

Chapter 4

The Death of the Dharma: Buddhist Sutra Burials in Early Medieval Japan

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The death of the founder presents a crisis of authority for all religious traditions. When the Buddha was asked who should succeed him after his passing, he is said to have responded that his teachings, the *Dharma*, would serve as the source of authority in his absence. The *sutra* is the literary form of such teachings: sacred texts containing discourses attributed to or inspired by the Buddha. The early sutra literature was first preserved orally and was only committed to writing around the turn of the millennium. Mahayana Buddhist traditions, movements that developed in India during the first centuries of the Common Era, place an increased emphasis on the materiality of such sacred texts. Mahayana sutras enjoin and celebrate their own veneration and reserve the highest praise for those who hear, recite, copy, and preserve them. Indeed, many Mahayana sutras claim an equivalency between the sacred text and the Buddha himself. In asserting that a sacred text is equal to or greater than a relic of the Buddha, Mahayana Buddhist traditions, employing a new theory of embodiment, equate or replace the Buddha's corporal relic with his textual corpus. The Buddha's word, rather than the Buddha's relic, is recognized as the central object of veneration and, as such, is to be enshrined in a *stupa*, a reliquary previously reserved for the remains of a Buddha.¹

In Mahayana traditions throughout Asia – in India, Tibet, China, and Korea – sutras have been enshrined in stupas. In Japan, however, the treatment of Buddhist texts was taken one step further. The enshrined sutras were buried in the ground as part of a complex ritual strategy to forestall the decline of the Buddhist teachings and preserve the Dharma for a future age. Beginning in the eleventh century, and continuing for more than five hundred years, sutras were copied, consecrated, enshrined, and then interred in the precincts of sacred mountains, shrines, and temples. The sacred texts, produced at great effort and expense, were not meant to be read, studied, or even seen for eons. Rather, they were deployed as ceremonial artifacts to assure the salvation of both the religion and the individual. The texts were given a memorial service following the same ritual protocols that the dead

¹ For example, the *Lotus Sutra*, the most influential Buddhist scripture in East Asia, asserts that “whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a stupa of seven jewels ... There is no need to even lodge a Buddha relic in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Buddha” (Hurvitz 1976, 178).

would receive. This distinctive method for disposal of sacred texts appears to be without parallel in Buddhist Asia.²

This essay examines the burial of sutras in eleventh- and twelfth-century Japan, the period in which this unique practice originated and flourished. The practice and discourse of Japanese Buddhists in these centuries was profoundly informed by eschatological concerns. It was a time in which the Dharma was thought to be dying out and new rituals were developed to address the religious conditions of the age. Sutra burial was seen as one way in which the teachings might be saved. The death ceremonies for sacred texts performed in early medieval Japan thus differ from many of the other examples discussed in this volume. Sutra burial was less a matter of disposal than preservation; the interment was more a time capsule than a tomb. The concern with death, nevertheless, remained at the heart of the practice. The end of the Dharma presented a crisis at once institutional and personal; for both Buddhism and the individual Buddhist, it seemed as if time was running out.

For Japanese Buddhists, the eleventh century marked the beginning of the end: the onset of the age of the “Final Dharma” (Japanese *mappō*) in which both the availability of texts and the ability of people to realize them would reach their lowest points. The Dharma would not be fully restored until 5.6 billion years after the death of Śākyamuni when the Future Buddha would descend from his heaven and inaugurate a new golden age. The ineluctable decline of the Dharma presented soteriological problems for both the tradition and the individual. The death of the Dharma challenged, of course, the very existence of Buddhism and required acts of protection and preservation to ensure its survival. But the age of the Final Dharma also had implications for Buddhist practitioners for whom individual salvation became increasingly difficult as the source of teachings receded into an inaccessible past and the spiritual capabilities of humans diminished. It was a time when history itself represented a profound religious problem and when Japanese Buddhists began to formulate specifically religious responses to the problem of history. The burial of sutras—as revealed in their contents, dedicatory inscriptions, material form, and locations—sought to address the twin religious challenges of the Final Dharma by establishing a link between the death and salvation of Buddhist texts and that of the individual believer.

² Although a legend about the sixth-century Chinese Tiantai master Hui-ssu suggests the possibility of a Chinese precedent, no mounds have been discovered in China. The one possible example on the Korean peninsula, a fragment of a *Lotus Sutra* transcribed on paper and the remains of what might be a sutra receptacle, remains inconclusive (see Miyake 1987, 172).

The Temporality of Sutra Burials

The idea that the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, will pass through successive stages of degeneration and eventually disappear is found throughout the Buddhist tradition (Lamotte 1988, 191–202; Chappell 1980, 122–154; Nattier 1991). Although the Pali and Sanskrit texts that refer to this historical plan rarely agree on the precise details – the cause, nature, or timetable of decline – Chinese translations and commentaries address the issue with far greater specificity. Working from Indian sources, and perhaps influenced as well by native traditions, Chinese Buddhists of the sixth century first articulated the scheme of three distinct historical periods following the Buddha's death.³ This cyclical chronology is comprised of the periods of "True Dharma" (Chinese *zheng fa*; Japanese *shōbō*) during which time Buddhist teachings and practices are available and enlightenment accessible; "Semblance Dharma" (Chinese *xiang fa*; Japanese *zōbō*) when teachings and practices are maintained but humanity's spiritual capacity has seriously diminished; and "Final Dharma" (Chinese *mōfa*; Japanese *mappō*) when true practice has disappeared and only the teachings remain, destined themselves soon to vanish. In this last age the capacity for enlightenment is at its nadir and the world will continue in its decline for some ten thousand years. The fact that this final age has little or no Sanskrit textual basis does not seem to have posed a problem for Chinese Buddhists.⁴ Whether canonical or apocryphal in origin, they found convincing proof of this prophecy in their immediate surroundings. Buddhist persecutions in the sixth century helped to make the Final Dharma a bitter reality and from the Sui and Tang dynasties, Chinese Buddhists believed they were living in the final age and began to formulate teachings appropriate to it.

The concept of the Final Dharma was part of Japan's early continental inheritance but did not gain popular currency until the eleventh century. Fueled in part by the growing influence of Tendai Amidism – a tradition that in Japan as in China presented itself as the most expedient path in the final age – many Japanese monks and aristocrats began to see their present era as one of acute historical and religious crisis. The precise date for the final age, however, was a matter of some debate. The four most common Chinese versions of the chronology measured the periods of True Dharma, Semblance Dharma, and Final Dharma as lasting 500, 500, and 10,000 years; 500, 1,000, and 10,000 years; 1,000, 500, and 10,000 years; or 1,000, 1,000, and 10,000 years. Variant dates for the Buddha's death – usually 609 or 949 BCE – also had implications for the onset of the Final Dharma (Taira

³ The first description of the tripartite system appears in the *Li shih yuan wen* attributed to Nanyue Huisi (515–577), see Nattier 1991 (110–111). The chronology also played a crucial role in Pure Land Buddhism. Such a provenance may help to explain the importance of *mappō* thought in the Tendai and Amidist traditions.

Although Japanese scholars have long assumed that *mappō* was a belief and a term (*saddharma-vipralopa*) found in Indian Buddhism, Nattier presents a compelling argument for its Chinese origins (1991, 91–118).

1992, 144). By the tenth century, however, 949 BCE was generally accepted as the year of the Buddha's death and one thousand years were allotted for each of the intervening periods of True Dharma and Semblance Dharma. The age of the Final Dharma was thus most commonly understood to begin in the year 1052.⁵

Although there was less than universal agreement on the chronological details of the overall scheme, this tripartite model of religious history was acknowledged by numerous Buddhist authors of the eighth and ninth centuries.⁶ In 984, Minamoto no Tamenori (d. 1011) voiced the immediacy of the threat in the preface to his Buddhist tale collection, the *Sanbōe*:

One thousand nine hundred and thirty-three years have passed since the Buddha Śākyamuni left this world. We may now be in the period of *Semblance Dharma*, but surely only a few years of this interim period remain to us. (Minamoto 1997, 4; Kamens 1988, 92)

The Materiality of Sutra Burials

Buried sutras were transcribed on a variety of materials, most often on paper or silk scrolls in black, gold, or vermilion ink (the latter was occasionally mixed with blood).⁷ Yet there are also numerous examples of sutras inscribed on more permanent materials such as stone, ceramic tiles, or bronze plates, signaling perhaps an even more explicit concern with the preservation of the teachings. The silk or paper sutras would be placed into cylindrical stupa-shaped containers fashioned out of bronze, iron, ceramic, or stone that were often in turn encased in a second outer vessel of ceramic or stone. They were then buried in small underground chambers lined with stones and occasionally packed with charcoal to aid in preservation (see Figure 4.1). The chambers were sealed with stone and marked, like a grave, with an earthen mound and a stone stupa, lantern, or stele. The sutra containers themselves exhibit a great variety of styles from the detailed miniature treasure pagoda (*hōtō*) to the simple lidded cylinder. Yet, however elaborate or plain, all of the containers share the basic form of the stupa, a reliquary housing the remains of a Buddha. As death rituals for the Dharma body, sutra burials were in keeping with the origins of the tradition and were understood within the vocabulary of Japanese Buddhist practice as *kuyō*, or memorial services. As memorial services, sutra burials produced a great deal of symbolic value, yet the beneficiary of this merit – the Dharma, the sponsor, the sponsor's family members – was by no means fixed.

⁵ For a survey of *mappō* thought in the Heian period, see Marra 1988.

⁶ Saichō (767–822), Anchō (763–814), and Annen (841–884) of the Tendai school; Gen'ei (c. 840) of the Sanron school; and Zan'an (c. 776–815) of the Hossō school were all concerned with the end of the Dharma and its soteriological implications (Marra 1988, 39–40).

⁷ For an example of such blood writing, see Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976 (60).

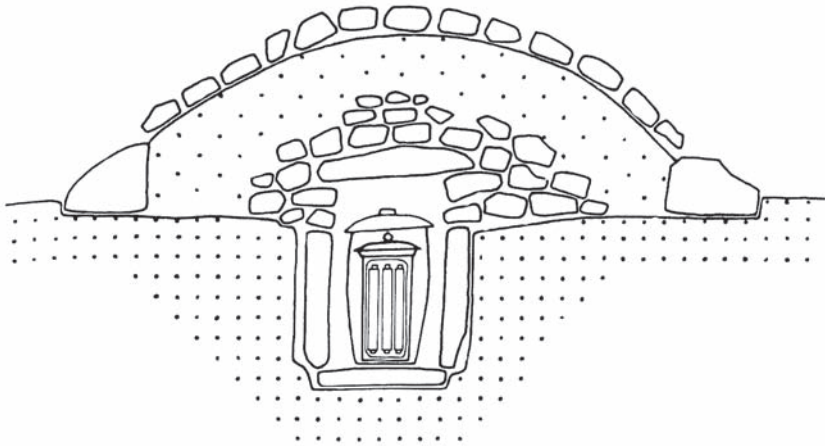


Figure 4.1 Diagram of Sutra Burials in Japan. Author's illustration

The scripture most often interred was the *Lotus Sutra* (Japanese *Myōhō renge kyō*) which in the Tendai tradition included the *Sutra of Innumerable Meanings* (Japanese *Muryōgi kyō*) and the *Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue* (Japanese *Kanfugen bosatsu gyōbō kyō*) as its opening and closing chapters. The presence of the *Lotus Sutra* in the vast majority of such burials should come as no surprise. It was perhaps the most important scripture in the religious culture of the time and the principal text of the Tendai school, which in China had most explicitly articulated the theory of the Final Dharma and in Japan was credited with the origins of sutra burial. It was among those early Mahayana sutras that encouraged its own enshrinement and veneration and asserted an equivalence between the sacred text and the bodily relic of the Buddha (Schopen 1975). Indeed, the *Lotus Sutra* reserves the highest praise for those “who shall receive and keep, read and recite, explain, or copy in writing a single verse of the *Scripture of the Blossom of the Final Dharma*, or who will look with veneration on a roll of this scripture as if it were the Buddha himself” (Hurvitz 1976, 174). In carrying out these scriptural instructions, the sponsors of sutra burials enjoyed the combined merit of copying and protecting the sutra together with that of building a stupa in which to enshrine and venerate it. The enshrinement of the *Lotus Sutra* within stupa-shaped reliquaries is thus entirely in keeping with the sacramental logic of the Mahayana sutra cults. The transposition of the text for the relic, which took place in Indian Buddhism around the turn of the millennium, was part of Japanese Buddhism from its very beginnings. As early as the eighth century, relics traditionally deposited beneath the central posts of pagodas were replaced

by sutra texts (Kidder 1972, 140).⁸ Such examples of bibliolatriy, following the injunctions of the sutras themselves, underscore the significance of the materiality and performativity of religious texts, an understanding of the function of scripture that informs the practice of sutra burial as well.

Although pre-eminent, the *Lotus Sutra* was neither the only text nor the only cult represented in sutra burials. As the Final Age was understood to portend political as well a religious troubles, the *Lotus Sutra* was also often joined by two additional scriptures held to protect the state, the *Golden Light Sutra* (Japanese *Konkōmyō kyō*) and the *Benevolent Kings Sutra* (Japanese *Ninnō hannya haramitsu kyō*). The other scriptures most commonly buried, and usually accompanying the *Lotus Sutra*, were the three sutras dedicated to the Buddha Amida – the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* (Japanese *Muryōju kyō*), the *Smaller Pure Land Sutra* (Japanese *Amida kyō*), and the *Sutra of Meditation on Amida Buddha* (Japanese *Kanmuryōju kyō*) – and the three sutras dedicated to the Future Buddha Maitreya, known in Japanese as Miroku, – the *Sutra on Maitreya Achieving Buddhahood* (Japanese *Miroku jōbutsu kyō*), the *Sutra on Maitreya's Rebirth Below [on Earth]* (Japanese *Miroku geshō kyō*) and the *Sutra on Maitreya's Rebirth Above in Tusita* (Japanese *Miroku joshō tosotsu kyō*). The Amida sutras describe the Gokuraku Pure Land and the Buddha Amida's vow to guarantee rebirth there for all who call on him. The Miroku sutras describe Miroku, while still a bodhisattva, practicing in the Tosotsu heaven where, with the accumulation of sufficient merit, his devotees may also be reborn. They tell as well of a future golden age, 5.67 billion years after the death of the Buddha Śākyamuni when the Dharma will rise again to the apex of its historical cycle. At that time Miroku, also known as Jison in his role as the future Buddha, will descend to the earth and expound the Dharma at three assemblies to be held beneath the legendary Dragon Flower Tree.

The *Lotus Sutra*, Amida, and Miroku cults were in no way mutually exclusive. The *Lotus Sutra*, for example, guarantees rebirth in Amida's Pure Land to women who revere the sutra's twenty-third chapter (Hurvitz 1976, 300). Elsewhere it promises that any male devotee “at life's end ... shall straightway ascend to the top of the Tosotsu heaven, to the place of the bodhisattva Miroku” (Hurvitz 1976, 335). Yet, while included within the ecumenicism of the *Lotus Sutra*, Miroku and Amida had their own followings as well among Japanese Buddhists. One significant difference nevertheless remained between the two cults. Miroku faith emphasized that heavenly rebirth can be gained through religious works, the most common of which in Japan at the time was copying the *Lotus Sutra*. This emphasis on scriptural production and displays of piety suggests another reason, beyond the eschatological, for the connection between the Miroku cult and the burial of transcribed sutras.

The origin of sutra burial is traditionally ascribed to the Tendai patriarch Ennin (794–864) who copied the *Lotus Sutra* and enshrined it in a small stupa on

⁸ This is not to suggest that the cult of relics was unimportant in Heian Japan. On the significance of the cult, see Ruppert 2000.

Mount Hiei in 831. Ennin's method of copying, known as "according to prescribed method" (*nyohō*), was itself a major ritual undertaking and set the standard for sutra transcriptions thereafter. Although sutra copying as a religious practice goes back to the earliest period of Buddhist Japan, Ennin's efforts were of a different ritual scale. He is said to have gone into retreat for three years to prepare for and carry out the transcription. He grew the hemp to make the paper on which the sutra was to be written, made his own brush of twigs and grass rather than animal hair, and made his own ink from graphite rather than using ink sticks containing animal glue. Combining ritual and writing, Ennin performed three full prostrations with the transcription of each character. He placed the completed sutra within a small wooden stupa, presented to it ten kinds of offering, and installed it in a hall at Yokawa later known as the *Nyohōdō* (*Genkō shakusho* 1930, 62).⁹ Ennin's wooden stupa containing the sutra was placed inside a larger stupa made of bronze. Yet the sutra was not in fact buried until 1031, a full two centuries after Ennin's transcription, when it was enclosed within a third bronze reliquary and interred in the earth beneath the *Nyohōdō*. The text chronicling the burial emphasizes the text's performative power to save both Buddhists and Buddhism itself until the coming of the Future Buddha.

In the Final Age, the head monk commanded that the gilt bronze sutra tube in the hall be moved and that the sutra be buried beneath the earth and stones of the mountain to await the coming of Miroku. This is in accordance with the Master's original vow. [The sutra] dwelling inside a seven-jeweled stupa will assuredly be transmitted to the age of Miroku and thus Śākyamuni's Dharma will save people. People will rely on this sutra until the age of Miroku arrives. (*Eigaku yōki* 1959–1960, 549b)

The Spatiality of Sutra Burials

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were both the earliest and the most active period of sutra burial. Although the practice continued into the eighteenth century, more than half of all sutra burials date from these first two hundred years.¹⁰ Sutra burials from these early centuries are more extravagant than those of later periods and include many examples of gold ink transcriptions on indigo paper. The period is also distinguished by the greater number of sutras interred at a single site and

⁹ On Ennin's transcription and the copying procedures of later Heian examples, see Seki 1990, 29–30; Tanabe 1988, 44–49; Kawada 1987, 169; and Miyake 1987, 173–174. The ten kinds of offerings are traditionally presented to a Buddha not to a text. As listed in the *Lotus Sutra* they are: flowers, incense, ornaments, powdered incense, unguent, burning of incense, canopies and banners, clothing, dancing and music, and joining ones hands in worship.

¹⁰ See the chronological table in Seki 1999, 709–739.

by the inclusion of other items such as mirrors and swords.¹¹ Yet these burials speak to more than the historical and soteriological anxieties of the age. They also locate the sites where such anxieties were expressed and where, it was hoped, they could be conquered as well. In an age so closely identified with the imperial court, it is significant that the majority of these sites were located outside of the imperial capital of Heian-kyō (see Figure 4.2). Some of these sites were relatively close by, such as Daidōji and Mount Inari to the south, Mount Kurama to the north, Hatogatake, and Mount Hiei to the north-east of the capital.¹² Others, such as Makiosan in Izumi Province, Mount Kōya and Kumano in Kii, and Mount Asakuma in Ise, were somewhat farther from the capital. Numerous other Heian period sutra burials have been found throughout the north-east, from Mount Fuji to as far north as Dewa and Mutsu. By the early twelfth century sutra burials were being carried out in every province.¹³

It is western Japan, however, that reveals perhaps the most surprising examples. In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, when the practice was at its height, more than 60 percent of known sutra burials took place in the northern part of Kyushu (Chijiwa 1987, 426).¹⁴ The sutra mounds of northern Kyushu differ from those of other regions in a number of respects. Many of the cylinders housing the sutras are made of stone rather than bronze and those made of bronze show a far greater variation in form. But it is the ceramic examples that are most distinctive. Although ceramic containers were used throughout Japan for the outer casings of metal sutra tubes, the use of Chinese ceramics is unique to the island. Brown glazed earthenware and porcelain sutra containers from western China are found nowhere else in Japan. These ceramic vessels, moreover, were not limited to the outer containers of sutra tubes. Porcelain stupa-shaped jars were often used on their own, in place of metal reliquaries, to house the scriptures. These were imported from China to Kyushu for the sole purpose of sutra burials; they were put to such use in neither China nor elsewhere in Japan. They represent but one item in the complex network of exchange, both cultural

¹¹ These extra-scriptural materials are usually interpreted as representing the donor's concern with the protection of the sutra, see for example Sekine 1968 (281). Chijiwa, however, has suggested that they may also represent a form of offering directed more toward local deities than the Buddhas (1987, 444).

¹² On the sutra burials at Mount Inari see Fushimi 1966. For those at Kurama, see Hosaka 1971 and Naniwa 1977. On sutra burials in Fukushima, Tochigi, Yamanashi, Aichi, Mie, Gifu, Yamaguchi, and Ehime prefectures, see Miyake 1983, 69–93, 117–144, 178–206.

¹³ For the chronology and locations of these sutra mounds see Seki 1990, 37–53.

¹⁴ For example, 173 sutra burials (of known location) were performed in the hundred years between 1064 and 1163. Of these, 104 took place in Kyushu (Seki 1990, 710–724).

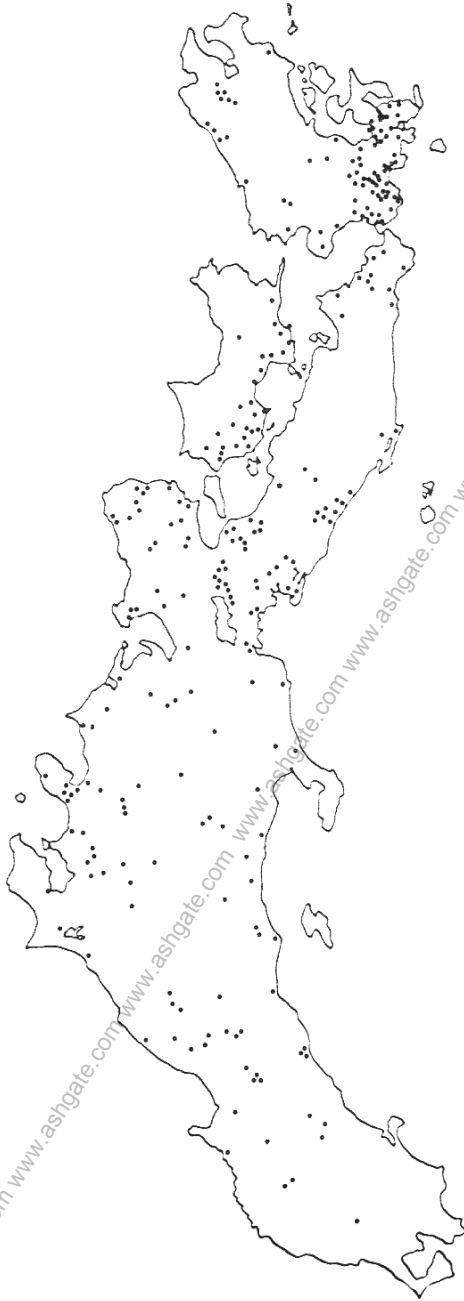


Figure 4.2 Map of Sutra Burial Locations. Author's illustration

and economic, between Japan and China from the tenth through twelfth centuries (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 2000, 4).¹⁵

Although sutra burials have been discovered throughout Kyushu, the vast majority of these burials – including sutras inscribed on stone, tile, and bronze – have been unearthed in the northern provinces of Buzen and Chikuzen (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 338). Within this region, the three areas with the greatest number of sutra mounds are Usa, home of the powerful clan of the same name and site of the Usa Hachiman-Mirokuji complex; Dazaifu, the political center of the island; and the mountains extending from Hikosan to the Kunisaki peninsula, which served as the ritual arena of Tendai-affiliated mountain ascetics. Usa was an early center for the cult of the Future Buddha, linked as it was physically and institutionally with Mirokuji, the temple of Miroku, built beside the Usa shrine in the early eighth century. Shrine traditions link the preservation of the Dharma to the local landscape, asserting that the region's sacred mountain will “protect the country by housing the sutras through the three ages of True Dharma, Semblance Dharma, and Final Dharma” (cited in Chijiwa 1987, 43).¹⁶

The mountains and temples of the Dazaifu region were the sites of numerous sutra burials. Indeed, half of the sutras buried in Kyushu in the twelfth-century period have been excavated from Mount Shiōji and its immediate environs (Oda 1970, 133; Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 2000, 9).¹⁷ Shiōji (Temple of the Four [Heavenly] Kings) was built in 775 and statues of these four protective deities were enshrined on the mountain's peaks in the four cardinal directions. As the name of the mountain and temple suggests, this was a religious site dedicated to maintaining the centralized power of the court. The mountain temples of the Dazaifu region – Shiōji, Kanzeonji, Buzōji, and Hōmanzan – were the sites of state protecting rituals, mountain ascetic practices, and numerous sutra burials concerned with preserving the Dharma until the coming of the Future Buddha. Two sutra burials performed at Buzōji around the turn of the twelfth century, for example, contain inscriptions expressing the wish that the sponsors be present at “the descent of Miroku” (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 21a–b, 27b–28a, nos. 33, 42).

As at Usa and Dazaifu, the cult of the Future Buddha was a prominent element at Hikosan. The inscription on a sutra tube buried there in 1110 refers with anticipation to the “three sermons of Miroku” (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 32, no. 52). The forty-nine caves of Mount Hiko were homologized with the forty-nine chambers of Miroku's Inner Palace in the Tosotsu heaven (Grapard

¹⁵ As the gateway to Japan from the continent, Kyushu was the first area to receive and incorporate Korean and Chinese forms of knowledge and practice. Yet the influence of Chinese or Korean Buddhist practice on Japanese sutra burials is unclear.

¹⁶ See also Shigematsu 1986. For a discussion and analysis of this text, see Grapard 1986.

¹⁷ For examples, see Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 49b, no. 84; and Takeuchi 1947–1968, 189, no. 195.

1986, 225). According to the *Hikosan ruki*, a religious history of the mountain written in 1213, the mineral formations found on the mountain were “used to erect the Great Lecture Hall in which Miroku would give his sermons upon becoming the Future Buddha” and were themselves said to constitute Miroku’s metaphoric body, whose function it is to protect the Dharma throughout the Final Age (cited in Grapard 1986, 225). Also indicative of an anxiety over the permanency of the teachings are two sets of the *Lotus Sutra* engraved on thin bronze plates excavated from Chōanji in Kunisaki and from Kubotesan, north-east of Mount Hiko.¹⁸ The two sets, made of a material designed to outlast the Final Age itself, were created within a year of each other in the mid-twelfth century.

The Motivations for Sutra Burials

Scholars have suggested a variety of reasons for eleventh- and twelfth-century sutra burials. Some see the practice linked to the rituals of Tendai mountain asceticism, some to the hope for rebirth in Amida’s or Miroku’s paradise, some to the desire for enlightenment and benefits for oneself and others. Nearly all, however, agree that the primary motivation was the concern to preserve the sutras throughout the Final Age until the coming of the Future Buddha Miroku, who will use the buried sutras in his three inaugural sermons beneath the Dragon Flower Tree (see, for example, Gotō 1937, 702; Hosaka 1957, 73; Ishida 1929, 30–31; Kurata 1936–1937, 14–21; Miyake 1958, 47; Yajima 1936–1937, 2–3). The locations of major sutra burials – such as the mountains of Hiei, Kōya, Kinpusen, and Hiko – were believed to be the sites of Miroku’s future descent. Moreover, dedicatory inscriptions included with the deposits appear to support the claim that an anxiety over the Final Dharma constituted the central motivation for sutra burials in this period.

The term Final Dharma appears often in inscriptions, as if attesting to the timeliness of the rites. It seems to function both as chronological notice and theological rationale for the burials. A *Lotus Sutra* inscribed on tile and buried in 1071 is dated “the third year of the Enkyū era in Final Age of the Buddha’s Dharma” (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 127, no. 123). In 1082, thirty years after the calculated beginning of the Final Dharma, the monk Jōe buried a *Lotus Sutra* that he dated “at the beginning of Śākyamuni’s Final Dharma Age.” He explained his reason as follows:

I have erected a three-*shaku* [90 cm.] high statue of Miroku on Yasugamine, one of the seven great mountains of Japan, and have transcribed a *Lotus Sutra* to be buried there. My prayer is that it will be used when Miroku comes to preach the Dharma beneath the Dragon Flower Tree. (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 131, no. 130)

¹⁸ The *Hikosan ruki* mentions a third bronze plate *Lotus Sutra* engraved at Hikosan in 1145 (Seki 1999, 720).

Numerous other sutra burials are dated “in the age of the Final Dharma of Śākyamuni” (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 357, 394, nos. 407, 449). Some are even more specific, counting off the exact number of years that have elapsed since the Buddha’s passing. The inscription on a sutra reliquary buried in 1103 is dated “2052 years after the death of the Buddha Śākyamuni” (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 161–162, no. 163; Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 83–84, no. 168).

Although a preoccupation with the age of the Final Dharma clearly informs the practice of sutra burial, the preservationist impulse was not necessarily the sole motivating factor. Inscriptions also express the hope that, due to this meritorious act, the donor (or another individual to whom the merit is being transferred) will be reborn, in the interim, in Amida’s Pure Land or in Miroku’s Tosotsu heaven. These two goals, one concerned with the salvation of the Dharma and the other with the salvation of the self, address the dual challenge of the Final Dharma and were often combined in the logic of practice. Even the burial of sutras inscribed on tile – a medium intended to withstand the test of time – reveals such multiple intentions.

Perhaps the most significant burial of tile sutras was performed in the years 1143 and 1144 at Gokurakuji in Harima Province by six monks under the leadership of Zenne, the abbot of the temple (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 265–278; Taira 1992, 115–118). Nearly five hundred ceramic tiles were inscribed with some thirty different sutras, images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and various mandalas were interred to last throughout “the ten thousand year period of the Final Dharma” (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 269). Zenne calculated that, “20,160 years have passed since Shakyamuni entered nirvana and it is still 5.67 billion years before Jison’s advent” (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 268). Zenne then asked for “tranquility in this life, good health, and longevity . . . rebirth in the upper realms of the Gokuraku Pure Land and presence at the coming of Jison” (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 274). In addition he prayed for a felicitous rebirth for his ancestors, his teachers, the retired emperor Ichijō (980–1011), for “the tranquility of the [present] Emperor,” and for “the protection of the state” (Takeuchi 1947–1968, 270). The other monastic sponsors of the burial, however, make no mention of Miroku or the chronology of the Final Dharma but ask only for rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land for themselves, their teachers, and their parents. Indeed the salvation of one’s parents was not an uncommon motivation. A burial at Shiōjisan was made in 1116 expressly “for the benefit of my mother” (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 44b, no. 74), and another at Kurodani in Echizen Province in 1157 “so that my father and mother may attain rebirth in the Pure Land” (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 117b, no. 233). Thus, even in the age of the Final Dharma, people buried sutras to save more than just themselves.

Such multiple intentions, moreover, characterized sutra burials from the very beginning. The sutra burial performed by Fujiwara Michinaga in 1007 at Kinpusen in Yamato Province is usually considered the first documented example of the practice. Kinpusen had long been associated with Miroku and his realm (Miyake 1988, 15). The Daigoji monk Sonshi (832–909) identified the deity of Kinpusen

as a manifestation of Miroku and described the mountain as the inner realm of the Tosotsu heaven (*Shugendō sōsho* 1985, 62, 80). The sutra burial of Michinaga, the most powerful figure of the age, was an enormous ritual production. He had an elaborate sutra case cast in gilt bronze and inscribed with a lengthy dedicatory inscription and twelve Sanskrit characters praising the *Lotus Sutra*. He then began a seventy-three-day period of purification.¹⁹ As he climbed the mountain, with sixteen other aristocrats in attendance, he stopped to make offerings of silver and silk at fertility shrines along the way. Once at the central sacred area, he presented lamps and parasols, one hundred copies of the *Lotus Sutra*, one hundred copies of the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, one hundred fascicles of the *Heart Sutra*, and eight fascicles of the *Essential Meaning of the Heart Sutra* to “the thirty-eight gods” of the fertility shrine. These dedications were performed for the benefit of the sovereigns Reizei (950–1011) (whose consort was Michinaga’s sister Chōshi) and Ichijō (whose consorts included Michinaga’s eldest daughter Shōshi and niece Teishi), and the Crown Prince, the future Emperor Sanjō (son of Reizei and Michinaga’s sister Chōshi).²⁰ Michinaga then dedicated a set of eight scriptures in fifteen rolls that he had copied out himself in gold ink. These are listed in his inscription as including “one copy of the *Lotus Sutra* in eight rolls together with the *Sutra of Innumerable Meanings* and the *Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue*, and one copy each of the *Essential Meaning of the Heart Sutra*, the *Amida Sutra*, the three Miroku sutras, and the *Heart Sutra*.” He described these actions as “burying the relics of the dharma body ... in anticipation of the dawn of Miroku’s age.” Michinaga worshiped both Amida and Miroku, stating that “the *Amida Sutra* promises that one who calls on Amida on one’s death bed will be reborn in his Gokuraku Pure Land [and] the Miroku sutras allow one to avoid an inauspicious rebirth and to be received at Jison’s advent.” Michinaga asked to be reborn in Amida’s Pure Land but only until Miroku’s advent: “When Jison becomes a Buddha, may I journey from the Gokuraku realm to the place of Miroku Buddha, listen to his lectures on the *Lotus Sutra*, and attain Buddhahood.” Michinaga prayed that at that future time his “buried sutras would spontaneously well up out of the earth” and be used by Miroku in his inaugural sermons (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 6b–7a).

The multiple motives for Michinaga’s burial exceed even the explicitly stated soteriological equivalent of having one’s cake and eating it too. The glory and preservation of Michinaga’s lineage relied on his daughter’s production of an

¹⁹ *Midō Kampakuki*, Kankō 4 (1007) 5/17. Although Michinaga’s dedicatory vow, inscribed on the exterior surface of the sutra tube, refers to one hundred days of purification, the standard period lasted around seventy. Ritual preparations for pilgrimages to Kinpusen could last for twenty-one, fifty, or one hundred days. Michinaga began the rites on the seventeenth day of the fifth intercalary month and ended them on the first day of the eighth month. Michinaga’s dedicatory vow is reproduced in Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 6b–8a, no. 10, and Takeuchi 1947–1968, 89–90, no. 86.

²⁰ *Midō Kampakuki*, Kankō 4/8/2–11.

imperial heir. By the year 1007 Shōshi had been Ichijō's consort for eight years but had yet to conceive a child. If Shōshi were to produce a son he would become Crown Prince and Michinaga would become grandfather to an emperor. The gods of Kinpusen's fertility shrines were worshiped as child-granting and child-protecting deities and the deity of Kinpusen to whom Michinaga addressed his prayers also assured the prosperity of descendants.

Early sutra burial donors such as Michinaga and those that followed for close to two centuries expressed a wide range of desires. They prayed for the salvation of the Dharma, themselves, and their family members. Michinaga dedicated the merit from some of his pious exertions on Kinpusen to his brother-in-law Reizei, his son-in-law Ichijō, his daughter Shōshi, and his nephew the Crown Prince. Thus, although the sites, scriptures, and dedicatory inscriptions indicate an anxiety over the death of the Dharma, the death of the individual received an equal if not greater degree of attention. Fujiwara no Moromichi (1062–1099), for example, the great-grandson of Michinaga, followed his forebear's practice of burying sutras on Kinpusen. In 1088 Moromichi dedicated a large number of memorial transcriptions to an equally large number of family members.²¹ In the colophon of his gold ink copy of the *Lotus Sutra*, Moromichi, who at the time was suffering from earache, reveals some of his motivations:

In copying this sutra during the period of ritual purification for my pilgrimage to Kinpusen, I pray for the purification of my inner ear, one of the Six Roots, and thinking of the importance of the daughters of this house, hope that the merit of [copying] the One Vehicle of the Lotus will provide them with the karmic bond to be present at the three sermons beneath the Dragon Flower Tree. (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 206, no. 30)

Another dedicatory inscription included in the sutra mound speaks also to a concern with the future glory of Miroku and of Moromichi's lineage as well. The final section begins with this statement from Moromichi:

I have copied out the *Three-fold Lotus Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and the *Diamond Life Span Sutra* by hand in gold letters and buried them at Kinpusen in a bronze vessel in order to advance the noble teachings of the One Vehicle of Shaka and to establish the karmic bond to be present at Jison's three assemblies. With faith that these offerings will surely enjoy the longevity of metal and stone, I present them to the mountain god with reverence for his miraculous powers, and to the fertility deities of the Thirty Eight Sites.

Yet it concludes with a prayer "for those born into this hereditary house to quickly rise to the Third Rank, for the past karma of its deceased fathers and grandfathers,

²¹ *Go-Nijō Moromichi ki*, Kanji 2 (1088) 7/1. This was the first of two sutra burials on Kinpusen. Moromichi again journeyed there two years later in 1090.

and for the prosperity of its descendants” (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 19b–20a, no. 29).

To these ends Moromichi offered one copy of the *Diamond Life Span Sutra* for the reigning sovereign Horikawa and his consort; one copy each of the *Benevolent Kings Sutra* for the longevity and prosperity of his brother-in-law the retired sovereign Shirakawa, his sister Fujiwara no Kenshi, and their four sons; ten copies of the *Lotus Sutra*, five copies of the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, and one hundred rolls of the *Diamond Life Span Sutra* for the longevity and prosperity of his father Fujiwara no Morozane; five copies of the *Lotus Sutra*, five copies of the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, and one hundred rolls of the *Diamond Life Span Sutra* for the health and longevity of his mother Fujiwara no Reiko; three copies of the *Benevolent Kings Sutra* and one hundred rolls of the *Diamond Life Span Sutra* for his son Fujiwara no Tadazane; and for his wife Fujiwara no Hiroko, one roll each of the *Kannon Sutra*, the *Essential Meaning of the Heart Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond Life Span Sutra*, the *Sutra of the Eight Secret Dhāranīs* and the *Sutra of the Eight Spells of Heaven and Earth* together with five copies each of the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, and the *Diamond Life Span Sutra*. These offerings were all in addition to his personal gold ink transcriptions of *Lotus Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and the *Diamond Life Span Sutra*. The disproportionate range of sutras that Moromichi dedicated to his wife suggests that the principal reason for this sutra burial was, like that of his grandfather Michinaga, to pray for the birth of descendants. Hiroko had given birth to one son, Tadazane, in 1078 and another consort had produced a second son two years later. But Moromichi was still without a daughter to marry into the imperial line, which was essential to the Fujiwara strategy for maintaining their political power. Moromichi explained as much in his prayer: “I am a young man in the prime of my life and yet I have not been blessed with many children. This I bemoan. My prayer is that I might have another” (Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1976, 19a).

The motivations for sutra burials were, like their contents and locations, so various that no single explanation can be meaningfully applied to all. The stated intentions of the donors exceeded a concern with the salvation of the Dharma to include the salvation of oneself and of one’s family members both living and dead. This range of religious desire is reflected in the scriptures chosen and the goals to which they were directed: rebirth in Miroku’s Tosotsu heaven or Amida’s Gokuraku Pure Land. Gokuraku rebirth was seen not as a means of final escape but as an intermediary stage in a larger eschatological plan: a place for the fortunate to wait before returning to earth to attend Miroku’s sermons ushering in the next age. Other donors who asked for rebirth in the Tosotsu heaven understood their goal also as a temporary station from whence to descend with Miroku in the far distant future.

There remains, however, a fundamental tension between these two motives; a difference in the way they approach history. The preservationist aspect of sutra burial, saving the Dharma in its material forms for the Future Buddha, represents an act of historical responsibility, an investment in the future. The

advent of Miroku's golden age cannot be accelerated; its eventual appearance after a long period of decline can only be prepared for. The other intention of sutra burials, saving oneself and one's family through immediate future rebirth in either Amida's or Miroku's paradise, follows a different model entirely. Although retaining a this-worldly emphasis (the petitioner would continue to amass spiritual capital to assure his future reward) its goal has become "severely dehistoricized."²² Buddhism's cosmological timetable, the grand historical model to which the Final Dharma belongs, is circumvented. The Pure Land path of personal salvation with its eschatology of the immanent seems to obviate the need for institutional preservation.

This divergence is born out in the sutra burials themselves. A preoccupation with preserving the sutras throughout the age of the Final Dharma in anticipation of Miroku's advent was largely limited to the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Kurata 1961, 150). Later sutra burials rarely mention Miroku's age and are more directly related to the fate of the individual after death. As their ritual function changed from preservation to memorialization, devotion to Amida came to replace the cult of Miroku. In Japan, as in China, Miroku's paradise cult was absorbed and superseded by that of Amida, and the transformation of sutra burials may have been part of this larger religious shift (Kitagawa 1987, 246). Rather than the Miroku iconography of early examples, later burials exhibit far more pronounced Amida imagery. The engraved mirrors and hanging bas-reliefs that often accompanied the sutras were decorated with scenes of Amida descending to welcome the dying into his Pure Land, rather than portraits of the Future Buddha.

Yet, as we have seen, sutra burials from their earliest examples were concerned with the postmortem salvation of both the religion and the religionist. The Pure Land faith was not limited to a single temporal orientation. Concern with a future rebirth, nostalgia for a past golden age, and visions of a paradise in the present world were in no way mutually exclusive. Such multiple intentions may explain the combined presence of the Miroku and Amida cults as well as the ambiguous place of the age of the Final Dharma in the sutra burials. For, although presented, both implicitly and explicitly, as the ostensible reason for the practice, the discourse of the Final Dharma appears on closer examination to have functioned more as a rhetorical center around which other personal, familial, and political anxieties converged. If the practice of sutra burial reveals anything about the role of eschatology in early medieval Japan it is the range of concerns that are contained within this discourse. As an umbrella term, the Final Dharma is able to embrace a variety of religious desires while at the same time charging them with a heightened sense of historical urgency.

²² Nattier 1988 has analyzed these two models as the "here/after" and the "there/after".

Conclusion

In the age of the Final Dharma, history and salvation presented a formidable set of interrelated problems. To many monks and aristocrats of the period the practice of sutra burial provided a solution of sorts. It offered the ritual strategies and material means whereby the end-time could be prepared for and paradise secured. For historians of Japanese Buddhism, however, the evidence of sutra mounds can address another set of problems and provide another kind of buried treasure. Sutra burials, like so many time capsules, offer materials for a geography of religious aspiration. They identify the desires, the individuals, the cults, and – perhaps most significantly – the sites central to Japanese Buddhist practice. As such they may offer a map to a new sort of history, a spatial history that might begin to explore the vast and less charted landscape of the Japanese religious imagination.

For scholars of religion beyond Japan, the history of sutra burials offers other lessons as well. The practice reveals that the meanings of sacred texts are not limited to their narrative content. Although the particular sutras selected were certainly relevant to the aspirations of those who buried them, the texts themselves did not bear the communicative or pedagogical function usually attributed to scripture. Great care and expense went into the production of these texts: carved in stone, clay, bronze, and copper; inscribed on precious indigo-dyed paper, costly silk, or in ink mixed with one's own blood; enshrined in reliquaries of figured gilt bronze and imported Chinese porcelain. Yet the texts were never to be recited, studied, or taught, or at least not for 5.6 billion years. The value of their production and use lay in their media as much as in their message: what mattered most were the time, place, and materiality of their deployment. They were created expressly to be hidden from sight, buried so as to outlast time and overcome death. These were not aged or exhausted scriptures in need of disposal but rather newly created ones buried in order to extend their life into a future age of renewal and renovation. They represent an example of how the power of sacred texts lies not only in their words and ideas but in their materiality and instrumentality as well.

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