CHAPTER 10

The Phallus at the Crossroads: Wayside Gods of Protection and Fertility

This chapter will shift the focus of sexual imagery away from the shrine to the wider world outside it and the wayside gods (michi no kami 道の神 or robō no kami 路傍の神) who stand alone or in small groups beside roads or rice fields. They may be made from stone, wood, clay or straw. Many are fully exposed to the open air or have only a simple roofed shelter to provide protection from the elements. Some are prominent phalluses; others display a human couple chastely holding hands. Many are less than one year old; others have stood there for centuries.

The wayside gods exercise two roles. Some act protectively as guardians against disasters, plagues and the unwanted entry of outsiders. Others receive devotion as providers of fertility, although the two functions often overlap because protection from danger is of course an essential item in ensuring any form of fertility. Nowadays the sexually innocuous variety may possess additional value as symbols of their local communities, in whose economic regeneration they help by being adopted as a logo for the promotion of commerce and tourism.¹

A number of different permanent and temporary objects are currently used to represent wayside gods, and because of a considerable overlap in their names and roles they will be described here in terms of their overall appearance rather than primarily through the titles given to them or the functions they perform. Apart from a few large wooden phalluses the permanent images are made from stone and may be classified as relief carvings depicting a human or mythological couple, relief carvings of phalluses, three-dimensional phalluses or some combination of phallus and human figure. The temporary figures are created on an annual basis and left to decay naturally. A combination of straw strengthened with wood is the usual medium for this, and in one area alone there is a tradition of making temporary wayside figures out of clay.

Two names are commonly used for the gods represented by wayside images: dōsojin 道祖神 (road ancestor deities) and sai (or sae) no kami 塞の神 (blocking deities, written also as 賽の神 and 才の神). Sai no kami can also appear

Figure 203  The large phallic sai no kami that protects the crossroads in Hadano (Kanagawa Prefecture). It dates from 1711.

Figure 204  A modern example of the sexually innocuous version of the dōsojin that involves a couple holding hands. In this wayside relief carving the husband and wife are gazing into each other’s eyes.