

taken in 734, when the monk Genbō 玄昉 (d. 746) returned to Japan after eighteen years' study in China carrying with him Buddhist images and a very large collection of sūtras, amounting to over 5,000 volumes. He was immediately appointed her personal meditation master (*zenji* 禪師) and his collection of texts was housed at Kōfukuji, transforming it overnight into an important centre for Buddhist scholarship. She also built a special temple for him called Kairyūōji 海龍王寺, a specific reference to the sūtra of that name that dealt with the enlightenment of the Naga King's daughter, which we have already discussed with reference to the 'Beetle-wing' cabinet at Hōryūji. Genbō himself was made Sangha Prefect in 737.² Work on the temple complex continued right through to 772.

Kōfukuji soon became known for its Ritual Assembly of Vimalakīrti or Yuima-e 維摩會, and for the academic discipline known as Hossō 法相.³ The interest in the *Vimalakīrtisūtra* is usually traced back to Kamatari himself, who is said to have been cured of an illness in 656 after a woman from Paekche had urged him to chant the fifth chapter, which treats of illness and its essential unreality (Tyler 1990: 78–80). The name Kōfukuji itself is thought to have been chosen from a passage in Kumārajīva's translation. The Ritual Assembly, which we shall treat in more detail later since it became of real importance in the subsequent Heian period, started life simply as recitations of the sūtra itself, but it soon turned into a major seven-day rite during which doctrinal debates and lectures on a variety of subjects were held, partly as an attempt to encourage scholarship. The main lecturer was appointed by the sovereign and to be chosen for this position was a certain mark of future advancement.

4.2 Tōdaiji

The first twenty years of Shōmu's reign were highly unstable. There were powerful rivals, unhappy at the way Genshō had arranged the succession; there was a disastrous smallpox epidemic that raged from 735 to 737, killing, according to some estimates, almost a third of the population; and in 740 the court was faced with having to raise a force of 17,000 to deal with a serious uprising in Kyūshū. This was followed by yet further unrest when Shōmu himself caused enormous worry and expense by trying to shift the capital

twice, to Kuni 恭仁 on the Kizu river in 740 and to Shigaraki 紫香樂, which was even further away from Nara, in 742. Why he vacillated in this fashion is not really known. It was only in 745 that the decision was made to remain at Heijō-kyō.

It was Shōmu who planned and oversaw construction of the monumental Tōdaiji 東大寺 with its large bronze statue of Vairocana Buddha. A project of unprecedented size and expense, it was originally planned in 743 for the site at Shigaraki but eventually built at Nara. Although, as we shall see, the native deities were still worshipped and the necessary rites continued, the reigns of Shōmu and his queen-consort Kōmyō were marked by the amount of attention paid to all things Buddhist. Buddhist ceremonies, such as the yearly confession of sins (*keka* 悔過), became prominent events at court, and members of the sangha must have been a more common sight within the Palace grounds. Although officially sanctioned ordinations continued to be restricted to ten per year, the number of unofficial initiations grew considerably: 900 in 737; 750 in 743; 400 in 745; 3,000 in 748; 1,000 in 749; and 800 in 757. A large number of men and women were clearly being recruited as 'offerings'. Not only did this begin to have an adverse effect on those who had a serious commitment to the religious life, it exacerbated the problem of finances, for these numbers represented a not-insubstantial diminution of the tax base.

There was also during this period a surprising shift of attitude towards those religious figures who had put themselves beyond the pale: Gyōki (668–749), for example, had been heavily criticised in 717 for maverick behaviour, and an entry in *Shoku Nihongi* for 730.9.29, which is assumed to refer to him, talks of worryingly large crowds gathering in the east of the capital to hear 'misleading' prophesies. He certainly gained a reputation as a charismatic proselytiser who was not content to remain within the precincts of a temple. But in the tenth month of 741, 550 of his followers were allowed to take proper vows and four years later in 745 he himself was raised to the rank of Grand Prefect by Shōmu. It was clearly in Shōmu's interests to harness as much support as he could for the project that became Tōdaiji.

Between 737 and 741 orders went out for the construction of more temples in the provinces and for the building of seven-storey pagodas for enshrining copies of the *Lotus sūtra*. The logical progression of this was seen in 741 with the institution of a network of provincial temples for both male and female members of the sangha, Kokubunji 國分寺 and Kokubunni 國分尼寺. Ten copies each of the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Sūtra of golden radiant wisdom* were also provided for each province. In this way Shōmu tried to extend his

² For more on Genbō see Bingenheimer 2001: 107–12; Grapard 1992a: 66–67.

³ For a fuller discussion of Hossō see §4.7.

authority far out into the provinces on the back of a nationwide temple-building project. Until Tōdaiji was completed, the central pivot for this state-wide *kokubunji* system was Daianji, which had been moved to Nara and rebuilt under the supervision of the monk Dōji. *Shoku Nihongi* notes that in 756 twenty of these provincial temples had already been completed.

It was undoubtedly Kōmyō who lay behind the addition of temples for women. We know very little about the ordination of nuns, but we do know that women carried out many of the same tasks as men at ceremonies within the Palace itself. This lasted until about 770, when Shōtoku Tennō 稱徳天皇, the last female sovereign for many centuries, died. As we have already mentioned, from that point on there was a rapid decline in officially recognised female members of the saṅgha, so that by the early Heian period they receive only limited mention in the sources. The term *ama* 尼, however, which is often translated as 'nun', was also used to refer to those many women who were accepted as initiates on an unofficial basis by men like Gyōki. If anything, the number of such women increased as time went on. There were, of course, many reasons for taking such a step: bereavement, divorce and retirement. It soon developed to the point where this became a socially acceptable status for any woman who was no longer active as wife or mother.⁴ It was also Kōmyō who encouraged the copying of sūtras. Partly this was for distribution to the growing provincial network, but to copy a sūtra was in any case an act of great merit and could be either done or ordered for a variety of personal reasons. Kōmyō was in charge of the sūtra scriptorium (*shakkyōjo* 寫經所) that was funded by the government, which perhaps explains the production of copies on such an enormous scale during this period. The scriptorium itself and the public nature of this enterprise was not to survive the move to Heian-kyō (Kornicki 1998: 78ff).

The pièce de résistance of Shōmu's reign was undoubtedly Tōdaiji and its smaller sister, Hokkeji 法華寺. We are probably now at the stage where an institution such as Hokkeji can legitimately be called a 'nunnery' or 'convent'; the equivalent male establishment, however, was still more in the nature of a temple than a monastery. The titles reveal a good deal about their respective roles: the Hokkeji was named after the *Lotus sūtra*, the one major scripture that specifically held out the prospect of enlightenment for women. The formal name of Tōdaiji on the other hand was the Temple for the Protection of the State by the Four Divine Kings of the Golden Radiant Wisdom sūtra (Konkōmyō shiten'ō gokokuji 金光明四天王護國寺). This

4. On this as yet poorly researched subject see Groner 2002: 245–88.

suggests that what lay behind the project was yet again the *Sūtra of golden radiant wisdom* (in the second translation by Yijing), but in fact the image housed in Tōdaiji is indubitably that of Vairocana, part of a rather different tradition.

Construction of Tōdaiji was clearly intended to bolster Shōmu's position as sovereign, but the project was too large for a mere domestic audience. By presenting what might be seen as an act of gross self-aggrandisement as an act of benevolence for all, he was not just indulging in further state patronage. It was tantamount to claiming the role of ruler as *cakravartin*, or ruler on a world scale, much in the manner of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty 梁武帝 (r. 502–49), who created his own ordination rituals and raised the status of the layman above that of the monk (Janousch 1999), or of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 684–705), who also used Buddhism to great effect. And there were precedents in China for such a monumental image: there remains a ten-metre high carving of Vairocana in the cliffs at Longmen near Luoyang, commissioned by Gaozong 高宗 in 672, and we also know that Empress Wu commissioned a huge bronze image in 700. But this was something on a truly grand scale: Japan, less than two hundred years after the introduction of Buddhism, was about to produce the largest and most magnificent monument to Buddha the world had yet seen. The proclamation of 743 reads as follows:

Although of little virtue, we have humbly assumed this great rank. Desiring to succeed all, we have devoted ourselves to soothing all living beings. From shore to shore this realm has been permeated with benevolence, but the Buddha's teachings have not yet penetrated everywhere. May Heaven and Earth be graced by the power of the Three Jewels, and may all living things prosper and countless generations bounteously continue their labours.

Here, on the fifteenth day of the tenth month of the fifteenth year of Tenpyō (743), we take the great vow of a bodhisattva to construct a golden image of Vairocana. The image will be cast in bronze, exhausting the copper in the realm. A great mountain will be excavated, a hall of worship erected, and the whole universe shall join us in this endeavour. Thus shall the whole universe gain benefit and reach enlightenment.

It is we who possess the wealth under Heaven, we who possess its power, and we shall use this wealth and power to erect the sacred image. But while it is easy to conceive of such a task, it will be difficult to fulfil our desires. We fear the people may be worked so hard that they will fail to sense the sanctity of the task, and, on the contrary, may feel resentment and commit crimes. Therefore, let all those who are committed to this great enterprise be assured of merit in absolute sincerity, and worship Vairocana Buddha three times a day. So will the image take shape. And if there are those who desire to bring but a blade of grass or a handful of earth to help create this image, then they shall be permitted to do so. Governors and district chiefs

are on account to importune or threaten the people, nor demand extra taxes from them. Let my command be proclaimed far and near, that all may know my will (Aoki et al. 1989-98, vol. II: 431-33).⁵

Preparations for the huge figure to be cast in Nara began in 745. The project involved levelling off a large area of land at the foot of the sacred Mt. Mikasa just to the northwest of Kofukuji and creating a compound that covered 6.6 km² (4 sq. miles). The layout was the same as that of the new Yakushiji, with the main hall in the centre facing south dominating a compound flanked by two pagodas, each over 100 m in height, arranged on an east-west axis.⁶ This main hall now measures 57 m long, 50.5 m deep north to south and 49.1 m high, but we know that the building we see today is quite different from the original, which at 86.1 m (eleven bays) was longer by another third, giving far better proportions than the present squat construction that dates from the late seventeenth century. Inside this huge hall sat the statue, almost 16 m high. The original base remains, but the head and most of the rest of the torso dates from the seventeenth century and is unfortunately somewhat ungainly.

After some false starts the casting began in 747 and was completed two years later. This was by no means the end of the process, since the statue had yet to be properly prepared, gilded and covered, but Shōmu visited the site in the first month of the year to review progress. Some idea of the difficulties involved in this kind of work can be obtained from the following description:

The monumental statue was cast in eight stages, working upward from the base to the head. After the bronze for each level had been poured, the molds for the next level were positioned and earth was piled up around them, both to hold them in place and to provide a surface for the bronze foundries. Thus by the time the casting was complete the entire statue was covered with a mound of earth. As each level of molds was removed, imperfections in the casting had to be repaired: the flashing that would have occurred along the seams of the mold would have required chasing, and the hollows caused by gassing would have required recasting. This time-consuming process lasted from 750 until 755; moreover, the 966 snail-shaped curls had to be cast one by one and set onto the head. At the time of the dedication ceremony in 752 the image was only partially completed (Morse 1986: 51-52).

A few months after his visit, Shōmu retired and forced through the succession of his daughter by Komyō, Princess Abe, known as Kōken 孝謙. Shōmu was ailing and wanted to spend his remaining time overseeing the grand project and making sure that Kōken's rule was secure. The official opening ceremony was held three years later in 752 and was presided over by

⁵ Trans. adapted from Piggott 1997: 104-05.

⁶ See the useful plan in Coaldrake 1986: 34, which shows both original and existing structures.

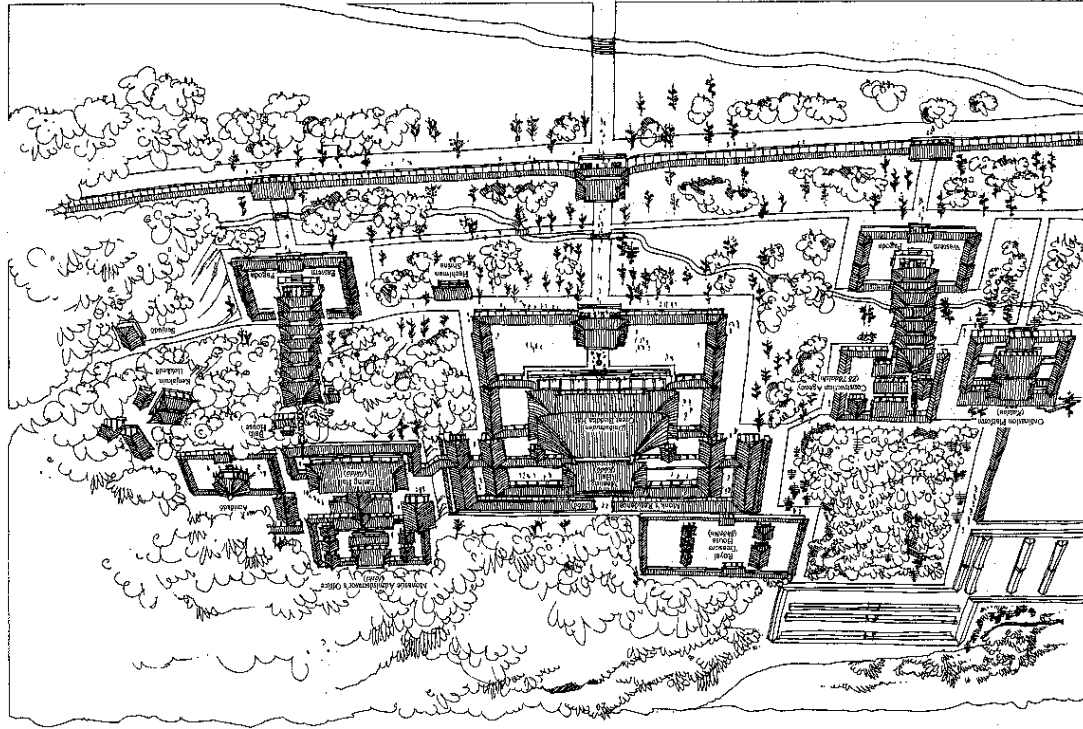


Plate 14 Todayji in the late eighth century.

the monk Bodhisena 菩提遷那 (704–60), who had arrived in Japan in 734, the only Indian known to have done so in pre-modern times. Shōmu himself died in 756. In the end, the image took 444 metric tons of refined copper, 7 metric tons of unrefined tin, and 391 kg of gold leaf (which had been discovered in the north of Japan at just the right moment). The project was so vast that a special agency called the *Zō Tōdaijishi 造東大寺司* was created to oversee the operation. This eventually grew to be the largest agency in the government and once the temple was completed it was transformed into a general agency responsible for all further palace and temple construction until the end of the century.⁷

Once created and in operation, Tōdaiji became the centre of all Buddhist activity that had relevance to the state. Perhaps for this reason, the curriculum was eclectic from the beginning. For academic purposes the community was divided into six groups, each responsible for studying the texts and practices of a particular academic tradition (see §4.7). Each subject had its own building, its own specialist library and its own administration. The first head of the community was Rōben 良辨 (689–773), who had originally been trained at Kōfukuji. He founded a strong tradition of Buddhist scholarship at Tōdaiji, as befitted a temple complex of such magnitude, and there was soon a full programme of festivals, readings and congregations throughout the year, designed to celebrate a wide variety of sūtras, most of them – as one might expect – of the ‘state-protecting’ variety (Piggott 1987: 166–87).

How was it that the central figure of Tōdaiji turned out to be the cosmic buddha Vairocana and not the historical buddha Śākyamuni? It is generally assumed that the decision to build in honour of Vairocana was in response to the recent arrival in Japan of the sūtra in which he is a major figure, the *Flower garland sūtra* (Ch. *Huayan jing*, Jp. *Kégon kyō 華嚴經*, T. 278). This vast work was probably compiled in Khotan sometime in the third century CE, but the Huayan doctrinal tradition to which it gave birth (and from which it should be distinguished) was a product of late Sui and early Tang China. Its founder was the scholar-monk Zhiyan 智嚴 (602–68), but it reached its apogee with Fazang 法藏 (643–712), who won the patronage of Empress Wu. The empress was so interested in this sūtra that she personally invited the Khotanese monk Śikṣānanda to work on a new translation.⁸ On a far grander scale than previous ‘state-protecting’ sūtras, offering the protection not just of guardian kings but of the cosmic Buddha himself, it was adopted as the

⁷ For further details of the construction and financing of Tōdaiji, see Piggott 1987.

⁸ For details of Empress Wu as a patron of Buddhism see Weinstein 1987: 37–47.

basis of a new and more grandiloquent state religion. The idea that the physical world was one and the same as the spiritual suggested that temporal power could be identified with spiritual power and so made the identification of ruler and Buddha that much easier. The sūtra was in turn adopted on the same basis in newly unified Silla, where it was represented by Wōnhyo 元曉 (614–86) and Ūisang 義湘 (625–712), who founded the first Hwaōm 華嚴 temple in Korea, Pusoksa 浮石寺, in 676.

The first sign that the sūtra was in Japan comes in 722, when Genshō Tennō had it copied in memory of Genmei. Both Genbō and Daoxuán 道璿 (702–60) brought copies with them in 734 and it is usually Daoxuán who is credited with its introduction. But Daoxuán was in fact better known for his knowledge not of Huayan but the *vinaya*, and it was a monk called Simsang 審祥 (Jp. Shinjō) from Silla who first explained the sūtra to Shōmu in 740. He began by expounding the text in his capacity as lecturer (*kōji 講師*) to be followed by a series of ‘repeaters’, or *fukushi 復師*, who paraphrased what he had said so that it could be absorbed a second time. In this fashion he managed to cover twenty books a year, in a format that was continued throughout the Nara period (Girard 1990: 224). There can be no doubt that these monks, coming from China in the mid-730s, brought with them news of the high esteem in which this sūtra had been held by Empress Wu and its major role at the court of the Silla kings. The central figure of this vast text is Vairocana, who was the outcome of a movement to unify all buddhas under a single entity; as the ultimate transcendent buddha of Mahāyāna, representing all matter and mind, nirvāṇa and saṃsāra, he was a natural symbol for a ruler to adopt. One may doubt whether Shōmu knew much about the complex doctrines of Huayan/Kegon, but he was clearly interested in appropriating to himself the most powerful, all-encompassing Buddha of them all.

It is thought likely that the iconography actually came from the description of Vairocana in the *Sūtra of Brahmā's net* (Jp. *Bonnō kyō 梵網經*),⁹ which had been compiled in China during the fifth century and also brought to Japan by Daoxuán. It was often treated as a closing chapter to the *Flower garland*. It is here that we read of Vairocana preaching on a throne of one thousand lotus petals, each petal containing a historical buddha, each one master of a universe containing a trillion worlds – a symbol of the Pure World that is the cosmos. This was an image of authority on not just a national but a world scale.¹⁰

⁹ Ch. *Fanwang jing*, T. 1484.

¹⁰ For a translation and study of the *Sūtra of Brahmā's net* see de Groot 1967.