

8. GREEN TARA

Mercury gilt copper alloy with glass inlays
Tibeto-Chinese
Yuan, 14th century
Height: 18.3 cm (7.2 in.)

Within the Sakya tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism, three deities are particularly prominent during the Yuan period and accordingly enjoyed enormous popularity: Mahakala, Manjushri and Green Tara. While Mahakala was considered to be the foremost of the protectors of the Mongol empire, Manjushri, especially performing the *dharmacakra mudra*, was believed to embody the ultimate perfection of wisdom and knowledge. Green Tara (Tib. *sGrol ma ljang*; Chin. *lü dumu*) was worshipped as a liberator, the “Mother of all Buddhas” and savior; acting only to benefit her devotees, she was thought to be swift in her actions.¹ It should therefore not be surprising that statues of Green Tara were included in the canon of Vajrayana deities that were cast in various workshops in China during the Mongol rule; within the limited corpus of metal icons of the Yuan period, images of Green Tara are among the most numerous.² Her greatest popularity in China after the Tang dynasty was in the border regions where tantrism flourished, and among rulers who embraced Tibetan Buddhism; the most important source of Tara’s iconography for these later tantric Buddhists was the [*Tara*]-*Ekavimsatisotra*, the “Praise in Twenty-one Homages”, which was translated into Chinese sometime in the late 13th century.³

This figure of the goddess is closely related to other metal images datable to the Yuan period and shares most of the iconographic details, such as the style of the five-leaf crown, the large circular earrings, the distribution of the jewelry, the stylized “v”-shaped knot at the back of the neck and even the treatment of the petals on the lotus base. In consequence the present sculpture can be safely dated to the early 14th century.⁴

It is noteworthy that the borders seen on the *dhoti* are left undecorated and do not display the otherwise omnipresent scroll motif. Another interesting feature is the treatment of the jewelry: while the majority of the larger gems or beads are enhanced by inset glass stones, a considerable number of them have been solid cast – a detail well documented for early Ming icons bearing an imperial reign mark.

NOTES:

1. On the symbolism of Green Tara see Mull 2004, pp.11 and Liebert 1986, p.292.
2. For further examples see Bigler 2015, pp.84, no.19 and pp.96, no.22 and Bigler 2017, pp.46, no.13.
3. Weidner (ed.) 1994, p.248, no.10.
4. The result of a TL-Analysis (no. OSZ1179) performed by Szeged University (Hungary) on January 12, 2016 is consistent with the dating of a dark copper alloy figure of Green Tara published in Bigler 2017, pp.46, no.13; for other sculptures in the same style and with very similar iconography see footnote 2.



