Kevin Gray Carr
Plotting the Prince: Shōtoku Cults and the Mapping of Medieval Japanese Buddhism.

Kevin Carr’s Plotting the Prince is the first study written in English that focuses on the cults of Prince Shōtoku (574–622). More specifically, as stated by the author: “the goal of the study is to tell the story of the cults of Shōtoku through the art historical record” (p. 3). As a well-trained art historian, Carr provides an insightful analysis of many important iconic imagery as well as paintings of the prince’s hagiographies produced in large-scale format. The paintings are usually on fixed panels and portable sets of hanging scrolls and are known as Illustrated Legends of Prince Shōtoku (Shōtoku Taishi eden), their dates of production ranging from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. Carr weaves the cults into the religious context of medieval Japan and explores how the medieval period visual material associated with the prince served to create a new Buddhist paradigm of Japan as a sacred land. Being one of the first cults widely “visualized,” Carr propounds that the devotion to the prince became the model for subsequent hagiographies and apotheoses of Japanese religious figures. This book aligns with the current trend in scholarship in Japan, such as the one edited by Yoshida Kazuhiko (2011), which focuses on exploring Shōtoku as the subject of devotion. These studies sharply contrast to past scholarship, which aimed to recreate his elusive historical figure.

In the introduction, Carr sets up the framework for his study. He briefly refers to the issues surrounding the orthodox approach to the studies of the prince, but states that they are not relevant for the purpose of his study because his focus is the prince as a subject of devotion, and not the historical figure. He clarifies that his use of the term “cult,” which can have pejorative connotations, refers to “a constellation of devotional practices, material culture, and shared narrative communities” (p. 6). Moreover, the term is used in plural form because the beliefs and practices associated with the prince were diverse over
time and regions. Carr also explains that his time frame for “medieval” is the beginning of the prince’s cults starting in the tenth-eleventh centuries and peaking around the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries. Importantly, he stresses that this is the first study to use the art historical material to explore how the stories about Shōtoku were “mapped onto the imagined and actual worlds of the medieval” (p. 11). By analyzing the paintings in the Picture Hall at Hōryūji, his aim is to demonstrate that the large-scale paintings representing the prince’s life functioned as “cognitive maps” that include narrative and topographic elements, but more importantly, give information about the structure of the minds and realities of the audience. Five chapters, an epilogue, an appendix, notes, a bibliography, and an index follow the introduction.

The book is appropriately divided into two parts as it contains two related but distinct topics. The first part entitled “Faces of Shōtoku: Cultic Identities through Time” has three chapters and presents an overview of the cults of the prince focusing on his multiple identities as an object of devotion and how these were visualized. The second part, “Mapping Shōtoku’s Tale: Cultic Identities in Place,” is dedicated to the study of the earliest extant example of large-scale pictorial representations of the prince’s hagiography, the one made in 1069 for the Picture Hall of Hōryūji. Consisting of two chapters, in this second part, Carr’s analysis of the complex composition of the paintings demonstrates that the intention of the patron and artists was to create a “cognitive map,” which was used by Hōryūji to locate itself as the center of the Buddhist world and importantly, the source for the cult of the prince.

Chapter 1 entitled “Ways to Tell a Sacred Life: Hagiographic Imagination in Medieval Japan” explains how the prince’s sacred identity progressed from a holy person to an incarnation of a Buddhist deity. Carr discusses the textual sources as well as the few sculptures and paintings related to the prince’s multiple devotional identities. He begins by explaining that the deification of the prince began in Nihon shoki (Chronicles of Japan, compiled in 720) where he is identified as a statesman and promoter of Buddhism, but also as a “holy person” (hijiri). He discusses the inscription on the mandorla of the Śākyamuni Triad in the Golden Hall of Hōryūji, which states that the image of the historical Buddha was made with the measurements of the sovereign (Prince Shōtoku). For this reason, Carr concludes that the Japanese prince must have been seen as an equivalent of Śākyamuni. The god-like nature of the prince is first mentioned in the Shōtoku Taishi denryaku (dated to the tenth century, hereafter Denryaku) where the priest from Paekche Ilia (Jp. Nichira) recognized him as a “divine person” (shinjin). Another element in the cult of the prince, addressed in length by Carr, is how narratives emphasize that Shōtoku was able to transcend the latter days of the Dharma (mappō). This last feature is particularly highlighted in