Recognizable by the three circular steps, this splendid example belongs to the type of the “Eight Great Stupas” and was therefore once part of such a set. Named “the Stupa of Complete Victory” (Tib. rnam rgyal mchod rten; Chin. Shengli ta), it commemorates Buddha’s prolongation of his lifetime by three months.¹ This event occurred at the city of Vaisali when Buddha was eighty years of age through the supplication of the lay devotee Tisundra.²

The original consecration plate is in place although the contents have been removed. While its function and purpose are shared with the previously discussed stupa, the richly gilt and heavily ornamented appearance of the present example stands in total contrast to the former. The structure of the present stupa consists of a square double-tiered terrace upon a plinth with a stepped corner pattern. The dome (Skt. anda), draped in double-beaded garlands with additional strings of pearls ending with pendants, rises above these terraces. A parapet (Skt. harmika) of identical form as the platforms rests on the dome and supports the spire, which consists of thirteen discs surmounted by a canopy adorned by a frieze of ruyi heads. The finial at the top is in the shape of a water pot (Tib. bum pa).

The most striking characteristics of the stupa are its form, heavy gilding and its lavish ornamentation. The edge of the bottom plinth displays an unusual combination of finely engraved horizontal vajras alternating with what appear to be four-petal lotus flowers.³ In Vajrayana Buddhism, friezes of vajras typically are used to define a sacred space; their combination with lotuses must have a specific meaning now lost to us. The tiered terraces are separated by rows of various lotus petals, while the outer surfaces of the stepped levels show different finely engraved motifs: at the bottom a variant of the scroll motif is used that is found on Yuan artworks of all materials. On the narrow register between the terraces a similar, but slightly wider version of this motif is visible, while on the more prominent protruding panels in the middle there are depictions of a gem flanked by elegant ribbons. The border of the upper terrace represents a band of alternating triangles and dots – an ornament often seen on Tibetan
Buddhist icons of the 13th and 14th century. The tiered harmika consists of two narrow horizontal ornamented registers. The lower displays a double outlined rice grain pattern, and the borders of the upper level show a simplified variant of the omnipresent scroll motif. The canopy is elegantly decorated with the same arrangement of hanging double-string garlands and carries a frieze resembling ruyi heads. These might also be interpreted as triple-eyed gems (Tib. nor bu mig gum pa), one of the secondary possessions of the chakravartin and symbolizing the Precious Jewel.

Silk tapestry and engraved decorative elements provide important information and can be used as reliable markers for dating. The combination of motifs that are found on Nepalese, Tibetan and Mongol sculpture, argues that the stupa can be dated to the Yuan period. So far no other comparable models of small metal votive stupas have been identified that would support the suggested dating and attribution. There are three surviving large stone Yuan stupas in China: the White Pagoda (1272-1288) of the Miaoyingsi Temple in Beijing (see image p.66), the Great White Pagoda (1301) at Wutai shan and the “Shengxian Precious Pagoda (1343) in Wuchang.” These share at least a similar structure with the present gilt metal example. It can also be compared with the miniature depictions of stupas found on the outer circle depicting the Hells on the Yuan hea silk tapestry mandala depicting Yamaantaka-Vajrabhairava in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Other details, like the extensive use of pearl strings and double strands of beads, the rich gilding, as well as the bold application of square and diamond-shaped bezel-set gems over the ornamental panels, reflect the Mongol taste for finery and precious things with haptic quality. The stupa also perfectly exemplifies not only the Mongol love of consummate technique and skill, but also the preference of gold as a supreme signifier of status.
Whether this rare and important example was produced in the imperial Yuan ateliers cannot be determined with certainty today, but the careful rendering of the details, the rich gilding and the elegant appearance of the stupa would make this attribution very likely.

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Notes:
3. This specific shape and depiction of flowers is found on Nepalese sculpture of the Transitional and early Malla period; for an example attributed to the 10th/11th century, see von Schneidereit 2001, vol.1, p.817, pl.164, no.164D.
4. See cat. no.5, footnote 9.
5. For examples see von Schneidereit, vol.1, p.522, S23, pl.170, no.170C.
7. For a Yuan figure of Green Tara displaying a similar combination of three different motifs on the borders of the garment see Bigler 2017, p.66, 47, no.1.3.
8. On the White Pagoda, Miaoyisi Temple, built under the supervision of the Nepalese architect Anige (Chin. Aniko) 1245-1306, see McCausland 2014, p.52, fig.
9. See Debreczeny 2011, p.20, footnote 90.
10. See Lan Wu 1995, pp.73-79.
11. Published in Kuhn (ed.) 2012, pp.352, 353, fig.7.21a.