



The city of Osaka in the medieval period: Religion and the transportation of goods in the Uemachi Plateau

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ABSTRACT

In the classical and medieval periods the area of Osaka connected the capitals of Nara and Kyoto with the Seto Inland Sea and areas beyond. The city of Osaka developed centered on the Uemachi Plateau, which was 15 m higher than the surrounding area. The first area to flourish following the decline of the ancient capital of Naniwa-no-miya was Shitennōji Temple and its gate town. Because it was believed to be the gate to paradise, many pilgrims came to Shitennōji. Many sick and poor people also gathered there expecting alms from those pilgrims. East of Shitennōji was Imamiya Shrine and its gate town. Farther east was the port of Kizu. These functioned as a single base for transit and transport. The port of Watanabe also developed in the area, along the northern edge of the Uemachi Plateau. This port was at the intersection of land and water routes. Above this port Osaka would develop from the 15th century as a town within Honganji Temple's precincts. Osaka Honganji was a True Pure Land Buddhist temple, and many performers and artisans came to dwell in the town. In this way, medieval Osaka had deep connections with temples and Buddhism. Because it was a religiously sacred land many sick people and beggars seeking aid gathered in and around the city.

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Introduction

The Osaka region in the classical (ca. 500–1185) and medieval (ca. 1185–1500) periods housed the capitals of Nara to the east and Kyoto to the west. Ideally located, this region was key to connecting the capitals, the various regions of western Japan, the Korean Peninsula, China, and the continent. The Uemachi Plateau, where Osaka Castle would be in the Edo period, stood more than 15 m higher than the surrounding lowlands; for this reason, the capitals Naniwa-no-miya and Naniwa-kyō were constructed here in the mid 7th and mid 8th centuries. However, after the capital was moved to Yamashiro Province (Nagaoka-kyō/Heian-kyō), there were no longer any major political centers in the Uemachi Plateau area.

Shitennōji's gate town

Instead of a political center, the temple Shitennōji and its "gate town," a type of town which develops at the gates of a temple or shrine (*monzenmachi*), became the center of this region Shinshū Ōsakashishi (1998). Shitennōji was located

in the Uemachi Plateau, approximately 4 km from its northern edge. According to legend, it was built by Shōtoku Taishi in the early 7th century, and was a temple dedicated to the spiritual protection of the nation during the classical period. However, in the medieval period, the character of the temple changed drastically. This change was triggered by the spread of Pure Land thought (*Jōdoshisō*).

Pure Land thought spread as a form of Buddhist ideology in Japan in the late classical period. Many believed that the Pure Land (*Gokuraku-jōdo*) lay to the west, and being reborn into this Pure Land after death became the central purpose of this faith. In Pure Land thought, it was believed that if you prayed towards the setting sun during the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (*ohigan*), you could feel the sensation of passing into the Pure Land. This meditative practice was called "contemplation of the setting sun" (*nissōkan*).¹

Situated atop the Uemachi Plateau, Shitennōji had a grand view of the Inland Sea of Japan to the west. As a result, it was one of the best sites for contemplating the sunset, and people could imagine the scene of Amitabha Buddha (Jpn. Amida)² appearing to carry them back to his

¹ "Nissōkan" is the first of 16 contemplative practices outlined in the Pure Land *Sutra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*.

² One of the main Buddhas associated with Pure Land thought.

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Pure Land. Because of this, the West Gate of Shitennōji came to be regarded as the Eastern Gate of the Pure Land, and many people, nobles and commoners alike, made pilgrimages there. The area to the front of Shitennōji's western gate developed into a town, most likely due to the influence of this faith surrounding the West Gate.

Excavation has revealed traces of buildings and human life on the western side of Shitennōji that have been dated from 13th century. Furthermore, many splendid buildings are pictured on the western side of Shitennōji's West Gate in the *Illustrated Biography of the Priest Ippen (Ippen Shōnin Eden)*³, which depicts scenery from the 13th century. These are presumed to have been the homes of Shitennōji's influential monks. There was probably additional housing for monks and laypeople serving Shitennōji as well. The *Illustrated Biography* also depicts the bustle of the market to the south of the West Gate during this time *Ōsaka no burakushi* (2005).

The *Illustrated Biography* also shows many beggars residing outside the southern walls of Shitennōji. Historical sources from the 13th century further note that a large number of "ill people," perhaps those suffering from Hansen's disease, lived at the West Gate. In 1275, the monk Eison from the Ritsu sect of Buddhism conducted relief measures for the "beggars" (*hinin*, beggars comprising the lowest rank of the status system) at Shitennōji. The sick and destitute most likely gathered at Shitennōji in hopes of receiving alms from the many people who made pilgrimages there: at this time, the temple had become the center of faith for Shōtoku Taishi, which drew many people from around the country. Relief work centering on the West Gate of Shitennōji continued even after the 13th century. Several factors perhaps motivated these people to help the sick and destitute who asked for financial assistance. For instance, by giving alms in such a place, these religious figures were attempting to heighten the religious significance of their sects. Stories in sermons (*sekkyō*), for example, were also a motivating factor. Tales such as that of Shuntokumaru (also known as Shintokumaru), who fell ill, became blind, was reduced to begging, and eventually wandered into Shitennōji where he was revived by alms, became widely circulated among the public from the 15th century.

Shitennōji's gate town continued to grow. *The Residences of Seven Thousand Households (Nanaseken no zaisho*, from around 1499), an historical source about Shitennōji's gate town, indicates that it was an extremely developed area. Not only did residents from the surrounding agricultural village gather there for commerce, but articles that had been unloaded at the ports of Kizu and Watanabe (discussed below) were also traded here; it is likely it was a large-scale market *Shinshū Ōsakashishi* (2005,2009).

The road heading west from the West Gate of Shitennōji descended the plateau, passed in front of the shrine Imamiya-jinja and reached the port of Kizu. In Imamiya, there was a community of people called *kugonin*⁴. *Kugonin* were affiliated with the Gion-shashrine in Kyoto, and in return for supplying seafood to the Gion-sha, were given the special privilege to move freely throughout the country. Thus, they became merchants, conducting commercial activities and

dealing in various products. A gate town formed at Imamiya-jinja, where *kugonin* and other merchants resided.

The port of Kizu was a fishing and commercial port. A considerable amount of clam shells dating from the Kamakura period (1185–1333) have been found in the remains of the district in front of Shitennōji's gate. Because there were too many to have been consumed only in the Shitennōji district, scholars speculate that some sort of processing was done there, after which they were shipped to the Kyoto and Nara regions. These clams were likely harvested in Osaka Bay and unloaded at the port of Kizu.

Kizu was also the outer port for Shitennōji and Imamiya-jinja. Articles for trade, as well as produce from the surrounding agricultural villages, were brought to the shore market affiliated with Shitennōji (*Shitennōji hama-ichi*). Scholars speculate that this shore market was held in Kizu, and it is known to have been a center for distribution. In 1361, an earthquake and a large-scale tsunami struck this region, and records indicate these caused extensive damage.

The Port of Watanabe

In the medieval period, the port town of Watanabe developed in the northwest end of the Uemachi Plateau. The Yodogawa and Yamatogawa Rivers flowed into this region from the north and east, respectively; Osaka Bay was only a few kilometers from Watanabe Port. The Port of Naniwa, the outer port of the capitals Naniwa no miya and Naniwa-kyō, is thought to have been in this location during the classical period.

Traveling upstream on the Yodogawa River from Watanabe Port, along the border of Settsu and Kawashi Provinces, led to Yamashiro Province; Kyoto could be reached by going ashore at Yodo or Fushimi. However, because ships that had sailed through the Inland Sea were too large to simply go upstream on the Yodogawa River, the cargo had to be transferred to a riverboat at a port town. Watanabe Port is believed to have continued to develop as such a junction port along this key route, even after the dissolution of Naniwa-kyō.

However, after the 8th century, the water became shallower at the estuary of the Yodogawa River due to sediment deposits, and upstream travel became difficult: ships from Osaka Bay were no longer able to land in Watanabe Port. This key distribution route, from the Inland Sea to Kyoto, was reworked so that the middle reaches of the Yodogawa River were approached through Amagasaki and the Kan-zakigawa River, which are to the northwest of Watanabe.

Although the main route for the transportation of goods shifted away from Watanabe Port, many travelers continued to use the port there. Travelers who had come downstream on the Yodogawa River from Kyoto disembarked at Watanabe Port and journeyed over land, traveling south from Watanabe Port to Shitennōji, then to Sumiyoshi and Sakai. From Sakai, they were able to embark on a ship sailing along the Inland Sea, or travel towards the Izumi and Kii Provinces over land. Of course, travelers from western Japan or foreign countries traveled along the opposite route.

Watanabe Port was thus a node connecting the Yodogawa River route to Kyoto with the land route along the western side of the Uemachi Plateau from north to south; it continued to develop as a hub through the medieval period.

³ The *Illustrated Biography of the Priest Ippen* was completed in 1299.

⁴ The *kugonin* were groups of people in the medieval period who were charged with or given the privilege of supplying goods to shrines or the imperial court.

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