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## SACRED TEXTS AS A SOURCE OF THE BUDDHIST VISUAL TRADITION: THE JAPANESE ICONOMETRIC CORPUS

*Buddhist sacred sculpture is based on classical sacred Buddhist texts that have a history of hundreds of years of existence and transformation. The need to create such instructional texts was dictated by the necessity to preserve and transmit tradition and craftsmanship (waza no denshō, 技の伝承), including the reproduction of the ritual for creating images (sacred sculptures), from master to disciple (shishi sōjō, 師資相承). Iconometric texts are present in the cultures of most countries where Buddhism was widespread, but due to their large number and content, it is more appropriate to study them according to their country of dissemination. In this case (the first publication in a series), the focus is on the Japanese corpus, which includes: Shosetsu fudōki (諸説不同記, IXth–Xth c.), Jikkanshō (十卷抄, XIIth c.), Besson zakki (別尊雜記, XIIth c.), Kakuzenshō (覺禪抄, XIIth–XIIIth c.), and Asabashō (阿娑縛抄, XIIIth c.).*

**Keywords:** *Japanese Buddhist art, sacred sculpture, Esoteric Buddhism (Mikkyō), iconometric texts, iconography, zuzōshō (圖像抄), Shingon school (Tōmitsu), Tendai school (Taimitsu), Heian period, Kamakura period, mandala, hibutsu (秘仏).*

Buddhist sacred iconometric texts comprise hundreds of editions distributed throughout the entire area of Buddhism's dissemination. This publication focuses specifically on the main Japanese texts – zuzōshō (圖像抄) – collections of iconographic images and rituals that contributed to the development of Buddhism and its realization in sacred sculpture, which are defined as a corpus. Key to this research is not only the review and analysis of Japanese iconometric texts but also an attempt to compare and connect them with examples of preserved cultural artifacts (i. e., to demonstrate their practical implementation). It is expected that the examination and representation of their connection not only with cultural artifacts but also with Buddhist sects will allow for a clearer differentiation in the future between the sacred and the decorative [Zolotarova 2024] in Buddhist countries and their religious sculpture. The iconometric texts examined in this study primarily belong to the Esoteric Buddhism of Japan – Mikkyō (密教) – because the large number of religious figures, images, depictions, and details prompted teachers, scholars, and masters to create such works-manuals.

One of the earliest works created to analyze and regulate the pictographic tradition of Japanese Buddhism can be considered the *Shosetsu fudōki*, or “Record of Discrepancies in Various Theories Concerning the Seed Syllables, Attributes, Iconography, and Sacred Positions of the Deities within the Universal Great Mandala of the Womb Realm of Great Compassion” (*Daihi Taizō Futsū Dai-Mandara-chū shoson shuji hyōji gyōsō shōi shosetsu fudō-ki*, 大悲胎藏普通大曼

茶羅中諸尊種子標幟形相聖位諸說不同記), authored by the monk Shinjaku (法三宮真寂, 886–927). It can be asserted that this text is one of the earliest iconographic corpuses of Japanese Buddhism, providing a description of 360 deities based on the *Taizōkai mandara* (胎藏界曼荼羅) brought to Japan by Kūkai (空海, 774–835) and its comparison with canonical sacred texts such as the *Daibirushana Jōbutsu Jinpen Kaji-kyō* (大毘盧遮那成佛神變加持經), or *Mahāvairocana-abhisambodhi-vikurvitādhiṣṭhāna-vaipulya-sūtreन्द्रarāja* (mahāvairocanaभिर्सभोदिविकुर्विताधिष्ठानवैपुल्यसूत्रेन्द्रराज), and various iconographic examples [入江 2005]. The *Taizōkai mandara* is one of the most important, and the comparative and analytical nature of Shinjaku's work indicates a desire for the fixation, systematization, and traditionalization of canonically correct images.

In figures 1 and 2, one can see the detailing of a similar and the most ancient mandala, the *Takao Mandala* (高雄曼荼羅), which belongs to the same period as the *Taizōkai* and in whose creation Kūkai himself participated. Its damaged state and overall appearance indicate that the identification and restoration of cultural artifacts from such a period can face obstacles, which is why Shinjaku's work is extremely important for the study and restoration of such examples of Japanese Buddhist art.

The Jikkanshō (“Gleanings in Ten Scrolls”), created approximately in the Heian period (平安時代, 794–1185), is based on a pair of mandalas – the *Taizōkai* and the *Kongōkai* (金剛界曼荼羅) – and, unlike the *Shosetsu fudōki*, has a more encyclopedic and systematic character, which was driven by the need for clear iconography and specific instructions. The pair of mandalas is not simply compared; rather, based on these comparisons combined with sacred texts, it aims to create a unified iconographic system justified by the sacred texts of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, reflecting the Tōmitsu (東密) tradition.

The oldest surviving example of this work, dated to the XIIIth century, the Kamakura period (鎌倉時代, 1185–1333), belonged to the monk and scholar Gōhō (杲宝, 1306–1362) and is preserved in the Nara National Museum (奈良国立博物館). Within this study, a copy of the 1309 edition, created in 1702 and now held in the Ryukoku University Library (龍谷大学図書館), is used. The Jikkanshō consists of 10 volumes, each dedicated to a specific group of sacred images: Volume 1: Buddha Section (佛部); Volume 2: Buddha Crowns Section (佛頂部); Volume 3: Sūtra Section (經部); Volume 4: Bodhisattva Section, Upper Volume (菩薩部 上); Volume 5: Bodhisattva Section, Lower Volume (菩薩部 下); Volume 6: Avalokiteśvara Section, Upper Volume (觀音部 上); Volume 7: Avalokiteśvara Section, Lower Volume (觀音部 下); Volume 8: Wisdom Kings Section (明王部); Volume 9: Celestial Beings Section, Upper Volume (天等部 上); Volume 10: Celestial Beings Section, Lower Volume (天等部 下) [恵什 編 1702]. Each section includes, besides iconographic and iconometric prescriptions, special rituals based on corresponding sutras, additional attributes,

and specifics of deity placement. For example, in Volume 8, the Wisdom Kings Section, the ritual associated with Fudō Myōō (不動明王) includes the following data: the Sanskrit/sacred name bongo (梵号), the esoteric name mitsugō (密号), the seed syllable or bīja mantra (shuji, 種子), the samaya form (sanmayagyō, 三形), the iconographic description sonzō (尊像), the ritual for attendants shishahō (使者法), and the ritual directly associated with Fudō Myōō – the Goma rite (goma-gi, 護摩儀). The iconography corresponds to the Japanese esoteric pictographic tradition, which we can also encounter in sacred sculpture, especially of this period (fig. 3, fig. 4).

At the end of the Heian era and the beginning of the Kamakura era, between 1177 and 1180 (some researchers believe the period is between 1162 and 1171), the monk Shingaku (心覚, 1117–1180), with later additions by Prince Shukaku (守覚), created a fundamental iconographic and iconometric work, the Besson Zakki (別尊雜記, “Miscellaneous Record of Individual Deities”), sometimes referred to as the Gojikkanshō (五十卷抄, “Collection in Fifty Scrolls”), which consists of 57 scrolls (editions with 51 scrolls also exist). It differs from other works of the Japanese corpus by combining the traditions of two schools, Shingon and Tendai, and by including various sources, including from China. It is a synthetic, compilatory work based on earlier iconographic collections and oral narratives, aimed not exclusively at fixing the pictographic tradition or creating unified rules, but at the ritual aspect as well, that is, comprehensively, where some deities (and the specifics of their visual realization) are recorded for the first time (for example, Shimizu Norie proved that the Besson Zakki was the first to mention a previously unrecorded form of Nyoirin Kannon (如意輪觀音) in a half-lotus posture [清水 2012]). The oldest copy of Besson Zakki, namely the Ninnaji-bon (仁和寺本), is kept in the treasury of the Ninnaji temple (仁和寺) in Kyoto and dates to the XIIth century (Shimizu Norie worked with this source).

The main problem in studying and researching this work is the absence of complete digitized versions (from the Heian or Kamakura period); only a few images are openly accessible that can be considered in the context of this work. Among the publicly available fragments, examples from the Harvard Art Museums stand out, namely object number 1984.350, measuring 30 x 766 cm and created in the Kamakura period, in 1321 (fig. 5), and another example of a single scroll from the same period, housed at The Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University. The digitized sample contains unique examples of Buddhist esoteric iconography, several images of which are realized in sacred sculpture. Thus, the Thousand-Armed Kannon or Senju Kannon (千手觀音), created in the Nara period (奈良時代, 710–794), i. e., before the writing of Besson Zakki, and located in the Tōdai-ji monastery (東大寺) where esoteric Buddhist rituals were also performed, testifies that Shingaku (and his followers) was quite precise not only in his descriptions of rituals but also in the detailed iconography (fig. 6). The large number of diverse Buddhist sacred sculptures in Japanese culture, and the rituals associated with them

(or the rituals from which they emerge), prompted such monks and scholars of their time to create iconometric collections to preserve the pictographic tradition and its unification.

Esoteric Buddhism in Japan was directed towards the systematization and generalization of ritual practice during this period. Among these, the work from the Kamakura period, completed by the monk Kakuzen (覚禅, 1143 – c. 1213) around 1213, *Kakuzenshō* (“Selected Notes of Kakuzen”), particularly stands out [佐和 1942]. This voluminous work of more than 120 scrolls is primarily based on the ritual side of the practice and tradition of *Tōmitsu* and includes the most complete iconographic description of images of the XIIIth-century Buddhist pantheon (about 400 sheets of *zuzō* (図像)). And if Shingaku synthesized previously known iconometric sources and added analysis and reflection, Kakuzen spent decades collecting oral information obtained through the practice of *kuden* (口伝), without excluding previous written works. There are many known copies of this so-called compendium, the most famous being the copies by the monk Ryōshō (了性), who created them between 1323 and 1326. Some of them are located in the Seinan-in (西南院) and Zuishin-in (随心院) temples, with which the monk Insei (寅清) later worked in the XVIth century [森 2018].

The Nara National Museum houses and has digitized one scroll from 1248, identified as *Kakuzenshō*, namely the *Gōzanze Myōō-hō* (降三世明王法) or “Ritual of the Wisdom King Gōzanze”. In addition to rituals, we can see the detailed iconography of such a complex image of Japanese esoteric Buddhism as Gōzanze Myōō and its numerous variations (fig. 7) by the brush of the monk Raiken (頼賢). On the page characterizing the forms of Gōzanze Myōō and one of its most complex and masterfully rendered figures, the following description is provided: “His body is blue-black in color. The central face expresses deep compassion. The right face is wrathful. The left face has a wide-open mouth, displaying fangs” (其身青黑色、正面三目、慈悲相。右面忿怒、左面大口相也), “The two hands in front of the chest form the ‘Gōzanze mudra’” (二手当胸作「降三世印」), “The three right hands: the upper holds a five-pronged vajra, the middle holds a sword, the lower holds an arrow” (右三手者、上持五鉤杵、次持劍、下持箭), “The three left hands: the upper holds a five-pronged vajra-bell, the middle holds a lasso, the lower holds a bow” (左三手者、上持五鉤鈴、次持索、下持弓), “With the left foot, he tramples on Daijizai-ten, and with the right foot, he tramples on his consort Uma” (以左足踏大自在天、以右足踏其妃烏摩) (fig. 8) [覚禅鈔 1248]. It is this iconography that we encounter in the IXth-century sculpture, from the Heian period, at the Tōdai-ji monastery (fig. 9), which was created before the writing of *Kakuzenshō* and demonstrates how deeply Kakuzen researched and preserved the pictographic tradition of *Tōmitsu*.

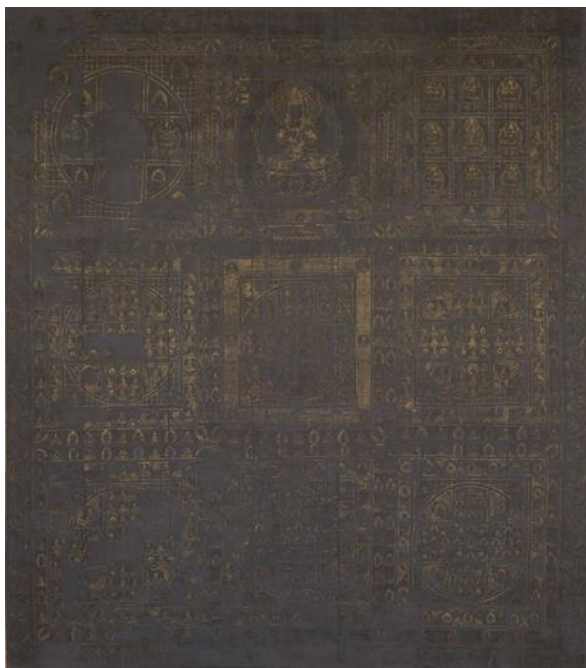
If the *Kakuzenshō* is a grand encyclopedia of the Shingon sect’s tradition, then the *Asabashō* can be considered a compendium of the Tendai school, specifically Taimitsu (台密), from the XIIIth century, Kamakura era, authored by

the monk Shōchō (承澄, 1205–1282), sometimes with his disciple Sonchō (尊澄) added as a co-author, comprising about 200 scrolls [岡田 2007]. The large number of rituals and iconographic instructions in the Asabashō has a similar structure to the corresponding texts of Shingon, yet there are significant differences. The most important difference is that the iconographic part is not as actively presented, with a more complex and syncretic approach to presenting information than in the works of the Tōmitsu tradition. There are copies and examples that can help to see the main specifics, for example, in the 1914 edition of the “Complete Collection of Japanese Buddhism” or Dai Nihon Bukkyō Zensho (大日本佛教全書), which includes a portion of the Asabashō scrolls. Here, great attention is paid to the ritual part, especially the preparation for rituals, as in fig. 10, where a detailed instruction for creating a sacred space, a dōjō (道場), is given.

Figure 11 from the same volume contains a unique example of the iconography of Ichiji Kinrin (一字金輪), which is quite rarely found in sculptural realization. Among these is a secret, hidden sculpture – a *hibutsu* (秘仏) – from the Chūson-ji monastery (中尊寺) from the XIIth century (fig. 12), which fully corresponds to the peculiarities of the *Taimitsu* tradition.

Despite such discrepancies, which are primarily due to the different schools and directions of esoteric Buddhism in Japan, all the considered iconometric texts are part of a classical corpus that contributed not only to the preservation of the pictographic tradition from the beginning but also to the structuring and systematization of a large amount of visual material and rituals.

**Conclusion.** Having studied the 5 main iconometric works of Japanese esoteric Buddhism (*Shosetsu fudōki*, *Jikkanshō*, *Besson zakki*, *Kakuzenshō*, *Asabashō*), or the Japanese iconometric corpus, it was possible to see how these and similar texts changed their functions. Beginning as collections of tradition, fixations of oral knowledge, and compilatory texts based not only on sacred texts but also on the pictographic tradition that appeared in Japan along with Buddhism, they continued as structured, detailed, and thorough encyclopedias or manuals. This raises another question that requires a solution: What came first? The sculpture or the text that describes it.



*fig. 1. Mandala of the Two Realms (Takao Mandala), Vajra Realm (Kongōkai)*



*fig. 2. Mandala of the Two Realms (Takao Mandala): Womb Realm*



fig. 3. Fudō Myōō. Zuzōshō, Volume 8: Wisdom Kings Section



fig. 4. Fudō Myōō, Attributed to Kaikei (快慶), Kamakura period (1185–1333)



fig. 5. 1984.350: Iconographic Drawing (Besson zakki) 1 vol.



*fig. 6. Senju Kannon, Tōshōdai-ji temple. Nara, Japan*



fig. 7. *Ritual Method of Trailokyavijaya Vidyārāja. Kakuzen's Notes.*  
Current owner: Nara National Museum.



fig. 8. *Important Art Object Iconographic Drawings, Kakuzenshō (Notes by Kakuzen), Ritual of Gōzanze Myōdō (Trailokyavijaya) Section.* Nara National Museum.



*fig. 9. Gōzanze Myōō, Tōdai-ji temple. Nara, Japan*



fig. 10. Diagram of a ritual space. Asabashō, from the “Complete Collection of Japanese Buddhism”, 1914.



fig. 11. Iconography of Ichiji Kinrin.  
*Asabashō*, from the “Complete Collection of Japanese Buddhism”, 1914.



*fig. 12. Ichiji Kinrin. Chūson-ji Monastery. Heian period. Hibutsu.*

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## САКРАЛЬНІ ТЕКСТИ

ЯК ДЖЕРЕЛО БУДДИСТСЬКОЇ ЗОБРАЖАЛЬНОЇ ТРАДИЦІЇ:  
ЯПОНСЬКИЙ ІКОНОМЕТРИЧНИЙ КОРПУС

Буддистська сакральна пластика базується на класичних священних текстах буддизму, які налічують сотні років свого існування та трансформацій. Потреба у створенні таких текстів-інструкцій була продиктована необхідністю зберегти й передати традицію та майстерність (*waza no denshō*, 技の伝承), зокрема й для відтворення ритуалу створення образів (сакральних скульптур), від вчителя до учня (*shishi sōjō*, 師資相承). Іконометричні тексти присутні в культурах більшості країн, де був поширений буддизм, але через їхню велику кількість та зміст доречніше досліджувати їх відповідно до країни поширення. У даному випадку (в першій публікації із серії) – це японський корпус, до якого входять: «Сьосецу фудокі» (諸説不同記, IX–X ст.), «Дзюккансьо» (十巻抄, XII ст.), «Бессон дзаккі» (別尊雜記, XII ст.), «Какудзенсьо» (覚禪抄, XII–XIII ст.) та «Асабасьо» (阿婆縛抄, XIII ст.).

**Ключові слова:** сакральна скульптура, езотеричний буддизм (Міккьо), іконометричні тексти, іконографія, дзудзосьо (図像抄), школа Сінгон

(Томіцу), школа Тендай (Тайміцу), період Хейан, період Камакура, мандала, хібцу (秘仏).

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