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HANAZAWA, Ayumi. Wooden Buddhist Sculptures from the First Half of the Heian Period at Seisui-ji Temple in Matsushiro-machi, Nagano City

The Kannon Bosatsu and Jizō Bosatsu sculptures (both Important Cultural Properties) at Seisui-ji temple, Matsushiro-machi, Nagano City, are often dated to the first half of the Heian period. Yakushi Nyorai and Shitennō sculptures located at the same temple were also likely created around the same time, and are thought to have been installed with the Kannon and Jizō sculptures soon after their production. This paper will examine the individual characteristics of these sculptures, and will also consider the circumstances of their creation in the first half of the Heian period.

The Kannon Bosatsu and Jizō Bosatsu sculptures share a similar style and appear to have been made in the first half of the Heian period, specifically at the end of the ninth century. The two sculptures are considered to be exemplary works from a period when belief in Hōkō Bosatsu was transmitted to Japan; this belief deified the Kannon/Jizō as a pair and was popular in Tang dynasty China. The Yakushi Nyorai sculpture is also considered to be a work from the same period. It shows an unusual form of a Sakyamuni mudra (hand gesture) and wears robes similar to Yakushi Nyorai images associated with the Tendai sect of Buddhism. It is a three-foot tall standing figure, which indicates that it may be one of Shichi-butsu Yakushi (Seven Buddhas), which are often seen in the Tendai sect. On the other hand, its robe style is also similar to those of Nara period gilt bronze Buddha sculptures, as well as gilt bronze sculptures imported from China. The Shitennō sculptures were produced between the end of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth century. Although the Tamonten sculpture was repaired afterward, its original style is still discernable. There are only six other examples in Japan of Shitennō groupings in which all four sculptures wear helmets, but the fact that all of them were made in rural areas in the Heian period is noteworthy.

In northern Nagano Prefecture where Seisui-ji temple is located, there is a temple called Zenko-ji which traditionally dates back to the seventh century. There are several Chinese gilt bronze Buddha sculptures in the surrounding area, and many of them show affinities with sculptures from Southern Dynasty China. It is likely that the drapery styles of the Yakushi Nyorai and Kannon Bosatsu sculptures are somehow related to these ancient gilt bronze images because the northern part of Nagano Prefecture had a strong relationship with mainland China via Korean Peninsula in the ancient period.

Life-sized Kannon and Jizō sculptures, triads including them as attendants, or groupings that include them with Shitennō and Shichi-butsu Yakushi were produced extensively in the northern part of Nagano Prefecture from the end of the ninth century to the beginning of the tenth. One possible catalyst for this type of sculptural production may have been the Ninna Flood which ravaged the north-eastern part of Nagano Prefecture in the fourth year of Ninna (888) immediately before the period during which the sculptures were constructed. Hōkō Bosatsu is believed to speed recovery from water disasters, and the Shichi-butsu Yakushi is believed to have the power to suppress floods. It is likely that the sculptures at Seisui-ji temple were made in order to bring the disaster under control in an area that was subjected to an unprecedented natural calamity. The four Shitennō sculptures may have been given helmets in order to increase their power against the disaster by reinforcing their strength. Understanding how the features of the Seisui-ji temple sculptures relate to the above issues shed light on the high level of sculpture production in the northern part of Nagano Prefecture. While retaining Nara period stylistic features, these sculptures also show that sculptors were using up-to-date forms and image types that were employed in the early Heian period.

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