

Japan's Asukadera Viewed Through the Lens of the Korean Baekje Kingdom Temple Site of Wangheungsa

Introduction

The founding of Asukadera 飛鳥寺 in 588 was a symbolic event not only because it marked the establishment of Japan's first large-scale Buddhist temple but also because it signaled the beginning of the Asuka 飛鳥 period (538–710), when various systems of thought and new skills were transmitted from the Korean peninsula to Japan along with Buddhism. This became the basis for Japan's growth into an ancient state. In this regard, some scholars describe the foundation of the temple as a symbol of cultural enlightenment comparable to the Meiji Restoration 明治維新 (1868–89) in modern Japan. The importance of Asukadera has led Japanese historians to search for historic sites of the Baekje 百濟 kingdom (18 BCE–660 CE) that might reveal the origins of Asukadera. Although this effort has been underway since the early twentieth century, no satisfactory answers have yet been found.

More than twenty-five temple sites—including those of Jeongnimsa 定林寺 and at Neungsan-ri 陵山里—remain in Buyeo, the ancient capital of the Baekje kingdom. Representative examples include the Neungsan-ri site, Wangheungsa 王興寺, and Mireuksa 彌勒寺 (the last in Iksan) excavated in 1993, 2007, and 2009, respectively. These temple sites have revealed remains of major structures like main halls and wooden pagodas as well as a vast array of important artifacts including *sarira* reliquaries.¹ These archaeological discoveries have made it possible to study Baekje Buddhist temples and their excavated artifacts from a fresh, new perspective. In particular, the inscribed *sarira* reliquaries unearthed from the wooden pagoda remains of Wangheungsa revealed that the temple was built in 577, eleven years prior to the foundation of Asukadera in 588, thus allowing scholars to speculate on the possibility that Wangheungsa, founded by King Wideok 威德 (reigned 554–98), might have inspired or even served as a model for Asukadera.

In this paper, I will introduce recent trends in ancient Buddhist temple research by Korean and Japanese scholars following the excavation of wooden pagoda remains at the Wangheungsa site in Buyeo. Then, I will examine important findings from the

excavation of Wangheungsa including major building remains and *sarira* reliquaries. Lastly, I will compare structural remains and artifacts found at Baekje temple sites including Wangheungsa with those of Asukadera to identify similarities and differences between ancient Buddhist temples of Korea and Japan. By doing this, I hope to elucidate the historical significance and influence of Baekje temples in the study of ancient Buddhist temples in East Asia.

Archaeological Findings of the Wangheungsa Temple Site in Buyeo

The Wangheungsa temple site sits across the Baengma 白馬 River from Sabi 泗沘, the capital city of Baekje. The discovery of Goryeo period concave roof tiles inscribed “Wangheung 王興” confirm the assumption that the site was indeed Wangheungsa, which dates back to the Baekje kingdom. Annual archaeological surveys conducted by the Buyeo National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage since 2000 have revealed the following building sites and remains shown in the temple plan (Figure 1).²

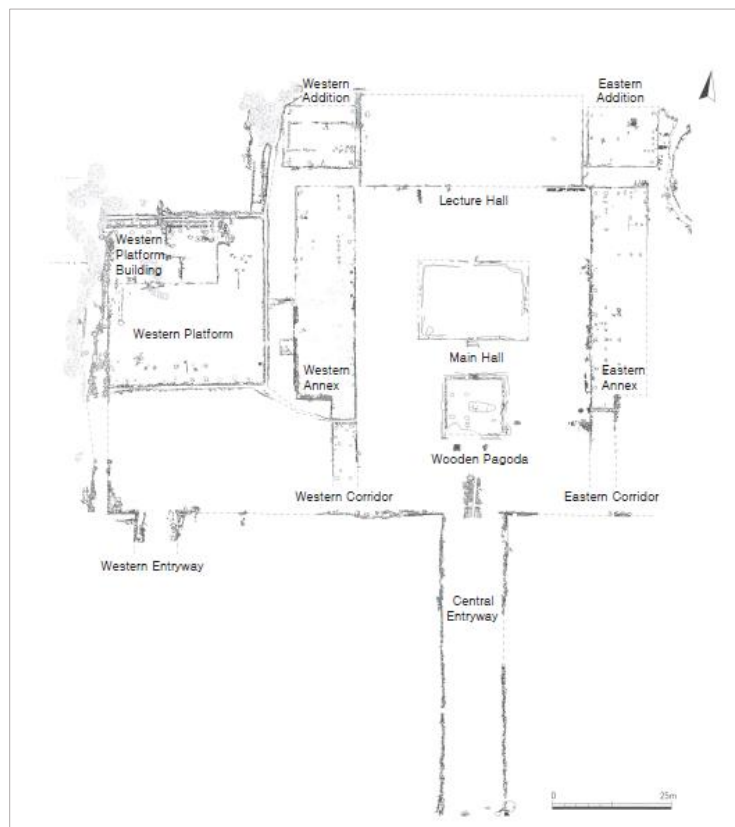


Figure 1. Plan of the Wangheungsa temple site. After Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, *Baekje Wangheungsa: Jeongyu nyeon e Changwang eul dasi mannada* (Seoul: Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, 2017), 43.

The steep slope of the temple site (running from north to south) was leveled with the addition of soil which reaches a maximum thickness of almost sixteen feet. The wooden pagoda is square in plan measuring 40 feet on each side. The rectangular main hall measured almost 75 feet from east to west and almost 55 feet from north to south. The lecture hall is an even larger rectangular building measuring 154 feet from east to west and over 63 feet from north to south. Eastern and western additions are located on either side of the lecture hall and two matching annexes measuring almost 146 feet north-south and 41 feet east-west were constructed north of the eastern and western corridors. These annexes are thought to have been comprised of eight small rooms. A large-scale roof ridge ornament (*chimi* 鴟尾) that is four feet tall was found in the vicinity of the eastern annex. A large platform was built outside the western corridor. A building to the north of the platform measures almost 77 feet east-west and 45 feet north-south; it appears to have been rebuilt twice after its first construction. To the south of the platform is a building with eleven bays that measures 9.5 feet north-south and almost 105 feet east-west.

Roof tiles ends produced at the time of the temple's foundation can be assigned to two general types by the design of the lotus petals. Type A has triangular or heart-shaped lotus petals around the edge and joins a convex roof tile that lacks an extension at the back. Type B has a raised circular dot at the tip of the lotus petals and is attached to a convex tile that has an extension at the back. The discovery of sixteen roof tile kilns about 500 feet east of the temple complex indicates that roof tiles were produced near the temple.

A foundation stone was found twenty inches below ground at the center of the wooden pagoda site.³ An opening in the middle of the southern side of the foundation stone held a nested series of gold, silver, and bronze *sarira* reliquary containers beneath a cover (Figure 2). No *sarira* was discovered inside. The surface of the bronze reliquary bears an inscription reading "On the fifteenth day of the second [lunar] month of the *jeongyu* year [577], King Chang of Baekje founded a temple for the deceased prince. The two *sarira* that were first buried miraculously became three 丁酉年二月 十五日百濟 王昌爲亡王 子立刹本舍 刹二枚葬時 神化爲三."



Figure 2. Gold, silver and bronze *sarira* reliquaries excavated from the wooden pagoda remains at the Wangheungsa temple site. After Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, *Baekje Wangheungsa* (Seoul: Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, 2017), 75.



Figure 3. Various jewelries and ornaments excavated from the Wangheungsa temple site. After Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, *Baekje Wangheungsa: Jeongyu nyeon e Changwang eul dasi mannada* (Seoul: Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, 2017), 82–83.

The fifteenth day of the second lunar month marks the day when Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, attained the final enlightenment (*parinirvana*). Two *sarira* turning into three symbolizes their miraculous ability to multiply and suggests the *sarira* enshrined under the wooden pagoda of Wangheungsa represent the Buddha's true body.⁴ More than eight thousand pieces of jewelry and other ornaments discovered around the foundation stone were ritual offerings made by nobles who participated in the ceremony of relic enshrinement (Figure 3). The material and composition of these artifacts are very similar to those unearthed from the tomb of King Muryeong 武寧 (reigned 501–23) in Gongju and the ancient tombs at Neungsan-ri in Buyeo.

The inscription on the reliquary, however, dates twenty-three years earlier than the record from the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk sagi* 三國史記), which states that the construction of the temple began in 600, the second year of King Beop 法王 (reigned 599–600). There has been a dispute over how to account for this discrepancy in date. Some scholars have argued that the two Chinese characters "*ipchal* 立刹" in the inscription—literally meaning "erecting the pillar"—should not be interpreted to mean the construction of the entire temple, just the raising of the central pillar of the wooden pagoda. Using this interpretation, they have suggested that only the wooden pagoda was erected in 577 and the rest of the temple complex including the main hall was completed in 600.

However, investigation of the soil strata of the main temple complex reveals that the platform of the main hall was constructed on the first stratum at the site and the wooden pagoda disturbs the ground level above the stratum of the main hall

platform. This finding shows that the construction of the main hall preceded the wooden pagoda.⁵ In other words, the term “*ipchal*” inscribed on the bronze reliquary relates not just to the erection of the pagoda but rather to the construction of the entire temple complex.

Another explanation offered to resolve this discrepancy in date rests on the notion that the temple named “Wangheungsa” mentioned in the *Samguk sagi* actually refers to Mireuksa in Iksan rather than the temple in Buyeo.⁶ To support this argument, researchers note that entries regarding Wangheungsa and Mireuksa in the historical records are often muddled. Second, it is possible that the name “Wangheung” could have been used like a common noun to refer to any Buddhist temple and needn’t name a particular temple. Archaeological findings at the Mireuksa temple site show that the temple’s period of construction indeed conforms closely to that recorded for the “Wangheungsa” in the *Samguk sagi*. This argument, however, has its limitations. No navigable waterways are found in the vicinity of Mireuksa that could corroborate a written entry in the *Samguk sagi* that states a king visited Wangheungsa by boat. Nevertheless, primary historical materials along with unearthed artifacts clearly suggest that the Wangheungsa temple site in Buyeo was a royal-sponsored temple of the Baekje kingdom built in 577.

A Comparison of Baekje Buddhist Temples and Asukadera

The construction of Asukadera, Japan’s first large-scale Buddhist temple, began in 588 when several craftsmen along with high-ranking officials and Buddhist monks were sent to Japan from the Baekje kingdom. Historical records such as the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon shoki* 日本書紀) document that Baekje artisans and craftsmen in timber construction, metalworking, roof tile making, and painting came to Japan. In fact, the structural remains and artifacts unearthed at Asukadera show close affinities with Baekje Buddhist temples. For example, the foundations of the wooden pagoda and the three main halls at Asukadera were constructed using the rammed earth technique. Known as *panchuk* 版築 in Korea, this technique was used to improve soft ground by layering materials with different properties including earth and sand and compressing the layers by pounding them with wooden poles. Scholars in Korea and Japan agree that it shows influence from Baekje.

The central hall of Asukadera was built on a platform constructed with carefully cut stones ornamented with designs simulating wooden post and beam constructions.

Conversely, the platforms of the eastern and western halls were faced with natural stones placed in a more random fashion. Interestingly, small foundation stones were placed above the lower tier of the platform for the eastern and western halls. Among the Baekje Buddhist temple sites, the use of cut stone platforms can be found at the main hall and the wooden pagoda at the Neungsan-ri temple site. Two-tiered platforms with small foundation stones placed on the lower tier, however, can be found among the remains of the main hall at Jeongnimsa and the temple site at Gunsu-ri 軍守里.



Figure 4. Precious objects unearthed from the wooden pagoda remains of Asukadera. After Nara bunkazai kenkyūjo Asuka shiryōkan, *Asukadera 2013* (Osaka: Nara bunkazai kenkyūjo Asuka shiryōkan, 2013), 2.

A wide variety of foundations and methods of supporting the central pillar of wooden pagodas have been discovered at ancient Japanese temple sites. The methods of installing foundation stones have evolved from burying them deeply below the ground, to half-burying them, and ultimately setting them at ground level.⁷ Elements that resemble Baekje practices include the method of burying the foundation stone for wooden pagodas underground, hollowing out the foundation stone to enshrine *sarira*, and using a lid to cover the square cavity. The composition of jewelry and ornaments such as glass beads, jades, and gold and silver objects that have been unearthed from the remains of the wooden pagodas at Wangheungsa and Asukadera also show very close relationships. In the case of the glass beads, even their chemical composition is identical (Figure 4).⁸

The roof tiles produced at the time Asukadera was established attest to the involvement of Baekje tile-makers in the temple's construction. These roof tiles can be assigned to two general types by the design of the lotus petals: One is the *hanagumi* 花組 or "flower group" with heart-shaped lotus petals, and the other is the *hoshigumi* 星組 or "star group" with raised dots at the tips of the lotus petals. These two types of roof tiles were attached to different types of convex tiles and used in different buildings. It is noteworthy that roof tiles associated with the founding of Wangheungsa bear a close resemblance to those of Asukadera both in terms of design and the ways they join the convex tiles, clearly demonstrating Baekje influence.

The temple layout of Asukadera is different from Baekje temples since it features a central wooden pagoda surrounded by three halls to the north, west, and east. This is known as the “one-pagoda-three-hall style” (Figure 5). Since this type of temple plan is only found at Goguryeo temples—like the remains at Cheongam-ri 淸岩里—the layout of Asukadera is widely believed to have been influenced by Goguryeo.⁹ However, it is difficult to find other similarities linked to Goguryeo temples besides the arrangement of halls. Further, the pagoda of Asukadera has a square ground plan which is different from the octagonal ground plan commonly found in Goguryeo examples.

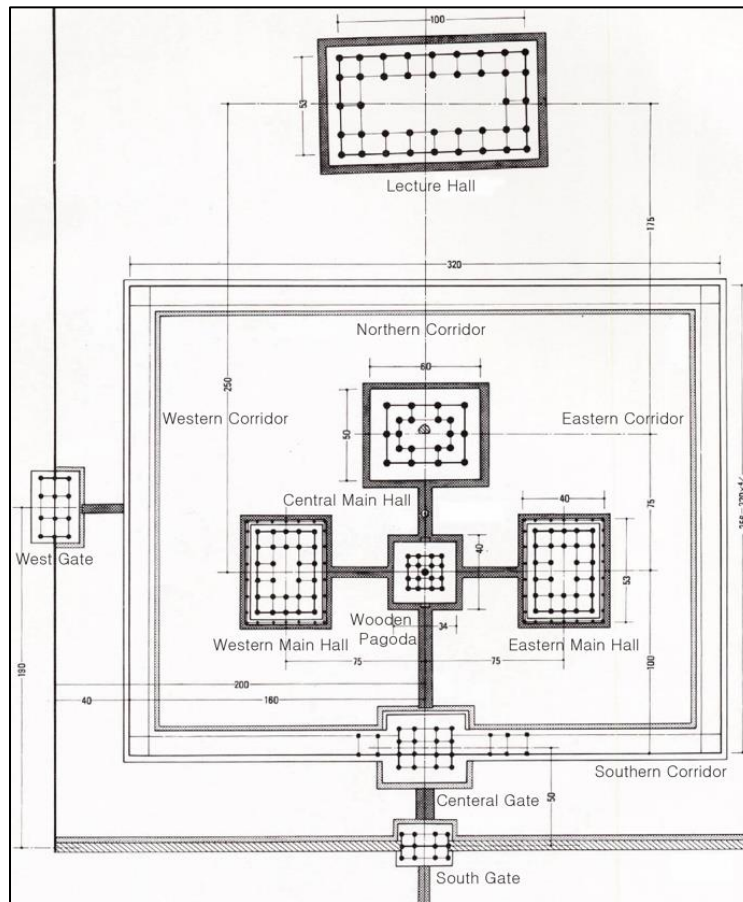


Figure 5. Plan of Asukadera. After Nara bunkazai kenkyūjo Asuka shiryōkan, *Asukadera* 2013 (Osaka: Nara bunkazai kenkyūjo Asuka shiryōkan, 2013), 18.

Several explanations have been presented to account for this. Some have suggested that the three halls might have been constructed at two distinct times, while others have proposed that Baekje culture mixed with influences from Goguryeo might have spread to Japan. Still, others have suggested that a similar temple layout with three

main halls might one day be discovered within the territory of the Baekje kingdom. Most recently, the Japanese scholar Sagawa Masatoshi has argued that the two annexes located north of the eastern and western corridors at the Wangheungsa temple site might have inspired the eastern and western halls at Asukadera in Japan.¹⁰

Sagawa's argument that a Baekje model influenced the eastern and western halls at Asukadera has caused a great stir in the scholarly world. However, annexes commonly found in Baekje Buddhist temple sites should be seen as monks' quarters associated with administrative functions for monks (*seungbang* 僧房) as these structures consisted of multiple rooms and have an elongated rectangular ground plan that is placed off the central axis.¹¹ The excavation of wooden tablets from the southern end of the central gate of the temple site at Neungsan-ri, the analysis of writings on the tablets, and the design of monks' quarters unearthed at the Mireuksa temple site all support this argument.

Around the time when Baekje transferred its capital to Sabi in 538, influence of Goguryeo material culture became increasingly prominent in the Buyeo kingdom, as demonstrated by the discovery of Goguryeo-style earthenware, roof tiles, metal craftworks, *ondol* 溫突 (traditional underfloor heating system), and murals depicting the four guardian deities. Moreover, new elements such as a multicomponent temple layout can be identified at the temple sites of Gunsu-ri and Wangheungsa, both of which were built in the mid- to late sixth century. Taking these into account, even if the temple plan with three halls comparable to Asukadera has not been discovered in Baekje temples, it is more plausible to think that this type of layout was introduced to Japan through Baekje following its assimilation of Goguryeo elements rather than regarding the three halls as the only element that was directly influenced by Goguryeo.¹² Thus, Asukadera should be considered to have been completed by an organized team of craftsmen from the Baekje kingdom from its inception.

Conclusion

Among Baekje kingdom Buddhist temples known to date, Wangheungsa, founded in the year 557, is closest in date to Asukadera, where construction began in 588. Thus, similarities between the two temples may come as no surprise. We may wonder, however, why the Baekje kingdom sent artisans and craftsmen to support the construction of Buddhist temples in Japan at the time. It can be easily discerned that

Baekje must have introduced architectural technology to Japan not simply because of good-hearted diplomacy but because of certain benefits that it might bring to the country. By transmitting the knowledge and skills of temple construction, the Baekje kingdom must have sought to strengthen its diplomatic influence in Japan through Buddhism against the backdrop of mid- to late sixth century political changes in East Asia, including the rise of the Silla kingdom and the establishment of the Sui dynasty in China.

Notes

- ¹ National Museum of Korea, *Baekje Historic Areas of World Heritage* (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2020), 126–77.
- ² Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, *Wangheungsa ji* 王興寺址 [Wangheungsa Temple Site], vols. 3–7 (Seoul: Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, 2009–2016).
- ³ Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, *Wangheungsa ji* 王興寺址 [Wangheungsa Temple Site], vol. 3 (Seoul: Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, 2009), 44–98.
- ⁴ Ju Gyeongmi (Joo Kyeongmi) 주경미, “Baekje Wangheungsa ji chulto sari jangeomgu wa 6 segi dong asia bulgyo munhwa 百濟 王興寺址 出土 舍利莊嚴具와 6세기 동아시아 불교문화 [Buddhist Reliquary Set from the Wangheungsa Temple Site in Baekje and its Cultural Relation to East Asian Buddhism in the Sixth Century],” *Baekje yeongu* 百濟研究 67 (2018): 64–66.
- ⁵ Gungnip Buyeo munhwajae yeonguso, *Baekje Wangheungsa: Jeongyu nyeon e Changwang eul dasi mannada* 백제 왕흥사: 정유년에 창왕을 다시 만나다 [Baekje Wangheungsa Temple: To Meet King Chang in the Year of Rooster Jeongyu] (Buyeo: 2017), 66–67.
- ⁶ Choe Yeonsik (Choe Yeonshik) 최윤식, “Mireuksa changgeon ui yeoksa jeok baegyeong 彌勒寺 創建의 歴史的 背景 [On the Historical Background of the Foundation of Mireuksa],” *Hanguksa yeongu* 韓國史研究 159 (2012): 5–9.
- ⁷ Sagawa Masatoshi 佐川正敏, “Ōkōji to Asukadera no garan haichi, mokutō shinso secchi, shari hōan no keishiki to keifu 王興寺と飛鳥寺の伽藍配置・木塔心礎設置・舍利奉安の形式と系譜,” in *Kodai Higashi Ajia no Bukkyō to ōken: Ōkōji kara Asukadera e* 古代東アジアの佛教と王權: 王興寺から飛鳥寺へ (Tōkyō: Bensei Shuppan, 2010), 168–70.
- ⁸ Nara bunkazai kenkyūjo Asuka shiryōkan 奈良文化財研究所飛鳥資料館, *Asukadera 2013*

飛鳥寺二〇十三 (Osaka: Nara bunkazai kenkyūjo Asuka shiryōkan, 2013), 32.

⁹ Nara kokuritsu bunkazai kenkyūjo 奈良國立文化財研究所, *Asukadera hakkutsu chōsa hōkoku* 飛鳥寺發掘調査報告 (Kyoto: Shinyosha, 1958), 39.

¹⁰ Sagawa, "Ōkōji to Asukadera," 163–64.

¹¹ Lee Byeongho (Lee Byongho) 이병호, *Baekje bulgyo sawon ui seongnip gwa jeongae* 백제 불교 사원의 성립과 전개 [A Study of Buddhist Temples in the Baekje Kingdom] (Seoul: Sahoe pyeongnon, 2014), 98–100.

¹² Lee Byeongho (Lee Byongho) 이병호, *Kudara jiin no tenkai to kodai Nihon* 百濟寺院の展開と古代日本 (Tokyo: Hanawashobō, 2015), 198–201.

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