat union in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> The Khoshuts traced their lineage back to Jochi Qasar, the younger brother of Chinggis Khan, and were thus descendants of the ‘golden clan.’ This did not grant them undisputed privilege among the Oirats, but it did give them a certain advantage, one that could be effectively exploited by strong clan leaders. Thus, for most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Oirats saw themselves as a union of tribes,<sup>15</sup> with no single clan holding a monopoly on power. Any issues that affected the entire union were decided at confederation meetings (*chulgans*), at which the Khoshuts, at least in the early and mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, had a dominant position.<sup>16</sup>

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was a decisive one for the nomads of Eurasia overall. As the Russian and Qing Empires expanded into the territory of the Kazakhs, Oirats, and Mongols, Central Eurasian nomad polities gradually lost their sovereignty. At the same time, Tibetan Buddhism spread and grew more entrenched among the Oirats and Mongols. Tibetan Buddhism not only strengthened

<sup>12</sup> Chernyshev (1990: 49), for his part, writes, ‘Scholars give the date of the Jungar Khanate’s founding as 1635, when the leader of the Choros tribe Batur Khuntaiji (1635–1653) united the Oirat tribes. However, the establishment of the khanate did not resolve its internal political issues, as the fight for power between factions of ruling princes continued.’

<sup>13</sup> Although Peter Perdue (2005: 104–105) tends to agree with Miyawaki, yet still insists that Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji laid the foundation for the future Jungar Khanate.

<sup>14</sup> Mongolian scholar Shilegiin Norbo (1999: 147) believes that before they migrated west, the Khoshuts were a part of the Uriangkhai tumen and had their pastures in the foothills of the Khingan Mountains. However, it appears that before they were incorporated into the Oirat, the Khoshut were a part of the Khorchin.

<sup>15</sup> In this historical period, the Oirat confederation consisted of several large clans headed by their clan leaders, namely the Khoshut, Ölöts (Jungar), Dörböt, Batut, Torgut, and Khoit.

<sup>16</sup> Ch. Dalai comes up with an alternative viewpoint arguing that the mid-17<sup>th</sup>-century Oirats were ruled by the duumvirate of the Jungar Batur-Khuntaiji and Khoshut Ochirtu-taiji (Dalai 2006: 85).



the ties between the Oirats and the eastern Mongols,<sup>17</sup> and with Tibet, it also brought cultural development through shared writing and literature, historiography, art, medicine, and architecture.<sup>18</sup>

Another important consequence of the Mongols' conversion to Buddhism was the transformation of their political culture. The tradition of genealogical transmission of power was supplemented by the possibility to gain investiture as a khan from the main religious leader of the *gelukpa* lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, the Mongols and Oirats were ardent followers of.<sup>19</sup> The Dalai Lama's investiture naturally took genealogy into account, and to be considered worthy of the title of khan, a candidate had to be a descendent of the 'golden clan,' as well as render special service to the Yellow Hat tradition (*gelukpa*).<sup>20</sup> In 1582, the title of khan was granted to the first Chinggisid who did not have a direct right to the title according to the older Mongol system. Altan Khan of the Tumet, the grandson of Dayan Batumunke Khan, led the right wing of the Eastern Mongols with the title of *jinong*. The next new khan was Abatai, son of Geresenje, who ruled one portion of the Khalkha. This launched the process of gradual spread of the title khan among ambitious Mongol chieftains.

The Oirat nobility began to convert to Tibetan Buddhism soon after the eastern Mongols. Though Tibetan lamas had made contact with Oirat rulers long before<sup>21</sup>, it was in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century that Oirats began to convert to *gelukpa* Buddhism in an organized way. The biography of Zaya Pandita Namkhai Jamtso, one of the most important written sources on 17<sup>th</sup> century history of the Oirats, states that at one *chulgan*, the head of each clan swore an oath to send their sons to become Buddhist monks. Zaya Pandita himself was adopted by one of the leaders of the Khoshuts, Baibagas, dedicated to monastic celibacy and religious life, and then sent to Tibet where he spent more than ten years studying *sutra* and *tantra*. In 1639, Zaya Pandita returned to the Upper Irtysh and began playing a vital role not only in strengthening Buddhism, but in politics, contributing to the consolidation of the Oirat tribes. Junko Miyawaki concludes, based on her analysis of his biography, that Zaya Pandita interacted mostly with the Khoshut tribe nobility, Baibagas' sons Ochirtu Taiji and Ablai Taiji, as well as with Baibagas' younger brother Köndölön Ubashi. Zaya Pandita spent only one summer (1647) in the camp of Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji out of his 14 years as a missionary (1639–1653) (Radnabhadra 1999: 60), while spending most of his time in the pastures of the Khoshut taijis, especially Ochirtu Taiji.<sup>22</sup> This fact speaks eloquently to the state of political power in Oirat society in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Khoshut rulers, furiously spreading Buddhism in the areas they controlled, saw this as their chance to raise their status in the Oirat world. Another important weapon in the battle for influence among the Oirats was the relationship with Russians in the region.

<sup>17</sup> At a 1640 conference, the Oirat and Mongol tribes agreed to act as allies and adopted a shared legal code, one point of which recognized Buddhism as the main religion.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Kitinov 2004: 103–146.

<sup>19</sup> See Ishihama 1992: 501–514.

<sup>20</sup> This new channel for legitimization of power continued to function until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Qing authorities placed limits on the power of the Dalai Lama in 1721.

<sup>21</sup> Kitinov (2017: 376–378) demonstrates that the Oirat tribes were acquainted with the Karma Kagyu school of Buddhism as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. how these observations from the main source on the history of Buddhism in the Irtysh region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century contrast with the following conclusion of I. Ia. Zlatkin (1964: 178): 'Thanks to the efforts of Batur Khuntaiji and Zaya Pandita, the Jungar Khanate, and within the household of Batur, became points of attraction for all Mongolia, for all its khanates and princedoms.'



## OIRAT RELATIONS WITH MUSCOVY

Russian authorities first came into contact with the ‘Kalmyks’ on the Irtysh no earlier than 1619, judging from existing archival sources. The eastern part of the Oirat world was based politically on an alliance between Khoshuts and Jungars, led by Baibagas and Khara Khula, respectively. They had just freed themselves from the rule of the Khotogoit Altan Khan (Zlatkin 1964: 126–127). Oirat sources refer to Baibagas’ dominance of the Irtysh region (KILP 1969: 28)<sup>23</sup>, who inherited the leadership of the Oirat *chulgan* from his father and grandfather. Khara Khula and Baibagas began their relations with Russians at about the same time. In 1619 and 1620, both swore to serve Russian authorities and cease attacks on the Bashkirs, who were Russian subjects.<sup>24</sup>

Relations between Russian officials and both the Khoshuts and the Jungars did not evolve smoothly. After Baibagas retired from public life, his younger brother and successor Töröbaikhu Gushi together with his brother Këndölön Ubashi and nephew Ochirtu Taiji, threatened Siberian cities with attack, both on their own and with the Jungars.

After Khara Khula died, his fourth son and son-in-law of the Khoshuts’ Töröbaikhu Gushi, Khoto Khochin, took his place. He participated in a successful military campaign to Kōkōnor and Tibet, organized by Gushi Taiji, and for his service to *gelukpa* and the Fifth Dalai Lama, he was granted the title of Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji. Miyawaki presents evidence from *The Annals of Kōkōnor*, which state that the title of *Khuntaiji* was first granted to his father-in-law Gushi, who was later declared khan by the Fifth Dalai Lama himself (Miyawaki 1992: 269). Thus, immediately after the eastern Mongol khans, the Khoshut leader first gained the title of khan, the highest title



Fig. 2. The only existing image (1701) of Ablai Taiji from *Remezovskaia letopis'*, 2006

<sup>23</sup> For example, Batur Ubashi Tümen calls Baibagas ‘khan.’

<sup>24</sup> Report of the Ufa voivode, O. Ia. Pronishchev for October–November 1620 (MIRMO 1959: 106–107). This document confirms Baibagas’ leadership, as he made the pledge ‘for himself and for his taichis’ (see p. 107).



in Turko-Mongolian world, thanks to investiture of the Dalai Lama. The Jungar Khoto Khochin could only be the second among Oirats according to traditional title nomenclature, as his clan did not belong to Chinggisids.

Gushi Khan apparently preferred to stay in Tibet and Kōkōnor, founding a new Khoshut dynasty that ruled until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Batur, upon returning to the Irtys area with the title of *Khuntaiji*, became a leading figure in the Oirat confederation. He actively fought for the interests of the Oirat union and in 1643 organized an attack on the Kazakh khan Jangir, in alliance with his older brother Chokur, as well as his Khoshut allies Ochirtu, Ablai, and Torgut Kho Örlök.<sup>25</sup> For the Oirats in general and Batur Khuntaiji in particular, this attack proved disastrous. The Oirats lost many warriors and suffered a painful defeat, which Batur blamed on Kōndölön and the Dörböt Dalai Taisha who refused to support the united forces. This sparked a long feud between the Khuntaiji and Kōndölön Ubashi that led to a schism in the Khoshut clan itself.

The Khuntaiji was not the only one who strove for dominance among the Oirats after Gushi Khan left the region. His rival Kōndölön, as well as Baibagas' sons Ochirtu Taiji and Ablai Taiji had a stronger claim to leadership in the Oirat union, thanks to their Chinggisid origin.

## ABLAI TAIJI AND HIS FELLOW KHOSHUTS

Ochirtu and Ablai were half-brothers born to different mothers.<sup>26</sup> Ablai's mother was the daughter of the Torgut ruler Kho Örlök (Tepkeiev 2012), and Oirat sources refer to her as Saikhan Zui Khatun (KILP 1969: 152). She is also mentioned in Gaban Sharab's *Account of the Oirats*, which notes her great religious devotion: '...to find salvation she brought all her property to the Dalai Lama as an offering' (Ibid). This inspired Lytkin to suggest that she was the one who urged her son to build the monastery of Ablai-kit.

Ochirtu Taiji's mother was Gunji Khatun. Some sources report that she passed away in 1652, five years after her pilgrimage to Lhasa (Radnabhadra 1999: 60). She was Baibagas' senior wife and after his death in the early 1630s,<sup>27</sup> she married her deceased husband's younger brother Töröbaikhu Gushi, as Russian documents call her the wife of 'Kuishi-taishi'.<sup>28</sup> She seems to have inherited at least part of her late husband's appanage.<sup>29</sup> As the independent ruler of her own ulus, she conducted important diplomatic correspondence with Russian authorities shortly before her death. She hoped for peaceful relations with Russian voivodes, trade with Siberian towns, and

<sup>25</sup> Report of the Tobolsk voivode G. S. Kurakin to the Siberian Prikaz, May 1644 (MIRMO 1974: 233–235). See also Fisher 1774: 445–446.

<sup>26</sup> The exact dates of Ochirtu and Ablai's births are not known, but G.S. Lytkin argues that both brothers were born between 1605 and 1614 (KILP 1969: 107).

<sup>27</sup> In 'Notes on the reception at the Embassy of Kalmyk envoy Murzei,' dated January 12, 1832, the envoy Murzei is reported as saying that Baibagas was killed by the taiji Konukha, and that later Konukha was killed by Baibagas' sons. [MIRMO 1959: 173]

<sup>28</sup> This can be explained both as an error on the part of Russian observers, as well as the tradition of levirate marriage among the Oirats. Whatever the reason, Gunji Khatun does not seem to have become Gushi's wife in practice and did not remain with him in Tibet.

<sup>29</sup> This is revealed by her name, related to the Chinese title of *gunji* (Chin. *gongzhu* 公主), which is often translated as 'princess.' In addition, she was the mother of the oldest son and main heir of Baibagas. Gunji Khatun is mentioned in passing in Radnabhadra's *Moonlight*. When she passed, her devoted son Ochirtu Taiji offered all her property and young male servants to the personal treasury of Zaya Pandita (Radnabhadra 1999: 71).





to reinforce her own authority in the eyes of Moscow, likely with the goal of supporting and boosting the prestige of the Khoshuts as a whole. This proved far from easy. In one of her letters to the Russian tsar, Gunji complained that the Tobolsk voivode refused to have anything to do with her, declaring ‘what can women know’ and sending away her envoys.<sup>30</sup> She insistently tried to convey the notion to the Russians that ‘Kalmyks all honor her, heeding her word and calling her “mother”’.<sup>31</sup> As a result of these efforts, in the summer of 1653, Russian authorities sent a trade caravan to Peking across her lands, and Gunji Khatun began to receive a salary from Moscow.<sup>32</sup> Thus, after Baibagas’ death and Gushi Khan’s departure for Tibet, Gunji Khatun took on some of the leadership roles among the Khoshuts.

Even earlier in 1644, Ablai Taiji tried to reach out independently to the Russians, sending his envoy Bakhtyi. Thanks to this embassy, Ablai succeeded in making an ally of the Tobolsk voivode (Slesarchuk 1961: 134). Well aware of the Russians’ struggles with Kho Örlök and Shukur Daichin, Ablai together with Köndölön proposed they launch a joint war against the Torgut in the Yayik River region. Russian officials were eager to make contact and strove to keep on good terms with the ‘Irtyskh Kolmaks’ in order to gain control over the Oirats who lived between Yayik and Volga.<sup>33</sup> In 1647, Ablai once again reached out to the Russian authorities, informing them that, among other things, the descendants of Siberian Khan Kuchum proposed he join them in an attack on Siberian towns, but he refused, saying that his people ‘do not go to battle against your lordships’.<sup>34</sup> In 1655, somewhat after Ablai, Ochirtu Taiji decided to start his own negotiations with the Russians. He sent envoys with gifts and offers of trade to Tobolsk, and received an answer in the affirmative and salary.<sup>35</sup>

One of the numerous conflicts between Ochirtu Taiji and Ablai unfolded when, after Gunji Khatun’s death, Ablai claimed he had a right to her ulus, as well as her recently acquired regular salary and status as main partner with the Russians.<sup>36</sup> Ablai’s actions can possibly be explained by the fact that after Baibagas’ death, Ablai was dissatisfied that when his father divided up his property among his sons, he gave his eldest son not only leadership over the Khoshuts and the right to head the *chulgan*, but also the largest portion of his dominion.<sup>37</sup> Ablai may have seen the occupation of Gunji Khatun’s ulus as kind of compensation for this. In addition, Baibagas’ younger son could not have failed to understand that controlling Gunji’s lands, located on the ancient route connecting the Urals and Western Siberia with Eastern Turkestan and the Silk Road, would likely raise his status among the Oirats. The year after his step-mother’s death, Ablai confirmed his right to Gunji’s property to envoys of Tobolsk voivode V. Khilkov and took on her previous

<sup>30</sup> In ‘Letter from the wife of the Khoshut Taiji Töröbaikhu Gunji’ MIRMO 1974: 371–372).

<sup>31</sup> Note in a report compiled by the Siberian Prikaz (MIRMO 1974: 375–376).

<sup>32</sup> Report from the Tobolsk voivode V. I. Khilkov to the Siberian Prikaz (MIRMO 1974: 393–397).

<sup>33</sup> Report from the Tobolsk voivode G. S. Kurakin to the Siberian Prikaz (MIRMO 1974: 233–235).

<sup>34</sup> Report from the Tobolsk voivode I. I. Saltykov to the Siberian Prikaz (MIRMO 1974: 233–235). This was not the last request Kuchum’s people made. In 1658, they once again asked Ablai about an alliance against the Russians. See also the report from the Tumen voivode F. Verigin..., dated September 1658 (Miller 2005: 399–400).

<sup>35</sup> Report from the Tomsk voivode M. P. Volynskii to the Siberian Bureau (MIRMO 1974: pp. 361–362).

<sup>36</sup> Russian authorities stated their intention to clarify who had inherited Gunji’s ulus after her death (MIRMO 1974: 322).

<sup>37</sup> Batur-Ubashi Tümen states in *Skazanie o Durben Oiratakh* that Baibagas evenly divided his property among his two sons. Lytkin specifies that Ochirtu received a slightly larger number of the households under his father’s rule, 70,000 to Ablai’s 60,000 (KILP 1969: 37, 108).



obligation to accompany Russian diplomats and trade caravans on their way to China.<sup>38</sup> Russian authorities attempted to sort out who in the end was the legal heir of the late Gunji. They even split Gunji's salary between Ablai and Ochirtu.<sup>39</sup> However, Ablai's insistence apparently forced the Tobolsk voivode to take him at his word. For Ambassadorial Prikaz, it was important to maintain their partnership with Gunji's heir, as first the Khoshut princess and then her stepson Ablai promised to supply diplomats and caravans with camels, maintenance, and escorts. In return, Ablai gained stable income from trade, the support of Russian authorities, and prestige among the Oirats, which in time could be converted to political power.

## WAR BETWEEN BROTHERS

The conflict over Gunji's property was one of the main sources of animosity between the two brothers, which predictably spilled over into political tension. Tension began at the moment of Baibagas' death in 1630, apparently, and continued until Ablai was taken hostage by Ayuka Khan in 1671, intermixed with a few rare periods of peace. Radnabhadra portrays this dynamic in *Moonlight* by contrasting this internal conflict within the Khoshuts with Zaya Pandita's attempts at brokering peace. The policy of Ochirtu Taiji, granted the title of Setsen Khan by the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1666, consisted of maintaining a close alliance with the Jungars, in the personage first of Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji and then of his son and heir Senge. Ochirtu Setsen Khan supported the Jungar *taijis*, helping suppress the opposition of other potential leaders among the Jungars. Thus, Ochirtu supported Senge when he came to power after the death of his father and faced the opposition of his half-brothers Setsen Taiji and Dzotba Batur, who believed that their age gave them precedence over Senge.<sup>40</sup> This conflict split all the Oirats in the Irtysh region into two warring wings and led to a serious political crisis.

The right (western) wing supported Senge and consisted of Jungars and Khoits under the protections of the Khoshut ruler Ochirtu Setsen Khan. The left (eastern) wing united the Jungar opponents of Senge with part of the Dörböts and Khoshuts represented by Ablai Taiji and his uncle on his father's side, the authoritative Köndölön Ubashi and his sons. Perhaps Ablai believed that if one of Senge's older brothers came to power in the Jungar ulus, he would gain a powerful ally in his own conflict with his brother Ochirtu. At that time, no one could have foreseen that the involvement of the Khoshut brothers in the Jungar crisis would lead to the death of both and the decline of Khoshut power along the Irtysh.

Why did the Khoshuts end up divided in a conflict for dominance within the Jungar clan? In addition to the personal animosity and grievances between Baibagas' sons, the brothers also held very different perspectives on the nature of Oirat politics. Some scholars argue that Ochirtu Setsen Khan supported Batur Khuntaiji, who was a proponent of a more centralized power structure among the Jungar nobility and attempted to take the reins of leadership of the Oirat confederation. Their opponents, for their part, likely represented the interests of the tribal elites who wanted to preserve the looser format of the Oirat confederation with its high level of dependence

<sup>38</sup> Report of the Tobolsk voivode V. I. Khilkov... (MIRMO 1974: 399).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Junko Miyawaki (1992: 269–270), referring to the Tibetan chronicle *Paksam Jongsang* by Sumpa Kenpo Yeshe Peljor, argues that Senge and Galdan, as full brothers, were all the sons of a Khoshut princess, unlike Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji's other sons. Moreover, Senge took a granddaughter of Ochirtu Setsen as a wife.



on individual clans (Zlatkin 1964: 109). However, this viewpoint only makes sense if we assume that there was actual potential for centralized leadership of the Jungar houses in the Irtysh region at this time. If we instead recognize the important role of the Khoshuts in the political processes within the Oirat confederation, the conflict of the 1660s can be seen in a different light, as a schism within the Khoshuts that eventually led to their decline and their subjugation to the Jungars. Thus, if in the first scenario, Ochirtu Setsen Khan, the only leader bearing then the title of khan in the Irtysh area, consciously strove to rule the Jungars against the interests of the Khoshuts themselves (which makes no sense), then in the second case, warring groups within the Khoshuts used a succession crisis in the Jungar house to try and settle their conflict with each other. As a result, the Jungars led by Galdan Taiji got a chance to finish off the Khoshuts, weakened by internal conflict, and concentrate power over the Irtysh region into their hands.

Despite Zaya Pandita's attempts to reconcile the brothers<sup>41</sup> and Ochirtu Setsen Khan's willingness to make peace, Ablai Taiji declared open war in the summer of 1661 (Radnabhadra 1999: 77).<sup>42</sup> His army, numbering 30,000 warriors, attacked the equally large forces of Ochirtu Setsen Khan and his allies. Ablai was defeated and retreated with the remnants of his army to his recently built and well-defended monastery on the Irtysh (Ibid: 78). After a month and a half of siege, the defenders of Ablai-kit began to die of smallpox. After the intervention of his stepmother Saikhan Zui Khatun, Ochirtu Setsen accepted his brother's surrender<sup>43</sup>. To resolve the conflict between the two Khoshut factions, a meeting of the supporters of Ochirtu Setsen Khan and Senge was called, where Ablai was generously pardoned out of respect for his lineage and status among the Oirats. He was even granted some of his property back (Ibid: 79). The monastery Ablai had built just a few years before the event could not protect him from military attack, despite its excellent defenses.

## THE DEATH OF ABLAI AND FALL OF THE KHOSHUTS

Ablai's defeat in the war against his brother and his brother's allies did not lead to his immediate loss of influence. During the 1660s, Ablai continued to develop active ties to the Russians. In 1660, a Tatar settlement on the Baraba Steppe was attacked by the Torguts under Kho Örlök.<sup>44</sup> Ablai solved this problem and returned the captured hostages to the Russian side. Not long afterward, he received a grateful commendation from Alexei Mikhailovich for his faithful service:

The Kalmyk taisha Lazan [Lobsang] and the Turguts [Torguts] without your knowledge brought war to Our Imperial Majesty in Siberian locales, and they took the people of Our Great Lord captive, and you, having sought out these captives, sent them to towns of Our Great Lord and in future keep on sending them back (MIRMO 1996: 87).

<sup>41</sup> Zaya Pandita as Baibagas' foster son and a member of the Khoshut clan might believe that Oirat unity depended on Khoshut unity.

<sup>42</sup> Ch. Dalai (2006: 84) argues that the conflict between Ablai and Ochirtu made the former to support his uncle Köndölön in his opposition to both Ochirtu and Batur-Khuntaiji.

<sup>43</sup> Radnabhadra (1999: 178) notes that during the siege of Ablai-kit, Ablai Taiji's mother came out from the besieged monastery and began peace negotiations. She convinced Ochirtu to forgive Ablai and end the siege. Out of respect for her, the Khoshut ruler did just that.

<sup>44</sup> These raids were led by the Torgut Lobsang Taiji, Gunji's nephew, who at that time had already sworn fealty to Russia and become a Russian subject (MIRMO 1996: 74–75, 455).



During the entire period of the 1650–60s, when Ablai systematically built up relations with Russian authorities, his brother, Ochirtu Taiji's attention was focused in other direction. He sent only three groups of envoys to Tobolsk over the course of those years, in 1650, 1657, and in 1658 (MIRMO 1974: 361; MIRMO 1996: 22–24, 50–51). At that same time, Ochirtu Taiji made two lengthy and profuse pilgrimages to Tibet, the first one in 1652 immediately after the death of this mother. On that trip, he donated almost all the livestock his mother had owned, a significant portion of his proceeds from the sale of 10,000 horses to China, and even sent 200 Kyrgyz and Oirat boys to serve Zaya Pandita and the Buddhist monasteries of Tibet (Radnabhadra 1999: 61, 71–72). This generosity did not have passed unnoticed. During his second pilgrimage to Tibet in 1665–1666, the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso officially granted Ochirtu Taiji the title of Setsen Khan, along with ceremonial garments, clearly acknowledging his service to the Buddhist faith (Ibid: 89). This decision shifted the political configuration among the Oirats and turned the Khoshut lands on the Upper Irtysh into a khanate.

After returning to his pastures as a khan, Ochirtu got down to business. In 1669, Ochirtu Setsen Khan's envoys held negotiations with Russian authorities on his behalf. In part, Ochirtu ordered his ambassadors to convey in oral form to the Russian tsar that the reason behind his lack of engagement with him was the war with Bukhara and the conflict with his brother. However, now, he said, he had peace with Ablai and had defeated his enemies. Ochirtu also announced that henceforth all of his mother Gunji's lands belonged to him and he was ready to accompany Russian emissaries and caravans not only to China but also to Bukhara, Tibet, and Kashmir. Ochirtu gave reassurances of his loyalty to the Russian throne and took on the responsibility of controlling all Oirat taijis whose territories lay near the Russian border. Ochirtu Setsen Khan also noted that in age and achievements he was superior to Ablai, with whom Russians had conducted affairs in previous years. He emphasized that his title of khan gave him status above all other Oirat taijis.<sup>45</sup>

Ochirtu Setsen Khan's emphasis of his patronage of the Buddhist sangha, of his close relationships with Zaya Pandita and the Dalai Lama bore fruit and led to his leadership among the Oirats. Senge, the Jungar he supported, strengthened his position among the Jungar ulus and his former rival Ablai could do little to prevent it.<sup>46</sup> As noted above, Ablai attempted to bring his own allies to power among the Jungars, but was unsuccessful.

Starting in the early 1670s, Ablai again tested the extent of his powers on the Yayik, where together with his Khoshut uncle Köndölön Ubashi, he took control of the Dörböts and Torguts who had their pastures there (Radnabhadra 1999: 92). Available sources have little to say about these incidents, but the biography of Zaya Pandita recounts that the united forces of Ablai and Köndölön were able to defeat the Dörböt Dayan Ombo and the Torgut Puntsok (Monchak), as well as take over the pastures of their Torgut uncle Daichin Taiji.<sup>47</sup> Some reports state that Ablai even demanded that Russian authorities send him the salaries of Dayan Ombo and Puntsok (Ocherki 1967: 138), thus announcing his right to their property.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Transcript of the accounts of Khoshut Ochirtu Tsetsen Khan's envoys Tarkhan and Sanzhi of 1669 submitted to the Ambassadorial Prikaz (MIRMO 1996: 212–215).

<sup>46</sup> In 1667, Senge defeated his old Khotogoit enemy Altan Khan Lobsang Taiji and in doing so increased his authority among the Oirats (Zlatkin 1964: 216–217).

<sup>47</sup> Ablai's mother Saikhan Zui Khatun was Daichin's sister. In 1655, Daichin spent the summer with his nephew, where he met Zaya Pandita (KILP 1969: 55–56; Tepkeiev 2012: 347–348).

<sup>48</sup> Sh. Norbo (1999: 271) suggests that Ablai's ultimate goal was to push aside the Torgut elite and control all the Volgo-Ural Kalmyks. V. Tepkeiev (2012: 347) argues that Ablai's retreat to the Yayik can be explained by the fact that during family disputes, taijis often withdrew to the lands of their maternal relatives.



As they were dividing the property they had won, a rift emerged between Ablai and Köndölön. Ochirtu Setsen Khan apparently decided to use this opportunity and snatched up the Yayik pastures of his former Dörböt and Torgut allies (Tepkeiev 2012: 347). A report by the Bukharan Seitkul Ablin to the Tobolsk prikaz house (*prikaznaia izba*) dated October 1671 states that Ablai complained that ‘he had been robbed by warriors,’ possibly meaning his defeat yet again at the hands of Ochirtu.<sup>49</sup> After spending the winter of 1671–72 on the Yayik, Ablai Taiji unavoidably came into conflict with Ayuka, son of Daichin. Both Ayuka and Ablai reached out for assistance from Muscovy, claiming the rights to Daichin’s estate. Russian authorities not only tried to reconcile the warring parties but also managed to get them both to agree to join Russia’s war against the Crimean Khan Hajji Selim Girei. Ablai immediately agreed to this proposal, mostly likely hoping a military alliance with Moscow would strengthen his position between the Yayik and the Volga.<sup>50</sup> Yet whatever Ayuka and Ablai agreed to do for Muscovy, they were not about to compromise with each other.

In winter 1672, Ablai and his son Tsagan moved a force of 30,000 to the Akhtuba River (Ibid: 354), where they were finally overwhelmed by the Torgut leader.<sup>51</sup> Ayuka not only defeated Ablai and his men, he took Ablai hostage (Radnabhadra 1999: 92). We know that Ayuka handed over the captive Ablai to the Russians who later informed Ochirtu in their letters that they were holding Ablai as he was ‘guilty of crimes and betrayals.’<sup>52</sup> This perhaps refers to Ablai’s breaking of his promises to not attack Russian subjects, which included the Yayik Torguts and Dörböts. It is possible that other facts were involved as well. Ablai was detained in Moscow where he died according to the reports of Russian officials. According to other information reported by G. S. Lytkin, Ayuka managed to have him returned to his Volga domains where Ablai ‘ended the distress of his life in Mogoitu Ulan on the River Sala.’<sup>53</sup>

In 1676, the smoldering conflict between the Jungars and Khoshuts erupted into its final stage. After assassination of Senge by his elder brothers, Ochirtu Setsen Khan supported the elderly Chokur, brother of Erdeni Batur Khuntaiji as leader of the Jungar domains. At the same time, Galdan, the full brother of Senge, having consolidated power in his hands, launched regular attacks on Chokur, and then on Ochirtu Setsen Khan, defeating his forces on the Ili River. Ochirtu Setsen Khan fled to Balkhash where he died in 1680.<sup>54</sup> His death signaled the complete decline of the Khoshut clan in the Irtysh region. Historian V. T. Tepkeiev recently cleared up the fate of

<sup>49</sup> From the statements of Tobolsk civil clerk the Bukharan S. Ablin... (MIRMO 1996: 233).

<sup>50</sup> V. Tepkeiev (2012: 353–354) cites this information based on materials from the RGADA archives.

<sup>51</sup> Clearly, due to this conflict with the sons of his former ally Köndölön, Ablai could not rely on his support.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Oblai taisha for his betrayals and misdeeds was taken captive and handed over to Muscovy...’ See Report compiled at the Ambassadorial Prikaz... dated January 1676 (MIRMO 1996: 287). Chuluunay Dalai argued that Ayuka was granted the khan’s dignity by the Fifth Dalai Lama in return of his service of suppressing the troublesome Ablai (Dalai 2006: 91–92).

<sup>53</sup> Lytkin clearly got this information from the work of Pallas (KILP 1969: 28). In general, there are many discrepancies surrounding the circumstances of Ablai’s death. G. F. Müller (1747: 420–468) stated that Ablai was moved by Russian officials to Astrakhan where ‘he died locked up in a tower of the city walls’. Tepkeiev (2012: 355) reports that immediately after he was taken hostage, Ablai and his family were held captive on the River Terek, then moved to Astrakhan. G. S. Lytkin also notes that before handing him over to Ayuka, Ablai was held at the prison in Tsaritsyn (KILP 1969: 66).

<sup>54</sup> According to the Mongolian chronicle *Erdeniin Tobchi*, one of the main reasons Galdan Boshoktu Khan fought the Khalkha Tushetu Khan Chakhun Dorji was the aid the Tushetu Khan tried to render Ochirtu Setsen Khan during his war with Galdan (Mongol’skaia letopis’ 1883: 70). G. S. Lytkin argues that Galdan took Ochirtu captive (KILP 1969: 63).



Ablai's son Tsagan Taiji, whose name disappears from Russian documents after 1673. After the defeat and captivity of his father, Tsagan managed to flee to his uncle Ochirtu Setsen. In 1673, the Russians discovered that after fighting with his uncle, Tsagan fled to the Kazakh Tauke Khan, where he soon died. His followers were held there and later began to serve the Kazakh khan (Tepkeiev 2012: 355)<sup>55</sup>. After the death of both main Khoshut rulers, the remains of Ablai's people left for the Volga region, following their fellow Khoshuts, the sons of Köndölön Ubashi and the widow of Ochirtu Setsen Dorji Rabdan. Some followed Ochirtu Setsen's grandsons Lubsan Gombo and Batur Jinong to Kökönör and Tibet (Zlatkin 1964: 168–169).

In 1672, Galdan received the title of *Khuntaiji* in Lhasa, a sign of his future leadership among the Jungars. After his victory over Ochirtu Setsen Khan in 1675, the Dalai Lama decided to grant Galdan the title of Shajin Barikchi Boshoktu Khan, or 'the Khan Sent by Destiny who Holds the [Buddhist] Faith' (Miyawaki 1997: 67). Though his father's line did not extend back to Chinggis Khan, authorities in Lhasa likely took into account his maternal Khoshut line and his religious status.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Galdan strengthened his ties to the Khoshuts by taking Senge's widow Ana, the granddaughter of Ochirtu Setsen Khan, as his wife. The Fifth Dalai Lama needed a powerful patron to support his goal of founding a Mongol-Tibetan Buddhist state, someone capable of standing up to Qing expansion. The hopes laid on the Khoshuts proved unfounded and for this reason the Jungars had a chance to establish themselves as a khanate. They made full use of it.

The monastery Ablai built on the Irtysh became a monument of sorts to the grand ambitions of the Khoshuts that never came to be. What can the written sources, artefacts, and ruins themselves tell us about Ablai and the Khoshuts of the Irtysh as a whole?

## THE CONSTRUCTION AND FATE OF ABLAI-KIT

Ablai-kit may not have been the first but was among the very earliest Oirat stationary monasteries. Ablai may have had several motives for building it: the desire to turn it into a center of religious power under his control, the willingness to strengthen his position thanks to the economic activity (agriculture, caravan trade transit point) related to the monastery, and finally the desire to have a reliable fortified location in case of war. Thus, Ablai Taiji tried to project his authority to the Oirat world in counterbalance to his brother's and other rivals' power, including the Jungars, who were making similar attempts of their own.

The initial stage of construction coincided with the arrival of envoy Fiodor Baikov, who spent several months in Ablai's residence from late autumn 1653 to early spring 1654 and witnessed the construction of Ablai-kit:

<sup>55</sup> Gaban Sharav notes that though Ochirtu Setsen's line died out, Ablai's continues in Kökönör. He also states that Ablai had two sons and he divided his ulus equally between them (KILP 1969: 143, 151). While we know very little about Tsagan Taiji, we know nothing about Ablai's second son.

<sup>56</sup> An important factor seldom mentioned by scholars of Galdan's elevation to khan status was his status as a reincarnate lama. In Tibet he was recognized as the Ensa Tulku, the reincarnation of an important teacher of the Gelugpa tradition. After Zaya Pandita's death, which had a significant impact on Lhasa's interests in the Irtysh region, Galdan Boshoktu Khan became the spiritual and political leader of the Oirats, united in a single person (Miyawaki 1997: 66).



On that same River Beshke, Ablai Taiji is making a town and not much is known about it, whether it be of stone or wood, yet much timber has been brought in; thin pine boards of the kind we in Muscovy have in our towns standing in a palisade around; and they are siting that town between stony mountains, and craftsmen have been sent to it from the kingdom of China.<sup>57</sup>

Construction not only coincided with Baikov's sojourn, but more generally with Ablai's cooperation with Russian officials in developing trade and diplomatic ties between Muscovy and the Qing Empire. This fit very logically into Ablai's plans. His main rivals already had such ties, including the Jungar rulers and his brother Ochirtu.

Ablai approached the construction of his monastery very deliberately. The future site was well chosen both in terms of military strategy and Buddhist geomancy. It was surrounded to the west and north by low but steep granite cliffs, and on the south and east by stone walls 2–6 m tall. From the highest peak, one gained a wonderful view of the surrounding steppes. On the eastern side, a stream served as further discouragement to foes, and to the south lay a swampy lowland. Within the boundary of the monastery, a small lake sat in a rocky elevated spot that could provide drinking water in case of siege. Within the monastery walls, four buildings of varying sizes were built. The main temple, 45×20 m, stood on a raised terrace measuring 80×45 m, reachable from the south by a long stair. On the terrace, in addition to the temple itself, which had two wings, was a pavilion of sorts, built at the temple entrance. To the west of the main temple was a small workshop, and to the northeast, rather generous living quarters for the monks. The walls of the temple complex were likely covered with clay tiles.<sup>58</sup>

The amount of worked stone and tile used in these buildings is remarkable. Even today, the foundations of the main temple are visible, as well as the base for pillars and the remains of the walls and cellars, despite the many years locals used the monastery as a source of building materials. Local Kazakhs used the ruins' worked stone to enclose tombs (*mazar*), and the glazed and ornamented bricks were used to decorate stoves in the homes of gold miners, Cossacks, and soldiers stationed at the Ust'-Kamenogorsk garrison (Vlangali 1853: 136). By 1842, Russian geographer Piotr Chikhachev (1974: 341) noted that the amount of stone and tiles locals had dismantled and taken away from the monastery ruins was 'enormous.' A local merchant told him that in the 12 years he had spent in the area, the annual removal of large quantities of stone from Ablai-kit had continued.

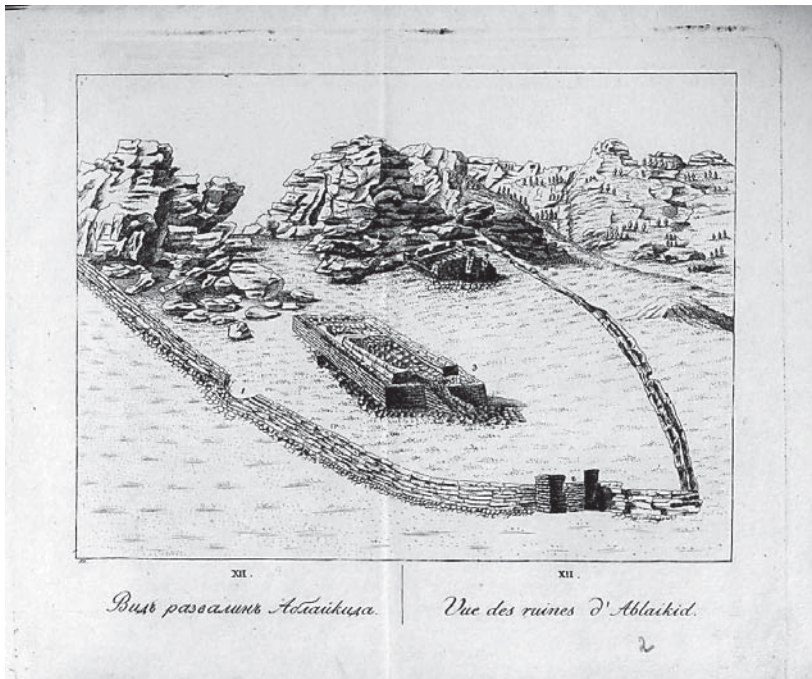
The religious significance of the monastery can be judged by what was observed of its library. Thus Müller and Gmelin, who visited Ust'-Kamenogorsk fortress in 1734 and who sent a small group of soldiers led by a sergeant (*uriadnik*) to explore the monastery, described the plundered library found on the monastery territory.<sup>59</sup> Enough manuscripts remained that ten horses could not carry them away. The soldiers were able to bring back 1,500 manuscript pages in total, as well as printing blocks and painted images, to Ust'-Kamenogorsk. This report, if not exaggerated,

<sup>57</sup> Demidova 1966: 119. Three versions of this source exist in the archives of relations between Russia and China, RGADA. This document has been published several times in various editions, I used the second edition.

<sup>58</sup> Detailed descriptions of the remains of Ablai-kit can be found in Chernikov (2018: 322–333) and Baipakov et al. (2017: 634–665).

<sup>59</sup> Müller reported that locals put Ablai-kit's manuscripts to various household uses, including wrapping goods (Spasskii 1818a: 65).





**Fig. 3.** The image of Ablai-Kit's ruins from Spasskii 1818b.

suggests that Ablai-kit contained a notable library for a monastery on the periphery of the Tibeto-Buddhist world.

Recent studies of more than 200 manuscript pages from Ablai-kit from the Tibetan collection at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences have substantially expanded our knowledge of the monastery's library. It appears to have contained a full collection of the Buddhist scriptures in Tibetan as well as a collection of commentaries.<sup>60</sup> Analysis of the paper and inks leave no doubt that the manuscripts were made in Tibet.<sup>61</sup> It seems clear that they were purchased or obtained as a donation from Lhasa. This might have happened thanks to Zaya Pandita, though his biography does not mention this, or may have happened at a later date. However, the very fact that this full collection of canonical Buddhist scriptures in a fancy edition existed at Ablai-kit indicates that the monastery was an important, if not the most important Buddhist center in the Irtysh region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Radnabhadra notes that Ablai invited Zaya Pandita to conduct a series of consecration rites in the winter of 1657 (Radnabhadra 1999: 75). This means that the construction was in general

<sup>60</sup> Helman-Wazny, Kriakina and Zorin (2015: 61–76) conclude that the manuscripts from Ablai-kit appear to be from a previously unknown edition of the Buddhist canon in Tibetan translation. Initial textual analysis did not allow the researchers to connect it to any extant Tibetan canonical edition.

<sup>61</sup> Recently conducted analysis of the paper of Ablai-kit manuscripts proves its Tibetan origin (Helman-Wazny, Kriakina and Zorin 2015). Another factor speaking well for the manuscripts' Tibetan origins is the quality of the edition. The manuscripts are written on black glazed paper in gold ink, a technique that was likely not widely used in the Upper Irtysh region at the time (Ibid).





completed in three years. A thousand monks were present at the consecration ritual of the *süme* (main temple) according to that same source (Ibid). This number is likely an exaggeration, one typically found in Buddhist writings, but suggests that the consecration of Ablai's *süme* was a major event for the Irtysh Buddhists at that time. Along with Zaya Pandita, two other monks led the consecration ceremony, Dayan Tsorji and Sertok Tsorji (Ibid). The title *tsorji* (Tib. chos rje) at that time was held by monks who acted as monastery administrators (Pozdneev 1887: 156). One can assume that both or one of these monks were appointed to this position at the new *süme*.

Why then was Ablai-kit abandoned, losing its significance with time? As argued above, the great resources Ablai invested in building the monastery, its significant collection of books, and its lavish interior decoration all speak to Ablai-kit's significance as a Buddhist center in the Irtysh region. We have no information about the monastery's fate after it was first conquered by Ochirtu Taiji and then returned to Ablai. Perhaps after Ablai moved to Yayik and was later taken hostage, the monastery came under the patronage of Ochirtu Setsen Khan. Sources are also silent as to what happened to Ablai-kit after the death of Ochirtu Setsen Khan and the flight of the Khoshuts to the Volga and Kökönör.<sup>62</sup> By 1676, it is clear that the entire domain of the Khoshuts came under the control of Galdan Boshoktu Khan.<sup>63</sup> The monastery was possibly used by monks for some time as a place of meditation, which is reflected in its historical name.

The Russian soldiers who investigated the monastery in the 1730s, more than a half-century after the fall of the Khoshuts in the area, found it only partially in ruins. The monastery library and some of the interior decoration remained in satisfactory condition. The final fall of Ablai-kit came over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, as it was systematically plundered by the local population. Most likely, Ablai-kit was only gradually abandoned, as the center of the Jungar Khanate began to shift in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to the region of Semirech'e and Eastern Turkestan.<sup>64</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this article, after analyzing a variety of primary sources and secondary research, we can confirm based on concrete facts Japanese historian Junko Miyawaki's opinion that the Jungar Khanate did not exist prior to 1675. Oirat and Russian sources clearly state that the political culture of the Upper Irtysh region was based on Khoshut leadership, who were the relatives and allies of the Jungars and other Oirat tribes. The Khoshuts had leadership, which can be traced through the activities of Baibagas, his brother Gushi Khan, and his sons Ochirtu Setsen and Ablai, not only in

<sup>62</sup> Some believe that the monastery was taken and partially destroyed by Galdan Boshoktu Khan, but we were not able to find any documentary evidence of that fact.

<sup>63</sup> It is unknown whether Ablai-kit survived yet another or perhaps several sieges. This idea is suggested by an observation made by surveyor V. Shishkov, who noted that the upper floor of the main temple appears to have been the site of a major fire (Borodaiev and Kontev 1999b: 126). Fire could have broken out for other reasons unrelated to a siege of the monastery, however.

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, on a map of Tartary produced by Guillaume Delille dated 1703, a broad swath of the upper Irtysh as far as Lake Iamyshev are called 'Terres d'Ablay.' The map also shows Ablai-kit, indicated as 'Boerkoe' (perhaps a corruption of the word 'urga' or residence) the 'residence d'Albay Prince Calmouc' (L'Isle). That by the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the main Jungar religious centers were all located south of Lake Balkhash can be easily seen on Johann Gustav Renat's map (Renat's Original A), where he notes all the most important Buddhist monasteries of Jungaria with special symbols (Talfer) (Erofeeva 2017: 35–48). Ablai-kit is not shown at all on this map.



the military and political spheres, but in the religious sphere as well. Zaya Pandita Namkhai Jamtso spent most of his time in the Khoshuts' domains and exerted a great deal of effort to ensure the unity of the Khoshut clan.

The many years of rivalry between Baibagas' sons led in the end to the decline of Khoshut power in the Upper Irtysh region. Before this occurred, Ablai Taiji did much to reinforce his position in this Oirat world. He pursued a policy of cooperation with Muscovy, trying to gain from Russian trade with China. Motivated by ambition, Ablai built a large monastery planned as both an important religious and economic center of the Irtysh Oirat world. The reports of early scholars as well as the latest studies of Ablai-kit's ruins and the manuscripts found there all point to its role as a significant religious center in the Irtysh area.

In the 1670s, the Khoshut clan gradually fell into decline. Oirat historians all agree that the reason for this decline was the animosity between Ochirtu Setsen and Ablai. According to Batur Ubashi Tümen, 'Ochirtu Setsen Khan and Ablai, brothers of the same father but by different mothers, fought each other and thus weakened their domains and people [*nutuk*]' (KILP 1964: 34)<sup>65</sup>. Pushed out of his pastures by his brother, Ablai tried to regain his leading position among his Torgut relatives between Yayik and Volga, but was ultimately defeated. In an irony of fate, Moscow, with which Ablai had worked so long and hard to build ties, most likely became the place of his captivity and death. Ablai's older brother did not get to enjoy his position as khan and undisputed ruler of the Khoshuts for long. In 1676, he was defeated by the Jungar ruler Galdan and died in his pastures near Lake Balkhash.

In light of the complete absence of information in historical sources, it is very difficult to speculate on the fate of Ablai-kit after the fall of Khoshut dominance. That early scholars found Ablai-kit in reasonably good condition with a nearly untouched library and interior, suggests that the monastery continued to function as a residence for monks until possibly the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the very least, we can say that Ablai-kit was not abandoned all at once, but that its significance declined gradually with the rise in significance of Jungar Buddhist centers, the majority of which were located in the Semirech'e and Eastern Turkistan.

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<sup>65</sup> Gabang Sharab agrees, stating that 'Tsetsen Khan and Ablai killed one another' and that 'Ablai lost his ulus due to increased envy' (KILP 1969: 36, 150).



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