

Eben: an immigrant priest who transmitted ancient Buddhism to Harima

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Narratives related to Buddhism in *Harima no Kuni Fudoki*

There are very few stories related to Buddhism in *Harima no Kuni Fudoki*, but a priest called Eben¹ who returned to secular life in Harima is written about in *Nihon Shoki* [720], *Gangōji Garan Engi* (hereafter abbreviated to *Gangōji* [747]), and gazetteers of Harima in the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods. While he is not recorded in *Harima Fudoki*, I should like to discuss him as he appears in ancient Japanese history and the tales of Harima, including how he is spoken of, and what kind of role he plays in the foundational stories of Harima's Buddhist temples.

Eben

Eben is known about through several documents and two statues dating from the Heian Period. Among the written sources, it says in *Nihon Shoki* that Soga no Umako sought an ascetic in order to dedicate a Buddhist statue, whereupon he found Eben, a priest from Goguryeo (Korean kingdom) who had returned to life as a layman² in Harima, and he made him re-enter Buddhist orders along with the daughter of Shiba Tatsuto³ and two other girls (entry for 9th month, Bidatsu 13 [584]). A similar account appears in *Gangōji*, in which the elderly monk⁴ Eben from Goguryeo and the elderly nun Hōmyō appear. Then in the Middle Ages there were mentions in *Genkō Shakusho*⁵ and *Mineaiki*.⁶ *Genkō Shakusho* likewise records that Umako found Eben in Harima (Vol. 16, entry for Eben of Goguryeo). In *Mineaiki*, Eben and Esō immigrated from Baekje during the reign of King Kinmei [509–571], were banished to Yano (present-day Aioi-shi) in Harima by Okoshi, the father of Mononobe no Moriya [d. 587], were pardoned and returned to the capital three years later, and were made to resume the priesthood by Moriya. Eben was dubbed Ujirō and Esō, Sajirō, and the pair were locked up in a prison in Noma in Yasuda (present-day Yachiyo-ku, Taka-chō). They were fed only 1 *gō* (180 ml) of millet per day, but in accordance with Buddhist strictures they refused the millet that they were given after noon, and instead chanted sutras. When the prison warden reported this to Moriya, he declared, 'They are chanting magic spells to bewitch me!' and increased the guard on them. Thereafter the pair ceased to speak, which is said to be the origin of the Japanese saying *uji saji mono awazu*, meaning 'silently uncomplaining'. When Moriya was defeated in battle by Umako, they were recalled to the capital and returned to life as monks. A temple was built on the spot where their prison was in Noma, and is still there. Such is the account in *Mineaiki*.

Eben also appears in stories about the foundation of some temples in *Harima Kagami* and *Banyō Banpō Chiebukuro* (hereafter *Chiebukuro*), gazetteers of the Edo period. In the *Harima Kagami* entry for Shikitō-gun and in *Chiebukuro* Vol. 7, it is related that Prince Shōtoku established the compound of Zuiganji Temple (Himeji-shi), where he dedicated a statue of the buddha Yakushi Nyōrai (Bhaisajyaguru) there, and that Eben lived there. In the Tenpyō era [729–749] the priest Gyōki [668–749] made a comeback and his disciple Tokudō [656–?] was made the

1 Translator's note: Korean: Hyepyon.

2 Translator's note: because Buddhism was not yet fully institutionalised in Japan.

3 Translator's note: Ssu-ma Tan-teng, an immigrant from China who took a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha to Japan in 522. According to *Nihon Shoki*, his daughter was aged 12 when Eben received her as a novice nun.

4 Translator's note: *bhiksu*, an ordained Buddhist monk.

5 Translator's note: 30 vols., compiled by Rinzaï Zen priest, Kokan Shiren (1278–1346).

6 Translator's note: Also known as *Hōsōki* and *Bushōki* (1348?).

resident priest, and although Tokudō transferred to the Hasedera Temple (Sakurai-shi), he returned to Zuiganji later.

According to the entry for Kako-gun in *Harima Kagami*, Prince Shōtoku established Kakurinji Temple (Kakogawa-shi) in Kako *Kōri* in Bidatsu 12 (583) as a suitable place for disseminating Buddhist teachings, and invited Eben there; while another version is that Kakurinji was founded by Eben himself.

In the entry for Noma-mura, Yasuda-shō —i.e., Noma Sato, Taka *Kōri*— (present-day Yachiyo-ku, Taka-chō) in *Harima Kagami*, it says that this was where Esō and Eben were exiled in the reign of King Kinmei, while in the entry for Bidatsu 13 in *Nihon Shoki* [584], it records that Umako found the lay priests Eben from Goguryeo and Esō from Baekje here, that they were sent to the capital, and that Umako had them reenter holy orders in Sushun 1 (588).

In the entry for Kasai-gun in *Harima Kagami* it says that in the *Jikiryaku* (abbreviated temple history) of Okusanji (Kasai-shi), Eben immigrated from Goguryeo in order to proselytise Buddhist teachings, but because Buddhism was not yet widespread in Japan, he became a lay devotee (*upāsaka*), and practised asceticism in this valley. He carved and consecrated a statue of Prince Shōtoku, but nobody prayed to it. Later, when the sage Hōdō flew down to Japan from India⁷ in the reign of Emperor Kōtoku [r. 645–654] and built temples all over Harima, he saw in an auspicious purple cloud that if he entered this valley there would be a statue of Prince Shōtoku in a small hall. While he was praying to it, an old man appeared and told him that if he were to place a statue of Kannon there, he would look after it; then the old man emitted light and disappeared into the valley to the west. Hōdō made a statue of the eleven-headed Kannon [Ekadasamukha], whereupon night after night it glowed and attracted believers to it. The following year, Hakuchi 2 (651), he built a temple compound there in response to an edict of Emperor Kōtoku, and called it Okusanji. It is noteworthy that these tales about Eben appear in temples whose origins and connections are attributed to Prince Shōtoku.

Two carved wooden statues of Eben are extant dating from the Heian Period (see photographs).

At Ankaiji Temple the story has been passed down that it was built on the site of the prison where Eben was incarcerated. Written in ink on the back of the Ankaiji statue are the words ‘Eben, priest from Goguryeo’.

The role of Eben

Eben converted three women to Buddhism according to *Nihon Shoki*. In *Gangōji* he appears with the nun Hōmyō, and it also says that Hōmyō taught those three women Buddhism. The three wished to join holy orders and Soga no Umako permitted them to do so. *Mineaiki* says that Eben and Esō came from Baekje in the reign of King Kinmei [509–571], but they were exiled to Yano, were made to revert to worldly life, and were thrown into the Noma Prison. They maintained Buddhist strictures nevertheless, continued to recite the sutras, and they were allowed to return to the priesthood when Moriya was defeated in battle.

These accounts put Eben as having come to Japan in the reign of Kinmei, the reign before King Bidatsu [538–585]. What is noteworthy about them is that he was made to return to secular life by the Mononobes, but he stuck to Buddhist precepts even in adversity and later returned to priestly activities. The fact that he is said to be the origin of the expression *uji saji mono awazu*, meaning ‘silently uncomplaining’, means that his story was widely known in the Middle Ages. The ‘Yano’ to which Eben was exiled at first is thought to have been Yano in Aioi-shi, and there is a local attribution that the ‘Uryū Rakan’ stone statues⁸ there were carved by Eben (entry for Akō-gun, *Harima Kagami*).

Hōdō is central to tales of the founding of Buddhist temples of the esoteric Tendai sect in Harima, and his achievements are recorded in the passage ‘The ascetic Hōdō’ in Vol. 18 of *Genkō Shakusho*, but a note, ‘*Shami Tokudō sunawachi Hōdō sennin nari*’ (‘The acolyte Tokudō was the ascetic Hōdō’) is inserted in the passage on Hasedera Temple in Vol. 28. Tokudō dedicated the statue of the eleven-headed Kannon in Hasedera, but he is thought to have come from Yatabe in Ibo-gun (present-day Taishi-chō). Kōyū SONODA [1929–2016] believed that Tokudō

⁷ Translator’s note: the myth is that he arrived on a purple cloud.

⁸ Translator’s note: thirty stone statues, including Shakyamuni, Norai (Tathāgata) and Monju (Manjusri) Buddhas, three bodhisattvas, and sixteen *arhats* (highest orders of Buddhist saints). Twenty remain.

was the model for Hōdō. The tales of Hōdō's founding of temples are mostly set around the year Hakuchi 1 (650 CE), but other Tendai temples such as Kakurinji and Zuiganji have different stories of their foundation. In the case of Kakurinji, it was founded by Prince Shōtoku and Eben set it up. In the case of Zuiganji, Prince Shōtoku founded it, and Eben lived there, Gyōki renovated it, and Tokudō lived there after residing at Hasedera. Many of the esoteric Shingon sect temples in Harima are said to have been established by Gyōki.

Studies of Buddhist statues to date have found that the majority of those which are the main object of veneration (*honzon*) in temples that claim to have been founded by Hōdō and Gyōki in Harima date from the Heian Period. The founding of these temples is thought actually to date from when their *honzon* was made, so it is inferred that stories claiming their establishment by Hōdō or Gyōki were worked into their 'histories' in order to make them appear older than they really were. Sonoda also demonstrated with regard to the founding of Kiyomizu Temple⁹ in Katō-shi that its origin tale dates from the end of the Heian Period: that the priest Zōmyō of Sūfukuji temple (Ōtsu-shi) built Kiyomizudera and it flourished as a sacred place for the worship of the *bodhisattva* Jizō (Ksitigarbha) (*Konjaku Monogatari*, Vol. 17, Part 7). Sonoda also found that this was replaced by the story that this temple originated when statues of the eleven-headed Kannon and Bishamonten (Vaisaravana) made by Hōdō were dedicated there.

Many of the stories of temples being founded by Hōdō date from around 650. For those such as Kakurinji and Zuiganji to claim to have been founded by Prince Shōtoku, it necessitated the appearance of somebody who had lived about half a century earlier. Eben having been promoted by Umako, it meant that he was an eminently suitable candidate as a priest from more or less the same period as Prince Shōtoku. One story that clearly demonstrates this is that of Okusanji. Eben carved a statue of Prince Shōtoku, and Hōdō made a statue of an eleven-headed Kannon during temple renovations. The *honzon* of Okusanji is indeed a statue of the eleven-headed Kannon dating from the late Heian Period, 139.5 cm in height, and this is attributed to Hōdō. Also, in the (Shōtoku) Taishi Hall of this temple there is a statue dating from the Kamakura Period, 58.2 cm tall, of Prince Shōtoku as a child: a dressed nude statue in which hair has been implanted in his head, dubbed 'Uegami no Taishi' ['Shōtoku with implanted hair']. It is this which is thought to be the statue of Prince Shōtoku made by Eben. There are other 'Uegami no Taishi' statues in Harima, at Kakurinji (82.7 cm) and Ikarugadera (Taishi-chō) (152.1 cm). They are both dressed statues (*kyōyōzō*) of Prince Shōtoku aged sixteen, dating from the Kamakura Period: they are both in a standing posture, depicting undergarments, with the upper torso in a *san* undershirt and the lower torso wearing *ōguchi hakama* (under-trousers). Ikarugadera also claims to have been founded by Prince Shōtoku, and it is thought to have been built before the Kamakura Period in fact, but the story that it was founded by Prince Shōtoku is probably based on the entry for the seventh month of Suiko 14 (606 CE) in *Nihon Shoki*, which says that Empress Suiko granted him one hundred hectares of land in Harima for having expounded and recited the Lion's Roar [Srimaladevi-simhanada] and Lotus [Saddharma-pundarika] Sūtras.

⁹ Translator's note: also known as Ontakesan Banshū Kiyomizudera.