



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

Donald F. McCallum

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Few periods in Japanese history are more fascinating than the seventh century. This was the period when Buddhism experienced its initial flowering in the country and the time when Asukadera, Kudara Odera, Kawaradera, and Yakushiji (the "Four Great Temples" as they were called in ancient texts) were built. Despite their enormous historical importance, these structures have received only limited attention in Western literature, primarily because they are now ruins. Focus has been placed instead on Horyuji, a beautifully preserved structure, but not a key temple of the period. Donald McCallum seeks in this volume to restore the four great temples to their proper place in the history of Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist architecture.

Extraordinary archaeological discoveries in the past few decades in the Asuka-Fujiwara area provide the basis for the monumental task McCallum has set for himself. Three of the temples have been studied archaeologically, but one, Kudara Odera (the first royal temple in Japan), has until recently been known only through textual references—primarily those mentioning its nine-story pagoda, a format closely linked to the grandiose royal temples of China and Korea. A series of digs carried out between 1997 and 2001 at Kibi Pond yielded what are thought to be the remains of Kudara Odera. A platform, the appropriate size for a large pagoda, has been uncovered at the site, indicating the reliability of the textual sources. These results have necessitated a rethinking of early Buddhist architecture in Japan. *The Four Great Temples* gives the first detailed account in the English language of these excavations.

In his detailed analyses of each of the four temples, McCallum considers historiographical issues, settings and layouts, foundations, tiles, relics, and icons and allows readers to follow their chronological evolution. A key feature is the interweaving of archaeological and documentary data to clarify numerous historical problems that have until now resisted plausible solutions. Although the focus is on temples, the book looks at broader political and religious developments that serve as a context for the study. It further makes an effort to unify data on great royal temples in China, Korea, and other parts of Japan, thereby providing cross-cultural insights into a matter that has frequently been discussed only in terms of a single region.

The Four Temples is a masterful, multifaceted study that will fundamentally alter and enrich current understanding of Japan's ancient Buddhist temples. It is sure to generate considerable discussion among scholars in the fields of Japanese and Asian history, art history, and Buddhist studies.

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