

Emperor Shōmu's Decision to Build Tōdai-ji

The reign of Emperor Shōmu extended from 724-749 CE. It was marked by attempted coups and rebellions, as well as natural disasters and epidemics. Following the Confucian thought that the natural order and the social order should reflect each other, Emperor Shōmu tried to be a virtuous ruler. He was inspired by his wife, who opened medical clinics and cared for the needy. He believed Buddhism could bring protection, peace, and prosperity to his people.

In the mid-6th century, the King of Baekje (southern Korea) presented a Buddhist sculpture to Japanese rulers. After that, Chinese and Korean rulers, diplomats, and immigrants in Japan suggested that Buddhism be incorporated into the government. Interest in the religion at the Yamato court increased with every returning *Kentōshi* boat of diplomats and monks. By the Nara period, Buddhism's popularity was growing with commoners, too. Emperor Shōmu would become the first to rule Japan with Buddhism as the state religion.

Emperor Shōmu found guidance in the Cosmic Buddha and compassionate bodhisattvas (enlightened beings) of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. This scripture describes a series of worlds where people live in perfect harmony and face no difficulties. The Cosmic Buddha encompasses thousands of Buddhas and millions of enlightened beings who carry his teachings. The emperor, a living god, and all other Shintō gods were interpreted as being part of this cosmos. Emperor Shōmu saw this Buddhist universe as a metaphor for imperial rule over aristocrats and commoners. Through the spread of Buddhism, he united capital aristocrats and provincial elites. He also reasserted government control over the religion as it grew to include believers from all classes.

In 741, Emperor Shōmu issued an edict that said every province should have a monastery and nunnery. The system of monasteries was known as *Kokubun-ji*. Each temple received a sutra (scripture) that the Emperor had personally copied out. The Emperor wanted the *Kokubun-ji* temples to serve as sites for prayer on behalf of peace and the well-being of the people. Thus, the temples could forge a connection between the countryside and capital.

In 743, the Emperor announced plans to build a huge statue of Vairocana, the Cosmic Buddha. In his announcement, the Emperor said, "The benefits of peace may be brought to all in heaven and earth, even animals and plants sharing in its fruits, for all time to come" (DeBary et.al. 2001, 114). This was a reference to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

Construction of the Great Buddha began in 743. The 53-foot-high bronze statue was cast in eight stages. It included 500 tons of ornamentation made of copper, tin, lead, and gold. The casting process used up all the copper in the Japanese archipelago. The chief sculptor, Kuninaka no Kimimaro, was the son of a Korean immigrant. During the bronzing phase, gods at Usa Hachiman shrine in Kyushu were consulted. Eventually, a shrine to Hachiman was built next to Tōdai-ji to protect the Great Buddha (Piggott 1987, 110; Huffman 2010, 22). As the casting was completed in 749, Shōmu gave up the throne and became a Buddhist priest.

Approximately 2.5 million people (almost half of the Japanese population) contributed to construction of the statue and temple. They provided rice, wood, metal, cloth, or labor. Notable

among the contributors were monks of Korean heritage: Rōben, the first Chief Abbot of the temple, and Gyōki, a monk who solicited donations and recruited workers. The work was backbreaking and in some cases deadly. The statue and temple required the work of “...plasterers, quarriers, masons, carpenters, cabinet makers, tile makers, sawyers, shinglers, thatchers, potters, mat makers, bamboo craftsmen, draftsmen, lacquerware specialists, seamstresses, founders, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, coppersmiths, sculptors, painters, dyers, gliders, engravers, and food preservers” (Piggott 1987, 136). Construction of the temple also resulted in deforestation.

The Great Buddha Hall was finished in 751. Now monks could be ordained in Japan instead of traveling to China. Upon the death of the Emperor, many of his personal belongings, some of Eurasian origin, and the objects used in the rituals at the consecration were placed in the Shōsō-in. The Shōsō-in is a large storehouse on the Tōdai-ji grounds. Those objects are still kept in the Shōsō-in today. They provide evidence of the cultural richness of the Nara Period and mark Japan as the “eastern terminus of the Silk Road.”

References:

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Proclamation of the Emperor Shōmu on the Erection of the Great Buddha Image

Having respectfully succeeded to the throne through no virtue of our own, out of a constant solicitude for all men, We have been ever intent on aiding them to reach the shore of the Buddha land. Already even the distant seacoasts of this land have been made to feel the influence of our benevolence and regard for others, and yet not everywhere in this land do men enjoy the grace of Buddha's law. Our fervent desire is that under the aegis of the Three Treasures, the benefits of peace may be brought to all in heaven and earth, even animals and plants sharing in its fruits, for all time to come.

... We take this occasion to proclaim our great vow of erecting an image of Lochana Buddha in gold and copper. We wish to make the utmost use of the nation's resources of metal in the casting of this image, and also to level off the high hill on which the great edifice is to be raised, so that the entire land may be joined with us in the fellowship of Buddhism and enjoy in common the advantages which this undertaking affords to the attainment of Buddhahood.

It is we who possess the wealth of the land; it is we who possess all power in the land. With this wealth and power at our command, we have resolved to create this venerable object of worship. The task would appear to be an easy one, and yet a lack of sufficient forethought on our part might result in the people's being put to great trouble in vain, for the Buddha's heart would never be touched if, in the process, calumny and bitterness were provoked which led unwittingly to crime and sin.

Therefore all who join in the fellowship of this undertaking must be sincerely pious in order to obtain its great blessings, and they must daily pay homage to Lochana Buddha, so that with constant devotion each may proceed to the creation of Lochana Buddha. If there are some desirous of helping in the construction of this image, though they have no more to offer than a twig or handful of dirt, they should be permitted to do so. The provincial and county authorities are not to disturb and harass the people by making arbitrary demands on them in the name of this project. This is to be proclaimed far and wide so that all may understand our intentions in this matter.

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Description of Tōdai-ji's Dedication Ceremony

The Great Buddha and Tōdai-ji temple were consecrated in 752. The “eye-opening” ceremony was attended by visitors from the Asian continent. The 17,000 attendees included monks and nobles from Japan, as well as monks and dignitaries from China, Korea, and India. Of course, the reigning Empress Kōken was there. So was her father, the retired emperor Shōmu.

Shōmu played an important role at the dedication. As the person most responsible for the building of the statue and temple, he held the paintbrush as the statue’s eyes were painted. This rite was seen as an invitation to the spirit of Buddha to enter the statue (Morimoto 2002).

The statue and Great Hall were impressive achievements. The *Daibutsu*, or Great Buddha, was more than 60 feet high and included three million pounds of metal covered with gold. As many as 350,000 people contributed to constructing the statue. The Great Hall in which the statue sat was 150 feet high and 300 feet long. It incorporated a blue-tiled roof, white walls, and lacquered pillars (Huffman 2010).

The ceremony sent a message to people in attendance about the power and stability of the Japanese government. It also demonstrated the emergence of Buddhism as the state religion. According to scholar James L. Huffman, “The government had located itself in a city of perhaps 100,000 people, modeled after the Chinese capital Chang’an. The Yamato clan was in total control (at least so it seemed on this dedication day), presiding over a flourishing cultural life and government that would set standards for generations to come” (Huffman 2010, 19).

References:

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