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The Hokkeji Nuns, Relic Worship, and Theft in Medieval Japan

This article examines Buddhist relic worship (*shari shinkô* 舎利信仰) associated with the Nara-based nunnery Hokkeji 法華寺 and the Shingon Ritsu 真言律 monk Eison 叡尊上人 (1201–1290). It does so by examining stories about and notions of relic worship related to the Hokkeji nuns. In the process, this inquiry seeks to answer a number of questions surrounding this subject. If, according to the temple origin narratives (*engi* 縁起), the Hokkeji nuns possessed so many relics, what became of them? And, why are there no clear extant reliquaries associated with the nunnery today? Eison's arrival at Hokkeji engendered a shift in the tales regarding the convent's relics. Soon after, its relics began to be distributed and lent outside of the convent. Such transactions had not taken place before Eison's arrival and, according to the *Hokkeji shari engi* 法華寺舎利縁起, were said to have been explicitly opposed by the nunnery's founder, Empress Kômyô 光明皇后 (701–760). This paper seeks to draw attention not only to these *engi* stories and the relationship between the nuns, their relics, and Eison, but also to explore, through these chronicles and narratives, the ultimate destination of the relics. The recent discovery of reliquaries in Hokkeji's thirteenth century Monju Bosatsu 文殊菩薩 (Skr. Mañjuśrî Bodhisattva) sculpture might start to help us answer such questions.

Keywords: relic worship – Hokkeji nuns – Eison – theft – Nara Buddhism

Framing the Hokkeji Relics

Buddhist relic (Jp. *shari* 舎利; Skr. *śarīra*)[1] worship is evident in Japan from the Asuka period (592–628) onward. In the Nara era (710–794), relics were used to protect the realm through temple-related Buddhist ceremonies. While the Heian

1. *Śarîra* (or *shari*) is often defined as the "bone" found in the Buddha's cremation fire. John Strong notes that according to the Pali tradition, nothing was left after the Buddha's body burned except for *Śarîra*. Although some scholars, such as Maurice Walshe and C.A.F. Rhys. Davids, translate *Śarîra* as "bones," Buddhaghosa writes that these were "jasmine buds, washed pearls, and nuggets of gold," which came in three

period (794–1185), in contrast, was marked by court rituals involving relics, especially relics of known pedigree that were brought back from Tang China by eminent Japanese scholar-monks, such as Ganjin 鑑真 (688–763), Kûkai 空海 (774–835), Engyô 円行 (852–799), Ennin 円仁 (794–864), and others. By the late Heian, relics, bodily remains of the "special dead" (i.e., saints and Buddhas), granted worshippers access to the Buddha at a time when his body and teachings were increasingly distant (*mappô* 末法).[2] In the Kamakura era (1185–1333), the belief in *mappô* led to an interest in the renewal of old systems of thought, such as the revival of the Buddhist precepts (*kairitsu* 戒律) and Śâkyamuni worship (*Shaka shinkô* 釈迦信仰). This came hand-in-hand with an increase in the worship of the bones, the relics, of the historical Buddha Sâkyamuni (c. 563–483 BC).

Materially, the popularization of relic worship resulted in a climb in *stûpa* construction projects, both small and large, at Nara temples such as Saidaiji 西大寺 and Tôshôdaiji 唐招提寺. Such *stûpa* included relic *stûpa*, five-ringed towers, treasure towers, flaming jeweled *stûpa*, and relic cabinets. In tandem with the construction of these objects and architectures, stories about and relic worship involving these relic mounds became increasingly popular. Possessing relics or *stûpa* allowed Buddhist monks as well as nuns (e.g., the elite nuns of Hokkeji) to prove their lineage and proximity to the Buddha and to his teachings far after his physical body had left this world. Keeping this in mind, let us turn to relic worship in the Kamakura era and relic worship at Hokkeji in particular.

The relics that are the focus of this paper appear more like crystal shards or jewel-like beads, rather than bone or ash. As John Strong points out in regard to bodily relics, a distinction came to be made between relics that were the actual physical remains of the body (bits of bone, fingernails, hair, or dried blood), and "transmogrified somatic substances" that could be as "small as mustard seeds and appear as jewel-like beads" (Strong 2004, 10).[3] This second type, central to this

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sizes (that of mustard seeds, broken grains of rice, and split green peas). In this way, these *Śarîra* seem to have been more like relic-beads or even jewels. See, for instance, Davids 1899–1924; Strong 2004: 117; and, Walshe 1987.

2. "Special dead" is a term used to refer to the sacred dead, such as saints, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. It does not apply to laypersons, the ordinary dead, who do not leave behind relics to be worshipped. The term "special dead" is borrowed from Peter Brown. See Brown 1981, 69; also, see Strong 2004, 12. In regard to *mappō*, this refers to the age of the degeneration of the Buddha's law. An age which many believed they had reached by the late Heian period.
3. This second type of bodily relic is often found in the ashes of cremation fires in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors.

study, came to be associated with wish-granting jewels (Skr. *cintâmaṇi*) in the East Asian context (Ruppert 1997). The majority of the Hokkeji relics, which were said to have multiplied from a single relic brought back from China, are bead-like crystal shards. These relics, believed to have magically appeared in the presence of the convent's nuns, were not brought from China; rather, they were unique to Japan. Often, they were made of translucent glass or crystal and crafted in the shapes and colors of small pebbles. According to relic narratives, these relics magically manifested at certain temples, shrines, or in front of given courtiers.[4] The phenomenon of relics magically manifesting, repeatedly, in the thousands at a given temple or shrine is fairly distinct to these Hokkeji relic narratives.[5]

Accordingly, this study builds on previous work on Hokkeji in an effort to explore why certain relics were believed to have miraculously emerged at this convent in the thirteenth century. It pursues the question of why there are no known verifiable reliquaries at the convent today that contain traces of Hokkeji relics.[6] By looking closely at Kamakura era chronicles, origin tales (*engi*), and annuals about Eison's life—including the *Hokkeji shari engi* 法華寺舎利縁起 and Eison's biography, the *Kongô busshi Eison kanjin gakushôki* 金剛仏子叡尊感身学正記 (hereafter, *Kanjin gakushôki*)—we can start to uncover the roles that relics played in these texts in regard to the Hokkeji nuns and, based on these stories and their associated reliquaries, suggest where these relics might have gone as well as the power dynamics behind their relocations.[7]

That being the case, this paper focuses on *engi*: a medieval Japanese document genre comprised of historical claims about the past that can be used, according to many scholars, to explain contemporaneous developments. *Engi* can be read

4. See, for example, *Hokkeji shari engi*.
5. I argue that although there are stories throughout Asia of Buddhist relics appearing during a sacred person's lifetime, from their hands, eyes, hair, sweat, mat, clothing, brush, and so on, the notion of relics appearing repeatedly in vast numbers at one site is fairly unique to these stories.
6. In the summer of 2018, the convent discovered relics in its Monju Bosatsu sculpture, but the sculpture has not yet been opened for inspection, so little to nothing is known about their origins. I will discuss this in more detail below.
7. *Kanjin gakushôki* is a record of the annual accounts of Eison's life, written by Eison. Translations of primary texts given in this paper are the author's. When I have consulted secondary sources in Japanese on the content or meaning of a passage, I have noted this in a footnote. For more on Eison's autobiography, see, for example, Groner 2001; Hosokawa 1999.

as historical texts in that they are instrumental in restructuring the spatial and temporal *imaginare* of the time in which they were created (Kawasaki 2015: 133). By examining such texts by Eison and his followers, I am interested in understanding the role that the nuns and their relics played in these *engi*, and, to a slightly lesser extent, in *engi* written by the nuns (e.g., the 1304 *Hokke metsuzaiji engi* 法華滅罪寺縁起 by the nun Enkyô 円鏡), to better understand relic worship at this site. Accordingly, this paper focuses less on the Hokkeji nuns per se, and more on the relics that they possessed and the power attributed to those relics.

To date, scholarship on the Hokkeji relics has focused primarily on Eison and the convent's relics, rather than on the nuns and their direct relationship to those relics (Hosokawa 1999; Kageyama 1986; Matsuo 2004).[8] This paper attempts to explore the relationship between the nuns and their relics, while expanding on past scholarship.[9] For instance, in her book *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan*, Lori Meeks argues that the agency of the elite nuns of Hokkeji was multivalent. Meeks explains that although "it is never clear that the women of Hokkeji consciously resisted or subverted androcentric Buddhist discourse," they did ignore or "talk past" androcentric teachings in certain discursive arenas, and, often, based on their writings, they did not seem to internalize the gender biases presented in Buddhist teachings. Building on Meeks' work, yet focusing primarily on the relationship between the Hokkeji nuns and their relics, we can start to better understand the nuns and relic worship at this site.[10]

With this in mind, I will explore why these relics came to be, to some extent, under the control of Eison's order, and to pursue their current whereabouts as well as the stories behind their enshrinements. To such an end, the following pages will look at two locations in which some of the Hokkeji relics may be enshrined: the first is in Eison's reliquaries; the second, which we cannot yet prove, is in the convent's

8. Matsuo Kenji 松尾剛次, for instance, looks at Eison and his relic faith (Matsuo 1996); Groner closely examines sculptures commissioned by Eison that enshrine objects, such as relics (Groner 2001); Kobayashi Takeshi 小林剛 examines Eison's relic-related and other religious activities (Kobayashi 1983). For a compelling and concise summary of Eison's life, see, for instance, Wajima Yoshio 和島芳男 (Wajima 1999).
9. For a well-researched study on the lineage of gender in the imperial house and in regards to the Fujiwara family 藤原家, see Brian Ruppert 2000. My study differs from Ruppert's in that I am interested primarily in the nuns of Hokkeji, and in what we can learn from the texts (e.g., chronicles and *engi*) and the material objects (e.g., reliquaries and *stûpa*) associated with these relic practices.
10. For one of the few studies in English on relics and nuns in medieval Japan, see "Lineage and Gender in the Economy of Relics," in Ruppert 2000: 192–229.

unopened Monju Bosatsu statue. We know from computerized tomography scans (CT scans) that the statue contains five reliquaries in its head, and, roughly, a total of eleven relic shards in these reliquaries combined. The Eison-related reliquaries and the whereabouts of the convent's other 1,500 plus relics, raises various questions: did Eison exploit the connection that he had to the nuns and their relics? What was the role of relics in these *engi*? What does it mean that the relics and their reliquaries are no longer extant at the convent?

Many of these chronicles show that Eison was proactive in establishing the nuns' order and in bestowing tonsure upon hundreds of men and women of both low and high rank.[11] Eison was, he professed, interested in saving the sentient beings of this world from suffering. As part of his faith, he showed deep interest in the cult of Śākyamuni, seen through his enshrining of relics in statuary as well as in the smaller extant reliquaries of bronze and gold that he commissioned and used in his relic rituals.[12] His autobiography is replete with instances of commissioning and dedicating reliquaries (*stûpa*), as well as his performance of relic rites and ceremonies (e.g., his annual Seven-day New Year Ritual at Saidaiji). These relics and their rites were an invaluable tool for establishing his legitimacy.[13] In these writings, relics are also recorded to have magically appeared, divided and multiplied at shrines, temples, and even in front of important courtiers (for instance, in 1284, relics suddenly appeared at Hokkeji, at Kasuga Grand Shrine 春日大社, and in front of Muromachi Nyoin 室町女院 [b. 1228],[14] Nimuro-in 二室院 [d.u.], and Eison's disciples).[15]

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11. Matsuo Kenji summarizes Eison's activities of bestowing tonsure upon hundreds of people over his lifetime, explaining that Eison conferred the precepts upon 442 *bhikṣuṇī* (or, nuns; Jp. *bikuni* 比丘尼), 100 *śikṣamāṇā* (i.e., nuns who undergo a two-year probationary period before ordainment; Jp. *shikishamana* 式叉摩那), and, 118 *śrāmaṇeri* (female buddhist novices; Jp. *shamini* 沙弥尼). There were six *bhikṣuṇī* who even received the secret esoteric consecration ritual from Eison (*denbô kanjô* 伝法灌頂). As for the laymen and laywomen who received precepts from Eison, they totaled 96,016. See, for instance, Matsuo 1996, 107.
12. A well-known instance of this is the thirteenth century standing Shaka Nyorai statue 釈迦如来立像 at Seiryôji 清凉寺, Kyoto.
13. For more on Eison, see for instance: Groner 2001; Matsuo 1996; *Saidaiji Eison denki shûsei* 1956.
14. Here, Muromachi Nyoin seems to refer to the first imperial daughter of Emperor Go-Horikawa 後堀河天皇 (r. 1221–1232). Muromachi Nyoin entered the Buddhist path at nineteen-years-old. According to Ôtani Yuka 大谷由香, this relic of Muromachi Nyoin was but one of three Buddha tooth relics (*butsuga* 仏牙) in Japan. See Ôtani 2014; and *Saidaiji Eison denki shûsei* 1956.
15. See, for instance, the *Kameyama hôô shinkan* 亀山法皇宸翰: 187–188.

In the case of Hokkeji in particular, these self-manifesting relics became associated with the convent and its nuns, as did the miracles that occurred in the presence of these relics. The nunnery and *engi* about its relics are distinct in that this is, likely, the first recorded example of a sacred site in Japan at which relics magically and repeatedly appeared in mass numbers. There are instances of Eison calling or summoning relics, through ritual and prayer, to other temples that he visited; nevertheless, these were always one-time ritual occurrences and, on each occasion, he had to call forth the given relics. They did not simply appear of their own will. Herein, Hokkeji is a rare, if not a completely individual case. We do not see such stories at other temples from this period, even at other Ritsu institutions.

Such miracles attested to the spiritual attainment of the Hokkeji nuns as well as to the convent itself, further strengthening the convent's power as a religious and a pilgrimage site.[16] It is noteworthy that the majority of these relics magically appeared in front of or split off from a relic that the Hokkeji nun Kûnyo 空如 (b. 1176) had received from Tôji 東寺. This relic was believed to be a bodily relic (i.e., bone relic) of Śâkyamuni.[17] As noted above, the self-manifesting relic that stemmed

16. Stories about miracles occurring when relics are present abound. For example a common trope is the magical appearance of a relic when a great master dies or is cremated. For instance, during the cremation of Lanxi Daolong 蘭渓道隆 (Jp. *Rankei Dôryû*; 1213–1278) of Kenchôji 建長寺, various relics manifested, attesting to the master's level of enlightenment. According to legend, when the smoke from Rankei's cremation pyre came into contact with the nearby leaves of a podocarpus tree, relics of the five colors (*goshoku shari* 五色舎利) formed on the tree. Today, this tree is referred to as "the relic tree." Other such tropes of miraculous *shari* occurrences include light emitting from clouds. Such light can appear in various colors or can simply include the five sacred colors. In other instances, sweet fragrances suddenly fill the air, or flocks of birds appear in the sky. An example of this appears in Eison's death story. According to the *Saidaiji Eison shônin senge no ki narabini tandoku ki* 西大寺叡尊上人遷化之記并嘆徳記, even though Eison's death ceremony was performed on a clear and cloudless day, the people of Nara saw purple clouds appear to the west of Saidaiji (i.e., the direction of the Western Pure Land) and a soft spring wind blew. And, three days after his death, Eison's body looked as if still alive. These supernatural events, and the notion that Eison's body was not corruptible after death, attest to his status as an enlightened being. Once his body was cremated, his bones changed into the five colors and *shari* appeared. Nakao 2001: 133–135; *Kanjin gakushôki*. Regarding Rankei, see *Genkô shakusho* 元亨釈書; Horibe 2010. On Hokkeji as a pilgrimage site and the value of narrative tales hereabouts, see Meeks 2010.
17. In the following pages, I use the word relic to refer to a bodily remain of the "special dead" (e.g., an enlightened being). Relics granted worshippers access to the Buddha in a time when the Buddha's physical body and teachings were increasingly distant (*mappô*).

from this single relic did not come to Japan via China, but, rather, magically manifested on the archipelago.[18]

The popularization of relic worship and stories involving magically multiplying relics were unique to Nara-area religious practices from this period. The distinct reliquary types associated with Nara temples from the Kamakura era illustrate these eclectic variations in relic worship. Such relic worship was central to the teachings and praxis of many of the well-studied Kamakura era Buddhist masters residing in the Nanto region such as Chôgen 重源 (1121–1206), Eison, Jôkei 貞慶 (1155–1213), and Myôe 明恵 (1173–1232). These masters used relics and relic ceremonies as integral parts of their teachings.[19] Possessing a relic from the continent helped to link them to a more idealized Buddhism of the past—to the relic worship of great Nara era and Heian era masters such as Ganjin or Kûkai—through the materiality of a given relic, an object that seems to transcend time and location. Relics helped these teachers to, among other things, establish their traditions, attract followers, and maintain the patronage of certain rulers.

At Hokkeji, relics and relic tales played a similar role, lending special power and legitimacy to the nunnery. They attested to the powers of the nuns and to the nunnery itself. Although there is ample scholarship on these celebrated Nara monks and on their brand of relic worship, less attention has been paid to the relationship between the relics that self-manifested at Hokkeji and the power that the nuns had over these relics. This will be the focus of the following section.

Kûnyo's Self-manifesting Relics

According to *Hokkeji shari engi*, *Kanjin gakushôki*, *Kairyûôji shari kibun* 海竜王寺舎利記文, *Kameyama hôô shinkan* 亀山法皇宸翰, and other such chronicles and *engi* about the nunnery's relics, Eison and his disciples were responsible for the distribution of the Hokkeji relics. A closer reading of these texts suggest, however, that the Hokkeji nuns exercised a noteworthy degree of control over their own relics and that they seemed to possess full control over their relics before Eison came to the convent. In the following pages, we will explore this question of the nuns' possession of their own relics and the question of where these relics went.

By facilitating complex social intercourse, relics are often seen as powerful, animate objects that can establish or organize communities through narrative and ritual, while also allowing direct access to the body of the Buddha.

18. On self-manifesting relics in Japan in the Kamakura era, see Naitô 2001.
19. Instances of this include Eison or Jokei's *Shari kôshiki* 舎利講式 as well as Myôe's *Shiza kôshiki* 四座講式.

In one story in the *Hokkeji shari engi*, the former-princess-turned-nun Kûnyo[20] possessed a relic from Tôji. One day, she wanted to test its authenticity:

> At Nara's Hokkeji, there were Buddha relics. They would repeatedly appear and perform unbelievable miracles; broadly they encouraged the faith of the monks and of the secular. Searching for their origins, there was a nun named Kûnyo[21] who, by nature, was said to be nimble and bright. She was young when she became a nun; she studied esoteric and exoteric teachings; she knew Japanese and Chinese; and, she was admired by all the wise people of the world. In her later years, she respected the original vow (*hongan* 本願) and lived in seclusion in Hokkeji, in a peaceful, quiet room.
>
> She only accumulated practice and theory. Sometimes she was accompanied at the temple by the elderly nun Jizen 慈善 (b. 1187), who was originally the nun's disciple. In order to form karmic ties with the 'Assembly to Meditate on the Name of Śâkyamuni,' they visited Tôshôdaiji. She said to Jizen: "I have some thoughts about the relic that I obtained from Tôji. Let us test its authenticity." She wanted to acquire pure belief. So, she put the relic on a rock, took an iron hammer, and struck it thrice. The relic was not damaged nor ruined. On the fifth strike, it broke asunder, as if it were dust. Each broken piece, one by one, emitted light. At this time, Kûnyo wept in grief and repented. She collected the fragments, and, with faith and respect, she did not deviate from the [way].
>
> She thought of the mother of Shakunen 釈念 who chants to Amida Buddha, received purification and took the name Shuamidabutsu 修阿弥陀仏, and was living in the temple. She frequently sought requests of the relics. The nun's feelings were earnest, honest, and sincere. She offered her one piece of the broken relic.[22] At first

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20. According to the *Kanjin gakushôki*, Kûnyo was a princess. She was the daughter of consort Takamatsu-in 高松院 (d. 1176), granddaughter of the retired Emperor Go-Toba 後鳥羽天皇 (1180–1239). Tanaka Takako 田中貴子 speculates that Kûnyo's mother died when she gave birth to her. Based on the *Distribution of the Tooth Relics into the Eight Grains*, stored at Shôjuraikôji 聖衆来迎寺, Kûnyo's father was the monk Chôken 澄憲 (1126–1203). Thus, Kûnyo was born from an illicit relationship between the two. Tanaka speculates that Kûnyo became a nun after the death of her material aunt, who had acted as her mother. After becoming a nun, Kûnyo first lived at Shôgutei'in. It seems that by the Ninji 仁治 period (1240–1243) she had moved to Hokkeji, where she spent her last years and was known for her zealous relic faith. See Hosokawa 1999b; and Tanaka 1993.
21. The text gives a note here that her preordination name was Hachijôin no Takakura 八条院高倉.
22. Shuamidabutsu's name is not actually mentioned here. Since there is no subject, I have added her name based on an explanation by Hosokawa. Hosokawa 1999b: 36.

> it was tiny and difficult to worship; as a result, Shuamidabutsu mounted it on black paper. After that, gradually, it divided and multiplied, scattered and became two. The nun's son, who chanted Amida's name from time to time, was named Gyôgû 行窮 (13th c.). He frequently made requests for her relics, but did not know why his mother's relics had divided.[23]

There are many parallels between this story and the *Nihon shoki* relic narrative (of which Eison, the author, was likely aware) in which Soga no Umako 蘇我馬子 (d. 626) tries to destroy a relic that has magically manifested. In this story, one of the first stories recorded about relics in Japan, Umako tests a relic that suddenly appeared during a feast to initiate the first Buddhist nuns in Japan. To test the relic's authenticity, he tries to smash it with a hammer and then attempts to sink it in water. When the relic does not break nor sink, Umako's faith is deepened and he has a Buddhist hall constructed in his home on behalf of the relic (*Nihon shoki NKBT*: 68).

In the *Hokkeji shari engi* version of this story, Kûnyo's testing of her own relic is strikingly similar. We see this in the manner in which she physically tests the relic, repeatedly hitting it with a hammer. The *Nihon shoki* story would have likely been familiar to Eison, who later recorded or invented the Hokkeji story, making it a significant allusion for various reasons. First, this is one of the earliest stories about relics and relic worship in Japan. Second, this story involves the first nuns ordained in Japan, and it is in front of these nuns that the first recorded relic in Japan chose to self-manifest. Third, this story is about a relic that appeared suddenly in front of believers, which is precisely the type of relic that frequently self-manifested at Hokkeji. And, fourth, because the enshrining of the *Nihon shoki* relic was said to have led to the "beginning of Buddhism" in Japan, it would have been an ideal story on which to model a relic compilation (*Nihon shoki NKBT*: 68).

As noted above, in the *Hokkeji shari engi* story, after Kûnyo places her relic on a rock, takes an iron hammer, and strikes the relic thrice, the relic emits light. The motif of relics emitting light, which differs here from the *Nihon shoki* story, demonstrates that the relic was real. Since the relic split into pieces it was not its durability, in this instance, but rather the light that it emitted which demonstrated its nature as a sacred object. Much like in the *Shasekishû* 沙石集 story entitled "The Matter of the Person who Wished to Obtain a Buddha Relic" (*Busshari kantoku shitaru hito no koto* 仏舎利感得シタル人事), in which the monk Shorenbô 生蓮房 receives a light-emitting-relic from a mysterious maiden next to Prince Shôtoku's 聖徳太子 (574–622) grave, this relic also attests to its own sacred nature by emitting light in front of a doubting

23. *Hokkeji shari engi*: 159–160.

devotee.[24] The motif of relics emitting light is not uncommon in relic stories; it is often used to signal auspicious occurrences as well as to prove the authenticity of a given relic.[25]

Conveniently, the splitting of the relic in the *Hokkeji shari engi* enabled Kûnyo to gift a shard of her relic to the nun Shuamidabutsu, simultaneously setting a precedent for the convent's relics to split and multiply in the hundreds and, eventually, in the thousands. Through this gifting of the relic, we know that according to these *engi* the nuns Kûnyo and Shuamidabutsu possessed their own relics independent of Eison. This is particularly interesting if we consider that Kûnyo, who possessed the first Hokkeji relic, is believed to have died before Eison started to revive Hokkeji, in Kangen 寛元 3 (1245).[26] Kûnyo's probable death date has been calculated by scholars based on a dream that Jizen—Kûnyo's disciple who played a key role in reviving Hokkeji—had in Kenchô 建長 3 (1251). In Jizen's dream, the voice of Kûnyo asked her to perform the Service of the Sixteen Arhats memorial on Kûnyo's behalf. Based on the record of this dream, Hosokawa Ryôichi 細川涼一 postulates that Kûnyo had died thirteen years prior, in En'ô 延応 1 (1239), since such memorial services are usually held thirteen years after the person's death date (Hosokawa 1999b: 36–37). This would have been six years before Eison came to Hokkeji.

This suggests that the first Hokkeji relics belonged to Kûnyo. Interestingly, Kûnyo is not listed among the first sixteen nuns who took the Great Vow (*taigan* 大願) under Eison, recorded in the *Hokke metsuzaiji engi* (Hosokawa 1999b: 27). Precisely because this text does not include Kûnyo, she seems to have played a far more important role in Hokkeji relic worship than previous scholarship has implied. Kûnyo lived and died at the convent before Eison arrived. Moreover, it was from the lineage of her relic that all of the Hokkeji relics multiplied and appeared, either as a physical splitting of this relic or as a self-manifesting of new relics in the presence of this very relic. Thus, these original relics chose to reside—and to divide—in the presence of these female monastics before Eison and his male followers came to the nunnery. This *engi* indicates that the first Hokkeji relic belonged to Kûnyo, who lived and died at Hokkeji before Eison came to the convent. Perhaps more importantly, it shows that the nuns possessed, gifted, and oversaw their own relics independent of Eison and his disciples. This further highlights the relics' appearance in vast numbers specifically in front of the nuns and at the nunnery. The relics consistently manifested in front of the nuns—Eison was at times present and at times not. Accordingly, I argue that the nuns

24. In this story, Shorenbô is gifted a relic by a deity who has manifested as a maiden. When she first presents the relic to Shorenbô, it emits light. *Shasekishû* 1973.
25. See *Nihon shoki* 2000: 59; also Ruppert 2000; Meeks 2010: 325–326, n. 25.
26. From 1245 onward, the nuns became followers of Eison's precepts (Hosokawa 1999: 26).

had more power over the relics magically manifesting at the convent, and, in turn, over the possession of these relics, than scholarship has hitherto implied.[27]

For instance, the Hokkeji nuns distributed their relics to other shrines and temples (for example, in 1291, Hokkeji lent relics to its neighboring Shingon Ritsu temple Kairyûôji 海竜王寺). This allowed the nuns to further buttress their temple networks in the Nanto region and to disseminate their miraculous relic tales, since relics, which often appear as dust or small pieces of glass, are void of meaning without a narrative. Distributing or lending out their relics afforded the convent a chance to spread the stories attributed to these relics. In one example in the *Hokkeji shari engi* (Fig. 1), relics suddenly appear throughout the temple grounds, further deepening the faith of believers. In this story, Gyôgû, the son of Shuamidabutsu, the nun who was given a relic by Kûnyo, arrives during one of Eison's visits to the nunnery. Gyôgû is carrying a relic that he borrowed from his mother. He appears with the relic before Eison, and in the presence of the nuns and Eison, the relic magically divides and multiplies:

> Together the nuns venerated and gazed at [the relic], and, in an instant, they watched it divide and scatter. The relics were innumerable. Gyôgû collected all of them. Eison was holding his book and about to lecture, but a small relic appeared on the book, and, in the courtyard and on the table [relics] appeared everywhere. Accordingly, Eison ordered the nuns to collect them. They put them into vessels, which the nuns placed into the temple. This was just the beginning. After this, one after another, on their own accord, the [relics] divided and their count doubled day by day. In all, these miracles and auspicious signs were so numerous that they could not all be recorded. When those of intent faith prayed and intoned, like mist, the [relics] arose from their containers and arrived at those who were happily and earnestly beseeching, just like grains of sand appearing before their eyes. Following this, the clergy and laity all bowed their heads in devotion, and many of the [relics] were provisionally distributed to the urban districts of the capital and to the provinces.[28]

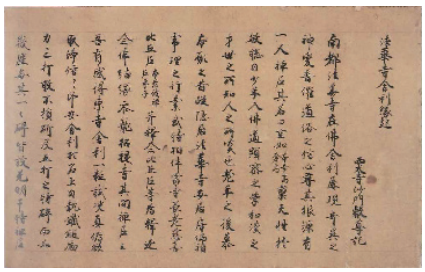

Figure 1.
Hokkeji shari engi. Ink on paper. Dated Kamakura period (13 c.). Hokkeji, Nara.

27. Scholars studying Eison and the Hokkeji relics have often attributed the relics to Eison and have focused on Eison's power over and possession of these relics, while overlooking that the first relics actually belonged to the nuns themselves and not to Eison.
28. *Hokkeji shari engi*: 159.

As indicated in this story, relics have their own free will and are, generally speaking, understood to be animate objects that can choose to manifest before true believers. The mysterious nature of relics, and their ability to appear and to disappear, are not uncommon tropes in relic narratives. In this way, relics attest to the true faith of devotees, or to the given devotee, in front of whom they choose to appear. In the case of Hokkeji, the relics magically manifested without having to be beckoned, but, in other instances, Eison summoned relics through prayer.

Hokkeji Relics and Eison

Eison's chronicles explain that in Kôan 8 (1286), the same year that he received an imperial edict to become the chief administrator (*bettô* 別当) of Tennôji 天王寺, he visited Gochikôin 五智光院. Here, he bestowed the bodhisattva precepts upon 730 people. During his visit to the temple, Eison was told that the Gochikôin relics had been stolen or misplaced:

> On the third day of the fourth month, over 730 people received the bodhisattva precepts at Gochikôin. The next day, [Eison] suddenly heard that the relics enshrined in the golden hall had been lost from the seventh month of the previous year. The whole monastery grieved greatly. Eison decorated the altar and prayed earnestly. Suddenly, the relics appeared, emitting light in the hall. At that time, there were auspicious clouds that surrounded the area and lofty white eagles soared propitiously in the sky. Eison was exceedingly happy. He ordered 1,500 monks to commence a relic ceremony.[29]

Although the text does not explain the reason for the loss of the relics—perhaps it was a theft, perhaps the temple was negligent and the relics were lost, or, perhaps the relics chose to leave—this excerpt shows that Eison had the ability to call back the relics through his ritual powers. This auspicious return of the relics is compounded by the plethora of miracles that ensued. Similar to the *Shasekishû* story mentioned above, and to the *Hokkeji shari engi* instance in which the Tôji relic was struck with a hammer, the Gochikôin relics emitted light throughout the temple hall, attesting to their sacred nature and to their authenticity as the proper relics.

Eison's ability to call back the relics and the auspicious events that accompanied this—clouds and eagles appearing in the sky—confirm Eison's authority as a Buddhist master. In various stories in Eison's chronicles and *engi*, Eison gifts or receives relics, or even calls them back to the temple from which they were missing or had been taken. Yet, the notion of relics magically appearing of their own will,

29. *Kameyama hôô shinkan*: 189.

repeatedly and in vast numbers, seems to occur only in instances when the Hokkeji nuns are present. Accordingly, I argue that such incidents are specific to the nuns and to the convent. Through their splitting, multiplying, and suddenly appearing out of thin air, the relics attest to both the sacredness of this site and to that of the nuns in front of whom they chose to appear.

Moreover, unlike the relics of Gochikôin, the Hokkeji relics did not disappear, nor were they clearly stolen. Rather, they were lent out to other temples, either for a brief period of time or more permanently. For instance, in the previous passage in which relics suddenly divide and scatter throughout the temple grounds, the *engi* notes that many relics were "provisionally distributed to the urban districts of the capital and to the provinces" (*Hokkeji shari engi*: 159). This raises a series of questions. First, why did the nunnery choose to distribute their relics to the urban districts and to the provinces? Was it to strengthen the convent's political and karmic ties with temples in the periphery? Did this help to strengthen the nunnery's networks? Moreover, who decided that the relics should be distributed? The text claims that the relics were *provisionally* distributed. In that case, the relics should eventually have been returned to Hokkeji, or, perhaps even ritually called back by Eison, as he did with the Gochikôin relics. According to these *engi*, however, it appears that the relics were not returned to Hokkeji. When examining Eison's role in telling these stories about the relics, one might ask: were these relics and their reliquaries taken or given away by Eison and his disciples? And why was it overlooked that the first Hokkeji relic belonged to the nun Kûnyo? Or, put differently, why did Eison's relic narratives overshadow the voices of the Hokkeji nuns in these *engi*?

According to the *Hokkeji shari engi*, the convent's relics increased to over 2,000 in the next few decades. The relics were periodically counted and stored in reliquaries by the nuns, such as gold-copper reliquaries, crystal cylinders, and in Hokkeji's eastern pagoda. The *engi* explains:[30]

> In the same year of Kenchô [1254], on the fourth day of the tenth month, the relics totaled 656. These were put into gold-copper reliquaries, which were placed into the *sûtra* storehouse. In Kenchô 7 [1256], on the twenty-second day of the third month, 713 relics were counted. They were moved into crystal cylinders… In Kôchô 2 [1263], on the twenty-second day of the intercalary seventh month, ten relics were selected and separated out. These were placed into the eastern pagoda. In the fourth year of the same era [of Bun'ei 文永, 1268], on the seventeenth day of the first month, the relics totaled 1,000. On this day, they were moved and put into their current crystal cylinders.

30. It was not unusual to annually count relics and to record their numbers as seen in the case of Tôji.

> In the seventh year of Bun'ei [1271], on the twentieth day of the first month, the *saṅgha* together counted the relics and compared their [numbers]. They totaled 2,073. All told, this single fragment of a relic had divided and dispersed within the span of thirty years—it amounted to over 2,000 relics. During this period, according to the fluctuating circumstances, their numbers had varied over time; sometimes they creeped and crawled like insects going back into their plate, and sometimes they were dense like [liquid] dripping from the edge of a spoon.[31] Of the strange [occurrences] in this degenerate age, has there ever been anything like this?[32]

Although this passage shows that the nuns possessed over two thousand relics, which they stored in reliquaries and various containers, there are, as far as we know, few to no reliquaries associated with the nunnery today. There is, however, the recent finding of objects—a handful of which appear to be reliquaries—inside of the convent's Monju Bosatsu sculpture. Nevertheless, the origins of these reliquaries or their relics is unknown. Although I will discuss the implications of this below, for now, I will focus on the reliquaries that are documentable: the extant reliquaries associated with Eison and his male disciples (Fig. 2), some of which contain Hokkeji relics.

According to Eison's biography, as Meeks has noted, the Hokkeji nuns 'begged' Eison to write out the *Hokkeji shari engi*, which suggests that the nuns were interested in publicizing their 'miraculous relic collection' (Meeks 2010, 146). I agree with this assertion, and would like to expand upon it by pointing out that in recording these miraculous relic tales Eison was bolstering his own power, as well as that of his relic faith; a faith that was central to his tradition, even after his death. By asserting that the nuns implored him to record their miraculous relic tales, Eison is putting himself in a position of power and benevolence. He is granting himself access to these magically-appearing relics, while also asserting control over the nuns' relics—objects that they possessed, in part, before his arrival—while simultaneously calling attention to his own bodhisattva-like nature to help others through the ritual use and distribution of relics.

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31. The relics increased and decreased over the years. In another example, in Kenji 1[1275], the relics were counted several times, because something was amiss when they had been counted five years prior. By 1275, the relics totaled 2,063. This included 500 large relics and 1,563 small relics. *Hokkeji shari engi*: 159.
32. Translation by author from the *Hokkeji shari engi*: 162. The term "degenerate age" (or "degenerate world") refers to the concept of *mappô*.

Figure 2.
Gilt-bronze Treasure *Stūpa*. Gilt-bronze.
Saidaiji, Nara. Kamakura era, 1270.

Figure 2-2.
Gilt-bronze *Cintāmaṇi* [Reliquary].
Saidaiji, Nara. Kamakura era, 1270.

Figure 2-3.
Crystal-made *Gorintō*-shaped reliquary, etc. Saidaiji, Nara. Kamakura era, 1270.

By examining the tales and records associated with these relics, we can see that the Hokkeji nuns were granted a considerable amount of sacred power through their possession of the relics, which they oversaw and for which they were, in many ways, responsible. If we reflect broadly on noteworthy relic stories in Japan, it is not surprising that the Hokkeji nuns were closely connected to the magical appearance and oversight of so many relics, since there are many literary and doctrinal examples linking female entities and Buddhist relics in Japan. Generally speaking, this connection between female sentient beings and relics can be seen in the following three categories: 1.) scripture (e.g., the Dragon Woman, Jp. *ryûnyo* 龍女, offering a *cintâmaṇi* up to the Buddha, in the *Lotus Sutra* 法華経); 2.) legend (e.g., the *Nihon ryôiki* 日本霊異記 tale of a relic magically appearing on top of the rice bowl of one of the first nuns ordained in Japan); and 3.) practice (e.g., the relic worship and the miniature-stupa construction projects of the early female Empresses Suiko 推古天皇 [r. 592–628] and Shôtoku 称徳天皇 [r. 749–758; 764–770]).[33]

In this context, it is not unusual that nuns, specifically the elite nuns of Hokkeji, possessed and oversaw thousands of relics. When writing these *engi*, Eison himself would have likely been familiar with many of these narratives that show a strong connection between female sentient beings and relics.

Missing Relics and Symbolic Values

In Japan, the theft of relics was not uncommon. Stories tell of coveted relics being stolen, or disappearing in a dream and reappearing when morning comes. Examples of this include the theft of the Murôji 室生寺 relics by Kûtai 空諦 (d. 1230); the relic stolen from Prince Shôtoku's grave; the Buddha tooth relic that flew from Kyoto to Kamakura on behalf of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 (1358–1408); and, the *Hokkeji shari engi* case in which Gyôgû's relic vanished in the night and returned to his mother, its rightful owner. Although these cases can be conceived of as thefts, there are also instances in which relics deliberately shifted hands. The relics themselves chose a new owner. This is a concept that can be seen as a seduction of the relic by the thief, or as a sacred theft (*furta sacra*).

When relics change residences or owners they are often assigned new symbolic functions. These new functions reflect the values of the people enshrining the relics, as well as the teachings of given groups apropos of the sites themselves. By means of these narratives, relics link these places, people and communities to the Buddha, as well as to the greater world of Buddhism in general (Strong 2004).

33. See Ambros 2015; Ruppert 2000.

Herein, relics were, and are, used to establish the power and to organize the existence of specific social groups, allowing those groups to change the dialectic of a given relic, giving old signs new significance. When adopted by these groups, relics, like other sacred objects, help to create identity, guarantee political protection and economic stability, establish dominance, and promote social integration or even exclusion. When a relic is stolen or exchanged, a new value is generated, a value that shifts across time and space.[34] This exchange is the source of the mutual value assigned to the relic as a sacred object. In this way, the theft or the gifting of a relic creates a channel for the exchange of values in specific communities, both spatially and temporally.

In the Kamakura period, peripheral religious groups were able to partake in this exchange of relics, which helped them to prove their legitimacy and to link themselves to specific places and people, both real and imaged, from the past (i.e., Shôtoku, Kûkai, Ryûju 龍樹 (b. 150 AD), and Dainichi Nyorai) and the present. As a consequence, Buddhist relics, much like the corpses of Christian martyrs, often served to express an individual narrative of the past and present through a single material body. As Katherine Verdery points out, the dead were (and are) used by the living for political and religious motives to rewrite history, to reshape and compress time, and to bring the past into the present through a given body or corpse (Verdery 1999).

Eison's use of relics was no exception. In his writings, he too used relics as symbolic capital, to bring about as well as to strengthen the religious and political transformations of his tradition, spreading his teachings from the court to the people. If we look closely at these chronicles, some of the extant reliquaries associated with Eison seem to contain relics that were taken and subsequently assigned new value by Eison and his followers. Similar to the Christian context discussed by Verdery, Eison and his disciples employed this ambiguous, multivalent, polysemic quality of relics to assign them new significance, using the narratives around these relics to make the past immediately present through the concreteness of the relics as material objects (Verdery 1999; Durkheim 1915: 19).

According to one story concerning relic theft, relics were stolen from Horyûji 法隆寺 in Kôan 7 (1285). As specified by the *Kameyama hôô shinkan*, a record penned by Eison, after these relics were taken from Horyûji, Eison chanted *dhâraṇî* and said prayers for three days for the safe return of the *shari*—specifically, *namu busshari* 南

34. I have borrowed the idea of the shifting value generated by the exchange of an object from Arjun Appadurai. For Appadurai, it is this exchange that is the source of value, which sets the parameters of utility and scarcity. Appadurai 1986: 4.

無佛舍利 said to have belonged to Prince Shôtoku—and then, suddenly, the *shari* manifested before him:

> In the seventh month, on the 28th day [of Kôan 7], the *namu* Buddha relics of Horyûji were stolen. The sorrow of the temple monks was unending. They looked all over, but there was no trace, so they went to tell Eison. For three days, he conducted rites, said *dhâraṇî* and prayers, then, suddenly, they appeared before him. He went to the palace and held an opening ceremony, providing offerings. Subsequently, he lectured on the *Exposition of the Sutra of Brahma's Net* 梵網古跡記 (Jp. Bonmô koseki).[35] When the sermon ended, over 1,200 people received the precepts.
>
> In the ninth month, on the second day, both the iron *stûpa* and the five vases of Saidaiji were completed.[36] [Eison] placed the relics into the [reliquaries] and performed an eye-opening ceremony as an offering. I searched all of the old records and found the complete history of this *stûpa* and the vases.[37] As for the iron *stûpa*, Eison ordered the metalworker Fujiwara Muneyasu 藤原宗安 [thirteenth century] to use the military tools of his ancestor Lord Kiso Yoshinaka 木曾義仲 [1154–1184] to [cast] it. It took 696 days to complete the iron *stûpa*. He had [Muneyasu] melt the great sword of Lord Yoshinaka for the foot of the *stûpa*, in hopes of somewhat diminishing the karma [Yoshinaka] had accumulated from killing.[38]

Although the Horyûji monks sought Eison's help to retrieve the relics, the relics were likely not immediately returned to Horyûji. It remains unclear if they were subsequently returned, or if they were enshrined in the five vases, and then placed into the iron *stûpa* constructed, in part, to lessen the negative karma of Eison's ancestor Lord Yoshinaka (Fig. 3, Fig. 4).[39] This story illustrates that after the relics went missing, they became objects that could be rediscovered, and, ostensibly, assigned new symbolic values.

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35. For an English study on this, see for instance, Muller 2012.
36. The Five Reliquary Vases (*gobyô shariyôki* 五瓶舍利容器), which are casted in nickel and copper, are a mid Kamakura era (1284) construction that are housed at the Nara National Museum. Each vase correlates with one of the five Buddhist directions (*gohô* 五方), and is draped with a colored thread that together comprise the five colors. In each of the vases is a smaller flaming-jewel reliquary containing hundreds of relics. The relics in each vase come from a given site or person who was important to Eison and his relic faith.
37. "I" refers to the author of this text.
38. *Kameyama hôô shinkan*: 187.
39. The five vases are each draped with a different color thread representing one of the five directions, which in turn accompany the five viscera, five buddhas, and five *siddhaṃ*. See Abe 2009 and Iyanaga (forthcoming).

Figure 3.
Iron Treasure *Stūpa*. Iron.
Dated Kamakura era, 1284.

Figure 4.
Five Reliquary Vases. Casted nickel and copper.
Kamakura era, 1284. Nara, Saidaiji.

Even though the relics continued to be connected to the religious sites that had previously enshrined them, the theft of relics, followed by their magical appearance before Eison, facilitated their shift in ownership. Although it remains unclear if this was a permanent shift, the idea that the power of relics can be dispersed across multiple sites can be seen in later passages in the *Kameyama hôô shinkan*, as well. Specifically, when the five vases were completed, relics were said to have appeared in various locations, including at Hokkeji and Kasuga Grand Shrine. The magical appearance of relics at these locations attested to the sacred quality of the vases and the sites where the relics chose to self-manifest. This, in turn, enhanced Eison's prestige, linking him to these sites through the relics and reliquaries that he oversaw and commissioned. The *Kameyama hôô shinkan* explains:

> As for the five vases, the great Tang Dynasty (618–907) craftsman Lu Tailing 陸太令 was ordered to craft them. When the *stûpa* and vases were complete, relics appeared at Hokkeji. Relics appeared before Nimuro-in, Muromachi Nyoin, and at the Kasuga Grand Shrine. Outside of this, the followers of Eison attained relics, among other things. These were put into the five vases and placed into the iron pagoda. It was said that in the central vase there were 500 relics; in the eastern vase there were 700 relics; in the southern vase there were 46 relics; in the western vase there were 1,400 relics; and, in the northern vase there were 2,801 relics. In total, there were 5,411 relics.[40]

40. *Kameyama hôô shinkan*: 187.

This passage refers to the construction of the five relic vases of Saidaiji and to how, along with their auspicious completion, relics magically appeared at Hokkeji as well as at other noteworthy sites related to relic worship in Nara, e.g., at Kasuga Grand Shrine.[41] In addition, relics appeared in front of important personages known for possessing relics, such as Muromachi Nyoin, known for harboring one of the few buddha tooth relics in Japan. In this vein, the text is directly linking these reliquaries to specific people and places: to Hokkeji, Eison's followers, Kasuga Grand Shrine, Muromachi Nyoin, and Nimuro-in (Naitô 2010: 148). In this instance, relics appeared at several Nanto-related sites: at a Ritsu nunnery, a Shinto shrine, and even before the daughter of the emperor. These relics were all placed into the five reliquary vases, which were then enshrined inside the iron *stûpa* of Saidaiji.

Returning to the theme of ownership and theft, this passage on the five vases illustrates that Eison took or borrowed the relics that magically appeared at Hokkeji, Kasuga and other sacred locations, and enshrined them in reliquaries inside of these vases. This begs the question: was this an act of theft, or were these relics actually gifted to Eison? Did certain individuals associated with these sites gift Eison relics to create their own karmic connections to his reliquaries and to his teachings? Whether we consider this a theft or a gifting, perhaps this act can help us to better understand why there are no clear instances of reliquaries at Hokkeji containing the convent's relics. Alternatively, we could ask where the Hokkeji relics were enshrined and why so many of the nunnery's relics were seemingly enshrined elsewhere.

In one example, some of the Hokkeji relics were placed into a golden pagoda at Kairyûôji to offer protection to the temple. The *Kairyûôji shari kibun* explains that this led to the recounting of the Hokkeji relics, an act performed by the nuns on ritual occasions or when the relics were transported to new locations for ritual use or for distribution:

> In the eighth month, on the first day, Eison went to Kairyûôji. There was a new golden pagoda, where thirty-seven relics from Hokkeji were enshrined to protect the temple. As a result, the Hokkeji relics were counted. The record said: In Shôô 正応 3 [1291], in the eighth month, on the first day, a location was picked for the new Mizuo-dono at Kairyûôji. The enshrined relics were counted and they totaled thirty-seven. In all, there were 2,020 relics. In Kôan 弘安 4 [1282], the relics were counted and they totaled 2,040, it was said. Presently, they have increased by seventeen.[42]

41. Naitô explains that the bronze-jeweled reliquary was likely used in the *Kinrin bucchô-hô* 金輪佛頂法 [Rite of Gold Ring Buddhosnisa] to help save sentient-beings during *mappô*. Naitô 2001: 105.
42. Translated by the author from *Kairyûôji shari kibun*: 195–196.

Figure 5.
One of five Gilt Bronze Flaming *Cintāmaṇi* shaped Reliquaries.
Gilt bronze and crystal.
Kamakura era, 1284. Saidaiji, Nara.

Figure 6.
Gilt-Bronze Flaming *Cintāmaṇi* shaped Reliquary.
Bronze-cast, gold gilt, and crystal.
Date Kamakura era, 1290. Kairyūōji, Nara.

Figure 7.
Gilt-Bronze Flaming *Cintāmaṇi* shaped Reliquary.
Dated Kamakura (13 c.).
Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo.

Figure 8.
Gilt-bronze Esoteric *Cintāmaṇi* shaped Reliquary.
Bronze-cast, gold gilt, and crystal.
Dated 1335. Saidaiji, Nara.

This is but one example in which the convent's relics are enshrined outside of the nunnery. Some of its relics, for instance, are enshrined in the five vases mentioned above, while others are enclosed in the reliquaries or architectural reliquaries (i.e., *stûpa*) of other monasteries. Through these relic narratives and physical exchanges, the gifting or exchange of relics forms a currency between the nunnery and other temples or shrines. In this case, it allows Kairyûôji to house relics associated with Hokkeji, while providing a platform through which Hokkeji can publicize itself as a site where relics magically appear and choose to remain, through the act of distribution. Moreover, according to *Kairyûôji shari kibun*, the Hokkeji relics increased after the temple gifted relics to Kairyûôji, showing that this exchange was fortuitous. In all, the commerce of this exchange seems to have enhanced the power of Hokkeji as well as that of Kairyûôji as important Nanto sites possessing and enshrining relics.

As noted in *Hokkeji shari engi* and *Kanjin gakushôki*, Hokkeji widely loaned and distributed relics to other temples other than Kairyûôji. In *Hokkeji shari engi*, for instance, the nun Jitsua 実阿 (d.u.) had a vision in which Empress Kômyô, the accredited founder of Hokkeji, spoke to her in the depths of the night, when everyone else was asleep. Only the ill Jitsua lay awake. The invisible body of the empress appeared in front of her, and in a voice of clarity and peace, she explained her disapproval that the relics had been lent out:

> I use relics and *Mahâprajñâpâramitâ sûtra* 大般若波羅蜜多経 to act as my two eyes. As for *Mahâprajñâpâramitâ sûtra*, the nun Jôamidabutsu 成阿弥陀仏 copied this, so my desire is satisfied [i.e., I have one of my eyes]. As for the relics, I have used expedient means (Skr. *upâya*) to command that they are placed in this temple, but you allow them to be distributed in all the directions. This is against my wishes [i.e, my second eye is amiss].[43]

According to this text the *engi*'s author, Eison, is showing that Kômyô did not want the temple's relics to be distributed. This implies that Eison himself had to follow the empress' wishes or fear her wrath, since the relics were closely linked to the well-being of the nunnery and to the very nuns themselves. For instance, when Jitsua asked the temples where the relics had been distributed to return the convent's relics, her near-death-illness was miraculously and instantaneously cured. This prompt healing could be seen as a miracle spurred by the return of the relics to the convent and by the dead empress' desires being met. In this instance, the nunnery's relics, as

43. See *Hokkeji shari engi*: 161.

well as their placement at the nunnery itself, are, literally and figuratively, invaluable to the prosperity and to the livelihood of the nunnery and to its nuns.[44]

In another example, the nunnery's relics were borrowed by Eison for a seven-day relic offering at Saidaiji, as noted in *Kanjin gakushôki*. As part of this offering, Eison placed the relics from Saidaiji and Hokkeji on top of a single altar. On the *kechien* 結縁 [forming karmic connections] day of the service, the Hokkeji nuns were invited to attend the relic ceremony. At this time, they performed a ritual counting of the relics. As the keepers of the relics, the nuns played a central role in this rite; it was their job to check that the relics were properly accounted for and safely returned to the nunnery (*Kanjin gakushôki* 1977: 37). Herein, if the relics increased or decreased, the nuns would be the first to know.

Even though Eison borrowed and possibly even took relics from Hokkeji, this is not to say that he did not have his own relics. As mentioned above, relics played a central role in Eison's faith and teachings. Throughout his life, Eison was repeatedly given relics by powerful figures, including rulers, lords, monks, and nuns. For instance, in the fourth month of Kenji 2 (1276), the retired emperor invited Eison to the imperial palace and, to encourage Eison to give a Dharma talk, he gifted the master five Buddha relics, each with a specific and noteworthy provenance. According to the record for this event, the first of these relics was brought back from the mythical Dragon Palace (*ryûgû* 龍宮) by Fujiwara Hidesato 藤原秀郷 (tenth century); the second was transmitted from Tang China by Kûkai and placed in Tôji; and the third was a Tôshôdaiji relic Ganjin had brought from China. The remaining two relics were, presumably, from the Indian-scholar monk Bodhisena (also known as *Baramon sôjô* 婆羅門僧正, 704–760). By inheriting these relics from the retired emperor, Eison is, conceivably, linking himself through his writing to some of the great figures from the past who brought relic rituals to the court from the continent, to the mythical Dragon Palace under the sea, and even to an (albeit imagined) Buddhism of eighth-century India.

Recent Findings

Through recent CT scans, researchers have discovered texts, reliquaries, and other such objects enshrined in Hokkeji's thirteenth-century wooden Monju

44. This statement is noteworthy if we consider that the *Mahâprajñâpâramitâ*—i.e., the very concept of *prajñā*—came to be understood as the true *cintāmaṇi* (wish-granting-gem), according to the Chinese Chan monk Huike 慧可 (487–593).

Bosatsu sculpture. In the last few decades, scholars of East Asian religions have discovered that many Buddhist statues in China, Korea, and Japan contain sacred objects (e.g., scrolls, statuettes, reliquaries, and talismanic pouches). Some scholars have even argued that rather than looking at premodern statues containing sacred objects as the exception, we should assume that they were the norm. Although modern technologies allow us to test these statues in a fairly non-invasive way, there has been some conflict around what certain monastics deem appropriate for study of their temples' living icons. For instance, even though it has been recently discovered that there are roughly one hundred and eight objects (including texts, scrolls, and reliquaries) in the Hokkeji Monju sculpture, the convent has, understandably, not wanted to open this medieval statue to be examined by scholars. Likely, we will not have access to these internal objects until the temple opens its statue for restoration purposes. Such policies are established to protect the icon and its longevity.

Given what we can tell from scans of the sculpture, however, there appear to be at least five reliquaries of diverse types enshrined in its head (Fig. 9). Present in different shapes and sizes, these reliquaries include a crystal ball-like reliquary; a long, thin rectangular reliquary; a *gorintô* 五輪塔 (five-ringed *stûpa*); a smaller *gorintô*; and, a small vial-shaped reliquary (Fig. 10, Fig. 11). Each of these reliquaries holds about two to four relics, which total an estimated eleven shards based on scans. The origins of these relics, however, are unclear. These might be eleven of the 2,000 Hokkeji relics discussed in *Hokkeji shari engi*, or they might have been gifted to the convent from another temple or shrine. It is likely that some of the texts near these reliquaries describe the origins of or the stories about the relics enshrined in the reliquaries, yet this will remain uncertain until the sculpture is opened. For now, all we can do is ask: will opening this statue reveal where some of the Hokkeji relics have gone? Were these reliquaries and their relics gifted to Hokkeji from other temples? What further questions would this raise about temple networks and the exchange of relics? Although it is tempting to assume that these are Hokkeji relics, lack of evidence prevents substantiation of such claims.

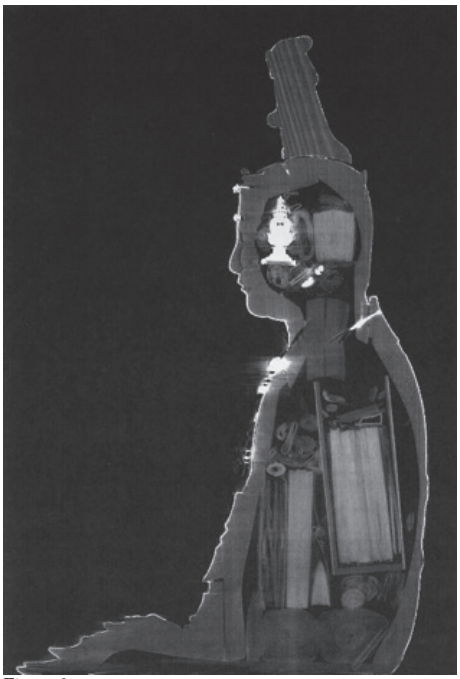

Figure 9.
Monju bosatsu statue (CT scan).
Wood with paint.
Dated Kamakura era, 13th c. Hokkeji, Nara.

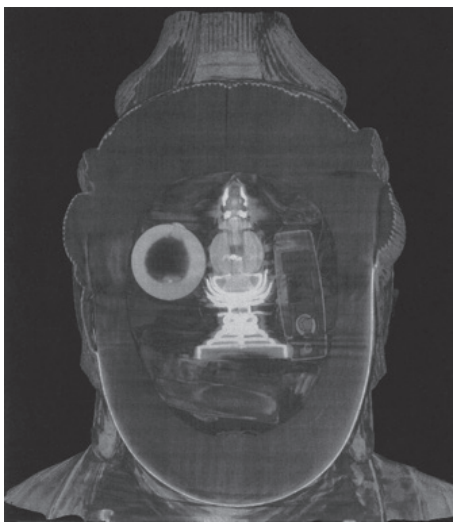

Figure 10.
Monju bosatsu head (detail).
Wood with paint.
Kamakura era, 13th c. Hokkeji, Nara.

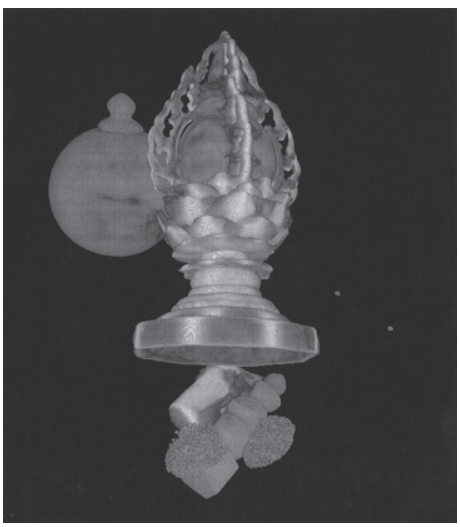

Figure 9.
Detail of round crystal reliquary (left), *gorintō* (center), and two small reliquaries (bottom of image).

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has sought to conceptualize the Hokkeji nuns and their relationship to the convent's relics. Through the texts and objects examined above, it is evident that relics on the archipelago began to repeatedly self-manifest in vast numbers, without being evoked, for likely the first time during the thirteenth century.[45] These magical, self-manifesting relics appeared specifically in the presence of the Hokkeji nuns. Although Eison owned his own relics, and relics existed at other sacred sites associated with Eison, *Hokkeji shari engi* paints a unique picture of the convent's relics in which these relics were controlled, counted and overseen by the nuns, and later lent out, taken, and perhaps even gifted to other temples by Eison and his male disciples. Herein, by this period, relics had become popularized and privatized by given communities. It was in these communities that they served specific purposes, and that they were afforded magical power and protection—to the living and to the dead—through ritual and narrative, as well as through their status as sacred objects to be enshrined and worshipped. We see here that these relics were owned, looked after, distributed, and gifted by as well as to powerful female monastics.

In short, this paper has focused on the construction of the origin tales that address Eison and the Hokkeji nuns' engagement with the convent's magically manifesting relics. Through examination of certain extant texts and reliquaries, I have begun to problematize why there are no known extant reliquaries or relics at Hokkeji, despite the chronicles and stories noting that there were thousands of relics at this site. To such an end, I have argued that Eison may have borrowed, given away, or taken some of these relics to benefit his own tradition. I am hopeful that this initial foray into Nanto relic worship will further prompt scholars to question the relationship between nuns and relics, as well as the theft of relics in medieval Japan via the documents and objects that survive, and to acknowledge that the Hokkeji nuns were accredited great spiritual power and legitimacy through the relics that they possessed and oversaw.

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45. The Tôji relics were known to have increased and decreased in number based on the prosperity or the decline of the realm during the Heian period. This influx in the number of relics—within their containers at Tôji—differs from the Hokkeji relics, in that the latter miraculously appeared throughout the temple grounds and before specific people. The dissemination of relics in the thousands to various temples in the Nanto region also appears to be unique to these stories. For an English study on the Tôji relics, see Ruppert 2000.

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