INTRODUCTION

A visit to the site of any of the Buddhist temples considered in this book can be a profoundly melancholy experience, at least to anyone having a sense of their original role as the Four Great Temples (Yondaiji). These temples are not designated by a modern historical term but rather by one that appears in the ancient texts. The four — Asukadera, Kudara Ōdera, Kawaradera, and Yakushiji — were by far the most important architectural projects of the initial phases of Buddhism in Japan, what I refer to rather broadly as “the seventh century,” here defined to include the last decade of the sixth and the first decade of the eighth centuries. Contrasting with the story told by textual sources, precious little remains today of what were certainly the key religious establishments of the early period (ca. 590–710). Foundation stones, a few icons, roof tiles — the scholar must mold such limited material together with the sparse historical records in striving to visualize these temples in anything approaching their ancient splendor. Nevertheless, archaeological investigations have, in recent decades, shown clearly that the status given these temples in the early texts is generally accurate, and there can be no doubt as to their importance during the seventh century. Vexing problems do remain, however, in the interpretation of textual references, with scholars taking varying positions as to their meanings.

In the history of postwar temple archaeology, by far the most stunning results were from the 1956–1957 excavations of the site of Asukadera revealing that the original temple — the first full-scale temple in Japan — had not one but three golden halls.1 Almost all scholars recognized that these results placed Asukadera as the most significant temple of the Asuka period, although the full implications of this position have often been obscured. The second of our Four Great Temples, Kudara Ōdera, remained the object of only textual research until recently because there was no compelling hypothesis as to its location. Here, too, archaeology may have come to the rescue, for in a series of digs between 1997 and 2001, archaeologists concluded that foundation remains at a site called Kibi Pond (Kibi ike) might, in fact, be those of Kudara Ōdera. While this supposition has yet to be
definitively proven, most authorities have accepted it, and I certainly find it highly likely.

Kawaradera has been extensively excavated over the years, revealing a large-scale temple that clearly was one of the Four Greats. The history of this temple is less fully understood than the other three, but a plausible chronology can be constructed from both documentary sources and excavation results. Finally, several excavations in recent years also have clarified the history of Yakushiji. As will become increasingly obvious in the following chapters, the themes and results of this study would have been impossible without the results of this archaeological fieldwork.

The term “Four Great Temples” itself appears in ancient times, but is not seen in the history on which we will most rely, *Nihon shoki*, compiled in 720 and covering the years up to 697; rather, its initial occurrence is in the second national history, *Shoku Nihongi*, dated 797, in a series of entries between 702 and 707. The first entry, of 702.12.25, states: “They prepared a sacred feast (ogami) at the Four Great Temples.” As this is only three days after the death of the dowager monarch Jitō (645–702, r. 686–697), scholars have always assumed a direct connection. Early in the next year, on 703.1.5, we are told specifically about rites performed for Jitō: “A sacred feast was performed for the deceased Empress at the Four Temples: Daianji, Yakushiji, Gangōji, and Gufukuji.” Although these temples are clearly the four that will be dealt with in this monograph, three of the four are here given their official “Buddhist” names (Daianji = Kudara Ōdera/Daikandaiji; Gangōji = Asukadera; and Gufukuji = Kawaradera), while Yakushiji always had a proper Buddhist name.

A little more than a month later, the forty-ninth day after the death of Jitō, there is a more elaborate order whereby messengers were sent not only to the Four Great Temples, but to thirty-three, including Shitennoji and Yamadadera, the latter two specifically identified. During the third and seventh months of that year, scriptures were read in the Four Great Temples: on the third month, tenth day, the *Dai hannyakyō* was read and one hundred people entered the priesthood; on the seventh month, thirteenth day, the *Konkōmyōkyō*, presumably both readings for the sake of Jitō. A variation is seen on 705.4.3, where there is a reference to the *Konkōmyōkyō* being read at the “Five Great Temples”: if the standard group constitutes four of these, we must wonder what the fifth was, and why it was necessary to include one additional temple.

Jitō’s successor, Monmu (683–707, r. 697–707), died in the middle of 707, and rites for his sake were ordered at the Four Great Temples from the seventh until the forty-ninth day after his death. All of these entries, related to Jitō and Monmu, clearly establish the contemporaneous usage of the term “Four Great Temples.” It remains uncertain, however, when the term was first used, although the frequent association of Tenmu, Jitō, and
Monmu with the four suggests that the grouping probably was established prior to 702. Of course, there were no initial plans to erect four temples; rather, the group formed as a result of building activities in the course of the seventh century.\textsuperscript{11}

The seventh century is conceptualized here as being of crucial importance in the development of Japanese Buddhist culture. Since the inception of modern historiography, the Nara period (710–784) has been seen as a sort of golden age in Japanese culture, an idea formed through analogy with the classical civilizations of the Mediterranean and applied especially to the art and architecture of eighth-century Japan.\textsuperscript{12} In recent decades great attention has been paid to the very long Heian period (794–1180), a time span that witnessed extraordinary developments in all areas of culture, not least in Buddhism and Buddhist art and architecture. Needless to say, there is no suggestion here that all of this scholarly activity is misplaced; indeed, I have myself worked in these centuries with considerable enthusiasm. Nevertheless, I am saying that the seventh century may not yet have achieved the amount of attention it so clearly deserves. It is not hard to see why this is the case. Nara-period Japan had a very large capital, Heijōkyō, numerous grand temples with a multitude of splendid sculptures, an increasingly centralized government able to exercise authority over broad areas of the country, and significant developments in literature. The Heian period is rich in all aspects of culture, making it well nigh impossible to comprehend its full scope. Kyoto (Heiankyō) was the capital for more than a thousand years, and it goes without saying that many of the crucial aspects of Japanese civilization flowered during the first four centuries of its existence.

Seventh-century Japan is different in kind. During these decades the ruling classes were open to extraordinary new modes of thought and practice, ranging from religious beliefs through technical advances in engineering, law, medicine, and the like. There is a freshness, even a sense of adventure in the seventh century, as the society is gradually transformed from a rather archaic political structure to one close to the level achieved in the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula, especially Silla. Here we are concerned primarily with developments in Buddhism, but it would be a mistake to ignore the influx of other religious traditions during these same years. Although specific dates are given for the “official introduction” of Buddhism (538 or 552), they are not particularly useful, in my opinion; rather, we are dealing not with an event but with a process, and I believe that this process was similar in the case of the adoption of other religious systems.\textsuperscript{13} The idea that there was great opposition to the acceptance of Buddhism, symbolized by the so-called Soga-Mononobe/Nakatomi conflict, about which more will be said later, sheds only minimal light on the actual course of events.

Much of this applies to broad ranges of Japanese society, and I certainly feel that an inclusive approach is desirable. The present study, however,
self-consciously concentrates on elite circles, in fact, on the highest stratum of the elite, and on the four temples directly associated with them. For reasons that will be evident presently, I believe that the construction of these four temples can be roughly related to the four quarters of the seventh century, broadly conceived. Asukadera was begun a decade before the seventh century, but much work was done on it after 600, so I am defining my first quarter (ca. 590–ca. 625) quite loosely. Kudara Ōdera was pledged in 639, and we assume that the construction process continued for some years after that, presumably at least into the 650s. Unfortunately, the dates for the founding of Kawaradera are unrecorded, although the most plausible hypothesis for its inception is ca. 660, with work continuing for twenty or so years after that. Finally, while Yakushiji was vowed in 680, we do not know exactly when construction began, although some parts seem to have been completed by 688; in any event, it was a fully functioning temple by 700, with additional construction extending into the eighth century.

These chronological subdivisions may seem rather arbitrary, but they are intended to highlight an important point: the construction of the four “greatest” temples of early Japan was spread quite evenly over the years and decades, and it appears as if a new building project was not initiated until the preceding one was complete. (There may have been minor overlaps, but in that case the principal work on the earlier temple was completed prior to the beginning of the next.) The substantial resources devoted to building these temples and producing their icons suggest that it was only practical to do one at a time. Moreover, we assume that the very best craftsmen worked on each of the four, so there may not have been comparable crews available for other major projects at the same time.

The focus in this study on the Four Great Temples is intended, of course, to highlight their central importance for the development of Buddhism and Buddhist monuments during the seventh century. This does not mean that there were no other significant temples, since obviously there were, and we shall consider some of them here. Nevertheless, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that these other temples did not have the status of the Four Great Temples during the seventh century. We immediately think of what we now call Hōryūji, the most beautifully preserved of the early temples, since its buildings, icons, and various other treasures constitute one of the main bases for a study of seventh-century art and architecture. Following from this state of affairs, it is easy to assume that “Hōryūji”14 was a central institution during the seventh century, while in fact it was comparatively minor prior to the formation of the “Shōtoku Taishi” cult in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. A similar situation exists for “Shitennoji” in Osaka, another center of that cult. Excessive concentration on these two Shōtoku-related temples precludes a full and accurate assessment of the
beginnings and development of Buddhism as well as Buddhist art and architecture in early Japan.

Let us consider the types of evidence available for study. Broadly speaking, this evidence can be divided into written sources and material remains. With regard to the former, there are both textual and inscriptional sources; textual sources normally exist in later editions and thus require careful exegesis; inscriptions may be contemporary, but they too require close analysis. Most of the controversies related to our period can be associated with variant interpretations of the documents, sometimes of a quite extreme nature. Material evidence may also be generally subdivided into two categories: architectural structures that exist above ground, such as temples and their icons; and remains below ground, which must be exposed through excavation.

There are several texts that are particularly significant for the present purposes, including *Nihon shoki* (Annals of Japan), and *Shoku Nihongi* (Annals of Japan, continued), both mentioned above, *Gangōji engi* (Historical account of Gangōji), and *Daianji engi* (Historical account of Daianji), both compiled in 747. The two *engi* deal, respectively, with Asukadera and Kudara Ōdera (the original names of the temples). There are no important contemporaneous records for Kawaradera, other than a few entries in *Nihon shoki*. In the case of the last of the Four Great Temples, Yakushiji, an early inscription is preserved, commonly referred to as the *Tōtō satsumeiki* (Inscription on the *satsu* element of the east pagoda), incised on an upper, bronze component (*satsu*) of the east pagoda of the Heijōkyō Yakushiji. This text presents a narrative history of the temple from its inception in Fujiwarakyō; there is also a later *Yakushiji engi* (1015) that provides some useful information.

The fundamental problem we must face is the analysis of the historical validity of these texts. Particularly complicated is the evaluation of information in *Nihon shoki* in relation to that of *Gangōji engi* and *Daianji engi*. If *Nihon shoki* is thought to be the most authentic source, as it often is, then data in the two *engi* could then be studied in comparative terms with *Nihon shoki*, thereby theoretically yielding reliable information. Similarly, the two *engi* could serve as a basis for assessing *Nihon shoki* if it was asserted that they were the more reliable sources. (Or, such a claim could be made for only one and not the other.) Unfortunately, none of these texts can be assumed, a priori, to be more reliable than any of the others, primarily because the writing of each was motivated by the special interests of those who wrote or compiled them. It goes without saying that self-interest is a component of all writing, especially historical narrative, so in that regard *Nihon shoki, Gangōji engi*, and *Daianji engi* are in no sense unusual. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible through probing analysis of all pertinent data to come to grips with at least some of the major issues dealt with in these
texts in a way that inspires reasonable confidence in the interpretation put forward.

Large sections of *Nihon shoki*, particularly in the first half, are essentially mythical in content, presenting vivid tales about the age of the gods and of the early “emperors,” but this material is not of any interest to us here. Those sections that deal with the fourth and fifth centuries have greater claims for authenticity, although these centuries are also not relevant to this project; with the sixth and seventh centuries, however, we are confronted with much pertinent data, so it is here that our real task begins.

*Nihon shoki* ends at 697, and most scholars believe the closer an entry is to that year, the greater the possibility of reliability, since 697 is only a little more than two decades earlier than the 720 compilation date for the history. However, when we turn to the end of the sixth century and the first half of the seventh, serious problems emerge, rising largely, in my view, from the ideological conceptions of the compilers; while this matter will occupy us very extensively in the first two chapters, it may be helpful to sketch out some of the main issues here.

At the time that *Nihon shoki* was compiled, the court was deeply interested in asserting the existence of a single imperial line stretching from the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, to the last monarch it recorded, *Jitō tennō*. Modern scholars have no illusions about the early “emperors,” but the issues become more complex when we reach the reigns of *Kinmei*, *Bidatsu*, *Yōmei*, *Sushun*, *Suiko*, and *Jomei*. As will be described presently in greater detail, the crux of the problem is that during these years, ca. 550–650, the most powerful family in Yamato was not that of the monarch, but rather the Soga family. Since the primacy of this clan did not adhere to the ideological premises of a single line of monarchs governing Yamato, it became necessary to conceal Soga dominance during these years. My considered opinion is that this process was not a result of lack of knowledge or simple error; rather, I perceive a very conscious distortion of the role of the Soga clan, designed to forge a new historical identity for the “imperial” line. This situation will occupy us greatly in Chapter 1 and to a lesser extent in Chapter 2.

Not surprisingly, related problems are encountered in *Gangōji engi* and *Daianji engi*, both compiled in 747 by official command. Although a few decades later than *Nihon shoki*, both *engi* were fabricated within the same general ideological environment; that is to say, the eighth-century conceptualization of a single, all-powerful royal line. In the case of *Gangōji engi*, those sections dealing with the early history of the temple (that is, *Asukadera*) were written in such a manner that even though *Asukadera* was unequivocally a Soga temple, the imperial family had to be given substantial credit for patronage there, particularly as pertains to the great sixteen-foot icon said to have been made by Tori busshi. A substantial portion of Chap-
fter 1 will be an attempt to illuminate a story of Asukadera that may be hidden between the lines of Gangōji engi; it will deal also with similarities and differences between the accounts in the engi and in Nihon shoki.

Daianji engi presents similar problems. At the time of its compilation, Daianji, the successor of Kudara Ōdera, was very much interested in aligning the founding of that temple to members of the imperial family of greater significance than Jomei, the putative founder. To that end, the text provides a lengthy narrative describing how the two most prestigious royal figures of the early Asuka period, Empress Suiko and Prince Shōtoku, were connected with the temple, stating that the empress requested the prince to build a great temple and then how, on his deathbed, Shōtoku passed on the order to Prince Tamura, who subsequently met this responsibility during his reign as Jomei by erecting Kudara Ōdera. This part of the text, the so-called Kumagori narrative, will not greatly concern us, but in Chapter 2 we will study the second half of Daianji engi in detail in comparison to Nihon shoki. Although Japanese scholars have done exceptionally interesting research and publication on these texts, on account of the complexity of the issues it will still be necessary to consider them at length in Chapters 1 and 2.21

The third great temple, Kawaradera, lacks an ancient engi, so we will have to rely mostly on Nihon shoki for data, combined with some informed speculation. The situation of the Tōtō satsumeiki of Yakushiji involves quite different factors, so I will reserve analysis of it to Chapter 4. Not so much must be said about Shoku Nihongi as it is far more reliable than its predecessor, Nihon shoki; in addition Shoku Nihongi plays a much less important role in our story than does Nihon shoki.22

Turning now to the material remains, it is fair to say that the present study would have been impossible to write without the efforts of archaeologists over the last decades. A very extensive body of data has come from the large number of excavations, and we can reasonably assert that our understanding of seventh-century Japan has been fundamentally transformed as a result of this research. Needless to say, just as is the case with texts, so too archaeological data require careful analysis; outright, uncritical acceptance is clearly inappropriate. Although I think that the archaeological information presented in Chapters 1 through 4 is generally very accurate, I am also aware of the pitfalls: for example, errors may be made in the excavation process or faulty interpretations produced; more positively, new excavation may alter or enhance the understanding of a specific site or complex. At a deeper level, archaeologists, like all people, have desires, and it is certainly not beyond the range of possibilities that an archaeologist may find what he or she is seeking, rather than examining the data from an objective perspective.

Much will be said about both temple foundations and roof tiles, since
they provide us with the most crucial data. Ordinarily, it is possible to determine a considerable amount about an abandoned temple through excavations of the foundation remains, including the overall temple plan and precise details concerning the construction of each building. This sort of evidence, while technical in nature, is essential for a clear understanding of the early development of architecture in Japan. In terms of the determination of chronology, roof tiles are an extraordinarily valuable resource; careful study by numerous Japanese specialists has provided an extremely refined sequence of designs that can be dated to the decade and sometimes to the year of production.

In the case of the Four Great Temples, documentary material allows fairly precise placement, but the fact that these placements are confirmed by the roof tile sequence allows greater confidence in the historical reconstruction. This textual and archaeological data may seem rather arcane, but what they tell is, as I hope to show, both significant and fascinating.

In order to situate this study, it may be useful to consider two problems of the early Buddhist period that have most occupied scholars: the dating of the west compound (saiin) of “Hōryūjī” and the status of the Yakushi triad and east pagoda of Heijōkyō Yakushiji. In both cases, reliance on the documentary sources and whatever other data existed led essentially to an impasse prior to archaeological investigation. I would like to analyze these two controversies in some detail here, since I believe that excessive focus on them has resulted in basic distortions in the understanding of seventh-century Buddhism and Buddhist monuments, a situation that even now has not been fully rectified.

The Hōryūji “rebuilt/not rebuilt” controversy produced an almost endless series of publications from the Meiji period onward, signifying to some degree the beginning of modern art historiography in Japan. As hardly needs repeating, the controversy resulted from a passage in Nihon shoki, which stated that the entire temple burned down in 670: those who doubted this entry believed that the present west compound was built during the Asuka period, perhaps founded in 607; the other camp accepted the description of the fire and thus argued that the current structures were built after 670.23 The implications of these two positions are critical: if built at the onset of the Asuka period (early seventh century) the present golden hall, pagoda, and related structures would be directly associated with the time of Prince Shōtoku (574–622) and place patronage of Buddhism and Buddhist art directly within the “imperial” family at a very early time; if built after 670 the west compound would become one of a number of later seventh-century temples.24 The problem was solved (for practically everybody) by the excavations of 1939, which revealed the foundations of an earlier temple just to the southeast of the present west compound; the standard “axial” plan of this site, undoubtedly that of Ikaru-
gadera, implied no special significance for the temple at its inception, placing it in a general category of temples directly based on prototypes on the Korean peninsula. As we shall see, recognition of these circumstances and the 1956–1957 excavations of Asukadera tended to shift the discussion of the initial stage of temple construction to Asukadera.

Resulting in an almost equal volume of research and publication has been the debate over the dates of the present east pagoda and the golden hall Yakushi triad of Heijōkyō Yakushiji. Documentary sources imply that Fujiwarakyō Yakushiji was largely complete by the end of the seventh century and also indicate that Yakushiji was transferred to Heijōkyō quite early in the Nara period; a possible conclusion from these data is that the original temple was disassembled and its structures and icons then moved to the new capital. If this were the case, we would have critical evidence of later seventh-century architecture and sculpture available for study at Heijōkyō Yakushiji. Documentary and stylistic analysis led scholars to two basic positions: the icon and pagoda were made at Fujiwarakyō Yakushiji and moved to the Heijōkyō temple or were produced for the latter temple after 710. As with the Hōryūji rebuilt/not rebuilt controversy, this also resulted in an impasse. Extensive excavation of the site of Fujiwarakyō Yakushiji in recent years, however, has conclusively demonstrated that construction continued well into the Nara period, thereby indicating that the Fujiwarakyō and Heijōkyō temples continued to function as religious centers simultaneously, presumably both with a full complement of icons. The implications of these results will be discussed in Chapter 4; for the moment I wish only to emphasize the potential value of archaeology in resolving seemingly intractable historical problems.

The preceding discussion may have created the impression that I see the Four Great Temples as somehow standing in splendid isolation, spaced regularly over the years of the first century or so of Buddhism in Japan, with no particular connection with anything else. Nothing could be farther from my viewpoint. A basic element of this study will be the effort to place each of the temples in the broader built environment of their respective periods. This is easier said than done, although intensive research on the early palaces and capitals of Yamato has clarified many important issues of relevance here. In addition, as far as possible, we will attempt to see our temples as they functioned in the wider political, economic, and religious realms.

For the period of Asukadera, the residences associated with the Soga clan are a primary concern with regard to the temple. In contrast to later decades, there does not appear to have been significant interest in a symmetrical, formal organization of the ground plan of the entire complex, so that while the Soga structures display a close proximity between temple
and residence, their placement is in terms of the geographical environment; that is to say, hills and valleys were not considered problematic in the relationship between the various buildings.

Throughout this study, Kudara Ōdera will consistently be more problematic than the other three temples as a result of uncertainty concerning its history and location. Nevertheless, when Nihon shoki tells us that Jomei ordered the construction of a great temple and a great palace in 639, we shall see that there is a hint of a more careful organization of the layout. Of course, there is always the possibility that the planning mentioned here is actually a retrospective application of later ideas to the time of Jomei in late-Asuka Japan.

From about the middle of the seventh century, considerably more evidence begins to appear as to the built environment of the Asuka-Fujiwara region within which our temples are located. Scholars have debated the sequence of palaces, recorded in the sources, dating to the decades up to the 690s, although there is now considerable agreement that the various palaces listed for these years were, in fact, essentially at the same general location. Naturally, the palace-capitals at Naniwa and Ōtsu are exceptions, but the important factor is that the center of political authority always returned to Asuka-Fujiwara during the years considered here. Kawaradera probably was integrated with the general palace complex and in that respect begins to show more careful conception of planning than seems to have been the case earlier.

The culmination of this narrative of palace-building is, of course, the single most important architectural undertaking of the seventh century, namely, the conception and construction of the Fujiwara capital. Primarily because of the extraordinary fame of the Heijōkyō (= Nara) capital, less attention has been paid to its seventh-century predecessor than is warranted, although in recent years there has been more focus on the former as a result of significant archaeological research and publication. The Fujiwara capital and palace, like its successors, Heijōkyō, Nagaokakyo, and Heiankyō, was centrally planned in a strict, geometric grid system closely following continental precedents. The temples embedded within this framework — especially Yakushiji — necessarily adhere to the grid and thus can be seen as important components of the overall geomantic and ritual structure of the capital. In fact, with Yakushiji we see what may be called a definitive manifestation of temple-palace relationship, with an exceptionally high degree of symmetry in placement signifying the temple’s precisely articulated position within the royal city.

Our focus will be on the tangible, material culture of the period in as much as that culture can be retrieved, either archaeologically or in terms of the documentary evidence. Of course, we will also be concerned with the development of Japanese political and religious elements over the decades.
dealt with here. Nevertheless, while I will attend to standard history as far as my knowledge and energy allow, I do wish to stress that I see this project as an attempt to approach some of the historical issues that have long occupied scholars from a significantly different perspective. I believe that many problems that have been dealt with in a rather abstract manner by historians can be seen in a new light when examined within the context of the material environment.

Asuka: Geography and Ideology

The region under discussion is modern Nara Prefecture, equivalent to ancient Yamato Province, but the focus here is more specific, centering on an area to the south of modern Nara City (see map 1). In Chapter 1, on the Soga temple Asukadera, our attention will be directed at the quite narrow valley that constitutes the Asuka region in a strict definition; Chapter 2, on Jomei’s Kudara Ōdera, is concerned with the ancient Iware area, to the northeast of Asuka; Chapter 3 returns to Asuka with the placement of Kawaradera to the south of Asukadera, at the southern edge of Asuka; and Chapter 4 considers the placement of Yakushiji within the grid structure of the new capital, Fujiwarakyō. Many structures, including large temples and palaces, were crowded together in the small Asuka valley, although it is fair to say that its historical significance is far greater than its size. At the western edge of the Asuka valley is a famous hill, Amakashi no oka, that is the principal landmark of the area, and behind are the larger Yoshino mountains. Directly to the north of Asuka is a broad plain bounded by three relatively small mountains: Unebiyama to the west, Miminashiyama to the north, Kaguyama to the east. It was earlier thought that Fujiwarakyō was entirely enclosed by the “Three Mountains” — Unebi, Miminashi, and Kagu — but it is now known that the ancient Fujiwarakyō extended out beyond their embrace.34

The Asuka/Fujiwara area is renowned for its scenic beauty, with gently rolling hills, sparkling streams and rivers, and green, fertile agricultural land; the same might be said for ancient Heijōkyō or Heiankyō, although some of the charm of our area is based on its quite intimate, small-scale geography. Fortunately, a combination of relative distance from major economic centers and an early recognition of its historical importance led to conservation policies that have prevented the incursions of suburban blight that have damaged so many other places in Japan. The degree of preservation is not perfect, and the visitor must still cope with occasionally poorly placed soft-drink vending machines, but a little exercise of historical imagination does allow that visitor to visualize, if only partially, the ambience of the seventh century. I do not wish to become overly romantic here: Asuka/Fujiwara is located in a modern environment, with the relatively large cities
the four great temples of Kashihara, Yagi, and Sakurai adjoining it, and tightly packed housing developments encroaching on its borders. Nevertheless, Asuka/Fujiwara remains, more than the other capital settings, relatively untouched, despite the changes that must have occurred between the seventh and twenty-first centuries.

The larger mountains directly to the south form a slight barrier to communication; it is from these that streams and rivers flow, particularly the...
Asuka River, which runs in a generally southeast to northwest direction across the plain, becoming one of the area’s major landmarks. The three mountains of Yamato, referred to above, function more as delineating points rather than as barriers, since the traveler can easily walk around them; actual barriers are further to the west and east. While communication to the west, north, and east is not especially taxing, Asuka/Fujiwara was a relatively enclosed, self-sufficient area. Certainly people moved in and out for political, economic, religious, and other reasons, but they seem to have been quite content to dwell in this pleasant land during most parts of the sixth and seventh centuries.

The Asuka region occupies a special position in Japanese history as conceived of in the modern period. Clare Fawcett has presented a careful analysis of this situation, emphasizing the ways in which government and business interests have worked to construct an ideological scheme based in part on Asuka, designed to influence the formation of Japanese identity. She traces a number of postwar developments connected with this strategy, such as the privately funded Asuka Preservation Foundation (Asuka Hozon Zaidan, 1971) and governmental efforts including the establishment of national parks and the building of the Asuka Historical Museum (Asuka Shiryōkan, 1975).

I would like to comment briefly on the Asuka Historical Museum; those who have visited it know that it has attractive, permanent displays, illustrating the history of the region from the late Kofun period to the seventh century. Particular attention is paid to technological developments, such as a complicated water clock, that tend to illustrate advances and innovations in fields such as engineering. Additionally, there are regular special exhibitions, often focusing on the most interesting and spectacular recent excavations. The overall impression created by the museum is of substantial progress as Japan assumed an important position in the broader East Asian cultural sphere, circumstances that presumably create a feeling of pride in the lay audience. Not surprisingly, there is no mention of any of the darker aspects of early society, and to that extent it may be seen as lacking in historical objectivity.

From an archaeological and historical perspective, a key role has been played by the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute (Nara Kokuritsu Bunkazai Kenkyūjo, abbreviated in this study to Nabunken) founded in 1952. In its early stages, the Institute facilities were located only in Nara City, although important excavations were also carried out in the Asuka-Fujiwara region, especially at Asukadera (1956–1957) and Kawaradera (1957–1958), the topics of chapters one and three. As research became considerably more active, a branch of the Institute, the Division of the Asuka-Fujiwara Palace Sites Excavations (Asuka-Fujiwara miya ato hakkutsu chōsa bu) was established in 1973. This division has carried out
excavations, not just of palace sites as the name suggests, but also of temples and tombs. Staffed by a large group of professional archaeologists and with excellent facilities to carry out research, the activities of this Institute have the greatest significance for the present book.

The years between 1956 and ca. 2000 were a sort of golden age for archaeology in the Asuka-Fujiwara region. Numerous important sites were investigated, yielding many new insights into the history of seventh-century Japan. However, with the serious problems in the Japanese economy during the 1990s, governmental organizations such as museums and research institutes faced their own financial problems, culminating in a type of privatization designed to control costs. Thus, the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute was redesignated in 2001 as the Independent Administrative Institute, Nara Research Institute for Cultural Properties (Dokuritsu gyōsei hōjin, Nara bunkazai kenkyūjo), with the term “National” deleted.36 As an example of belt-tightening, the Annual Bulletin had appeared three times a year until the year 2000, but was reduced to a single issue each year starting in 2001. The full implications of these changes remain to be seen, but it is clear that the research institute will now devote substantial efforts to gaining public support for their programs.

Although not a new development, the On-site Explanation Meetings (genchi setsumei kai) have become a crucial aspect of the Institute’s activities, often drawing thousands of visitors and receiving extensive coverage in the media, both print and TV. They occur at the end of an excavation campaign with a format including a general description of the major results and the distribution of explanatory descriptive material; needless to say, such events are extremely effective in garnering support for archaeological work. Another example of this sort of activity is the special exhibition, a key example of which is the 2002 Asuka-Fujiwara Capital Exhibition (Asuka-Fujiwarakyo ten) celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Nara (National) Research Institute for Cultural Properties.37 Curiously, the show was titled in English “The Birth of ‘Nippon’: The Asuka and Fujiwara Capitals,” although the Japanese title says nothing about the “Birth of Nippon.” This exhibition contained a wide range of important and interesting objects, but it was evident that a principal goal was to offer an experience that would be appealing to a lay audience; for example, there were models reconstructing the battles of the Jinshin Disturbance (Jinshin no ran) and showing the armor of ancient warriors. Clearly, stress was not placed on purely academic research, and it seems likely that this sort of popularization will become increasingly popular.

Our reactions to these strategies of popularization should perhaps be nuanced and somewhat sympathetic. There is an enormous interest in Japan in ancient archaeology, with any of the larger bookstores having many
shelves devoted to the subject. A few of the volumes on display are technical in character, but the vast majority are obviously produced for the lay audience; significantly, a large number is devoted to the seventh century, and it is evident that this era engages the interests of many readers. Fawcett and others see an effort of the part of governmental and political elites to utilize Asuka as one element in the formation of national identity, and I am sure there is some truth to this. Nevertheless, I also think there are broader intellectual concerns motivating the "archaeology boom" — after all, results of compelling interest have been achieved by serious archaeologists working in the Asuka-Fujiwara region, and it should not be surprising that these engage the attention of so many readers. Additionally, I believe that in many respects the eighth-century capital, Heijōkyō (present Nara) and Hōryūji, are far more crucial to ideologically based efforts to forge a sense of national identity. While it is true there is a limited amount of reconstruction of Asuka-Fujiwara palace and temple sites, such effort palls in comparison to the enormous resources devoted to the rebuilding of Heijōkyō. A problem that arises when a site such as a temple is excavated is what to do when the work is finished. Archaeologists generally prefer to rebury the remains, leaving only a sign with a short text and plan to document their efforts. There is, however, pressure to make such sites permanently accessible, as we will see in the case of Kawaradera, where the foundations of the temple have been reconstructed in a way that enables visualization of the original form.

An extreme example of temple reconstruction can be seen at the Nara location of Yakushiji, where a project to rebuild all of the major buildings in what is thought to be their original forms is nearing completion; significantly, the Yakushiji project has absolutely nothing to do with restoration, since the previous buildings have been torn down to be replaced by entirely new structures. The greatest of the eighth-century temples, Tōdaiji, plays a key role in the creation of a glorious image of Japan, with its numerous halls and Buddhist icons, and of course the treasures of the Shōsōin are central to this evocation of splendor; an extremely large number of people visit the temple each year as well as seeing the related exhibitions at the Nara National Museum. Similarly, Hōryūji has far more visitors each year than any of the Asuka temples (probably more than all of the Four Great Temples together) and is considered by the vast majority of Japanese as the most important early temple, particularly on account of the putative role of Prince Shōtoku.

All of this is not to minimize the issues concerning Asuka dealt with by Fawcett, but only to suggest that there are other, and perhaps more important, locales for the creation of Japanese national identity. Be that as it may, I doubt very much that the ruins of the Four Great Temples play a
significant role in the process, and I would even argue that the story this book will tell runs contrary to many aspects of the dominant ideology, especially in the case of the first, Asukadera.

Historical Background prior to the Four Great Temples

Human inhabitation has long existed in Asuka/Fujiwara, but it is with the Kofun period (ca. 250–600 CE) that we begin to see the sorts of economic, political, and cultural developments that form the background for the present study, and so some attention must now be paid to those centuries. The presence of very large tombs, more advanced tools and weapons, and other objects can be interpreted as evidence for a steady enhancement of political power centered in elite groups. This development can be observed in the great tombs of both Osaka and Nara prefectures and also, to a lesser extent, in other areas of the Japanese islands. The process of the centralization of political authority and the concomitant concentration of economic resources is not fully understood, although by the fifth century there is evidence for well-developed political elites able to exercise their authority over substantial parts of the population. Traditionally, the process has been conceptualized as the growth of an imperial institution, although I take a somewhat different perspective in this study.

The political situation in the later fifth century remains vague, and it would appear that various powerful clans were fighting for dominance. Orthodox history sees a monarch, subsequently designated as Yūryaku, as dominant during the third quarter of the century; following his period there seems to have been a time of chaos, when no political group was able to claim supremacy. In this orthodox account, the following “emperors” are listed after Yūryaku: Seinei, Kenzō, Ninken, and Buretsu, but no scholar claims to know very much about any of these enigmatic figures and we may just as well ignore them as historical realities.

The first quarter of the sixth century is dominated by a king referred to posthumously as Keitai; the fluid nature of the so-called “imperial” institution at this time is made clear by his lineage. He apparently came from a powerful clan located outside of the central area, and his supporters also seem to have been largely from the provinces. Nevertheless, the compilers of Nihon shoki had to link Keitai with the largely legendary imperial lineage, and so imperial ancestors were discovered for Keitai several generations prior to his time. A skeptical observer may be excused for wondering if virtually all members of the elite could trace their pedigree in this manner, thereby rendering the imperial lineage as a convenient construct, at least during these years. Be that as it may, it does seem as if some sort of inchoate royal court was forming around Keitai and his allies. And yet the
fluidity of the situation is again made clear by how the succession is described; following Keitai, there are two more enigmatic “emperors,” Ankan and Senka. As was the case with the “Seinei to Buretsu” group, essentially nothing is known about Ankan and Senka, and doubts even have been raised concerning their very existence.41

Rather than a personalized narrative, probably a functional analysis of these decades would be more productive. Granting the tangible existence of Yūryaku and Keitai, it still seems clear that nothing much emerges from a focus on the majority of the so-called “emperors.” Consequently, I believe it is more fruitful to see the increased centralization of authority in a relatively small group of powerful clans. In an important sense all, or most, of these clans could be designated as royal; the eighth-century formulation was based on the success of one clan that was able to establish its primacy during the later seventh century. Presumably some other clan, if it had achieved dominance, would have been designated as the “imperial” line.

Who the next king, Kinmei (?–ca. 570), succeeded is uncertain, but for our specific purposes the story of Buddhism in Japan always begins with his reign, since it is during these years that Buddhism is said to have come “officially” to the islands. Following the paradigm stated above, I will recognize the historical existence of Kinmei and work under the assumption that he presided over a court made up of noble families of status roughly equal to his own line. It seems certain that there were, by this time, institutional structures able to deal appropriately with foreign elements, such as a new religion.42

We should keep in mind that Buddhism and Buddhist art are such central components of Japanese culture that it is difficult for us to conceive of a time when they were not present, at least during the historical period. While there was probably no significant presence of Buddhism in Japan during the fifth century, perhaps travelers to the continent would have seen Buddhist priests, temples, and images, and spoken of them when they returned home. With the sixth century, however, focus shifts to events within the Japanese islands, particularly the so-called official introduction of Buddhism, said to have resulted from a gift of Buddhist icons and other objects from King Sŏng of Paekche (Kudara) to “Emperor” Kinmei of Japan in either 538 or 552. While the historicity of this event need not be discussed here, we should note that from the putative beginnings of Buddhism in Japan there is an explicit association of the religion with the imperial institution. I believe this association was constructed—or at least enhanced—by the imperial ideologues who compiled Nihon shoki in the eighth century.43 The fact that Kinmei, after “leaping with joy” on receiving the gift, then consigned it all to the leader of the Soga clan, Soga no Iname, does not really distract from the notion that Buddhism passes
the four great temples

through the hands of the emperor when it first arrived. More will be said about the role of the Soga presently, but for the moment it might be best to continue our discussion of the “imperial” line.

During the reigns of Kinmei’s successors, Bidatsu (r. 572–585) and Yōmei (r. 585–587), there are crucial references to “imperial” connections with Buddhism: Bidatsu is said to have been unfavorably disposed toward the religion, whereas Yōmei was a supporter. In fact, their respective attitudes are highlighted in *Nihon shoki* by being the first entries in their annals after the short genealogical sentences. With regard to Bidatsu, *Nihon shoki* states: “The Emperor was not a believer in Buddhism, but was fond of literature.” And for Yōmei it says: “The Emperor believed in the Law of Buddha, and reverenced the Way of the Gods.”

Obviously the importance attributed to the attitudes toward Buddhism of these two monarchs has critically informed subsequent discussions of the development of the religion in Japan, because such statements create a
strong impression that rejection or acceptance of Buddhism was a burning issue at court during the later decades of the sixth century.

Despite all the crucial events concerning Buddhism said to have taken place under the next monarch, Sushun (r. 587-92), there is no characterization of his attitude toward Buddhism. One possibility (discussed in Chapter 1) is that, as he is treated as an enemy of Soga no Umako, it was not considered appropriate to associate Sushun himself with the religion.

From the middle of the sixth century until the middle of the seventh, the most important family in terms of political power was that designated as the Soga. The origins of the Soga clan are shrouded in mystery, making it almost impossible to delineate their early history with any degree of confidence. Traditional sources provide largely mythical lineages extending back to a nonhistorical individual, Takeuchi no sukune, said to be himself a descendant of one of the early “emperors.” Following him is Soga no Ishikawa no sukune, who appears to be a composite constructed by combining two names — Soga and Ishikawa — both of which are important for the lineage under consideration. I would like to stress here that there is absolutely no historical evidence for these two figures, and they are cited only to make the point that this clan, like most others, fabricated a very prestigious ancestry as justification for their political roles.

Machi, the next person in the traditional lineage, is followed by Karako, Koma, and Iname; there is no question about the historicity of Iname, although serious problems exist with regard to his immediate predecessors. Karako and Koma have names directly related to political entities of the Korean peninsula, making it only natural to assume they had some specific connections with that neighboring region. What about Machi? Most scholars assume he was the real founder of the Soga line, at least in the context of its status as a powerful clan; beyond that there is strong diversity of opinion as to his origins. Traditionalists argue that he belonged to a “Japanese” family (that is, not an immigrant family) that became increasingly influential in the later part of the sixth century. The unorthodox approach, championed by Kadowaki Teiji, is that Machi was a Korean nobleman who moved to the Japanese islands around 475, quickly becoming one of the most influential leaders of the time. Kadowaki offers a complex and highly intriguing theory, arguing that the Machi under discussion here is the same person as Moku Machi, an important official in Paekche in the later fifth century. This theory, which has been harshly criticized by many Japanese scholars, appears to have fallen out of favor in recent years; in any event, it is not necessary to solve this problem here. Nevertheless, there are still convincing grounds for assuming that the Soga clan had strong ties with the Korean peninsula, especially Paekche, either because of their ancestry or because of their close relationship with the Paekche elite. Of course, if there
is any validity in Kadowaki’s theory, Machi may have been active around the time of Yūryaku, while his descendants Karako and Koma would be similarly enigmatic as the “emperors” following Yūryaku. If this hypothesis is to be consistent, we would also have to locate a “Soga” who paralleled “Emperor” Keitai, active in about the first quarter of the sixth century.

As noted above, there are significant problems in tracing the predecessor(s) of Kinmei, and the same problems may be visible in the case of the first clearly historical Soga, Iname. Soga no Iname held the title of ōomi, while the leader of what came to be the imperial family held the title of ōkimi. The compilers of Nihon shoki asserted a strongly hierarchical relationship between the two terms, with ōomi having the sense of “great min-

Genealogy 2. The Soga line
ister,” the rank traditionally thought to be the highest rank other than that of ōkimi or “great king.” In my view there is a distinct likelihood that the compilers did this in order to subordinate the Soga and enhance the imperial institution as constructed during the later seventh and early eighth centuries. Be that as it may, quite clearly the Soga clan, and their leader, Soga no Iname, were the most powerful group from the middle decades of the sixth century.

During these years the Soga clan appears to have been especially active in furthering contacts with the continent. They were apparently more open to new ideas and things, an openness that must have been due in large part to their strong connections with the Korean peninsula and especially Paekche. Needless to say, it was for this reason that they played the central role in the furthering of Buddhism in later sixth-century Japan. Although there was a strong effort on the part of the Nara idealogues to transfer credit for such things to the so-called imperial line, the role of the Soga was so well known that it could not have been entirely erased. This is the reason why the “official” introduction of Buddhism is directly associated with Iname, even though it was stated that Kinmei was initially responsible. In the next chapter we will see how the Soga, under Soga no Umako and other leaders, utilized Buddhism for their own purposes, a tendency that may have begun at the time of Iname.

Iname died around 570, about the same time as Kinmei; however, in contrast to the series of short “reigns” following the latter’s death, Iname was succeeded by his son, Umako, who remained in power until 626, some fifty years. The degree to which Bidatsu, Yōmei, and Sushun had personal political authority is uncertain, although I believe it is likely that they served in a more symbolic than governmental role. The fact that Nihon shoki treats the “emperors” as central is simply a result of their clan’s success in asserting its primacy in the latter half of the seventh century; as noted above, if some other clan had achieved this primacy, they would now be seen as the imperial lineage. While nobody doubts the power of the Soga, many scholars will disagree with the analysis presented here, continuing to maintain that there was a distinct ruling family — the ōkimi — who were served by the ōomi. Since my goal is not to write a political history of early Japan, it is not necessary to reach a definitive conclusion on these matters; rather, it is enough to understand when and how the Soga achieved their dominant position and how that contributed to their patronage of Buddhism. And with that in mind, it is time to turn to the extraordinary temple built by the Soga, Asukadera, the first of the Four Great Temples.