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Richard Bowring

Excerpt

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1 The introduction of Buddhism

1.1 Gifts from Paekche

The entry in the chronicle *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720) for the year 552, winter, tenth month, reads as follows:

King Sōngmyōng 聖明 of Paekche 百濟 (also known as King Sōng) dispatched envoys to Japan, led by Norisach'igye, a *talsol* 達卒 of the Hūi 姬 family from the Western Sector. They had with them an offering of a gold and copper statue of Śākyamuni Buddha, together with several banners and canopies, and several volumes of sūtras and treatises. In a separate declaration, the king praised the merit of propagation and worship, stating: 'This Dharma is superior to all others. It is difficult to grasp and difficult to attain. Neither the Duke of Zhou nor Confucius was able to comprehend it. It can give rise to immeasurable, limitless merit and fruits of action, leading to the attainment of supreme enlightenment. The treasure of this marvellous Dharma is such that it is as if one owned a wish-fulfilling gem that granted every desire. Every prayer is granted and nothing is wanting. Moreover, from distant India to the three kingdoms of Korea, all receive these teachings and there is none who does not revere and honour them. Accordingly, your servant Myōng, King of Paekche, has humbly dispatched his retainer Norisach'igye to transmit it to the Imperial Land 帝國 and diffuse it through the home provinces 畿内, thereby fulfilling what the Buddha himself foretold: "my Dharma will spread to the East."'

That day the Heavenly Sovereign 天皇 [Kinmei] heard this declaration and leaped for joy, declaring to the envoys, 'Never until this moment have we heard such a fine Dharma. But we cannot decide on the matter ourselves.' Thereupon the Sovereign inquired of his assembled officials in turn: 'The Buddha presented to us by the state to our west has a face of great dignity, such as we have never known before. Should he be worshipped or not?'

Grand Minister Soga no Iname 蘇我稻目 replied: 'The many countries to the west 西蕃諸國 all worship it. Can Japan alone refuse to do so?' But Mononobe no Okoshi 物部尾與 and Nakatomi no Kamako 中臣鎌子 together addressed the Sovereign saying: 'Those who have ruled as kings over the world, over this our state, have always taken care to worship the 180 deities of heaven and earth 天地社稷百八十神 in spring, summer, autumn and winter. If we were now to change and worship a foreign deity 蕃神 we fear we may incur the wrath of the deities of our own land 國神.' The Sovereign then declared: 'It is fitting that we give it to Soga no Iname, who has

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expressed his desires. We shall ask him to worship it and see what results.’ The Grand Minister knelt down and received the statue with great joy. He enshrined it at his home at Oharida and practised the rituals of a world renouncer with devotion. He also purified his home at Mukuhara and made it into a temple.

Later, an epidemic afflicted the land and cut short the lives of many. As time passed, matters became worse and there was no respite. Mononobe no Okoshi and Nakatomi no Kamako together addressed the ruler, saying: ‘This epidemic has occurred because our counsel went unheard. Now, if you rectify matters before it is too late, joy will be the result. Throw away the statue of the Buddha at once and diligently seek future blessings.’ The Sovereign responded: ‘Let it be done as you advise.’

So the officials took the statue of the Buddha and threw it into the waters of the Naniwa canal. They then set fire to the temple in which it had been enshrined and burned it to the ground. At that moment, although there were no wind or clouds in the sky at the time, a fire suddenly broke out in the Great Hall (Sakamoto et al. 1967, vol. II: 101–02; Aston 1972, vol. II: 65–67).

This passage was written 168 years after the events it describes and is contained within a chronicle whose compilers had a very specific purpose in mind. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the account has been shown to contain a whole host of problematic features. As might be expected, the language betrays an exclusively Japanese perspective and the representation of a Korean king sounding so humble is doubtful, to say the least; native Korean names such as Norisach’igye (the reading is tentative) had already been replaced by Chinese-style names in Paekche by the mid-sixth century; the order of titles is incorrect and should read: family name, rank (*talsol*) and then personal name; ‘Western Sector’ is an anachronism; and the key term ‘Heavenly Sovereign’ 天皇 was certainly not in use in sixth-century Japan. King Sōngmyōng’s declaration also contains two passages which have been lifted from Yijing’s translation of the *Sūtra of golden radiant wisdom*,¹ which was not completed until 703 and did not reach Japan until 718. Although the delicate balance maintained between the new foreign deity and the native gods was a likely outcome, it must never be forgotten that all passages from *Nihon shoki* are far more a product of 720 than of 552.

We are fortunate in having access to another account of these events in the *History of the Gangōji monastery with a list of its treasures* (*Gangōji garan engi narabi ni ruki shizaichō* 元興寺伽藍緣起並流記資材帳), a history and inventory that was drawn up in 747. This short work postdates *Nihon shoki*, of course, and is no less tendentious, stressing as it does the pivotal role of

¹ Sk. *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtra*, Ch. *Jingguangming zuishengwang jing*, Jp. *Konkōmyō saishōō kyō* 金光明最勝王經, T. 665.

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the Soga house, and in particular Suiko Tennō 推古天皇 (r. 592–628), in the struggle to secure the future of Buddhism in Japan; but it is nevertheless important because it gives us quite a different picture of what might have happened.² In this account, Buddhism is said to have been introduced in 538, there is no separate declaration, and the image that arrives is a statue of Śākyamuni as a prince, accompanied by vessels for an anointing ritual. It is strongly suggested that the image had been requested by the Soga rather than having simply arrived out of the blue from Paekche. It is now thought likely that the later date of 552 in *Nihon shoki* reflects not historical accuracy, but rather the tradition that placed the beginning of the decline of the Dharma (*mappō* 末法) in this year, exactly 1,500 years after the putative death of Śākyamuni in 948 BCE. Written in the early eighth century to legitimise the position of the ruling family, *Nihon shoki* succeeds in creating history and masking the past to an extraordinary degree; our major source for the whole period becomes our major problem.

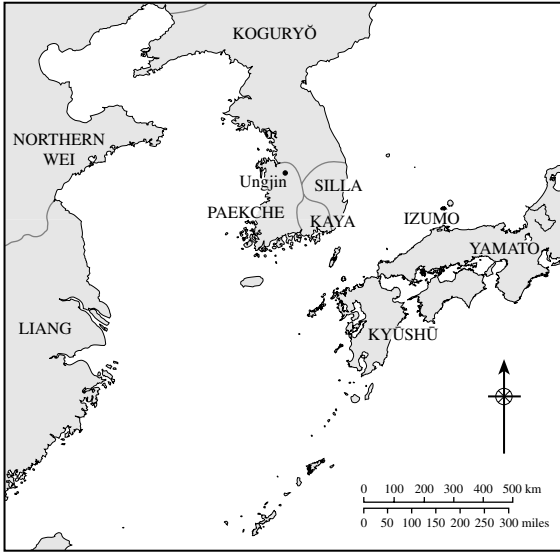
It is, of course, quite possible that the Japanese had been exposed to Buddhist ideas well before this time; a large number of small Buddha figurines that may well predate the mid-sixth century have been found along the Japan Sea coast facing the Korean peninsula, and it is always tempting to question official dates in official texts. But on the other hand, we must avoid the temptation to assume that Buddhism had been long established on the peninsula itself. Admittedly, Koguryō to the north had adopted certain elements of Buddhism as early as the reign of King Sosurim (371–84), but the situation in Paekche and Silla, the two states closest to Japan, was quite different [map 2].

As far as Paekche was concerned, Buddhism was not in fact a major influence until the reign of King Sōng (r. 523–54) himself, who sponsored the construction of the first large temple, the Taetongsa 大東寺, in the capital Ungjin 熊津. The case of Silla is equally instructive: cut off from direct contact with China, it was not until the reign of King Pōphūng 法興 (r. 514–40) and, in particular, his successor, Chinhūng 眞興 (r. 540–76) that Buddhism became adopted as something close to a state religion, a pattern that was to be repeated in Japan two hundred years later. Once Buddhism had been accepted by the courts of both Paekche and Silla, it flowed on into Japan with hardly a break.

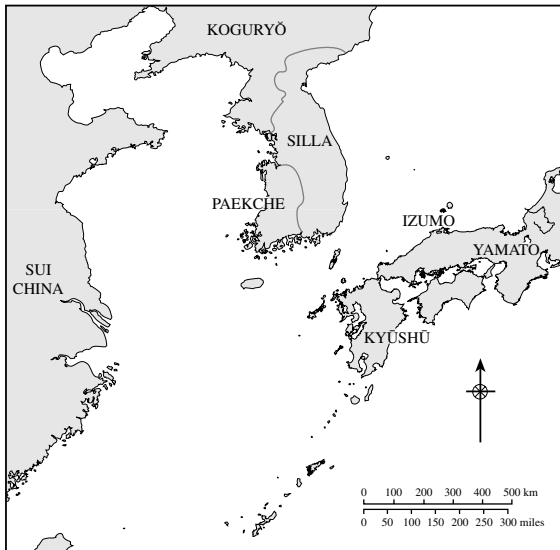
Map 2 shows the situation in Korea at the time of the gift in (let us say) 538; but this was to change rapidly [map 3]. In 551 Silla moved north against

² For the text see Sakurai et al. 1975: 7–23; for a translation, Stevenson 1999.

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Map 2 Japan and Korea: early sixth century



Map 3 Japan and Korea: late sixth century

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Koguryō and occupied the whole of the Han River basin, giving itself direct access to the Yellow Sea for the first time. It continued to expand, putting constant pressure on Paekche (King Sōng died in battle in 554) and occupying the region of small states known as Kaya in 562. If the gifts from Paekche to Japan had not been requested by the Soga, then at the very least they were part of a diplomatic offensive to ensure support from the Yamato court.

1.2 Patronage at court

Given that our earliest sources of information about this early period are dated almost two hundred years after the events themselves, the description that follows should be read as a ‘traditional account’; there is little that is independently verifiable. In whatever manner Buddhism was first introduced to Japan, it is clear that the initial experiment failed in the face of opposition from both the military, in the shape of the Mononobe, and the ritualists, in the shape of the Nakatomi. But the flow of priests, artists and architects devoted to the worship of this powerful foreign god known as ‘Buddha’ 佛神 did not dry up. On the contrary, events on the peninsula were unstable enough to generate a constant influx. An embassy arrived from Paekche in 577 bringing gifts, texts and men skilled in temple construction. Despite further discord which surfaced in 585, the Soga pressed ahead and finally eliminated the Mononobe in a massacre in 587. In 588, three women were allowed to cross (or perhaps they were sent) to Paekche to obtain formal ordination (they duly returned in 590), and more craftsmen, led by Hyech’ong 慧聰 (fl. 595–615), arrived from the peninsula. This enabled Soga no Umako 馬子 (d. 626) to start the construction of a temple, known as Asukadera 飛鳥寺 in southeast Yamato. It was completed in 596 and furnished with a large image made by the sculptor Tori Busshi 止利佛師 in 606.³ One must presume that most of the priests who worshipped there were from Paekche. During the long reign of Suiko, who was placed on the throne after her father’s death by Umako, her maternal uncle, Buddhism gradually became entrenched under the patronage of the ruling families, despite the odd difficulty. The building of large tomb mounds came to an end around this time, to be replaced by smaller mausoleums, temples and pagodas. Recent excavations of pagodas have re-

³ Asukadera is thought to have been the first temple built in Japan. At a later date it became formally known as Hōkōji 法興寺 (perhaps in honour of the Sillan King Pōphūng?) and was then renamed Gangōji when it was moved to Heijō-kyō c.716.

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vealed jewels, gold ornaments, mirrors and swords in small chambers buried beneath their central pillars – precisely the same kind of material found in the larger tombs of a few decades earlier. From the very beginnings, then, Buddhism was connected to funeral rites and commemoration of the dead.

The figure most closely associated with this whole process is Suiko's nephew Prince Shōtoku 聖德太子 (572–622), who acted as Regent. Whether they were truly 'co-rulers', as a recent study would have it, or whether Shōtoku qua male was the de facto ruler, is difficult to tell (Piggott 1997: 79–81). Unfortunately, almost nothing we know about Shōtoku can be taken at face value, because by the time *Nihon shoki* was written his persona had already taken on semi-divine attributes and he was the object of a cult; but, at the very least, he can be counted as the inspiration behind some of the most outstanding architecture of the period and he may also have been indirectly responsible for some of the earliest Japanese Buddhist scholarship (Deal 1999: 316–33). Another inventory of 747, which records the contents of Hōryūji 法隆寺, lists three commentaries (*gisho* 義疏) said to be the work of Prince Shōtoku himself.⁴ This attribution has long been accepted as fact, but is probably little more than a pious fiction. There are two main problems. Firstly, given the state of Buddhist scholarship in Japan at this stage, it is simply difficult to believe that Shōtoku himself could have written them. Secondly (and perhaps more seriously), there is no reference to this extraordinary achievement in *Nihon shoki*, which in all other respects treats Shōtoku as being close to a saint. In the circumstances, it seems safer to assume that they were the work of a group centred on the Koguryō scholar Hyeja 慧慈, who was Shōtoku's mentor from 595 to 615. The nature of the first two of these sūtras will be described in due course, but the *Lion's roar of Queen Śrīmālā* is of particular interest here because the forceful portrayal of the bodhisattva path for both layman and member of the saṅgha that it contains is couched in terms of a discussion between a young queen and the Buddha himself. The queen emerges as a wise, compassionate ruler, responsible for spreading the Buddhist Dharma and fully knowledgeable about the tenets of Mahāyāna. Given Suiko's central role at this time, it seems a natural choice for her to sponsor and have copied.

Shōtoku is also said to have been responsible for the so-called 'Seventeen articles' of 604. Among statements of general principle, we find:

⁴ The sūtras were the *Lotus sūtra* (Sk. *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra*, Jp. *Hokekyō* 法華經), T. 262; the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* (Sk. *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, Jp. *Yuimagyō* 維摩經), T. 475; and the *Lion's roar of Queen Śrīmālā* (Sk. *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanādasūtra*, Jp. *Shōmangyō* 勝鬘經), T. 353.

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Reverence for the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. These are the last resorts of humankind, pillars of faith in every realm. What world and what people fail to treasure this Dharma? The Three Jewels will not fail to win over even the most evil man, and so will the crooked be made straight.⁵

The first moves towards regulation came in 624. *Nihon shoki* reports that in that year a priest was accused of murdering his grandfather with an axe. Suiko demanded an investigation, and severe punishment would have been meted out to all priests had it not been for the intercession of a man called Kwallūk 觀勒, who had arrived from Paekche in 602. In the end it was agreed that what must have seemed at the time to be a group of immigrants rapidly growing out of control would need some form of regulation. Kwallūk was made saṅgha prefect (*sōjō* 僧正) and a Koguryō monk called Tōkchōk 德積 was made saṅgha administrator (*sōzu* 僧都). At the same time, the lay office of Dharma Master (*hōzu* 法頭) was established to oversee the financial administration of the increasing number of temples. This triumvirate was to develop later into a full-blown Saṅgha Office (*sōgō* 僧綱), which was to remain the chief instrument of state control for centuries. An opportunity was also taken at this juncture to carry out a census of Buddhist institutions. The entry in *Nihon shoki* for the ninth month of the same year reads:

There was a review of temples and priests, men and women. The reasons why temples had been built, the reasons why people had entered the Buddhist path, as well as the year, month and day, were all recorded in detail. At this time, there were 46 temples, 816 men and 569 women: 1,385 in total (Sakamoto et al. 1967, vol. II: 210–11).

Within less than a hundred years of its arrival, then, Buddhism had gained enough of a presence among the ruling elite for it to be treated as an institution in its own right. We see here the beginnings of a Buddhist establishment, and the beginnings of regulation by the secular authorities. The pattern was already a familiar one in both China and Korea. Control was made palatable because it came with patronage and no one who believed in spreading the Buddhist message could afford to turn away from such support. Of course, this ran counter to the Buddhist ideal that it was the duty of the layman to support the monk in his quest and that great merit would thereby be accrued, but at this stage in Japan there were no monks in the sense we would normally understand the term. It is clear from the entry in *Nihon shoki* with which we began that we are dealing with priests, male and female, whose duty it was to worship an image. It was to be some time before anyone

⁵ Piggott 1997: 92. Note that the first mention of these ‘Seventeen articles’ is in *Nihon shoki* and so their authenticity must remain somewhat suspect.

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recognisable as a ‘monk’ emerged, since Buddhism was quite naturally being interpreted as just another cult at this stage.

When Suiko died in 628, the usual disputes over the succession broke out and violent confrontation continued for the next fifteen years. Finally, in 645, Nakatomi no Kamatari and Prince Naka no Ōe destroyed the Soga and forced most members of the clan to commit suicide. This ushered in what is known to history as the Taika Reforms 大化改新. There is, however, a good deal of scepticism about the reliability of the *Nihon shoki* sections that deal with these reforms and it is probable that many of the administrative changes attributed to this period were in fact instituted much later. Certainly we have to wait until the Taihō Code 大寶律令 of 701 before a new system of administration was really put into practice. But for Buddhism the impact was more immediate: patronage shifted from private (Soga) hands into those of the monarchy and the newly emerging bureaucratic state. The establishment of a fully fledged Buddhist prelacy seemed to be only a matter of time. In the same year, a long edict was proclaimed at the one state-sponsored temple to be built so far, the Great Paekche Temple (Kudara Ōdera 百濟大寺),⁶ in which the principle of central control was again made explicit and ten ‘learned masters’ (*jisshi* 十師) were appointed to run Buddhist affairs along early Tang lines. This particular administrative system was not to last long, however, for the pattern soon reverted to that established by Suiko.

Prince Naka no Ōe was de facto ruler from 655 to 671, only ascending the throne as Tenji Tennō 天智天皇 in 668. During this period, events on the continent had considerable impact on domestic issues and it is clear that lineage ties between Paekche and Yamato were still strongly felt. In an attempt to save Paekche from being overrun by Silla, a Japanese force of some 5,000 men was sent across in 661, and a much larger fleet two years later, only to be crushed by a Tang naval force in a sea battle off the mouth of the Paekch’on River 白村江 in 663. From then until 676, when the Tang forces finally withdrew from the peninsula, Japan felt under constant fear of invasion.⁷ When Tenji died, the civil war known as the Jinshin no ran 壬申の亂 broke out, his chosen heir was killed and his younger brother eventually took power in 673 to rule as Tenmu Tennō 天武天皇. It was under Tenmu that the ruling family was finally to stake its claim to divine status.

⁶ After 677 this became known as Daikan daiji and then simply as Daianji 大安寺 after the move to Heijō-kyō.

⁷ See Batten 1986. Batten argues that major administrative changes took place in three phases: immediately after 645, from 664 to 671, and post-702.

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1.3 The ‘Beetle-wing’ cabinet

The best, and possibly only, way to find out how the Buddhist message was understood at court at this early juncture is to look at what remains of the material culture it produced; and this means in essence Buddhist temples and images. Of course this brings with it its own problems. In the case of temples, the dating of wooden buildings is fraught with difficulties and the only thing one can be sure of today is that what one sees is not what was originally built. Not a temple exists that has escaped at least partial destruction at some stage in its life, and it is difficult to monitor change with any accuracy. Most Buddhist halls now contain a bewildering array of statues and paintings from the whole span of Japanese history, and considerable care must be taken to ensure one knows the provenance and date of each article. Some halls are little more than museums. In such light it may seem foolhardy to attempt to flesh out a history of early Buddhism in this way. Yet we have little choice. The new deities from the continent were entirely the preserve of the aristocracy and the court, who showed their interest by sponsoring the building of temples and images; in this sense, the Buddhism of this period can only speak to us through its art and architecture. We are fortunate to have one or two examples that remain to speak with eloquence.

The temple that today contains the most informative material from this period is Hōryūji 法隆寺. Originally known as Ikarugadera 斑鳩寺, it was begun by Prince Shōtoku about 607. Destroyed by fire in 670, it was rebuilt soon afterwards, but on a slightly different site. The oldest buildings in the western precinct are the main hall and the pagoda, which date from 680–90, although the murals inside the main hall are thought to date from *c.*711, as are the clay diorama and statuettes inside the pagoda.

A few precious objects were saved from the 670 fire, the most important being four wooden statues of the Four Heavenly Kings (Shiten’ō 四天王) carved from camphor; some sections of what is known as the Tenjukoku tapestry 天壽國繡帳 embroidered with scenes from a ‘heavenly realm of longevity’, said to have been created in memory of Shōtoku; a number of small gilt-bronze statues; two large images of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, known as the Guze Kannon 救世觀音 and the Kudara Kannon 百濟觀音; the main gilt-bronze Śākyamuni triad [plate 2], which is dated 623; and the ‘Beetle-wing’ cabinet [plates 3–7]. An inscription on the back of the halo of the Śākyamuni figure gives a full description of its provenance.

The former Dowager Sovereign [Prince Shōtoku’s mother] passed away on the twelfth month of the thirty-first year of Hōkō [621], and on the twenty-second of the

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Plate 2 Gilt-bronze Śākyamuni triad, 623. Height of central figure 8.75 m. Hōryūji Kondō.