Study on Documents Stored in Buddhist Temples

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This paper looks at documents stored with some intention in the main sanctuary or other sanctuaries of Buddhist temples in the Middle Ages —— hereafter called “documents stored in Buddhist temples”. The author examines the principles and actual situation of the secure storage of documents in temples, by tracing examples of storage mainly in Eizanji, Kōyasan, and Kongōji temples, with regard to conditions of storage, types and functions of the stored documents, and their relation with documents stored in warehouses.

Various types of Buddhist sanctuaries, such as the Mieidō and the main sanctuary, were used for the storage of documents. The Mieidō, in particular, contain an abundance of historical information, and commonly held an important position in many temples. The reason many documents were stored in Buddhist sanctuaries was that these buildings were appropriate for the storage and accurate transmission of documentary evidence regarding rights, in case of confrontation between opposing groups of Buddhist priests, or disputes with various influential powers outside the temple. It seems that the Mieidō, which is dedicated to the founder of the temple or the sect, was particularly chosen for the storage of documents because a higher power than secular powers was entrusted with the storage of documents. However, this system can be said to have been a false system, which was established on the assumption of the assistance of a fictional higher authority. This idea has something in common with the legal principles behind the prohibition of the misuse of “Buddhist objects” as stated by Mr. Kasamatsu Hiroshi. Behind this principle, the validity of the documents stored in the Buddhist sanctuaries was assured only when a control system in line with real conditions was perfected, that is, letters of dedication, such as the Goshuin-engi of Kōyasan, accounting procedures determined by a meeting of ten, the addition of a phrase indicating that the documents were stored in the Mieidō, etc. Furthermore, a method of spreading risk, such as storing a draft in the main hall in addition to the original document in the Mieidō, must have been devised for greater assurance. In other words, actual interests and powers cannot have been countered by only principles or a false system. It should be further noted that the documents stored in Buddhist sanctuaries were principally limited to official documents and manor documents, those are directly related to the temples' rights and interests, documents on Buddhist meetings were not stored there, and annual land tax was stored in other storehouses. In this way, storage facilities in temples were distinguished according to purpose.

The storage of documents in Buddhist sanctuaries was really a phenomenon which directly reflected the organizational structure of the temples in the Middle Ages.