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The Four Great Temples: Buddhist Archaeology, Architecture, and Icons of Seventh-Century Japan

By Donald F. McCallum

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009

xvii, 261 pp. + notes, glossary, bibliography, index; figures, maps, genealogies.

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In his introduction to *The Four Great Temples*, Donald McCallum makes the startling observation that “archaeologists, like all people, have desires” and that “an archaeologist may find what he or she is seeking, rather than examining the data from an objective perspective.” (p7) This thesis, shocking as it may seem, is amply documented in McCallum's book, which provides abundant evidence of the impassioned and highly opinionated debate among not only archaeologists, but also art historians and others concerning the implications of shards, roof tiles and heart stones for the history of seventh-century Japan.

The temples of the title are Asukadera (Gangōji), Kudara Ōdera (Daikandaiji, Daiianji), Kawaradera (Gufukuji), and Yakushiji. The term “four great temples” itself comes from a half dozen references in *Shoku Nihongi* from 702-707 to Buddhist temples in the Asuka region, specifically in the capital of Fujiwarakyō. McCallum treats their histories in a conceptual chronological framework which forms a narrative roughly approximating the course of the seventh century; each chapter begins with a historical introduction, and thus the book can be read as an outline history of this neglected period.

Nihon Shoki provides the core of the textual source material, along with *Daiianji Engi* and *Gangōji Engi*, both compiled in 747, and many later sources with a variety of provenances. McCallum carefully analyses this material in each chapter before moving on to trace the archaeological evidence as mediated through the debates and controversies among Japanese scholars over the last century. Particularly fresh is the material on the Kibi Pond excavations of 1997-2001, Kibi Pond being the putative site of Kudara Ōdera. Replete with maps, photos, architectural drawings and excavation plans, the book provides an exceptional visual tour of the Asuka region during the seventh century, and helps to set the stage for the move to the Nara capital in 710. A fascinating leitmotif is the

evolution of the round eave-end roof tiles (*noki marugawara*), which tell an intriguing story all by themselves.

One jarring note is the strident anti-Hōryūji sentiment which pervades the book. This theme first manifested itself in the author's 2002 *Monumenta Nipponica* review of J. Edward Kidder's *The Lucky Seventh: Early Hōryū-ji and Its Time*. In that very negative assessment, McCallum heralded the theme of four, as opposed to five, six or seven great temples, and began the Shōtoku Taishi-bashing which is so unpleasantly evident in the current work. A constant reminder of this is the author's refusal to call the great Buddhist saint by his name, Umayado, preferring to English it as "Prince Stable Door". This gratuitously snarky usage begins to grate on one's nerves by the fifteenth or twentieth time it is employed. All the other characters are referred to by their Japanese names, although McCallum might just as well have chosen to call Soga no Umako "Soga the Horse-Boy", or Soga no Emishi "Soga the Hairy Barbarian".

Thus McCallum strongly insists on Asukadera as uniquely a Soga creation, emphatically denying that the "Imperial" family was anything more than a rival clan at the time. In fact, however, the story of the development of the imperial institution during the seventh century is still far from settled. Quite apart from the valuable archaeological and art-historical data that McCallum presents, his interpretation of the political history of this period, still relatively unknown in the West, can be usefully read in comparison with other recent narratives such as Kidder's rather more lively portrayal of the era in *Lucky Seventh*. From the reign of Suiko Tennō, the first great empress, and the regency of her nephew Prince Shōtoku, to the destruction of the main Soga lineage and the Taika Reform, to the fraternal warfare between Emperors Tenji and Tenmu, to the founding of the new capital of Fujiwara, this is an exceedingly dramatic century in Japan's history. The story line, with its many twists and turns of plotline and plotters, conspiracies and coups, is narrated in the *Nihon Shoki*, a document with so much confused editing, imprecision and ambiguity that it still offers numerous puzzles after all these centuries. As with so much of ancient Japanese history, there is as yet no such thing as an authorized and definitive version of the 600's, either in Japan or in the West.

Of course, McCallum's antagonism toward Shōtoku Taishi is part of a great wave of deconstruction of the Buddhist saint which has been going on for quite some time now. But the author's palpable hostility toward the Hōryūji, the great temple most famously associated with the Prince, in fact comprises the major revisionist argument of the book. Hōryūji has indeed been lucky over the centuries, and its fortuitous survival and preservation of national treasures has made it an international tourist destination. The Four Great Temples survive in much less impressive form (three of them having been moved and rebuilt in Nara), and as far less splendid archaeological sites. The contribution

McCallum has made here is to meticulously follow the traces of these ancient wonders as they began to be constructed in Japan, and to paint a picture of a time when Hōryūji was not at all as grand as it is today.

McCallum's book is also highly significant in that he foregrounds the issue of the evolution of the great temples vis-à-vis the development of the political capital in ancient Japan. Our evidence for the Buddhist establishments is so much more substantial than that for the early imperial palaces simply because of the architectural demands of the former – sky-scraping pagodas (Figure 2.10 illustrates a putative reconstruction of Kudara Ōdera's nine-story pagoda as towering over Himeji Castle), weighty roof tiles, colossal foundation stones. Another fascinating theme of *Four Great Temples* is how the original buildings were transported first into the Fujiwara capital, then to Nara. Even the short-lived Ōtsu capital had its complement of temples. Quite obviously the genesis of “permanent capitals” in Japan was correlated with the concrete demands of constructing the most advanced, gorgeous and sacred edifices of the time.

Text Mentioned

Kidder, J. Edward. *The Lucky Seventh: Early Hōryū-ji and its Time*. Tokyo: International Christian University Hachiro Yuasa Memorial Museum, 1999.

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