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EXCAVATIONS AT SAIRYŪ-JI, AN  
ANCIENT NUNNERY IN NARA, JAPAN

English Table of Contents and Summary

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## Note

Throughout the table of contents and the text, we use the following abbreviations: SA for feces and walls, SB for buildings, SC for corridors, SD for ditches, SE for wells, SG for ponds and reservoirs, SK for pits, and SX for other miscellaneous features, including ritually buried pottery and wooden troughs. We distinguish two types of structures, a post-hole type and base-stone type. In the former, a supra-structure is supported by pillars directly planted into the ground, and in the latter a supra-structure is supported by pillars standing on base stones.

**Excavations at Sairyū-ji: an  
Ancient Nunnery in Nara, Japan**

1993

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## Excavations at Sairyū-ji, an Ancient Nunnery in Nara

### SUMMARY

This report summarizes the results of archaeological investigations carried out at the site of Sairyū-ji 西隆寺, an eighth to tenth century nunnery in Nara, Japan. Prior to the expansion and remodeling of a major department store and the construction of streets, staff of the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute (Nabunken) conducted eight excavations between 1989 and 1991 in the areas of the corridors surrounding the image hall, the dining hall and a part of the tamped-earth walls enclosing the compound. These excavations confirmed the existence of the east-side corridor at the previously anticipated location, and moreover, clarified changes in the arrangement of structures in the dining hall complex located to the northeast of the nunnery compound. Since Sairyū-ji is not well documented in written sources, the results of these excavations will shed new light on researches into ancient temples in Japan.

### Overview of the Site

It is historically known that the construction of the Sairyū-ji nunnery began in 767 A.D. during the reign of Empress Shōtoku 称徳. The nunnery was a national temple in a pair with the Saidai-ji 西大寺 monastery, and it occupied the ninth, tenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth blocks of the second ward on the first row avenue in the western sector of the ancient Nara Capital (in use 710-784), which was confirmed archaeologically during six excavations between 1971 and 1973, opening the area of 5434 sq. meters in total<sup>1</sup>.

These excavations also revealed the foundations of the image hall, the pagoda, and the eastern gate. The image hall was situated on the north-south axis of the nunnery compound, which was along the alley between the tenth and fifteenth blocks. It was, however, a little off to the south of the east-west central axis of the compound. The foundation platform of the image hall measured 38.2 by 23.4 meters. The supra-structure can be reconstructed to a seven by four bay building standing on base stones.

Approximately 100 meters to the southeast to the image hall was the pagoda. The foundation of the pagoda measured six meters north-south by less than six meters east-west. The foundation platform was not preserved.

The eastern gate was situated a little off to the north of the east-west

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1 KUROSAKI Tadashi, Editor. 1976. *Sairyū-ji Hakkutsu Chōsa Hōkoku* [Report of Excavations at Sairyū-ji]. *Ad Hoc* Committee for the Sairyū-ji Investigations, Nara.

central axis of the nunnery compound, roughly 140 meters to the east of the image hall. The gate was elaborately constructed; the supra-structure of the gate was supported by four major pillars and eight minor pillars on base stones.

Inside of the eastern gate was a paved alley leading west to the center of the compound. The alley was 12.7 meters in width, and both sides were marked by tamped-earth walls. This suggests that the nunnery compound was divided into smaller areas enclosed by tamped-earth walls.

These major structures in the nunnery were already completed by 771 when the imperial government granted the official seal of Sairyū-ji. Historic sources record that Sairyū-ji was under the administration of Saidai-ji by 880, which indicates that the influence of Sairyū-ji had declined. Although Sairyū-ji still remained as of the tenth century, *Yamato Saidai-ji Jiryō Kenchū-chō* [Notebook of Examinations on the Saidai-ji Territory in Nara] dated to 1251 records that the site of Sairyū-ji was used as agricultural lands, meaning that Sairyū-ji had ceased to exist by that time.

The excavations, the results of which are reported in this volume, opened an area adjacent to and to the east of the image hall, and seven separate areas to the north and northeast of the image hall, all together 6067 sq. meters in total. In these areas, a part of the east-side corridor and the northeastern corner of the corridor enclosing the center of the Sairyū-ji compound, a complex of buildings related to the Sairyū-ji dining hall, and the northeastern corner of the tamped-earth wall enclosing the whole Sairyū-ji compound were discovered. These significant results have added greatly to our knowledge about the Sairyū-ji nunnery.

## **Features Dating Prior to Sairyū-ji**

### **Prior to the Nara Palace (710)**

Features dating prior to the construction of the Nara Palace in 710 include a final Jomon Period ditch (ca. tenth to fifth centuries B.C.) (SD440) and a middle and late Kofun Period fence (SA442), buildings (e.g. SB441, SB536, SB551), and ditches (e.g. SD350, SD493, SD529, and a few minor ones), which are dated to the fifth and sixth century A.D. The Jomon Period ditch can be interpreted as being man-made owing to similar discoveries from the Yayoi Period (ca. fifth century B.C. to A.D. third century). The Kofun Period ditches may have been for irrigation purposes. Surrounding ditch SD350 of 3 meters in width, 0.45 meters in depth, for example, there are minor ditches parallel to and perpendicular to it, approximately 20 to 24 meters apart, which might have demarcated individual rice paddies. There were a group of residences surrounding ditch SD529 in the sixth century.

### **Nara Period before Sairyū-ji was constructed (710 to 767)**

Residences occupying the second ward on the first row street of the

western sector of the Nara Capital were discovered. A noteworthy example was SB510, a north-south oriented post-hole type structure with a roofed veranda (*hisashi* 廂<sup>2</sup>) on the east side, which was the largest structure in this area of the Nara Capital dating to this phase. The Kofun Period ditch SD529 was turned into the reservoir SG530 during this phase, and was filled up when the construction of Sairyū-ji began in 767.

## Features Related to Sairyū-ji (767 to ca. tenth century)

### Corridors surrounding the image hall

Parts of the north-side and east-side corridors surrounding the image hall of the Sairyū-ji nunnery were discovered. The corridors were “double or composite” corridors<sup>3</sup> (*fukurō* 複廊) of 16 *shaku*<sup>4</sup> 尺 or 4.8 meters in width. The north-side corridor is reconstructed to be 260 *shaku* or 77.8 meters, and the east-side corridor to be 286 *shaku* or 84.8 meters. The east-side corridor had 27 bays or spaces between two columns. It remains in question whether or not the north-side corridor was connected to a lecture hall of the nunnery, which is presumed to have been situated due north of the image hall.

### Dining hall complex in the northeastern part of the nunnery

Between the corridor surrounding the image hall and the tamped-earth wall enclosing the entire nunnery compound in the northeastern part was a dining hall complex. The complex was built after the reservoir SG530 was filled, and the ground was leveled. The complex was enclosed by a tamped-earth wall in four directions. Careful stratigraphic analysis made it possible to discover that the structures in the dining hall complex were once modified although it was impossible to determine the calendrical date.

#### Phase a (before the structural modification)

The main hall of this complex was the post-hole type building SB490A, a northern part of which was revealed during our excavation. It was oriented east-west and was seven bays in width (70 *shaku* or 21 meters). SB490A was surrounded by three post-hole type buildings SB485, SB495, and SB520 in three directions (to the east, north, and west respectively). All of them were five by two bay buildings. Behind SB495 to the north was a seven by two bay post-hole type building (SB505, 14.7 by 4.8 meters in plan), which was enclosed itself by a fence (SA506).

Owing to the close similarity in the structural arrangement to that of the Saidai-ji dining hall complex which was well recorded in historic sources, the

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2 *Hisashi* is a narrow aisle-like area outside of the core (*moya*) of a building. Throughout the text it is referred to as a “roofed veranda.”

3 Although a single structure, a *fukurō* is divided into two corridors by an earthen wall with windows. The whole structure is supported by three rows of columns.

4 A unit of length in premodern Japan. During the Nara Period, one *shaku* equaled approximately 30 cm.

main hall SB490A is attributed to be a *jikidō* (食堂 dining hall), SB495 to be a *tono* (殿 pantry), SB505 to be an *ōitono* (大炊殿 administrative building), SB485 to be a *higashi no kuriya* (東厨 eastern kitchen), and SB520 to be a *nishi no kuriya* (西厨 western kitchen).

**Phase b** (after the modification)

The Sairyū-ji dining hall complex was completed during this phase when the major buildings, including the dining hall and the kitchen(s), were turned into heavily constructed structures standing on base stones. SB490A was replaced with a base-stone type building of the same size with a roofed veranda (SB490B). To the west of SB490B, the western kitchen SB520 was once demolished, and instead, the minor base-stone type building SB521 was erected near the site of SB520. The eastern kitchen SB485 was replaced with the base-stone type building SB480. It was oriented north-south, and was a nine by four bay building with roofed verandas on both the east and west sides. The nature of SB480, however, still remains in question as to whether it was a large kitchen or an administrative building. The pantry SB495 was replaced with a large post-hole type building of seven by four bays, with roofed verandas on both the north and south sides (SB500), whose function probably remained as a pantry.

In a space between the dining hall, administrative building, and kitchens was the large well SE491. The use of this well continued until the tenth century, which suggests that Sairyū-ji existed until then.

**Tamped-earth walls enclosing the nunnery compound**

It is likely that the entire nunnery compound was enclosed by tamped-earth walls. A part of the east-side wall (SA420) and traces of a part of the north-side wall were excavated. The width remains unknown. The discovery of a base stone on the north-side wall (SB608) suggests that a gate was provided on the north side.

### **Discussion: Nature of the Sairyū-ji Nunnery**

Sairyū-ji was erected in a pair with Saidai-ji by Empress Shōtoku's order in the late Nara Period (the 760's and 770's). The former was meant to be a national nunnery, and the latter to be a national monastery. For this reason, the temple compounds of the two were anticipated to be very similar. Indeed, the excavations revealed that the Sairyū-ji dining hall complex was extremely similar to that of Saidai-ji. Roof tiles excavated at Sairyū-ji also strongly suggest a close relationship with Saidai-ji. Sairyū-ji and Saidai-ji were found to share six types of eaves tiles produced with ten molds (e.g. Fig.61, a pair of types 6235C and 6761A). Since none of the Sairyū-ji eaves tile types were used in Tōdai-ji, it is likely that craftsmen in charge of the roof tile production for Saidai-ji were involved in the production of roof tiles for Sairyū-ji in the 770's. (In the 760's when the construction of Sairyū-ji started, however, the roof tile

production for Sairyū-ji was conducted by craftsmen who were involved in the roof tile production for the Nara Palace.)

Despite these similarities of Sairyū-ji to Saidai-ji, Sairyū-ji had some unique features. Excavations yielded types of eaves tiles that were not used at Saidai-ji (e.g. Pl. 30, type 6125A and Pl. 39, type 6775A). The Sairyū-ji compound was much smaller than Saidai-ji, estimated at 260 by 230 meters for the former as opposed to 400 by 500 meters for the latter. The arrangement of buildings in the Sairyū-ji nunnery was different from that of Saidai-ji. For example, while the former only had one image hall surrounded by corridors, the latter had two which were connected by corridors. Accordingly, the specific nature of Sairyū-ji in comparison to Saidai-ji still remains to be debated, and the excavations have provided data contributing to this debate.

In conclusion, eight excavations carried out between 1989 and 1991 contributed to understanding about the Sairyū-ji nunnery which is not well recorded in historic sources. The excavations resulted in the discoveries of the east- and north-side corridors surrounding the image hall, the dining hall complex, and the northeastern corner of the tamped-earth walls enclosing the nunnery compound. These results revealed some aspects of Sairyū-ji which were shared with Saidai-ji, and also some aspects which were unique to Sairyū-ji. The results will be useful in interpreting the nature of this nunnery.