



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.

The port town of Watanabe was on the southern banks of the Yodogawa River, but the Watanabe Tenmangushrine (currently Osaka Tenman-gū Shrine, or Tenma Tenjinja) was located on the opposite bank. The shrine was founded prior to the 9th century, and was the local Shinto deity for the region (the Nakajima region on the northern bank of the Yodogawa) at the time. Because its gate town is believed to have also been a port town on the northern bank of the Yodogawa in the medieval period, it can be said that Watanabe Port developed along both the southern and northern banks of the Yodogawa.

The road running in front of the gates of the Tenman-gū Shrine from Watanabe Port passed through the east side of the Senri Hills from Suita, and merged with the Saigoku Kaidō road near Ibaraki. Moreover, because the Saigoku Kaidō road connected Hyōgo Port (modern day Kobe City) with Kyoto, it can also be said that Watanabe Port was connected to Kyoto by this route.

In the late 13th century, Shunjōbō Chōgen⁵ took note of this advantageous positioning of Watanabe Port. Chōgen was commissioned to rebuild Tōdaiji temple in Nara⁶, and was looking to develop a route to transport the lumber for this reconstruction from Suō Province (modern day Yamaguchi Prefecture) to Nara. He was attempting not only to set a temporary transportation route, but to control a distribution route that would support the economic activity of Tōdaiji over the long term. To this end, Chōgen established centers at all the key points along this distribution route: Watanabe Port was one of these. He constructed a building called Jōdo Hall (the Pure Land Hall) in Watanabe Port, and it is believed that he established branches of Tōdaiji surrounding it. In this way, Watanabe Port came to be not only an economic center but also a religious center for the realization and spread of Pure Land thought.

The exact location of the Jōdo Hall remains unknown, but scholars speculate that it was built on the western slope of the Uemachi Plateau, to the eastern side of Watanabe Port. Not only could Watanabe Port be glimpsed from the Jōdo Hall, but there was also probably a vista opening to Osaka Bay, stretching to the west and toward the Inland Sea. Gazing in the direction of Hyōgo Port, which also became an outpost for Tōdaiji, the viewer could contemplate the setting sun over the sea and sense the Pure Land to the west, as one could at Shitennōji.

The Jōdo Hall existed until the 16th century. Additionally, there were many other temples in Watanabe Port besides the Jōdo Hall throughout the medieval period, as can be seen in the historical record. Excavation data indicate that Watanabe Port maintained its position as an economic center throughout this period due to the influx of Chinese ceramics and porcelain.

In the late medieval period, Watanabe Sanjo⁷ was established. It is believed that the people of the Sanjo took charge of land and water traffic with Watanabe Port as their base.

⁵ Chōgen (1121–1206) was an ascetic monk who was affiliated with Shingon Buddhism but displayed a deep interest in Pure Land thought.

⁶ Tōdaiji was burnt by the forces of the Taira clan in the late 12th century.

⁷ Sanjo refers to an area, sometimes on nodes of transit, the residents of which would be affiliated with a temple, shrine, or elite family and would perform duties related to cleaning or transportation in exchange for an exemption from yearly taxes. The residents of some of these areas came to be discriminated against.

Kumano Kaidō road

The Kumano Kaidō, with its base in Watanabe Port, was a major road that passed through Shitennōji and Sumiyoshi and led towards Sakai. It was the most traveled and the most famous pilgrimage route in Japan during the medieval period.

Devotion to the Kumano Sanzan (the three major temple-shrine complexes of Kumano: Kumano Hongū Taisha, Kumano Hayatama Taisha and Kumano Nachi Taisha), located in the south of Kii Province, gained popularity with the Imperial Family in Kyoto during the 11th century. As part of this faith, pilgrimages by imperial groups that included a few thousand people were undertaken nearly a hundred times. The Kumano Kaidō was thus maintained as a passage for these groups of pilgrims. After the 13th century, the general populace began to make pilgrimages to Kumano as well, and the number of those traveling along the road increased; therefore, it continued to develop into a major road.

Pilgrims to Kumano who had traveled by ship from the direction of Kyoto disembarked at Watanabe Port and traveled on the Kumano Kaidō. *Ōji*, places of worship for those traveling from afar, were set at various places along the Kumano Kaidō; pilgrims traveling to Kumano would stop to pray at each *ōji*. Kubotsu *Ōji* was the first such place at Watanabe Port. The front of Shitennōji's temple gates was the first place that most Kumano pilgrims stayed.

Kumano was not the only destination for pilgrims, however. In the early medieval period, the emperor, his family, and other nobles made pilgrimages to Mt. Kōya in Kii Province (Wakayama Prefecture) as well. Many of these pilgrims, after proceeding to the capital, also traveled over land (i.e. on part of the Kumano Kaidō) from Watanabe Port or by boat from Sumiyoshi, on their way to Mt. Kōya.

Kumano Kaidō, maintained for religious reasons, eventually developed into a key traffic route running through the region. It can be said that the flow of those making pilgrimages to religious institutions not only contributed to road maintenance but to the invigoration of the economy of Uemachi Plateau's northern district, thus spurring urban development.

Osaka (Ishiyama) Honganji's temple compound town

Watanabe Port, which was below the Uemachi Plain to the west, flourished throughout the medieval period. However, following the dissolution of the capitals of Naniwa-no-miya and Naniwa-kyō in the 8th century, the villages in the area lacked large buildings and were sparsely populated. Rennyo⁸, who revived the True Pure Land (Jōdo Shinshū) sect of Buddhism, noted the prominent characteristics of this location, and at the end of the 15th century, he constructed a retreat here. The document where Rennyo first mentioned his retreat is also the first time that the contemporary name of this region, "Osaka," appeared.

Why was this place called "Osaka," which means, "*ooki-nasaka* (large hill)"? There was most likely a sloped road climbing up from the largest city in this region, Watanabe

⁸ Rennyo (1415–1499) was the 8th patriarch of the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism, and is revered as a second founder alongside the original founder, Shinran.

Port, to the Uemachi Plateau. This road may have passed through the plateau to the east and connected to Kawachi Province. It is speculated that this sloped road was called “Osaka,” and the surrounding region was named in connection to it.

In the 16th century, what had been Rennyō’s retreat came to be called Osaka Gobō (a main temple under the control of the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism), and was a gathering point of True Pure Land followers in Settsu and Kawachi Provinces. Residences of monks and followers were built around the Gobō and developed into a city. A characteristic of cities belonging to True Pure Land sect temples was that trade and manufacturing would not take place in front of the gates of the temple, but would form within the temple grounds. More precisely, the neighborhoods surrounding the temple were regarded, according to law, as being within the temple compound. That is why they were called “temple compound towns” or “towns within the temple precincts” (*jinnai-chō*). As a result, safeguards accorded to the temple were applied to the town as well; this is the foundation upon which the town developed, and the basis for its special characteristics.

After the 1530s, Osaka Gobō, at the center of Osaka’s temple compound town, became Honganji, the national head temple of the True Pure Land sect. At the heart of Honganji, in addition to religious facilities such as the Amida Hall, were residential quarters for the sect’s patriarch and monks’ housing. The town developed around this. The temple compound town was encircled by huge earthen walls, with wooden towers constructed at important positions to heighten military protection. It had its own port on the Yodogawa River, and there are records of Chinese ships having entered this port. The entire population of Osaka is estimated to have been between a few thousand and ten thousand people at this time. There were six local communities in the town that each had a certain amount of autonomy. Honganji and its temple compound town on the Uemachi Plateau were called by the name of “Osaka” in the 16th century while the generally well-known name of “Ishiyama” was ascribed to it by later generations.

In addition to those serving Honganji, many craftsmen, merchants, and farmers resided in the town as well. There were also more than a few financiers, innkeepers, and samurai. We know that there were professional castle builders there as well. Due to the pilgrimages made to Honganji by all the followers of the True Pure Land sect across the country, an enormous amount of capital and pedestrian traffic flowed into and out of the temple compound town.

It is said that the True Pure Land sect developed from the Ritsu sect and faith in Shōtoku Taishi in the early medieval period. Many people who were discriminated against in the 16th century are said to have converted to the True Pure Land sect, and such people, including craftsmen and entertainers, lived in Osaka.

About twenty temple compound towns were established in the Osaka Plain in the middle of the 16th century, with Osaka Honganji in the center. These temple compound towns were connected to Honganji’s town through religious faith and the distribution of goods. Furthermore, they had a mutual aid system in case of war.

In fact, one of the characteristics of these temple compound towns was that, in contrast to many cities in Japan

during the medieval period, they had a system of mutual cooperation. However, this was not an alliance amongst equals; rather it was a hierarchical structure with Osaka Honganji at the top. Many of the temple compound towns that developed in the 16th century continued to function as the city center in their respective regions even after the 17th century, and are currently satellite cities of Osaka.

The city, religion and the distribution of goods

As we have explored above, the cities in the Osaka region in the medieval period, and especially those around the Uemachi Plateau, were established and developed in connection to religious faith, the temple, and Buddhist influence.

In the medieval period of Japan, religion influenced not only faith but other aspects of society such as the economy, military, and culture, as well. This was a characteristic shared not only by “Old Buddhism” such as the Tendai and Shingon sects, but also by “New Buddhism” including the Zen, Hokke (Nichiren), and True Pure Land sects. Because of this, large-scale religious institutions attracted large numbers of people that included but was not limited to their followers. As a result, places for the creation of goods and commerce developed, and cities grew around these institutions. Or perhaps the converse was true, and it was religious influence that developed within existing cities where people had gathered.

As also mentioned above, the Osaka region in the medieval period was located at the juncture of the traffic routes connecting the capital of Kyoto, western Japan, the Korean Peninsula, China and the continent, and thus became a hub of commerce, distribution, and cultural interaction. Therefore, various cities were established and religious influence spread throughout.

The fact that the Uemachi Plateau had the topographical conditions to provide a full view of Osaka Bay and the Inland Sea to the west was an important factor in the Osaka region becoming a sacred place. In the medieval period of Japan, there was an especially strong desire to pass into the Pure Land, and it is likely that the religious faith that developed at the West Gate of Shitennojō, Chōgen’s Jōdo Hall, and the Amida Hall at Honganji were born at these places because the geography of these places fostered people’s desires to contemplate the setting sun and sense their passing into the Pure Land.

Just as the Kumano Kaidō passes through such sacred grounds and functions as a pilgrimage route, cities in the Osaka region and the distribution system between these cities during medieval times were characterized by their extremely strong religious color. Moreover, it may be argued that such cooperation between small to mid-size urban networks, which operated across the various religious sects despite differences, is characteristic of the Osaka region in the medieval period.

Holy grounds and cities of religion also had the power to draw those requiring relief, such as the poor or the ill. The lower classes, who worked in transportation, cleaning, funeral services, and entertainment, or those who were sick or physically disabled, gathered in the Osaka area and its peripheries in medieval times, seeking daily

sustenance and hoping for happiness in their future lives. Shitennōji was an especially large national center, and many religious followers are known to have been active in the area.

The unifiers of Japan (Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu) who came forward to claim de facto control over the Osaka region in the late 1560s, valued this area for political and economic reasons, and so they tried to put the cities and their distribution systems under the control of the samurai. The warriors who dominated the ten-year war against Honganji⁹ later built an enormous castle (Osaka Castle) on the ruins of the temple, and developed a sprawling castle town that encompassed Watanabe Port and Shitennōji's gate town.

Under this influence at the end of the 16th century, the cities in the Osaka region changed drastically, signifying the shift from the medieval period to the early modern period.

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