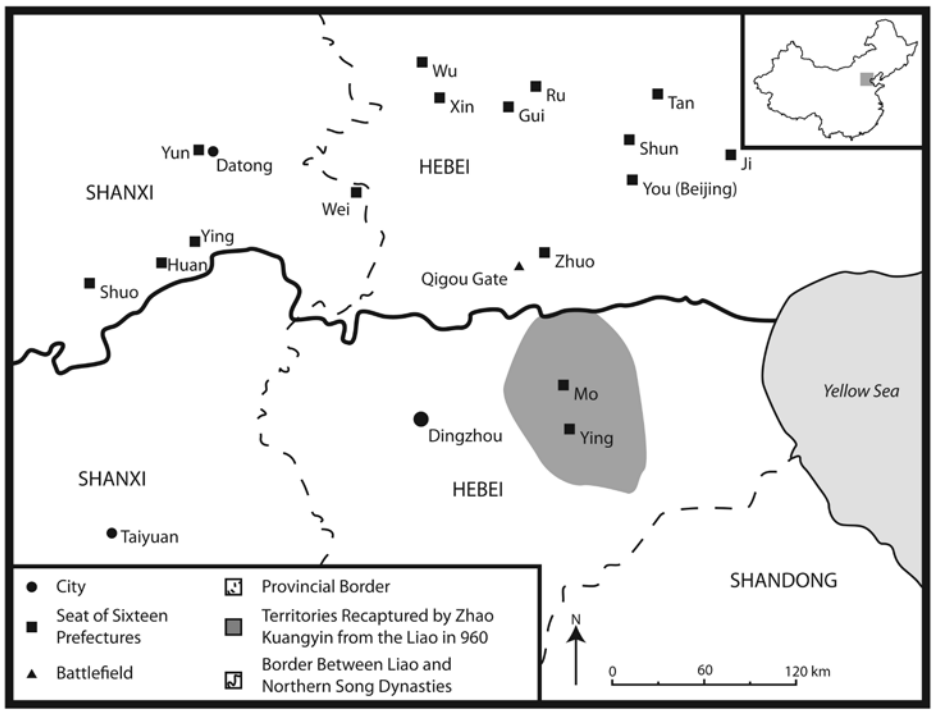
Chapter Four
Impermanent Burials: Relic Deposits

Master Zhaoguo was a survivor of war. Like the many residents of Dingzhou who lived in the decades following the fall of the Tang dynasty, the monk was caught in the relentless fighting between the invading Khitans and the native defenders from a succession of short-lived regimes better known in history books as the Five Dynasties (907–960).[1] After a particularly fierce battle in 947, Zhaoguo was captured and taken northward. Following years of captivity in Liao territories, the monk somehow managed to escape and returned home to rebuild Jingzhi Monastery, at which he was once the monastic residence head. A chance for renewal came one day, when the monk uncovered three secret relic deposits from the temple ground in 976 (Kaibao 9) under the recently established Song dynasty. The discovery immediately attracted generous support from several high-ranking government officials in the area and an eager congregation whose number grew by the day. Within a year, the relics along with numerous offerings were re-deposited under a newly built stone pagoda.[2]

Fruits of Master Zhaoguo's labor at Jingzhi Monastery came to light again in the modern era. In May 1969, a major archaeological discovery was made in the city center of Ding County, Hebei, where the temple once stood (map 4). While the pagoda above ground was destroyed a long time ago, what was put underground in 977 had been preserved intact for nearly a millennium. Altogether, the crypt yielded over twenty-five thousand coins and some seven hundred items of metalwork, jades, textiles, wood carvings, ceramic and glass wares, and stone caskets, along with a set of exquisite mural paintings rendered on the walls of the hidden brick structure.[3] The many donor inscriptions from the site indicate that some of objects were originally made for four previous deposits, but were reused in the latest round of interment in the tenth century.

In retrospect, the find at Jingzhi Monastery was one of over eighty relic deposits unearthed in the past fifty years across China, the majority of which date from the ninth to twelfth centuries.[4] This growing body of archaeological evidence shows that Buddhist relic worship had remained vibrant and widespread after an initial phase of development that was driven primarily by imperial rulers



Map 4
Northeastern China in the tenth century. Map by John M. Marston.

in the sixth and seventh centuries. In fact, the practice by then had permeated deeply into different segments of the population, thus becoming more conducive than ever toward local adaptation and reinvention. There is no better gauge of the situation than the nirvana image, which was one remarkable continuity throughout the history of relic worship in medieval China.

Previously, the motif appeared as a sophisticated narrative format under the Wu Zhou regime, which seized upon its symbolic richness as a propagandist tool to advance the empress's legitimation campaign. By the tenth century, the nirvana image had solidified its association with the relic cult by making the hidden space of relic deposits its new home. The motif's entry into the domain of the invisible necessarily spelled changes in medium, mode of presentation, contents, as well as in viewership, function, and intent. Perhaps the most revealing indicator of all was the breakup of the nirvana iconography into a mosaic of multi-media. In foregoing the compositional coherence that once held the various components together in a unified setting, the motif now manifested itself synecdochically on different objects in the deposit, whose placement within the assemblage did not always allow for ready identification as before. In some cases, one particular element—be it the reclining Buddha or the mourning audience—was featured

by itself without any supporting material in the same spatial vicinity. In other cases, different elements were made in disparate representational media as if in tandem, with one as the subject of a mural painting, and another in three-dimensional form as an object of offering, or a third as a verbal reference in a donor inscription.

The increasingly defused, malleable character of the nirvana image in relic deposits poses considerable challenges for researchers. The potential danger of misidentification is all too real, for a coffin-shaped metal reliquary alone does not denote the nirvana theme, especially without the presence of any other iconographic elements associated with the motif. On the other hand, any expectation of finding a full-blown rendition of the entire repertoire is unrealistic. As it turns out, pictorial nirvana narratives as we come to know them from the eighth century were rare in relic deposits of the later period.[5] To mitigate these two opposite concerns, the present study centers on specimens that can be identified as "nirvana images" by the inclusion of one or two classic components, namely, the reclining Buddha and the surrounding mourners.[6] Accordingly, there are nine dated deposits with nirvana images from the tenth to twelfth centuries, all made by patrons living in areas under the jurisdiction of the Northern Song.[7]

The many variations in which the nirvana image appeared in relic deposits point to diverse experimentations in utilizing the motif to amplify the allure and efficacy of the Buddhist relics. The present study aims to locate the significance of this complex phenomenon by focusing on two of the most important examples extant today, the aforementioned Jingzhi Monastery and the nearby Jingzhong Cloister, which was completed in 995 by the same network of patrons and monastic establishments in Dingzhou. The builders of these two sites inherited a number of characteristic features of Tang precedents and in turn adapted them in ways that better suited the specific needs of their time. In the process, they had also created unknowingly for today's researchers a veritable standard by which to measure what was to come in the next two centuries. The remarkable condition in which the two sites were preserved and the extensive inscriptional documentations that came with the finds have rendered them truly exceptional cases worthy of close analysis.

The two deposits of Dingzhou were each unique in illuminating different aspects of the relic worship tradition in China. The Jingzhi Monastery deposit, on the one hand, exemplified the increasing localization of the practice, whereby

the abstract notion of the Buddha's relics were rendered more palatable by being featured as a source of local pride and patriotic feelings. At Jingzhong Cloister, on the other hand, an expanded definition of relics had occurred, which coincided with the growing interest in making the remains of Buddhist monks a viable object of devotion. In broad historical terms, both developments were emblematic of a fundamental change in the place of the Buddhist faith in Chinese society, as it had evolved into what Makita Tairyō has called "the people's Buddhism" in the mid Tang period and onward.[8] By then most Buddhist monastic communities were fully integrated into the local population across the country. People from all walks of life would rely on these neighborhood establishments to address more immediate concerns in their lives via the various "Buddhist-inspired options" available, which did not always follow the templates promoted by the central authority in the capital.[9] Under these circumstances, it was remarkable that relic worship became an instant hit almost everywhere in the tenth century. Its popularity drew not only on a colorful history of imperial precedents which could readily be emulated at the local level, but also on a simplicity in message that allowed for greater participation by believers of all kinds.[10]

Crucially, the nirvana image played an indispensable role in the development of relic worship throughout the Five Dynasties and Song period. Its prominence in the two Dingzhou sites points to a sophisticated use of the motif in defining the kind and symbolic values of the relics housed therein. The high level of visuality thus elicited raises questions concerning viewership and the very act of seeing in the hidden space of relic deposits. To be sure, what has hitherto been referred to as a "relic deposit" was typically an assemblage of material objects purposefully set up to accompany the relics inside a sealed underground structure in brick or stone, which was located at the foundation level of a pagoda (known as *digong* 地宮) or aboveground inside the structure's main pillar (*tiangong* 天宮).[11] Because many of the aboveground pagodas were destroyed long before the modern era, the discoveries of any deposits in their original setting have given rise to the impression that the underground structure was like a tomb.

Indeed, one pervading interpretation of relic deposits from medieval China is to treat this unique type of architectural space as a form of tomb burial that had remained permanently inaccessible to the living once sealed.[12] The rationale behind this approach stems from the fact that a pagoda crypt was built with many trappings of a tomb, whose design often dovetailed the latest trends in

funerary architecture of the time. While such formal similarities ought not to be disputed, it is also critical to stress the fundamental differences between the two architectural types. This is precisely where viewership becomes important to our discussion.

The two sites in Dingzhou provide us with compelling evidence to argue against the "tomb" interpretation from two distinct angles. First, the fundamental contradiction lodged in the relic deposit's working logic as an impermanent burial was thoroughly exposed by the history of the Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt. A series of five deposits and rediscoveries at the site demonstrates that each deposit was made to be seen insofar as the contents were meticulously preserved for a future generation to inherit and pass on to the next. Moreover, each generation of devotees seems to have become increasingly self-conscious of the legacy they would leave behind and thus furnished the deposit to the effects of such awareness. As a result, the kind of objects retained from previous deposits and the new items added to complement them came to be revealing traces of meaning that were attached to each round of reburial.

Second, with the example of the Jingzhong Cloister crypt, the elemental difference in function between tombs and relic deposits is made clear by the treatment of the very subject of burial, the relics of the Buddha as opposed to a dead human body. What makes the Jingzhong Cloister such an interesting case is that the deposit was built to enshrine the cremated remains of a prominent local monk as if they were authentic relics from the Buddha's body. This monastic sanctification process was carried out via a rich assemblage of offerings and a mural program that made use of the nirvana image to symbolically conflate the subject of burial with the Buddha Śākyamuni. The purpose and logic behind such an unusual handling of the body were fundamentally different from what has been found in tombs of the time.

Aside from resisting the likening of a relic deposit to that of a tomb burial, the present study also de-emphasizes the ritual usage of this space by the lay congregation who sponsored its construction.[13] Although the structure was likely consecrated by monks before installing the relics and all the accompanying offerings therein, it would have been too small to accommodate any large crowd inside for the actual ceremonies. Moreover, as in the case of the two Dingzhou sites, the pictorial program would have lost much of its impact without the assemblage of offerings nearby, whose installation inside the structure left

practically no room for anything else. Rather than perpetuating the separatist approach, one objective of the present study is to stress and account for the interconnectedness between the deposit contents and the spatial environment that housed them. To this end, the ensuing analysis examines the dynamic correlations between the three components that constituted a full-fledged relic deposit like what was found in Dingzhou: the assemblage of offerings and ritual implements, crypt structure, and the pictorial subjects that decorated its interior. In coming to terms with such a complex amalgamation of meanings in one setting, it is vital to keep in mind that the relics housed inside were the very reason for making the deposit in the first place. Each configuration of architecture, painting, and material assemblage had thus encapsulated a specific moment of understanding of what these precious pieces meant to each local community of devotees.

In furnishing the relic deposits, the devotees of Dingzhou were clearly more concerned with preserving what they knew about the present than speculating on what the future would be. It seems that regardless of when the rediscovery would occur, the deposit was well prepared to be self-sufficient in explaining the key contents to whoever would chance upon the find. The anticipation of the space's future can thus be seen as a projection of the same system of praxis and mindset as the present generation would find in their own living reality. This presumed continuity is evident in the appropriation of familiar devotional practices for the making of the deposit. Not only did the builders rely heavily on existing templates from urban monasteries and cave temples for the creation of pictorial programs, donors also followed the same pattern of sponsorship in commissioning offerings for the relics as they would for Buddhist icons in temples of their own neighborhood. In storing these objects of devotion away in a hidden space, however, the devotees had turned the deposit space into something distinctly different from any built environment of everyday life. The crypt now became a curious middle ground where the present had prepared to meet the future, however distant and unspecified as it might appear. It was a place vested with the hope that the relics along with all the sumptuous offerings around them would be rediscovered and treasured by those sharing the same values and concerns as the previous generations. Writing to commemorate a new deposit made in 1078, a monk at Ganlu Monastery of Runzhou eloquently summed up the situation: "From now to the future, we do not know how many hundreds or thousands of years it would pass, during which there will be times of decay and flourish, before

those destined will rely on their will power to chance on this place. Since it is impossible to predict, we hereby record the history encapsulated in the completion of this pagoda. The present moment is the eighth day in the fourth month of the Yuanfeng first year [1078]."[14]

The present characterization of relic deposit as an impermanent burial also helps better account for its complex, symbiotic relationship with the pagoda. The history of Jingzhi Monastery shows that each rediscovery of the relics had provided the justification for the construction or restoration of a pagoda. That the fate of a deposit space was so closely linked to the material condition of its affiliated pagoda suggests a course of coexistence that constantly alternated between flourish and decay, with the two architectural units taking turns to represent each state. In this schema of things, an immaculate pagoda tended to signal a period of strength and prosperity for Buddhism, which in turn called for dormancy of the relics. But when the pagoda entered into a state of disuse and dilapidation, the relics would then become active and visible in order to bring about the renewal of the structure and by extension the Buddhist community at large. The dynamic relationship between the pagoda and deposit in many ways can be taken as a metaphor for the rise and decline of Buddhism in cycles. Given the kind of evidence available today, the scenario hitherto described may not ever be fully substantiated as historical reality for all cases. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the idealism that fueled the conception of a relic deposit as a timed self-rescue, for it underlined a universal reason to strive for permanence in life and in death. As long as the world is subject to change, the intention to overcome impermanence and to ensure the survival of their faith would always be on the mind of the Buddha's followers.

True Body Relics of Jingzhi Monastery

The deposit at Jingzhi Monastery yielded a particular kind of Buddhist relics known as the "True Body Relics," or *zhenshen sheli* 真身舍利 in Chinese. The term carried rather specific connotations, especially after it had attained widespread prevalence in the ninth century. When appropriated to describe the remains purported to have come from the Buddha's body, the "True Body" qualification was an imperfect solution that Buddhist thinkers reached in explaining the complex ontology of the Buddha's body here and now on the one hand, and in asserting the relevance of the Buddha in the devotees' lives on the other hand.[15]

What we have in the Dingzhou deposit, however, appears to have been a far more straightforward application of the term: namely, to denote the age and pedigree of the relics that local devotees had inherited from the past.

When discovered in 1969, the relics were stored inside a large stone case set against the lower center of the north wall (hereafter Stone Case A; fig. 4.1). In the upper area of the same wall (fig. 4.2), a cartouche, written in ink and framed on all sides with a border, declares the contents of the stone case: "The True Body Relics of Śākyamuni Buddha" (Appendix 5G). Without providing any photographs of the relics, the initial excavation report only states that inside Stone Case A were numerous containers, many with silvers, jades, crystals, ambers, pearls and glass wares inside, while others held bone ashes mixed with marble stone fragments.[16] Despite the lack of specific information from the report writers, the many inscriptional records accompanying the deposit contents have made it clear

Fig. 4.2
Veneration of the Buddha's relics by ten disciples. North wall, Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 977, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Table 4 The Five Relic Deposits at Jingzhi Monastery

Date of Deposit (day/month/reign year)	Major Items in Deposit	Date of Rediscovery (day/month/reign year)	Reason of Discovery/ Location of Reburial
453 (5/11/Xing'an 2)	Four relics and Small Stone Case B	603 (29/5/Renshou 3)	Construction of pagoda; same location
606 (8/10/Daye 2)	The above, plus Stone Case A; epitaph; gilt bronze case	849 (?/10/Dazhong 3)	Renovation of Maitreya Hall; new pagoda
858 (8/4/Dazhong 12)	The above, plus two relics in a stone pagoda from Tianyou Temple	889 (?/4/Longji 1)	Renovation of pagoda crypt; same location
889 (25/7/Longji 1)	The above; two stone coffins (one with lid, one without)	976 (?/10/Kaibao 9)	Recovery of relics; new pagoda
977 (22/5/Taiping Xingguo 2)	Contents from three locations; hundreds of new items	May, 1969	Ground work at local power plant

that what the relics meant to different generations of devotees in Dingzhou was determined not so much by their actual physical properties as by the objects that were assembled around them.

Simply put, what was found in 1969 was the accumulation of five separate relic burials made at Jingzhi Monastery over the course of five hundred years, specifically in the years of 453, 606, 858, 889, and 977. Table 4 enumerates some of the basic facts concerning each burial. Each of the five deposits had contributed a different layer of meanings to the Buddhist relics housed at Jingzhi Monastery. The selection of objects and their placement within the assemblage were vital to defining what these elusive entities meant in the minds of the devotees. Upon a closer examination, the long history of repeated burials and rediscoveries can be understood in terms of two main phases prior to the tenth century. The earlier period in large part pertains to a crucial deposit from 606, which was assembled in a time when the Sui imperial house actively promoted Buddhist relic worship countrywide. The second phase commenced in the ninth century with the appearance of the term "True Body Relics" in Dingzhou for the first time. This new identity was to remain in place until the deposit of 977. Not only were many key objects from the earlier deposits retained for the new round of burial, hundreds of new items were added to commemorate the occasion as well. The

resulting assemblage was in many ways the fullest expression of an unflinching belief among devotees of Jingzhi Monastery in the continued relevance of Buddhist relics in their lives. As if by dint of their magical power, these sacred fragments managed to galvanize believers at yet another critical moment in Dingzhou's history, bringing them hope as much as pride in their native land.

Two Early Deposits

Jingzhi Monastery first became a site of relic worship in the mid fifth century, when four pieces of relics were buried underneath the pagoda for the first time. By all accounts, this deposit must have been a rather modest affair. When it was unearthed in 603 during a repair of the pagoda, only a stone case containing four pieces of relics was reported in the find.[17] The same container had been passed on in all subsequent relic burials, and was found against the west wall on top of an upside-down stone lid in 1969 (hereafter Stone Case B; fig. 4.3). An inscriptional fragment on one side of the case confirms the Northern Wei date of 453, or "the second year of Xing'an reign in the Great Dynasty" (Appendix 5A).

Although it was not documented in any official records of the time, the first recovery of relics at Jingzhi Monastery was likely well received by the local devotees. The fact that the event took place in 603—i.e., between the second and third rounds of the Renshou redistribution campaign under Sui Emperor Wendi—is especially illuminating. After all, Dingzhou was one of the first thirty prefectures to receive relics from the capital Chang'an, and the local Buddhist community must have been sensitized to spotting any additional signs of sympathetic resonance or divine approval in the vicinity.[18] There is thus every reason to believe that the recovered relics were preserved with care and reverence. The rather elaborate nature of the deposit of 606 is another good indicator.

In addition to four pieces of relics and Stone Case B, the deposit of 606 incorporated a number of newly made items, including Stone Case A with a stone epitaph placed on top, a square gilt bronze box with intricate pictorial motifs and decors all around (hereafter Gilt Bronze Case C; fig. 4.4), a silver pagoda model, and two glass jars (fig. 4.21). These containers comprised the various layers in the deposit contents, each punctuating a key stage in a complex process of assembling. A passage from an inscription recording their rediscovery in 849 provides a crucial description of the original configuration:

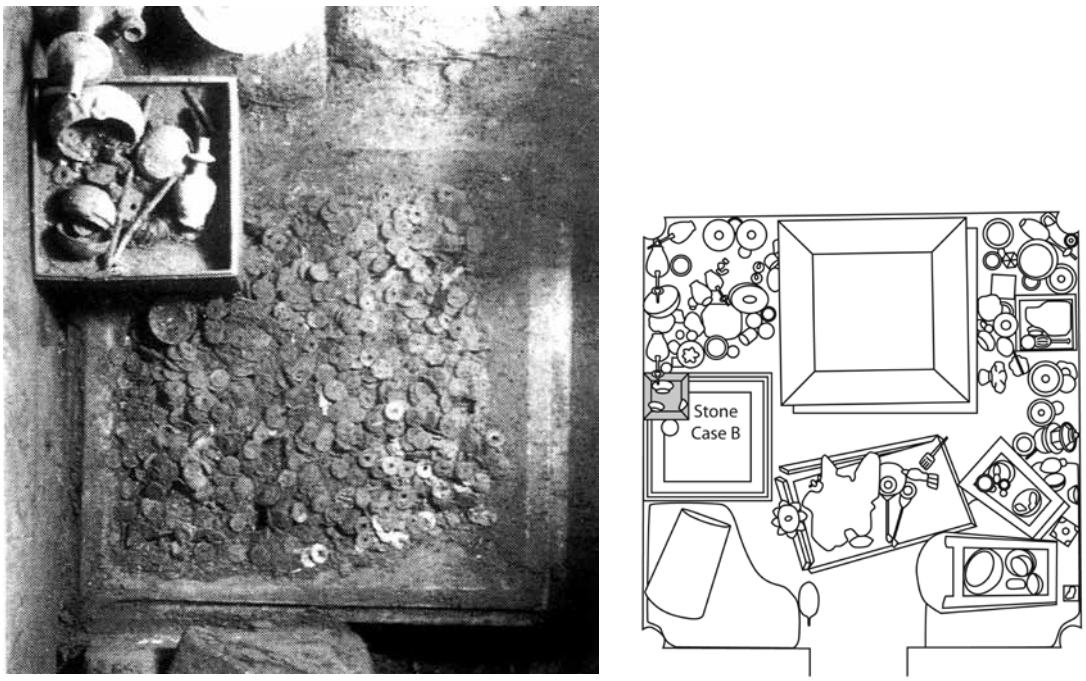
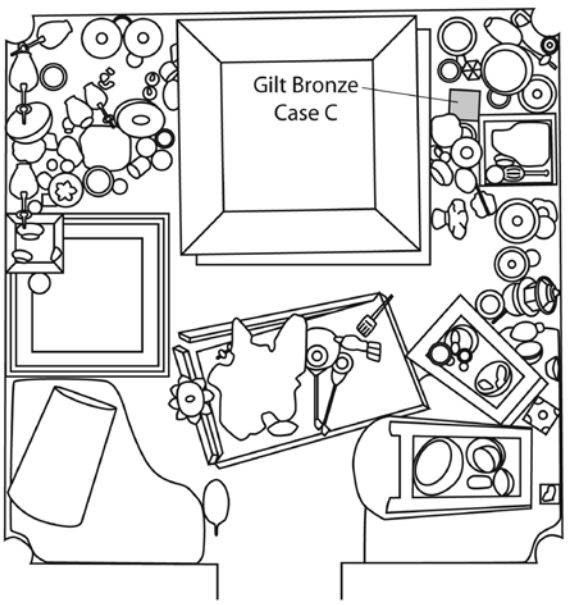


Fig. 4.3
Stone case dated 453 (Stone Case B), with diagram showing its position upon discovery in 1969. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo. Diagram by John M. Marston, adapted from Idemitsu Museum of Art, *Chika kyūden no kenhō*, fig. 13 on page 30.

> In the tenth month of the following year [849], from the area in front of the great Maitreya statue, which was once the foundation of [a pagoda], we unearthed two stone cases, one large and one small. The large case contained four jade-like figures, pins in gold and silver, numerous ritual implements, and a metal case in which were found seven layers of wrapped brocades. Inside the silver pagoda were two glass jars, the smaller one in white, the larger one in blue. They were nested in one another, their color constant and clear. They held true masses [inside], some clustering together, and some remaining separate. These pellets were resonant in appearance, and were accompanied by a plaque. (Appendix 5Db lines 7–10)

The 606 deposit was also referred to in a dedicatory inscription on Gilt Bronze Case C, which was also made the same year: "In addition, we made a precious canopy in pure gold, glass jars and others. They were then amassed and stacked together, amounting to seven layers from outside to inside" (Appendix 5B). Despite its brevity, this record is significant not only because it dates from the time of the deposit, but also because it contains a self-reference for the case as "a precious canopy."

Fig. 4.4
Gilt bronze case dated 606 (Gilt Bronze Case C), with diagram showing its position upon discovery in 1969. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo. Diagram by John M. Marston, adapted from Idemitsu Museum of Art, *Chika kyūden no kenhō*, fig. 13 on page 30.



Based on these two passages, we are able to piece together the method of multiple encasements, which was in use to prepare the relics for interment in Sui times. It was a procedure involving the careful nesting of containers made of various materials, in different shapes, and of graduating sizes. The seven layers mentioned in the record from 606 can each be identified by the objects described in the passages (the number in parentheses denotes the order of appearance from the outside):[19] The outermost layer was represented by a large stone case (1), which provided the necessary durability to protect its contents; the next level was comprised of a case made of precious metal (2), which contained

sheets of wrapped textiles (3); inside was a silver pagoda (4) with two glass jars that were nesting in one another (5 and 6); the relic pieces (7) are reported to have been stored inside the small white jar. In between these layers of receptacles were interspersed a wide range of accessories, ritual implements, and ornaments made of precious stones such as jade and amber.

When cross-checked with other period sources and archaeological evidence available today, the deposit made in 606 at Jingzhi Monastery was by and large typical of the conventions in currency at the time. The seven-layer encasement, for example, matches in description the veritable prototype from Emperor Wendi's relic redistribution campaigns. Each of the first thirty assemblages of relics sent out from the capital in 601 purports to have included a stone case, a bronze case sealed by fragrant incense mud, a glass jar, and at the innermost layer a gold jar that contained the relics.[20] This configuration must have been kept unchanged for other assemblages used in the two subsequent campaigns, for one such example from the third round (604) was discovered at Yaoxian, Shaanxi, in 1969.[21] This find outside Xi'an essentially affirms what was recorded in textual accounts of the time.

Of the many items from the 606 deposit, Stone Case A was unquestionably the anchor of the entire deposit. Not only did it provide the outermost layer of protection for the relics, it was also the very medium of documentation by which the sacred fragments were identified. At the center of both its lid and the epitaph placed on top are two crucial inscriptions. On the former, the dedication date and the function of the case were engraved in large, imposing characters: "This is an inscription for the precious case of relics, dedicated on the eighth or *jichou* day of the tenth or *renwu* month in the second or *bingyin* year of the Daye reign in the Great Sui" (Appendix 5C). On the latter, the inscription is more detailed in relating the nature of the relics and the various circumstances leading to the making of the deposit (fig. 4.5; Appendix 5Da). The presence of these inscriptions lends authority to the stone case, as the written word helps transform the container into the most palpable visual representative of the entire assemblage. Indeed, it can even be argued that the very design of the stone case was to optimize its dualistic function as a receptacle and as a documentary of the relics.

Stone Case A comprises essentially two parts (fig. 4.1): a square base with a height that is half of its length and width, and a large lid in the shape of a truncated pyramid with four sloping sides and a thick wall at the bottom. Other

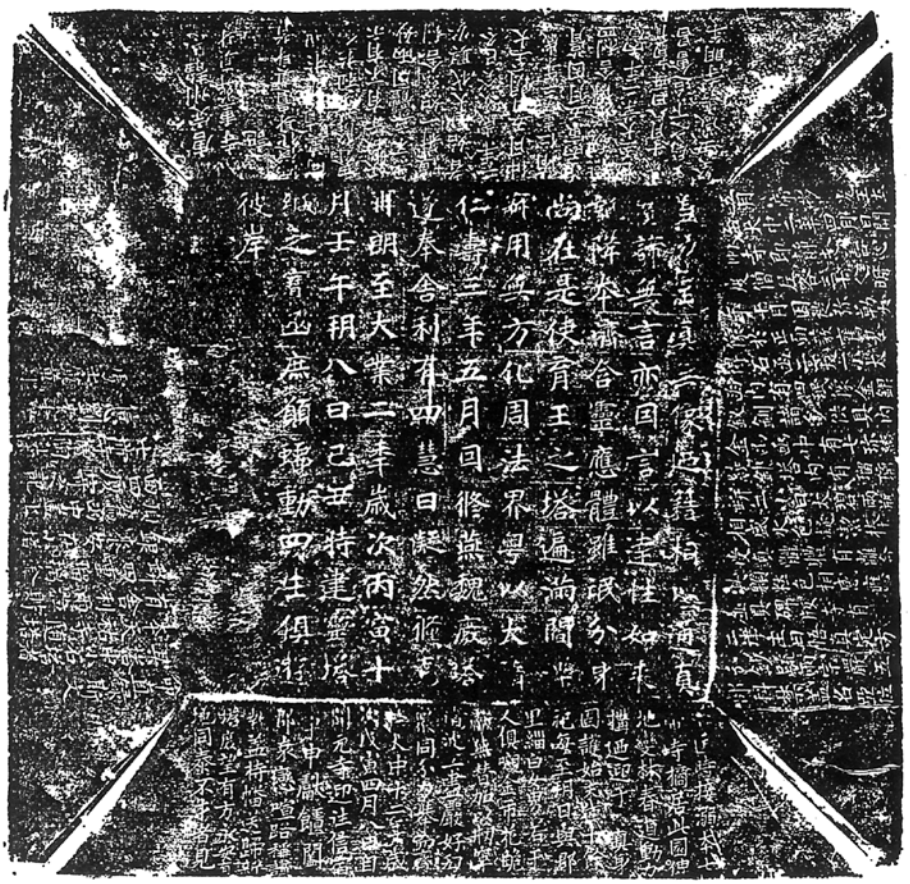


Fig. 4.5, right
Ink rubbing of inscriptions on an epitaph dated 606 and 858. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou Hebei. From Dingzhou xian bowuguan, "Hebei Dingxian," fig. 14.

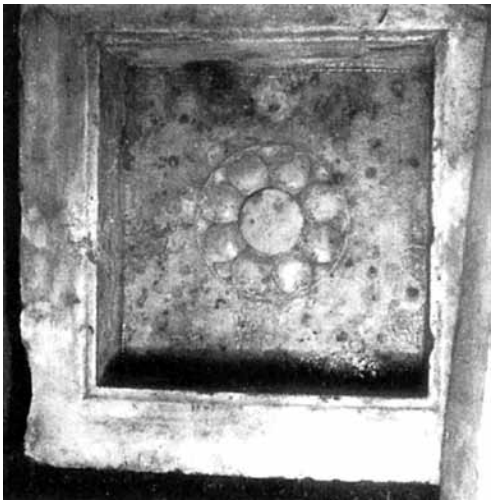
Fig. 4.6, opposite above
Lotus pattern on the bottom of Stone Case A. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

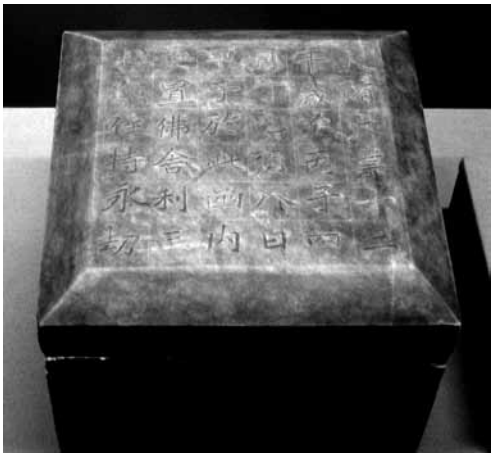
Fig. 4.7, opposite below
Stone case dated 616. From the Leiyin Cave, Yunju Monastery, Fangshan, Beijing. Beijing Capital Museum. Photograph by the author.

than the inscription engraved at the center of the lid, there is no other form of decoration on the exterior, which contrasts sharply with the interior in which the bottom was decorated with a large lotus flower in low relief (fig. 4.6). Due to the thick walls that make up the case body, there is rather limited space inside, but the recessed interior of the lid does at least provide some additional headroom for the objects placed within. Upon discovery, a square stone epitaph was found on top of Stone Case A. Its truncated pyramidal shape and diminished size gives the impression that the epitaph was a literal extension of the lid.

The inclusion of stone epitaphs in relic deposits has been noted as a feature borrowed from contemporary burial practices.[22] While archaeological evidence from tombs of the fifth and sixth centuries does support this interpretation, the same set of data also reminds us that the use of large stone cases like the one from Jingzhi Monastery did not originate in tomb burials. In fact, no tombs in Sui and Tang times have yet yielded any comparable examples, and the only sites that have

were all relic deposits.[23] That the design of these stone cases was rooted largely in relic worship of the time is further corroborated by the discovery of two Sui specimens in the area around Dingzhou: respectively Zhengding County in Hebei and the Leiyin Cave of Fangshan outside Beijing.[24] Although the stone cases unearthed at these two sites are smaller in size than the Jingzhi Monastery example, they all share basic similarities in design and the use of inscription. On the lids, as shown in the specimen from Fangshan (fig. 4.7), either the main donor's name or a wish is included in the record, along with the date of dedication and the characteristic reference to their basic function as a physical receptacle of the relics.[25] Interestingly, a Northern Wei relic deposit dating from 481, discovered in Ding County in 1966, also yielded a stone case that had a nearly identical design as all our Sui examples (fig. 4.8).[26] Together with Stone Case B from the Jingzhi deposit, there is no question that the use of stone reliquaries in the northeast can be traced as far back in time as the mid fifth century.





The close association in design of Stone Case A with the Sui period must have been heeded by later discoverers at Jingzhi Monastery. Its appeal was undeniable, especially given its imposing size and the powerful presence of the dedicatory inscription engraved on the lid. It thus comes as no surprise that Stone Case A was reverently retained as the preferred receptacle of relics in two subsequent deposits in the ninth century (858 and 889). Likewise, the epitaph was reused for the engraving of a crucial inscription from 858 along the four sloping sides. In the deposit of 977 too, the set was again chosen to occupy the most crucial position, directly underneath the "True Body Relics" plaque on the north wall. A close examination of the two deposits from the ninth century reveals that the symbolic significance of Stone Case A was first recognized in the later period, and that this heightened awareness was to be continued in the final reburial a century later.

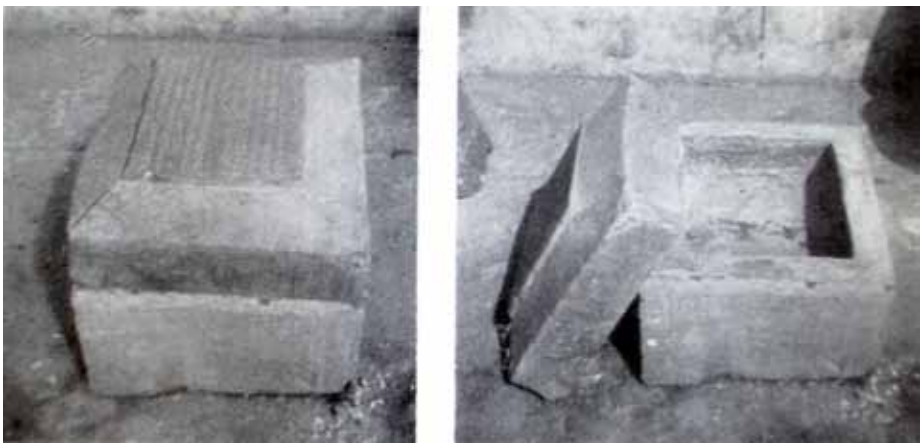


Fig. 4.8, right
Stone case dated 481. From Ding County, Hebei. From Hebei sheng wenwuju wenwu gongzuodui, "Hebei Dingxian chutu," fig. 3 on plate 5.

Fig. 4.9, opposite
Ink rubbing of an inscription dated 977. Foundation wall, Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei. From Dingzhou xian bowuguan, "Hebei Dingxian," fig. 6.

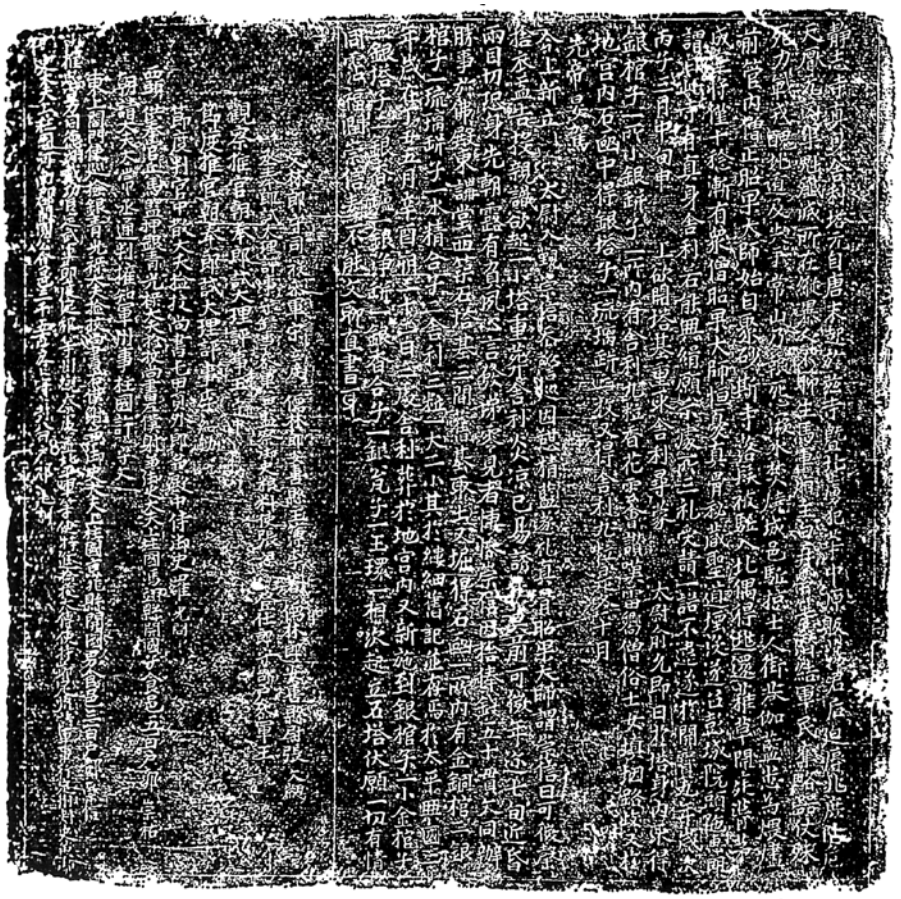
The Ninth Century

The two inscriptions respectively from 858 and 889, along with a long donor record from 977 that was inscribed on the foundation wall of the pagoda crypt (fig. 4.9), provide us with some crucial information on the development of relic worship in ninth-century Dingzhou. Perhaps the most noticeable change from Sui times was the addition of metal relic caskets to the stone case contents, a practice which was first initiated in the 858 deposit and continued in the next two rounds. In retrospect, the use of these miniature coffin-shaped containers began only in the second half of the seventh century in China. One of the earliest records is associated with Empress Wu Zetian's donation of a set of "golden coffins and silver caskets" to honor the relics at Famen Monastery in 659.[27] The Chinese term *jinguan yinguo* 金棺銀槨 refers to a category of relic receptacles whose design was quite distinct from what had been in use before. In all the pertinent descriptions of the Renshou redistribution campaigns, for example, the large containers made for the relic assemblages were described as a *han* 函 (i.e., a case), to be prefixed by an adjective denoting its material like stone, gold, silver, or bronze; smaller containers, on the other hand, were typically referred to as a *ping* 鉼 or 瓶 (i.e., a jar).[28] The three aforementioned Sui deposits from Yaoxian (604), Zhengding (605), and Fangshan (616) further confirm that no coffin-shaped containers were ever found at these sites.[29]

While the development of coffin-shaped reliquaries is a complex topic that requires more in-depth discussion than what can be provided here, suffice it now to say that the introduction of this new category of objects at Jingzhi Monastery

coincided with some fundamental changes in relic worship practices that gained prevalence in ninth-century China. Indeed, it was no mere coincidence that these relic caskets became popular at a time when the notion of "True Body Relics" was adopted locally as well. At Jingzhi Monastery, the two trends converged within the space of the pagoda crypt, as the term was used to describe the relics for the very first time in an inscription that was added in 858 to the stone epitaph from Sui times.

Entitled "A Record concerning the Reburial of the 'True Body' at Jingzhi Monastery of Dingzhou in the Tang Dynasty," the inscription relates the rediscovery of the relics in 849, following the devastating persecution of Buddhism during the Huichang era (Appendix 5Db). The find could not have come at a more opportune time, for Jingzhi Monastery had reached a particularly low point in its existence as a religious institution. Like thousands of smaller



temples throughout the empire, it was forced into closure by the imperial court in 844.[30] The situation remained dire until the new emperor Xuanzong ascended the throne after the death of Wuzong in 847. An imperial edict issued in the same year to restore abandoned monasteries countrywide had a considerable impact in Dingzhou, as two local monasteries were reopened in 848 with thirty monks and nuns residing at each.[31] But the true sign of the revival came in the fall of 849, when the deposit from 606 was rediscovered in an area in front of the great Maitreya statue. The relics immediately became the focal point of devotional activities in the area, with monks and laymen alike gathering in front for worship every first day of the month. This state of affairs continued for nearly ten years, until a new pagoda was finally completed and the relics were reburied after a lavish ceremony in May, 858.

The prolonged exposure to the relics in the decade following the discovery of 849 must have allowed devotees in Dingzhou to reflect more deeply on their meaning and legacy. The new understanding is clearly evident in how the relics are characterized throughout the inscription from 858. The short exposition on the nature of True Body Relics that begins the text is a case in point: "From his Transformation Body the Buddha left behind his True Body. They spread to foreign towns and over the world; they brought fortune to [heaven?]. This is why they show they are there but [in fact] not there, and why they show nonexistence but are [in fact] not absent. The two wonders are in one mass body, just like flourish and quiet are one" (Appendix 5Db lines 2–3). The rhetorical contrast of the two extremes that the relics conjure simultaneously highlights their unpredictability as much as their ability to work wonders. This portrayal of relics as some animate entities with magical power marks a notable departure from what we see in the earlier inscriptions from the Sui, in which the same relics were noted rather matter-of-factly for their physicality in terms of number and location. I would argue that the change in part resulted from local efforts to enhance the pedigree of the relics at Jingzhi Monastery by modeling after the relic cult at the famed Famen Monastery outside Chang'an. The motivation stemmed not so much from rivalry between the two monasteries as from an interest in taking advantage of the tremendous popularity of a national cult for local gains.

Without a doubt one of the most celebrated sites of relic worship in the Buddhist world, Famen Monastery of Fufeng was home to the legendary finger bone of the Buddha Śākyamuni. What is of particular relevance to us here is a

history of repeated reappearances that the relic had made since the early Tang. In fact, the tradition came to be identified with a thirty-year cycle, in which the reigning emperor would play a key role in bringing the relic out of the pagoda crypt and putting it on display in the capital for worship by the entire population.[32] The imperial sponsorship of all the related festivities was very much part of the political calculations by Tang rulers in manipulating religious sentiments to garner popular support. But for most devotees, the reappearance of the relic out of the invisible realm was a most special occasion on which one would have the opportunity to be in the presence of the Buddha via his physical remains and thereby achieve a deeper connection with one's faith.[33] Yearnings for such spiritual affirmation and renewal must have reached a fever pitch after the traumatic Huichang persecution that lasted from 844 to 847. For this reason there have been speculations that Emperor Xuanzong might well have planned to carry out another round of relic veneration at Famen Monastery, as there had not been any such official welcoming since 819.[34] Regardless of what actually happened in Fufeng, the court's indisputable interest in reviving the Buddhist faith did contribute to an increase in the discoveries of relics countrywide in the first few years of Xuanzong's reign.[35] In response to the favorable condition of the time, Buddhist devotees everywhere were all too eager to rebuild dilapidated pagodas, or simply to dig for old relics buried underground in order to search for signs of divine approval. It was precisely under such circumstances that the relics at Jingzhi Monastery came to light again in the ninth century.

To make sense of the newly rediscovered relics, the devotees in Dingzhou apparently turned to the Famen Monastery cult for inspiration, comparison, and appropriation. Perhaps the most revealing point of connection was the borrowing of the term "True Body" to describe the relics at Jingzhi Monastery. At Famen Monastery, the term was first applied to the finger bone relic in 710, when Emperor Zhongzong renamed the pagoda as the "Precious Pagoda for the True Body of the Great Sage."[36] The nomenclature had since then become closely identified with this particular relic in Buddhist literature, in part acknowledging its age and accepted authenticity from the Buddha's body.[37] At Jingzhi Monastery as well, the legacy of the "True Body" at Famen Monastery was very much on the mind of the writer of the 858 inscription, for he deliberately recast the local relics in light of their famous counterpart in the capital. First, he made an effort to retrace the long history of the relics back to the time of Northern Wei, which

also marked the beginning of Famen Monastery. Then, he duly noted the "resonant appearance" of the relics, which could only be the manifestation of a deity with transcendental power like the Buddha. But the most persuasive parallel that the writer made use of was the miraculous find of the relics in 849 along with all the historic artifacts from Sui times. The event was taken as the ultimate proof of the history and efficacy of the Dingzhou fragments as on par with the finger bone in Fufeng. This blatant assimilation was wholeheartedly embraced by the entire community, when the new pagoda was named "The True Body Relic Pagoda of Jingzhi Monastery."[38] This new title thus made the temple the only other extant case after Famen Monastery to have acquired the "True Body" designation in the ninth century.[39]

The "True Body" designation was to remain a crucial part of the identity of the Jingzhi Monastery relics in subsequent times. Until the tenth century, the term had not been deployed as consciously as before, but some of the qualifications that constituted its very definition were maintained. For one thing, the connection with Famen Monastery seems to have been kept alive purposefully by the locals. After the relics were reburied in the fourth month of 858, they were once again unearthed in the fourth month of 889, thus marking an exact thirty-one-year interval that no doubt evoked the thirty-year cycle associated with the finger bone relic. For another, in the only inscriptional record that has survived from the deposit made in that year—found on the exterior of a stone coffin made to accompany the reburial—there is a characterization of the relics as "simultaneously hidden and revealing, separated and conjoined" (Appendix 5E line 2). While the term "True Body" was not used in the text, the phrase here does remind us of the description from the 858 inscription cited above.

Significantly, the deposit of 889 introduced some changes to the configuration of the relic assemblage that would bear enormous impact on the next round of reburial in 977. The splitting up of the deposit contents into multiple installments and the possible loss of some items are two most notable developments. The foundation wall inscription from 977 states that Master Zhaoguo uncovered relics from three different places in that year, first inside the "pagoda frame" (*tashen* 塔身), then inside the "pagoda crypt" (*digong* 地宮), and finally outside in an area "east of the Buddha Hall and west of the Lecture Hall" (Appendix 5F lines 9, 11, and 17). At the first location, there were nine relics stored inside a small silver jar that was in turn nested inside a silver casket. The

second location yielded another set of nine relics, together with what appears to be Stone Case A, the silver pagoda, and glass jar from the 606 deposit. Three additional relics were discovered outside the pagoda in a stone case that held two gilt bronze caskets, one silver casket, one glass jar, and two crystals (Appendix 5F lines 18–19). From the description, it is clear that the basic configuration of the previous deposit was essentially preserved, as demonstrated by the location of the find inside the pagoda crypt. However, the inscription gives no explanation as to what had led to the sudden increase in the number of relics and deposit locations. The way the topic is broached at the beginning of the text does imply that the plan to split up and hide the assemblage in three separate places was a precaution taken in response to the growing instability in the area that resulted from the disintegration of central authority at the end of the Tang dynasty and the encroachment of the Khitans from the north.[40] That Master Zhaoguo is said to have known about the secret of the monastery and consulted an old monk to find the relics is a revealing clue to the situation. Why he chose to recover the finds in 976 and how he reintegrated the contents are two key questions to address in determining the significance of the deposit made the following year.

A Deposit for a New Era

A little more than a year after Master Zhaoguo made the first discovery at Jingzhi Monastery, the relics were re-deposited on June 11, 977. The remarkable speed with which the deposit was completed was due largely to the generous sponsorship of a number of high-ranking Northern Song officials stationed in the area, including the commander of the Song army Qi Tingxun. Their involvement underscores an indisputable connection with national politics that had a profound impact on the temple and Dingzhou at large. Indeed, the foundation wall inscription from 977 clearly shows that Master Zhaoguo was well aware of the local implications from the beginning. Not only did he ask Qi for permission to proceed with the recovery of the first batch of relics inside the pagoda frame, the monk later persuaded the commander to donate fifty thousand cashes for the construction of a new pagoda.[41] Through their collaboration, both parties had come to acknowledge that the Jingzhi Monastery relics were inextricably tied to the survival of the entire community, a conviction which led them to go to such extraordinary lengths to ensure the well-being of these sacred fragments.

National Politics, Local Events

To better understand the political circumstances related to the deposit of 977, we may turn briefly to Dingzhou's place in the history of North China around the mid tenth century. Located just south of the border with the Liao empire, the prefecture was in one of the most fiercely contested territories in East Asia (map 4). After the fall of the Tang dynasty, Dingzhou first came under the control of the Later Jin (936–946), a puppet regime of the Liao, and then the Later Zhou (951–960), from which the future Song dynasty was to emerge.[42] Indeed, Dingzhou bore particularly close ties to the Song not only because it was part of its power base from the beginning, but also because the dynastic founder Zhao Kuangyin was the very general under Later Zhou who in 960 succeeded in retaking Mozhou and Yingzhou, two of the sixteen prefectures east of Dingzhou that were ceded to the Khitans in 938. While the first emperor was preoccupied with consolidating the rest of the country in the following decade, there had been constant military actions along the northern border since the founding of the new dynasty. For example, the Song army won a major battle over the Khitans at Dingzhou in 970, when General Tian Qinzuo succeeded in fencing off over sixty thousand Liao cavalry from the prefecture with only three thousand men.[43] In 976, the first emperor once again turned his attention to the north by launching a long-awaited campaign against the Later Han, the only remaining holdout state based in Taiyuan, Shanxi. This was intended to be the first step toward securing the northern front and paving the way for the recapture of the other ceded prefectures from the Liao.

In Dingzhou, Master Zhaoguo and his congregation must have followed the military campaign closely, as Taiyuan was only some two hundred kilometers away to the west. His decision to bring out the relics at this crucial moment in time was no doubt politically motivated. The fact that he was able to recover the relics on the same day he received the permission from Commander Qi reveals the working of a premeditated plan to coincide the discovery of relics with a worldly event. Emperor Taizu's offensive against the Later Han was likely what the monk had waited for, as it would have made the long-cherished dream of ridding the north altogether of the hated Khitans all the more tangible. The trauma of enduring the Liao invasion of Dingzhou in 947 and subsequent captivity would not have been forgotten so easily. The professed patriotic tone with which Zhaoguo's experiences are described in the opening lines of the

foundation wall inscription from 977 lends support to this reading (Appendix 5F lines 1–4).

The Song attack on the Later Han came to a temporary halt when Taizu died on the campaign trail. As soon as his brother ascended the throne the same year in 976, the new emperor Taizong (r. 976–998) vowed to continue the military offensive. At the local level, these events are alluded to in the 977 inscription vis-à-vis an account concerning a visit that Qi Tingxun made to Jingzhi Monastery to venerate the newly rediscovered relics after attending the emperor's ascension ceremony in Kaifeng. The meeting with Master Zhaoguo at the temple is especially memorable, for the monk's tearful plea is said to have led to the army commander's generous donation (Appendix 5F lines 13–17). Shortly after the pledge was made, the third and final batch of relics miraculously emerged in the course of constructing a new stone pagoda. The timing of the incident again suggests that Master Zhaoguo might have made use of his knowledge of the temple's secret for the latest find. The way the occasion is introduced in the narrative reveals a carefully orchestrated juxtaposition of national and local events that aims to project the discovery of relics at Jingzhi Monastery as a sympathetic response in approval of the new emperor (Appendix 5F lines 17–19). What is particularly significant is that the people of Dingzhou seem to have taken the initiative to make the connection. Such eagerness to offer local justification for a national event is quite different from similar cases in the previous era, in which the central authority in the capital would assume the lead role in disseminating ideas and practices for its subjects around the country to follow or react to. In this light, the deposit of 977 at Jingzhi Monastery marked the increasing localization of relic worship in medieval China, whereby the practice gave ordinary folks a channel to better connect with the outside world and affirm the relevance of their own lives.

To celebrate the three spectacular finds of relics and precious artifacts from the past, a new pagoda was thus built at Jingzhi Monastery. Instead of repeating what the previous generation did in 849, the devotees of the tenth century forewent the opportunity to construct a large, imposing monument and opted instead for a modest structure in stone.[44] Clearly, time was a major concern, as was the safety of the new structure, considering that the old pagoda was damaged during the invasion of Dingzhou in 947. Regardless, two crucial features from the old structure were deliberately retained. The first was the old name, "True Body

Relic Pagoda of Jingzhi Monastery," and the second, the space of an underground crypt to enshrine the relics.

Pagoda crypts first began to appear in large number throughout China sometime in the eighth century. In Dingzhou, the practice was adopted locally only in the mid ninth century, as none of the aforementioend pre-Tang deposits are reported to have come from an accessible, basement-like structure.[45] While the old pagoda crypt is no longer extant to allow for any comparison with the structure completed in 977, the pristine condition in which the latter has been preserved does at least enable us to examine its role in shaping the presentation of the deposit contents.

Deposit Space

The Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt of 977 was built of bricks on a north-south axis, with the single entrance due south and directly preceded by a short vestibule and a sloping ramp that once connected the crypt to the ground level (fig. 4.10).[46] The main chamber was formed by four walls a slightly uneven square, about 2 m wide and 1.1 m high on each side. The ceiling was in the shape of a truncated pyramid, which added another meter or so to the total height of the structure. Its center is believed to have once been decorated with a hanging bronze mirror and topped by a roof-shaped stone slab from the outside. In the upper reaches of each wall were three sets of beams and brackets that were modeled in bricks and painted with architectural details in bright red and green colors.[47] In the space below, four groups of figures were painted in fluid, outlined style on the plastered wall surfaces.

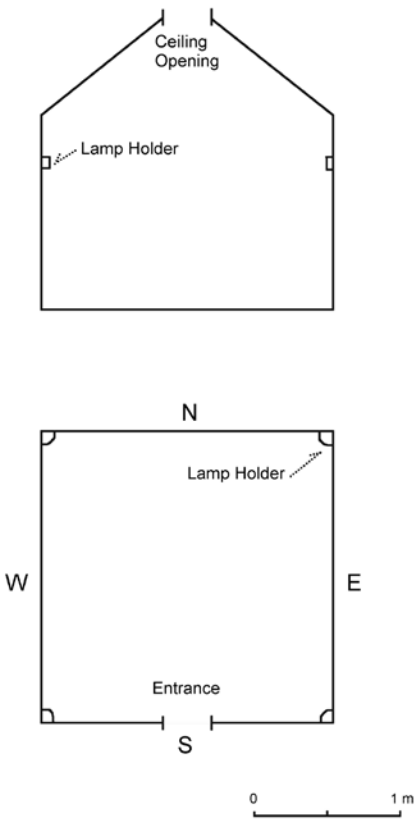


Fig. 4.10
Plan and elevation of Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt. Dingzhou, Hebei, 977. Diagram by the author.

The murals in the Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt were clearly meant to complement the material contents of the

deposit from 977. Perhaps our strongest evidence can be found on the north or back wall. There, ten monks were painted, five on each side, who stood calmly and faced the central area that was left blank (fig. 4.2); immediately above the blank space was the crucial cartouche, "True Body Relics of Śākyamuni Buddha." When discovered in 1969, Stone Case A was placed at the center against the blank space on the north wall. The juxtaposition was highly strategic in visually identifying the contents of this relic container, as well as in making the north wall the focal point of the entire pictorial program by virtue of its association with the most important item in the deposit. The mutual effects in the physical coalescing of objects and images in turn suggest that the builders of the crypt must have had certain types of objects in mind when choosing pictorial motifs to correspond to the objects' placement inside the crypt. In other words, the paintings on the walls were never intended to be viewed alone, but always in conjunction with the group of objects placed nearby. Moreover, each pairing of objects and murals formed a unified theme that would add to the symbolic character of the deposit as a whole.

In the case of the north wall, the physical presence of the relics vis-à-vis Stone Case A and a scene depicting the veneration of ten disciples collectively suggest the theme of the Buddha's nirvana. Although there were no readily identifiable markers like the reclining figure or the surrounding mourners, the connection with the nirvana theme manifested in several objects found inside the main relic receptacle. First, there was a metal relic casket that showed the soles of the Buddha's feet appearing on one end of the container and monks mourning along the longer sides (fig. 4.11). The allusion to Śākyamuni's superhuman power to transcend the boundary of life and death is unmistakable. The purpose, it seems, was to make use of this reference to the Buddha so as to create an impression that the relics contained inside were in fact an extension of the deity by sharing some of his magical abilities. Second and more interestingly, there are stated wishes to reach "the city of nirvana" in two donor inscriptions found respectively on a silver incense burner (fig. 4.22) and a silver miniature pagoda (fig. 4.23). While this description in many ways registers an

Fig. 4.11
Coffin-shaped relic casket. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, tenth century, gilt metal. Dingzhou City Museum. Photograph by the author.

attempt at making the concept more concrete and understandable, it can also help us understand the mindset that drove the devotees of the tenth century to making such generous offerings in honor of the Buddha's relics. Thus, both the inscriptions and the objects will be examined in greater detail in the ensuing discussion of the material assemblage.

The east and west wall murals in the Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt can be read as two related parts of the same subject. On each wall, a similar grouping of four figures was depicted heading toward the entrance. Each group centered on either a male or female figure who was dressed in Chinese-style regal outfit, with two smaller attendants by the sides and another one leading the way in front. Badly faded cartouches in the northern end of each wall identified the main figures as Brahmā on the east wall (fig. 4.12) and Indra on the west (fig. 4.13). The use of large naming cartouches underscores the new roles assigned to these two

Indian deities in the nirvana iconography. While we have seen them in nirvana pictorial narrative like the one in Mogao Cave 148, they were rarely depicted together as homage-paying figures in sinicized appearances. This unconventional depiction of Indra and Brahmā as a royal couple, I would argue, helped create a collective image of all the Buddha's human followers, thereby giving representation to the many male and female donors whose names were written profusely on the two walls.[48] This reading fits well with the numerous actual offerings that were

Fig. 4.12, opposite
Brahmā and attendants paying homage. East wall, Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 977, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Fig. 4.13, left
Indra with attendants. Detail of west wall, Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 977, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Wenwu Press, Beijing.

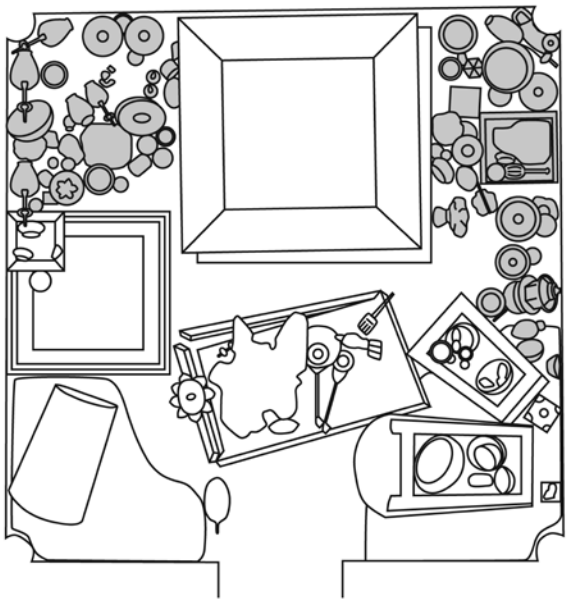


Fig. 4.14, right
Location of offerings along the east and west walls. Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 977. Diagram by John M. Marston.

Fig. 4.15, opposite above
Vaiśravaṇa. Detail of south wall, Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 977, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Wenwu Press, Beijing.

Fig. 4.16, opposite below
Vaiśravaṇa. Detail of wall behind the main Buddha's throne, East Great Hall, Foguang Monastery, Wutaishan, Shanxi, ninth century, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Wenwu Press, Beijing.

placed against the two walls and along the two sides of Stone Case A (fig. 4.14).

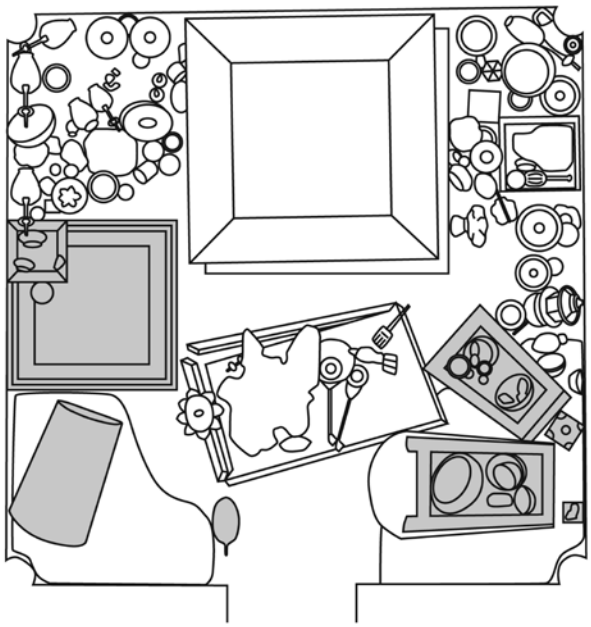
On the south or entrance wall, two fierce-looking guardian kings were painted on the two sides of the entrance. Sitting atop demons and wielding swords in their hands, both figures donned traditional Chinese military armor, with a halo behind their head to denote heavenly status. While the exact identity of the guardian on the east side is difficult to determine due to areas of paint peeled off from the figure, the one on the west side is without question Vaiśravaṇa, the guardian of the north who holds a small pagoda in his left hand (fig. 4.15). The dynamic body language and fierce facial expression were clearly modeled after Tang precedents in Buddhist temples like the Main Hall of Foguang Monastery at Wutaishan (fig. 4.16). More significantly, the selection of the guardian kings for the entrance wall is apt not only for providing symbolic protection for the crypt, but also for demarcating the kind of objects placed in the vicinity. Unlike the east and west walls which were devoted mainly to displaying lavish offerings from pious donors, the south wall marked an area where objects from previous deposits concentrated, including two stone coffins, various combinations of coins, unpolished jade pieces, and bronze implements (fig. 4.17). The presence of the two heavenly guardians nearby readily heightened the historical value of these artifacts from the past, as they drew attention to the long history of deposits at Jingzhi Monastery and the relics that these supernatural deities were summoned to protect permanently.[49]

Relic Assemblage of 977

Now that we have surveyed the pictorial program inside the pagoda crypt of 977, we may now examine the material assemblage in greater detail. To reiterate, there

are three main groupings of objects that have been highlighted in the discussion above. First, Stone Case A and the relics enshrined therein occupied the center of the north wall directly under the "True Body Relics" cartouche. Second, offerings wrapped in bundles were piled on the two sides of Stone Case A at the northwest and northeast corners, consisting mainly of ceramic containers, boxes, and other items that were too large to fit inside the main relic receptacle. Third, large-size stone containers from previous deposits were placed near the south entrance wall.

Among the numerous objects deposited in 977, Stone Case A was without a doubt the most important object in the entire assemblage. Its selection followed a recognizable pattern that had been established by three previous deposits since the seventh century, with the case serving each time as the main relic receptacle. In the latest round of burial, its premiere status was reaffirmed by the "True Body Relics" label on the north wall, and by a special arrangement of accompanying ritual implements on top and in front of the case (fig. 4.18). Specifically, there were six devotional images and three wood-carved lotus flowers placed on top of the case, and a wooden tray holding three bronze lamps, coins, ceramic bowls, and lidded boxes placed in front of the case.[50] While the retention of the "True Body" designation



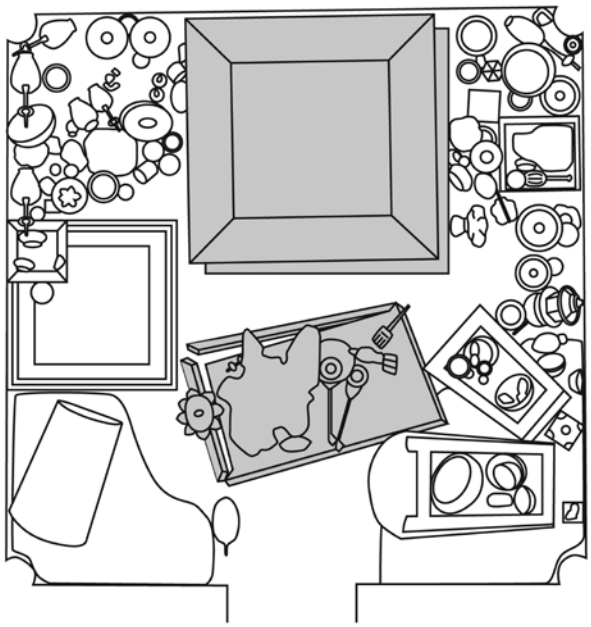


Fig. 4.17, left
Location of offerings near the south wall. Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 977. Diagram by John M. Marston.

Fig. 4.18, right
Location of Stone Case A and offering tray. Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 977. Diagram by John M. Marston.

for the Jingzhi Monastery relics underscores continuity with a ninth-century tradition, conscious efforts were also made to reach further back in time as if to create a more resounding validation of the present with the site's long history. This is evident in the assertion of the purported authenticity of the relics at two fronts: the strategic preservation of contents from previous deposits on the one hand, and the legitimation of new objects by incorporating them into old configurations on the other hand.

The selection of Stone Case A and its subsequent reconfiguration as the principal relic receptacle in the tenth century is particularly revealing in how the relic deposit of 977 was put together. At the beginning of the process, many options were available to Master Zhaoguo and his team. In addition to the possibility of making a brand new stone case, there were several stone containers from previous deposits to choose from, including the two stone coffins from 889 (fig. 4.19). Despite their rather large size (respectively 32 cm high, 51 cm long, 32 cm wide; and 35 cm high, 66 cm long, 40 cm wide), they were ultimately passed over and given a lesser position in the crypt, namely, the southeast corner. While the old age and prestige associated with Stone Case A made it a natural choice of preference, the makers of the 977 deposit had also stressed that not all objects from previous finds would be reinstalled verbatim. To be sure, the stone case was

Fig. 4.19, above
Two stone coffins dated 889, upon discovery in 1969. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Fig. 4.20, below
Contents of Stone Case A, upon discovery in 1969. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

reassigned to articulate the concerns of the present through its highly selective contents.

When discovered in 1969, Stone Case A contained three gilt bronze relic caskets, four silver miniature pagodas, one silver incense burner, two gilt bronze guardian figures, and many ceramic boxes and containers that held bone ashes and stone fragments, as well as a large quantity of ornaments made of jade, silver, crystal, amber, glass, and pearl. A photograph from the excavation shows that the previous multiple encasement method was superseded by a more general form of layering in which ceramic containers were individually wrapped in silk brocades and placed near the top, whereas the relic caskets and other metal works were possibly positioned near the bottom (fig. 4.20). While the excavation report only provides a rather general listing of objects found inside the stone case, a closer examination of their dates and types reveals that they were mostly new items made by the devotees in the tenth century. The inclusion of so many new items inside Stone Case A necessarily means that, except some small-size items, the majority of offerings from previous deposits were now placed outside the case.

Fig. 4.21
Blue glass jar. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, seventh century. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

From the 606 deposit, only the glass jars (fig. 4.21) were included inside Stone Case A along with numerous small-size ornaments probably from the Sui deposit.[51] The rest were reassigned to new locations outside the case. Gilt Bronze Case C, for example, was put outside together with a great number of newly made ceramic containers and boxes, whereas the "four jade-like figures" (standing bodhisattvas in white marble) were set to stand on top of Stone Case A along with two other heavenly guardians in wood and three wood-carved lotus flowers. As for the silver miniature pagoda mentioned in the 858 inscription, it was nowhere to be found, even though it was reportedly discovered by Master Zhaoguo in 976 inside the pagoda crypt. It is possible that the item was left out of the last round of deposit, and instead was replaced by four new ones as found inside the stone case in the modern era.[52]

The penchant for substituting old deposit contents with new commissions had generated three to four hundred new items altogether, which accounted for over half of the total number of objects discovered in 1969, excluding the twenty-five thousand coins.[53] These objects can be classified into seven major types: 1) vessels and containers in glass, silver, stone, and ceramic (mostly white Ding wares); 2) relic caskets in gilt metal; 3) ritual implements in gilt metal; 4) ornaments made in precious stones of various shapes; 5) replica offerings in glass and ceramic; 6) devotional images in wood, bronze, and stone; and 7) textiles for

wrapping.[54] Containers of various shapes and sizes by far constitute the majority in number, to be followed by ritual implements and ornaments. Donor inscriptions are found on some vessels and implements (see Appendix 5H–K), most bearing the same dedication date as those donor cartouches written on the crypt's walls, that is, the twenty-second day in the fifth month of the Taiping Xingguo second year in the Northern Song (977).

Judging from the types of deposit objects and their anticipated functions, it is not difficult to fathom some of the motivations behind the making of all these new items in the tenth century. Like the countless structures and artifacts sponsored by Buddhist devotees throughout the ages, the Jingzhi Monastery deposit was at the most elemental level a product of merit-making, of creating beautiful and useful things in honor of the Buddhas in hope of making progress toward salvation for oneself and the loved ones. The form of sponsorship evident at Dingzhou pertained mainly to devotional societies that were spearheaded by monks and nuns from local monasteries. The names of these organizations like "the Relic Society of Jingzhi Monastery" (*Jingzhisi sheli yi* 靜志寺舍利邑), "Mañjuśrī Society of Kaiyuan Monastery" (*Kaiyuansi Wenshu yi* 開元寺文殊邑), and "Relic Pavilion Society" (*sheli ge yi* 舍利閣邑) tellingly indicate that the relics had provided devotees with a basis for organizing religious activities and maintaining social identity in the Dingzhou community.[55] In addition to this network of lay and monastic participants, there were nine government officials who were explicitly named in the foundation wall inscription as major benefactors of Jingzhi Monastery. With Commander Qi setting a fine example by donating fifty thousand cashes, it is reasonable to assume that the eight other officials had also made sizeable contributions to the cause as well.

In light of the tense political situation in North China as discussed earlier, it is indeed remarkable that the devotees at Jingzhi Monastery had contributed so generously to the reburial of the True Body Relics in the middle of a major military campaign. From the launch of the offensive against the Later Han to Emperor Taizu's unexpected death and the succession of a like-minded emperor, this entire series of events at the macrocosmic level certainly would have provided the necessary "trigger" for Master Zhaoguo's undertaking. But to better explain the deep-seeded religious sentiments that fueled relic worship and made it a constant, living practice, we need to turn to the microcosmic level of evidence left inside the deposit. The question of what the devotees hoped to gain from the veneration of

the True Body Relics, in particular, is a crucial one to address.

Two donor inscriptions found respectively on a gilt silver incense burner (fig. 4.22) and one of the four silver pagodas (fig. 4.23) help pinpoint some of the underlying concerns. Both writings share a similar compositional structure that is fairly typical of the genre: an enumeration of donors' names at the beginning, to be followed by a declared wish, and a factual statement concerning either the date of dedication or the amount of precious material donated (Appendix 5H and 5I).[56] Of particular interest to us is the fact that the declared wish in both inscriptions are identical: "May this work of merit-making help all beings with feelings everywhere return to the path of release and together reach the city of nirvana." The inscription on the incense burner further provides us with two intriguing points related to the context in which this wish was made. First, among the twenty-four donors' names (eleven pertaining to monastic members, thirteen to married lay women), that of Huilang's, or the old monk who helped Master Zhaoguo locate the relics in 976, was included. Second, the dedication date given was the sixteenth day in the fifth month of the Taiping Xingguo second year (977), which was six days earlier than what was recorded in most other inscriptions in the deposit.

The declared wish for all sentient beings to attain release from sufferings had been one of the standard topoi in Buddhist devotional inscriptions, as it first gained currency in China in the sixth century.[57] What is new and unusual about the Jingzhi inscription lies in the elaboration of this path of release as one with "the city of nirvana" as its final destination. A fundamental concept in Buddhist

Fig. 4.22, opposite
Three-legged incense burner. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, tenth century, gilt silver. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Fig. 4.23, left
Miniature pagoda. From Jingzhi Monastery pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, tenth century, gilt silver. Dingzhou City Museum. Photograph by the author.

thought, nirvana denotes the cessation of all aggregates of personhood that leads to an unconditioned existence beyond the world of transmigration. To project this state as the ultimate goal in one's spiritual quest is certainly appropriate from the doctrinal standpoint, but the characterization of it as a reachable location also underlines an emphasis on the universal attainability of nirvana by all sentient beings. This seems to have been the point the Dingzhou devotees sought to make via their generous donations for the Buddha's relics. In fact, there was no better way of humanizing and concretizing the concept of nirvana than to celebrate the example set by the Buddha himself. His own entry into nirvana was what made possible the practice of relic veneration, which in turn had created an especially viable channel for merit-making. The relics at Jingzhi Monastery were presented as a vivid reminder of this very fact. Not only did the cartouche on the north wall ensure correct identification of the precious pieces to be from Śākyamuni's body, the painted images of the ten disciples explicitly evoked the moment of his nirvana.

The message articulated via these two implements from Stone Case A was embraced by both the monastic and lay contingents in the local congregation, as the names and titles of the donors have indicated. Interestingly, the wish to "reach the city of nirvana" did not seem to be intended solely for the underground space. Given the discrepancy in the date of dedication, it is likely that the incense burner was used in some consecration ritual prior to the final interment of deposit

contents. Its presence in an aboveground context would have guaranteed visibility for the text as much as its approval among a wider audience in the community. The involvement of Huilang in the commission is also noteworthy, for he was one of the oldest members in the monastery who was clearly familiar with some of the old customs from the past. His presence thus ensured the continuity of the practice from one generation to the next.[58]

The professed preference for a speedy completion of the deposit in 977 turned out to be justified by political necessities. The new emperor's determination to carry on the campaign against the Later Han produced some immediate successes, including the conquest of Taiyuan in 979. But the collapse of the Later Han also spelled disaster for the entire northern front. Elated by the capture of Taiyuan, Taizong continued to press on into the Liao territories against his generals' advice. The invasion of the Liao Southern Capital (today's Beijing) was a major debacle for the Song armies, from which the emperor barely managed to escape on a mule cart. After another series of failed campaigns in 986, the Song court had no choice but to give up any further military offense against the Khitans. The threat of the Liao now loomed larger than ever.

Master Zhaoguo must have been distressed to witness the rapid downturn of events around Dingzhou not long after the re-deposit of the relics at Jingzhi Monastery in 977. As a survivor of war, however, the monk probably had learned from his painful experience to take all the necessary precautions so that history would not repeat itself again. By advocating for a small stone pagoda as the site of reburial, Zhaoguo facilitated the speedy completion of a modest aboveground structure and a durable underground crypt, all to ensure the safety of the relics for generations to come. Little did he know that his plan had worked better than ever expected, as the deposit of 977 was to survive for the next millennium, well beyond the time of his temple and the Song dynasty.

Jingzhong Cloister

Seven months after the discovery of the pagoda crypt at Jingzhi Monastery, another major relic deposit was unearthed in Ding County at the end of 1969.[59] An underground structure—labeled as No. 6 by the excavators—was located approximately three kilometers to the west of the Jingzhi site. An inscription found on the central stone case dated the deposit to the eighth day in the fourth month of the Zhidao first year (995). Although the find at what was

once Jingzhong Cloister yielded only 106 items, many of the ceramic and metal artifacts were made with the highest level of craftsmanship available at the time. More significantly, the interior walls of the crypt were decorated with a lively pictorial program that centered on the Buddha's nirvana. Despite sharing the same subject matter as the Jingzhi crypt, the murals at Jingzhong Cloister exhibited noticeable differences in style and iconography to warrant our close attention. In fact, the change in the rendition of the nirvana image can be explained in terms of a broadening in the definition of Buddhist relics that had gained wide currency throughout the tenth century. By then, the focus of worship no longer confined to the purportedly authentic relics of the Buddha, but also included the remains of eminent monks, which had become an equally viable subject of veneration. The coexistence of these two types in the Jingzhong Cloister deposit thus offers us a particularly rich case in which to explore the many ramifications of this critical development in Chinese religion.

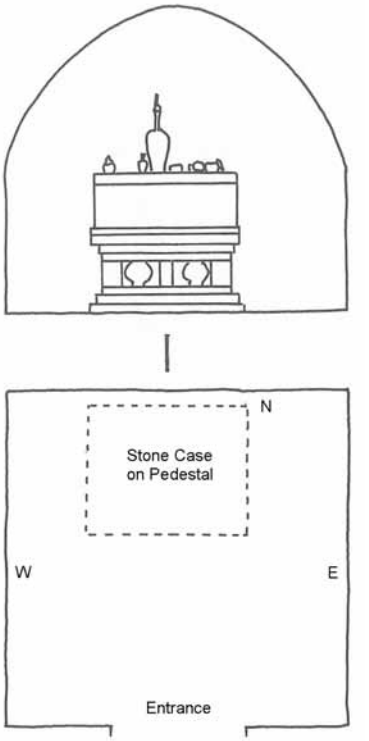


Fig. 4.24
Plan and elevation of Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt. Dingzhou, Hebei, 995. Diagram by the author.

Murals

We may first turn to the Jingzhong crypt and its murals. The wall paintings were distributed on the four walls of a square-shaped underground structure measuring about 2.5 m on each side, with a south-facing entrance and a cone-shaped ceiling (fig. 4.24). Rendered on un-plastered wall surfaces in a fluid, linear style of painting, the pictorial program entailed a range of Buddhist subjects. The *apsaras* and phoenixes that decorated the ceiling area are to a certain extent reminiscent of painted tombs of the Northern Song, where celestial constellations and mythological legends tend to populate the ceiling area and thereby evoke the vast, otherworldly cosmos of which the afterlife was thought to be a part.[60] But like Jingzhi Monastery, the main pictorial subjects

were unique to the space of pagoda crypts, as they were not found in tombs built for ordinary human burials.

On the north wall of the Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, the Buddha's entry into nirvana was the sole composition that occupied the entire upper half of the wall space with the lower half left blank (fig. 4.25). The scene depicted Śākyamuni lying on a jeweled platform commonly referred to as the Sumeru throne, accompanied by nine disciples whose frantic gestures and movements around the Buddha's body expressed extreme grief. The Buddha was reclining on his right side, with one hand supporting his head and the other one extending along his left side. While his entire body was turned outward for full frontal display, his serene yet prohibiting facial expression had held the viewing audience at bay, due in large part to the deterring effects of the closed eyes. This conscious shunning of the viewer's eye contact was, to be sure, one of the classic features of all nirvana images across time and space.

Fig. 4.25
The Buddha's nirvana. North wall, Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 995, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

In addition to the Buddha and his disciples, there were several other participants in the composition that are worth pointing out. First, the male figure in gentlemanly garbs who touched Śākyamuni's feet reminds us of the Chicago stele from the mid sixth century. As discussed in Chapter 1, the feet-touching homage was not necessarily performed by Mahākāśyapa in pictorial renditions of the nirvana motif, even though the act had been associated with the eldest disciple in most textual accounts. Second, the two half-naked figures who jumped around excitedly at the two ends of the composition likely refer to the infidels celebrating the Buddha's passage (fig. 4.26). The episode seldom appeared in the pictorial nirvana narrative, as it has been found only once previously in a comparable scene in Cave 148 at Mogao Caves of Dunhuang.[61] Third, the female figure along with two small-size attendants peeping from behind the Buddha's body has been identified as Queen Māyā.[62] This interpretation is still subject to debate, as it is indeed uncommon for the Buddha's mother to appear at the moment of nirvana rather than in the rising from the golden coffin scene with which she is generally associated. Regardless of her identity, this figure was the only one on the north wall to gaze directly and frontally out of the compositional space. Her position behind the Buddha's body directly opposite of the entrance thus made her the first to meet the future viewer's gaze upon entering the crypt.

Fig. 4.26
"Infidel" dancing. Detail of north wall, Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 995, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Wenwu Press, Beijing.

To turn to the east and west walls, each was painted with an ensemble of six heavenly musicians playing different musical instruments (fig. 4.27). Although the two groups headed toward the entrance, or away from the north wall, they were depicted to complement the Buddha's nirvana at the back. Iconographically,

the inclusion of musical performances in the nirvana motif was specific to the space of relic deposits, as it was rare among specimens found on stone implements or in the interior of cave temples. The earliest extant example we have today is from the underground deposit at Qingshan Monastery in Lintong County of Shaanxi province, dated 741 (Kaiyuan 29, Tang). There, an ensemble of ten female musicians along with five seated monks as listening audience in an adjacent panel was painted respectively on the east and west walls of a north-south oriented structure (fig. 4.28). The murals in the Qingshan Monastery crypt were apparently intended to supplement a crucial nirvana narrative depicted on a large stone case that was placed against the north wall on a platform (fig. 4.29).[63] In terms of figuration, the example from Jingzhong Cloister clearly marked a departure from the Tang tradition as represented by the murals from the

Fig. 4.27, opposite above
Heavenly guardians performing music. West wall, Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 995, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Fig. 4.28, opposite below
Female musicians in performance. Detail of west wall, Qingshan Monastery pagoda crypt, Lintong, Shaanxi, 741, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Wenwu Press, Beijing.

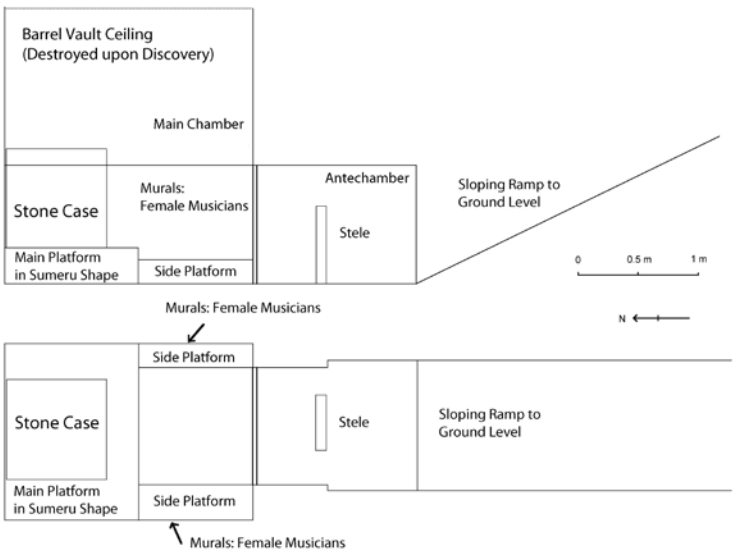


Fig. 4.29, left
Stone case decorated with a pictorial narrative on the Buddha's nirvana (top). From Qingshan Monastery pagoda crypt, Lintong, Shaanxi, 741, relief sculpture. Diagram indicating the location of stone case and other motifs inside the crypt (bottom). Photograph from Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, *Kyūtei no eika*, plate 37. Diagram by the author.

Qingshan Monastery crypt. The players were now stout military men donned in full armor, as opposed to young, elegantly dressed women in the earlier structure. The preference for an all-male military band to accompany Buddhist deities in preaching assemblages turns out to be rather unique to Dingzhou in the Song period. As indicated by a Western Pure Land scene from Kaihua Monastery in Gaoping, Shanxi, dated 1096, celestial ensembles continued to be staffed with female musicians (fig. 4.30).

A comparison with Jingzhi Monastery shows that the pictorial program in the Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt inherited the basic operative logic from the earlier example, and at the same time embraced notable changes in emphasis and meaning. At both sites, the north wall was the most crucial in setting the tone for the entire program, as it hosted the pictorial motif to which the principal relic receptacle was strategically placed nearby to correspond. Likewise, the east and west walls were deployed to complement the central composition by enhancing the celebratory ambience with worshippers in veneration. In light of the overall dynamic setup of images and objects inside the pagoda crypt, it was no mere coincidence that the classic configuration of the reclining Buddha with mourners was fully represented at Jingzhong Cloister rather than just a scene depicting the

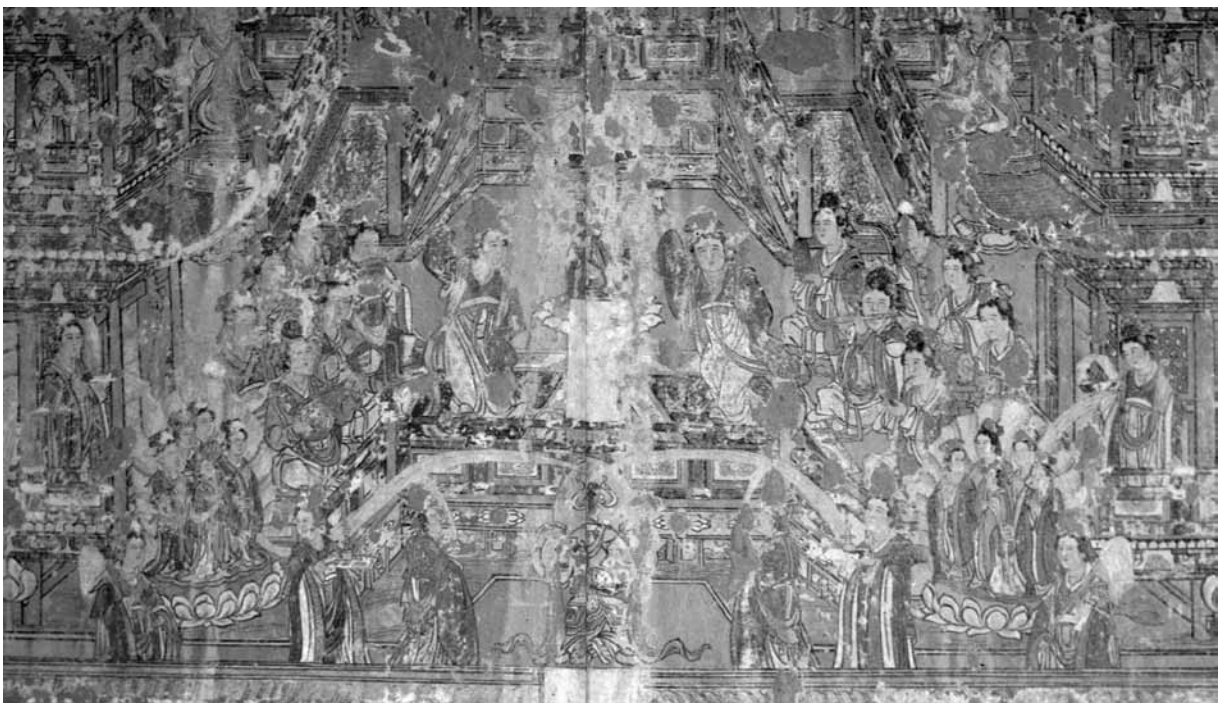


Fig. 4.30
Female musicians in performance. Detail of Western Pure Land of Amitābha, west wall, Buddha Hall, Kaihua Monastery, Gaoping, Shanxi, 1096, painted mural. Photograph courtesy of Wenwu Press, Beijing.

veneration of relics by the ten disciples. Neither was the absence of any naming label to accompany this instantly recognizable nirvana image. Both factors suggest that the makers of the Jingzhong Cloister deposit were keen on using pictorial images as the primary means to articulate the symbolic values of the relics and the numerous offerings that were assembled in front of the north wall. The situation was quite the reverse at Jingzhi Monastery, where the emphasis was clearly placed on the relics themselves, whose high pedigree as "True Body Relics of Śākyamuni" was publicized in both words and images. The reason for this change is not difficult to discern, for the relics of Jingzhong Cloister had no such illustrious history to flaunt about. What was enshrined instead was a rather different type of bodily fragments that required some form of explication and sanctification through representational means. Crucially, the nirvana image assumed a major role in achieving this objective.

"Relics"

According to the excavation report, the Jingzhong Cloister crypt yielded more than a hundred kilograms of "relics" that were distributed among a great number of metal and ceramic containers inside the structure.[64] The large rectangular lidded stone case that was placed on a meter-high brick pedestal immediately in front of the north wall had many such relic containers inside (fig. 4.31). Another key location pertained to two stone pagodas, each about 1.2 m in height, that were placed at two sides of the entrance (fig. 4.32). From the way the stone case was set up in relation to the painted murals and the various offerings around, it is clear that its contents were deemed the prime focus of the entire deposit. The unequivocal preference for the stone case is remarkable, considering that the relics contained inside the two freestanding stone pagodas were explicitly referred to in the accompanying donor inscriptions as "the Buddha's True Body Relics," a term which did not appear anywhere else in the Jingzhong crypt (Appendix 6C).

Fig. 4.31
Containers inside rectangular stone case, upon discovery in 1969. From Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, late tenth century. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

The importance with which the main relic receptacle was held by the makers of the Jingzhong

deposit is apparent in the special arrangement of offerings around the stone case (fig. 4.33). When first discovered, a large Ding ware ewer with a dragon-shaped spout (fig. 4.34) was placed at the center on top of the lid, accompanied by half a dozen of small rounded jars and lidded bottles. One longer side of the pedestal top also served as a ledge to display additional offerings, including another rounded jar, a pile of grains, and a few other items. The brick pedestal itself was made in the shape of a "Sumeru throne," which resembles the platform bed painted on the north wall in the nirvana scene (fig. 4.25). The similarity seems deliberate in visually matching the reclining figure with the stone case. The blank space left in the lower portion of the wall further allows for a more seamless coalescing of objects and images. As clearly shown in the excavation photograph of figure 4.33, the positional juxtaposition in effect created a symbolic equivalence between painted images and actual objects such that the body of the nirvana Buddha was likened to what was enshrined in the case.

A short inscription on the entrance-facing side of the stone case provides a possible identification for the principal relics of the Jingzhong Cloister deposit: "At this time, in the *jiashen* hour on the eighth or *dingchou* day in the fourth or *yiwei* month in the first year of the Zhidao reign of the Great Song, was buried Śramaṇa

Fig. 4.32, opposite
Stone pagoda. From Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 995. Dingzhou City Museum. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 4.33, left
Rectangular stone case, upon discovery in 1969. From Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, 995. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Yiyan, the merit-recipient for the founding of this temple and the rector who lectured with a specialty in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*" (Appendix 6B). Based on this inscription, the excavators have deduced that the pagoda deposit was made upon the death of the monk Yiyan in or before 995 to enshrine his remains, which were then placed inside the rectangular stone case.[65] Notwithstanding the slight ambiguity in the use of the word *zang* 葬, or "to bury," in the inscription, I agree in principle with this interpretation.[66] The central placement of the cartouche amidst the numerous names of donors that were inscribed on all four sides of the stone case confirms in favor of the reading that Yiyan was the subject of the enshrinement rather than a sponsor thereof. Moreover, a stone stele dated to 988, found six meters west of the pagoda foundation, offers key information as to why this monk became the very focus of cult worship after his death at Jingzhong Cloister.

Entitled "A Record on the Establishment of Jingzhong Cloister," the stele text was written by one Shi Chongzhen, a secretariat in a local devotional association for Pure Land beliefs (fig. 4.35; Appendix 6A). The occasion for which the stele was made to commemorate was the imperial bestowal of the temple's name "Jingzhong Cloister," which took place in the year 986. How a small Buddhist temple in the northern provinces grew into a major religious center with imperial recognition was the very subject of the inscription. The text in many ways was a homage to Master Yiyan, who was portrayed as single-handedly responsible for making this miraculous transformation possible. The temple first came into being when a wealthy layman named Li Jingqian of Longxi donated an orchard to a few local monks. Knowing their own limitations, the monks decided to ask Yiyan to become their leader. The master, who by then had already acquired a fine reputation as a preacher and a temple administrator, took up the challenge.

Under Yiyan's leadership, the temple grew rapidly. The master understood that the path to building a congregation of true faith began with the monastic, as indicated by a speech he gave to the young monks (Appendix 6A lines 22–24). Accordingly, he applied religious discipline and intellectual rigor to the training of the young monks, and at the same time nurtured them with care and inspiration such that they would learn to see the importance of their work in broad perspectives. By encouraging the young monks to set a fine example in attitude and action, Yiyan believed that the lay believers would soon follow them with devotion and generosity. Indeed, lay participation was deemed particularly crucial to the future

Fig. 4.34, opposite
Ewer with dragon-shaped spout. From Jingzhong Cloister pagoda crypt, Dingzhou, Hebei, late tenth century, Ding ware. Photograph courtesy of Dingzhou City Museum/ Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Fig. 4.35, left
Stele commemorating the establishment of Jingzhong Cloister, dated 988. Dingzhou City Museum. Photograph by the author.

success of the temple. To this end, Yiyan's piety was combined with pragmatism to great effects, as much evident in the formation of a devotional association with some seventy members shortly after he took over as the temple's leader (Appendix 6A lines 32–38). The organization was a testimony to the monk's ability to attract believers from all over the area, as it was a first step toward creating a platform for himself to make Buddhist doctrines and scriptures accessible. His lectures are reported to have drawn large crowds that were all too eager to pack the place and listen in rapture.

Yiyan's tireless efforts to welcome all to the Buddhist faith eventually attracted the attention of the Song emperor. It turns out that Taizong was mounting a major offensive against the Liao in June of 986 at the Qigou Gate, only ninety kilometers northeast of Dingzhou (map 4). He must have learned of the monk's accomplishments when amassing his troops in the prefecture.[67] While the imperial recognition was likely intended to bolster the morale of a local population facing the grim prospects of war, it also helped solidify Yiyan's place in the hearts and minds of all devotees at Jingzhong Cloister. Understandably, upon his death there must have been some perceived need among the congregation to memorialize the monk, to celebrate his life and contributions to the community. What is of particular interest to us is that this need was satisfied by building a pagoda crypt to enshrine Yiyan's remains in a manner that was typically reserved for the Buddha's own relics. The situation was clearly different from burying the monk at a location designated for the monastic dead (as in the cemetery inside a monastery complex), or depositing the cremated remains of Buddhist laymen inside a conventional tomb.[68] As I argue in the following section, the Jingzhong

Cloister crypt was in fact a site of monastic sanctification at which Yiyan was symbolically turned into an object of relic worship.

Whose Nirvana Was It?

Erecting pagodas for the enshrinement of Buddhist relics had a long, complex history in medieval China. By the tenth century, the tradition had undergone some fundamental changes after centuries of accustomation and maturation. One notable development occurred in the second half of the Tang dynasty, when the monks' remains were first incorporated into relic worship. According to Nishiwaki Tsuneki's study, the phenomenon coincided with the growing popularity of cremation as a viable form of disposing the dead in Chinese Buddhist monastic communities.[69] The method, to be sure, was at once practical and symbolic. On the one hand, cremation was thought of as a kind of "second burial" which could lessen the various forms of pollution associated with death.[70] On the other hand, the instant reduction of the human body into a pile of ashes readily echoes the basic goal in Buddhism to achieve nirvana or utter extinction. As Bernard Faure puts it, cremation in effect "reduces to a minimum the transition between death and rebirth (for ordinary people), or between death and awakening (for monks)."[71] By the same token any bodily residuals resulting from the cremation came to be regarded as a measure of the deceased's saintliness, an irreducible material reminder of his ultimate realization or transformation as a holy figure.[72] By taking these bodily remains as a subject of devotion, it was the worshippers' hope to avail themselves of a share of the monk's power and bring it down to earth.

The growing appeal of enshrining cremated remains of eminent monks for worship can also be seen as an offshoot of the relic cult's overall prevalence in China from the ninth century onward. As lay communities everywhere in the country became more involved in this form of devotionalism, the demand for a share of the authentic Buddha's relics grew exponentially. As already shown in the case of Jingzhi Monastery, relics with established pedigree had become quite rare over time and were thus highly prized by devotees whenever they were discovered. Given the inevitable shortage, it was only a matter of time before a different source of supply, namely, the remains of eminent monks, would gain wider acceptance within the tradition.[73]

In stressing the great demand of Buddhist relics in general, however, we need to keep in mind that the monastic type by no means replaced those pertaining

to Śākyamuni in practice or symbolic value. On the contrary, the elevation of the monks' relics onto the realm of divinity renders the practice a distinct subcategory within relic worship. With the case of Yiyan at Jingzhong Cloister, I would further argue that the phenomenon also underscores the concerted efforts by a community to create collective memories of a highly esteemed member after his death. Given the considerable human and financial resources needed for the construction of the monument, it makes sense to see that only monks who had demonstrated a high level of spiritual accomplishments would be selected to receive such honors by their surviving congregation. By consecrating the remains of great monks in the same manner as the relics of the Buddha, the need of funerary commemoration and that of relic worship were thus met in one setting.

The conflation of two disparate realms of religious practice in the enshrinement of the relics of eminent monks raises fundamental questions concerning the possible function of the deposit space as a tomb. The 995 deposit at Jingzhong Cloister, however, has demonstrated forcefully that a pagoda crypt with a monk's remains was not intended to be a human burial in the conventional sense. Although there are telling funerary connotations as evoked by the coffin-like shape of the rectangular stone case and the architectural design of the crypt at large, my main objection has to do with the treatment of the deceased's body. At Jingzhong Cloister, Yiyan was treated like no ordinary dead body, precisely because his was completely stripped of its human characteristics such that it was given a sanctified form in return.

The transformation of Yiyan first took place with cremation, through which the familiar bodily form was reduced into something beyond recognition. The remains were then mixed in with other objects and stored inside the rectangular stone case. With its former identity completely eradicated, the body in fragmentary form was now furnished with a new one vis-à-vis a sumptuous assemblage of offerings that befit the exalted status of a Buddha. The symbolic likening of the body of Yiyan to that of the Buddha's was at its most compelling, when the entire relic assemblage was pictorially enveloped within a mural program that focused on Śākyamuni's nirvana. Through the pictorial images, Yiyan's transformation was complete, as his body had been put through a ritualistic reenactment of the Buddha's own path to final extinction.

Symbolic Postures of Death

The sanctification of Yiyan that unfolded inside the pagoda crypt at Jingzhong Cloister helps concretize the postmortem fate of a significant number of eminent monks in medieval China, whose bodies were literally turned into icons of worship after death. Likewise, hagiographic records of the time enable us to better explicate some of the unusual features in the material finds we have at hand. The three major collections of *Biographies of Eminent Monks* compiled respectively by Huijiao (497–554), Daoxuan (596-667), and Zanning (919–1001) provide us with a representative body of materials from the third to tenth centuries to further explore the topic.[74] A survey of pertinent entries in all three texts reveals an overall intensification of interest during the Tang dynasty in recording the moment of a monk's death and its aftermath. Writing in a period when relic worship was flourishing throughout China, both Daoxuan and Zanning would patiently note such details as the subject's death posture, reaction by the witnesses in attendance, and any postmortem arrangement or miracle related to the dead body, whenever the information was available. This marks a notable shift from Huijiao's account, in which descriptions of this nature tend to be fewer in number and less specific in detail, due in part to the relative novelty of relic worship in China in the early centuries. The keen observations of our later authors thus allow us to further refine our understanding of the complex process of monastic sanctification as evidenced at Dingzhou.

In many ways, the transformation of an adept's body into relics began long before death. Particularly illuminating was a common practice among advanced monks to predict the time of their death. A monk's ability to determine the timing of his passage and to prepare himself accordingly either by following nature's course till the end or taking his own life at a more appropriate time had long been regarded as a mark of enlightenment.[75] Admirations for such knowledge were genuine in Buddhism, for death was part of the reality in the world of impermanence, and one's mastery of death was seen as the key to liberation from *saṃsāra*.[76] What is of particular relevance to our discussion is the way in which eminent monks proclaimed their conquest of death by striking a specific death posture.

Knowing the precise time of death was essential to rendering any final posture symbolic and efficacious. It was because the dying moment was often "staged" as a communal event attended by disciples and even laymen, and any

miscalculation would have caused great embarrassment to all those involved.[77] At least in cases where things did work according to plan, the master usually chose a final resting place at which he would either sit upright in meditation or recline on his right side until death overcame him. Surrounded by living witnesses, the dying man's final posture was a visceral yet public display of his ultimate spiritual state. So powerful was this image of an expiring body that this final posture was to be etched forever into the memory of the community in one form or another. In some cases, the monk's body would literally remain behind intact as if it were still alive, defying natural decay or destruction by crematory fire; oftentimes it was then mummified as a "flesh icon" and preserved inside a pagoda for worship.[78] In other cases, the body in its final posture would come to serve as the very template on the basis of which iconic representations of the monk's newly deified identity were made and disseminated among cult followers.

One well-known example in which the two scenarios coincided was Sengqie (617–710), a Central Asian monk who was the subject of one of the most popular devotional cults in the late Tang to Northern Song period.[79] As shown in a late eleventh-century example from a relic deposit at Xingshengjiao Monastery outside today's Shanghai, he was regularly depicted in sculpture and painting as sitting cross-legged in meditation, often with his head hooded under a monastic robe (fig. 4.36).[80] The pose was biographical in that it was meant to represent the moment of his death as described in all related records: Sengqie died in a seated position inside Jianfu Monastery in Chang'an in 710; he was then transported back to his native Sizhou, Jiangsu, and buried as such inside the pagoda there.[81] The resulting representation arguably marked the end of the ritualization process following the monk's death, at which point funerary commemoration gave way to cultic worship.

Sengqie's divine status was firmly established by the early Song, as he came to be known for his magical power and as an avatar of Avalokiteśvara. His biographies in the *Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era* (978) and the *Song Biographies of Eminent Monks* (988) were now expanded with various miraculous events that supposedly took place long after his death. Particularly memorable were the monk's repeated appearances in people's dreams or around the pagoda in Sizhou (at which his body was enshrined) in order to defend it against banditry and other threats. Although the texts did not specify the exact physical form in which Sengqie made in such postmortem appearances, Zanning did report that

Fig. 4.36
The monk Sengqie. From Xingshengjiao Monastery pagoda crypt, Songjiang, Shanghai, late eleventh century, gilt bronze. Shanghai Museum.

the people of Sizhou were so awestruck by the monk's magical power and goodwill that they had begun to make iconic representations after him. The many surviving sculptures of Sengqie in the form hitherto described were no doubt a testimony to the tremendous popularity that this cult enjoyed not only in the Lower Yangzi River region but also in different parts of China throughout the Song dynasty.[82] More importantly, when devotees prayed to an icon like this, they were probably

not thinking of his life as a monk, but rather as a deified figure who could bring about fulfillment of their wishes.

With the case of Sengqie in mind, we may now turn to the reclining pose. Although the position was not as common as the seated one in general, there was a significant growth in popularity throughout the Tang.[83] Of the some three dozens of cases that can be identified in the three *Biographies*, the majority of the monks in question were not as famous as Sengqie in that they did not receive imperial patronage during their lifetime; nor did they become a cult figure with countrywide followings after their death. The relatively limited extent of their fame turns out to be an illuminating fact, for it helps delineate the various levels of development within the monastic sanctification process. Accordingly, the case of Sengqie marks an advanced stage of development that called for the creation of a distinct iconography for the greater promulgation of its central cult figure and the values he stood for. On the other hand, most of the other monks can be taken as representatives of the next level down, at which the process was initiated by and mainly targeted for a local audience. In these cases, precisely because the monk at the time of his demise still remained in the collective memory of his community as an individual with local roots rather than as a celebrity with a unique persona already in place, the ensuing sanctification had tended to rely heavily on the power of familiar exemplars in order to achieve symbolic resonance with its audience. Within this context, the Buddha Śākyamuni was an ideal source of emulation.

Well known to every Buddhist practitioner, the Buddha's life story allowed for and ensured the smooth working of a signification process in which the legacy of the dead monk was evaluated and celebrated by way of comparative allusions to Śākyamuni's own achievements. One of the most common ways is simply to refer to the Buddha in comparison. To take the biography of Yuanhao as an example, the monk is reported to have come to the end of his life in 817. Quoting from his biography, "On the eleventh day of the eleventh month in the twelfth year of the Yuanhe era, the monk showed signs of illness. He lay on his right side, stacked the two feet together, and entered nirvana. This was the realm of the non-dual vehicle, a true *samādhi* of the Thus Come One."[84] The brief elaboration on nirvana following the death scene readily evokes Śākyamuni's own experience, as he is no doubt the most famous precedent to have reached that state. The verbal likening of Yuanhao to the Buddha is further intensified by the use of the word *ding* or *samādhi*. As Zanning explains in a separate commentary in the *Song Biographies*,

samādhi (*ding*), regulations (*jie*), and wisdom (*hui*) are the three keys to fully realizing the Buddha's teaching; in short "they are the three paths that originate in the land of life and death, but converge at one gate leading to the realm of nirvana."[85]

In our hagiographical accounts, another recurrent feature in alluding to Śākyamuni is the announcement of one's own death to a fellow monk or congregation. In the Buddha's life story, he informed Ānanda of his decision to enter nirvana three months beforehand. For our cases at hand, the proclamation was made mostly on the day of the individual's death. As seen in the lives of Fachang (Northern Qi) and Faxiang (late Tang), the two monks publicly announced their imminent death before striking the reclining pose.[86] The early Tang monk Zhikuan went a step further. Moments before he passed away in 643, Zhikuan in his dying posture warned his disciples to detach the body from all desires, beseeching them to see it as nothing but a phantom.[87] These last words uttered by the monk must have produced a rather eerie effect on the disciples witnessing his death. It seems as if the image of the man reclining in front of them were no longer Zhikuan's body, but that of an apparition who had spoken a much deeper truth.

The third type of comparative allusion to the Buddha has to do with the characterization of the bodily remains of the monks, which are often noted for their sheer quantity and numinous quality. The historical Buddha is known to have generated enough relics to be shared by the entire world in eight shares. While the exact quantity remains elusive in most textual accounts, the substantial nature of the remains had caught on to become a veritable sign of sanctity for all Buddhist monks.[88] In medieval China, the trait was frequently noted by hagiographers like Daoxuan and Zanning as a praiseworthy measure of the subject's saintliness. In the *Song Biographies of Eminent Monks*, for instance, it is not uncommon to see that some monks are reported to have produced as many as several hundred pieces of *śarīra*.[89] In some extreme cases, the number can be in the thousands or even in liters, as seen in the case of Shanjing, who died in the reclining pose before 950.[90] In addition to quantity, the quality of the remains is also taken as a telltale sign of the monk's spiritual attainment upon death. They are noted for their unusual sizes or colors, healing power, and the emission of a fragrance or stench that could fill the entire city. The desire to evoke the exemplary example of Śākyamuni is at the most conspicuous with the borrowing of the terminology previously associated

with the Buddha's relics to describe the monks'. The once exclusive use of the term "True Body Relics" for Śākyamuni's authentic remains had eroded by the late Tang period, as the term by then became part of the parlance to refer to monks' relics as well.[91] Indeed, the seeming redundancy in the use of the cartouche label "True Body Relics of Śākyamuni" at Jingzhi Monastery was probably intended to clarify the ever expanding definition of relics, which by the tenth century had been perceived to encompass two distinct types, those from the Buddha and those from eminent monks.

Power of Exemplar in Relic Deposits

With these observations from medieval Chinese hagiographical sources, we may return to the Jingzhong crypt to further analyze its pictorial program. Within the context of monastic sanctification process, the theme of the Buddha's nirvana was evidently selected to provide a visual cachet on Yiyan's qualifications as a local saint. The choice became all the more significant considering the fact that the monk's body was not preserved through mummification but was cremated and enshrined as if they were authentic relics of the Buddha.[92] In lieu of idolizing the corpse and thereby drawing upon the departed master's force of personality, the followers of Yiyan at Jingzhong Cloister had opted to rely on the power of the Śākyamuni example to make a case for the master's postmortem identity. This was achieved by likening his remains to Śākyamuni's ultimate spiritual attainment, by using the nirvana image to signal the level of enlightenment he was believed to attain at the end of his life. The symbolic conflation of the subject and the exemplar was reinforced by the relics themselves, whose noticeable weightiness corresponded well to an established mark of sanctity as discussed earlier. The lavish arrangement of offerings around the main relic receptacle further proves that the monk was indeed held in high esteem by his surviving followers. Although there was no other record from the pagoda crypt that detailed Yiyan's death, there seemed to be no doubt in the minds of his followers that the monk would continue to make vital contributions to the community through his numinous remains. They were imagined to share the same kind of magical power as the Buddha's own relics. By affirming Yiyan's continued presence as a sanctified figure, the devotees in Dingzhou had moved from the initial phase of funerary commemoration into the realm of religious veneration, all with the hope to keep alive the memories of one of their finest ever. In the process, the community was

thus reassured that it would continue to thrive as before with the blessing of their very special dead.

The strategic deployment of the nirvana image to transform the bodies of departed masters into a subject of relic worship was in fact a recurrent phenomenon throughout the Northern Song period. A significant example from the late eleventh century has been preserved at Xingshengjiao Monastery in Songjiang outside present-day Shanghai.[93] A bronze reclining Buddha of 0.42 m long and over twenty-five kilograms was found holding two cream-colored relic beads inside the statue's hollow belly (fig. 4.37).[94] An inscription written on a piece of wood that was used to seal the hollow identifies the relics to have come from a monk's body: "Here is interred [the remains of] Bhikṣu

Miaoyuan of Xingsheng Cloister" 興聖院比丘妙遠入藏 (fig. 4.38). What is also worth noting is that the monk's remains were enshrined with all the pomp and circumstance alongside the more traditional form of the Buddha's relics as represented by two elephant teeth.[95] These teeth, plus seven other relic beads that were similar to those inside the reclining statue, were stored neatly inside two silver cases. Together with the reclining statue, they constituted the innermost layer of a relic assemblage in three nesting layers, with a rectangular stone case at the outermost and a lacquer one in the middle (fig. 4.39). The entire assemblage was then buried inside a pagoda crypt that measured merely 0.65 m wide, 0.48 m long, and 0.45 m deep, and was devoid of any form of interior decoration.

Like the nirvana mural in the Jingzhong Cloister crypt, the reclining bronze Buddha from Xingshengjia Monastery had lent a vivid, iconized presence to the cremated remains of a Buddhist monk. As one of the earliest extant relic receptacles in the shape of the nirvana Buddha to date, the sculpture had the sheer volume and concreteness to fully realize the symbolic identification of the departed master with Śākyamuni.[96] The literal rendering of the reclining posture as an actual container for the remains had created the impression that the dead man had indeed attained enlightenment just like the Buddha himself. Yet at the same time, conscious efforts were made to distinguish the two types of relics enshrined in the deposit space. The two "Buddha's teeth," for one, were individually wrapped and stored in two separate silver cases, whereas the relic beads were more casually placed inside

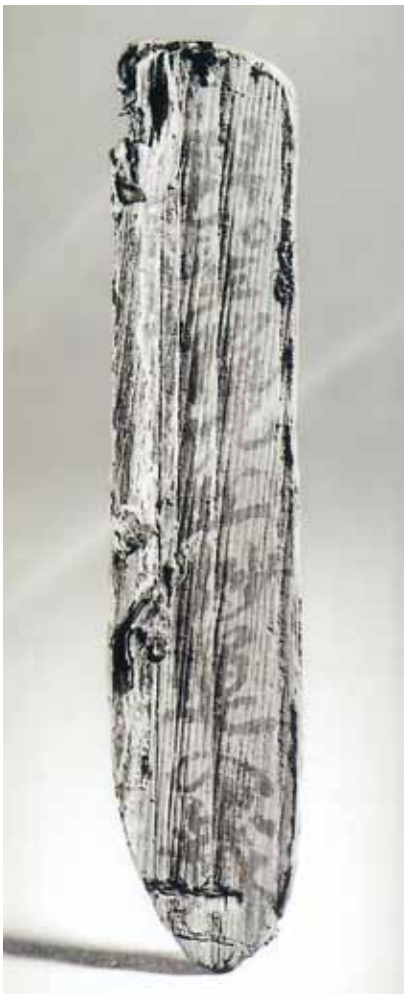


Fig. 4.37, opposite
Reclining Buddha. From Xingshengjiao Monastery pagoda crypt, Songjiang, Shanghai, late eleventh century, gilt bronze. Shanghai Museum.

Fig. 4.38, left
Wooden seal with an undated inscription. From the gilt bronze reclining Buddha, Xingshengjiao Monastery pagoda crypt, Songjiang, Shanghai, late eleventh century. Shanghai Museum.

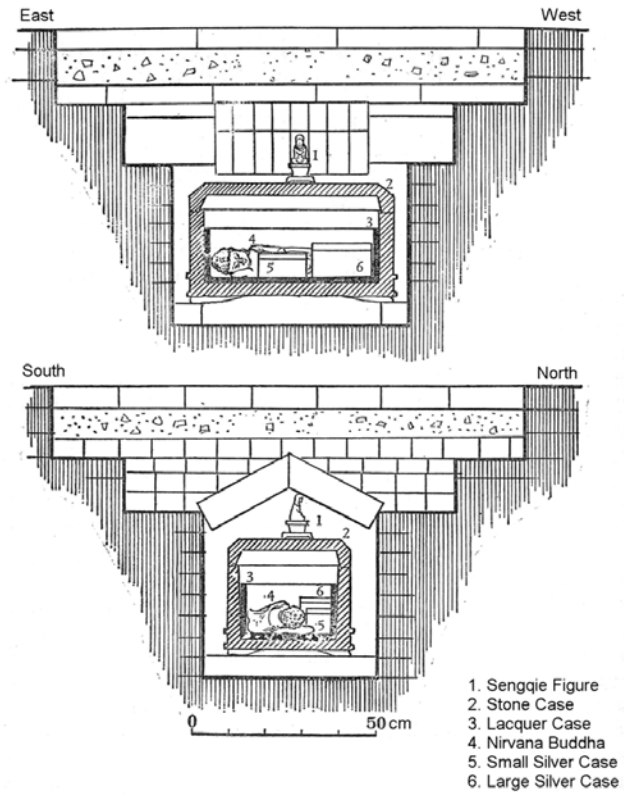


Fig. 4.39
Cross-section of Xingshengjiao Monastery pagoda crypt. Songjiang, Shanghai, late eleventh century. Diagram by the author, based on Shanghai bowuguan, "Shanghai shi Songjiang xian," fig. 1.

the two designated containers (i.e., the statue and the small silver case). Although there was no accompanying label to verbally articulate the difference, the more individualized attention given to the teeth was in fact typical of other relic deposits from the Northern Song that also contained diverse types of relics.[97]

A particularly intriguing example comes from a deposit found inside the Aśoka pagoda at Haiqing Monastery (dated 1026) in Lianyungang, Jiangsu. A small metal relic container held a large horse tooth inside, which was referred to as "relic" in the accompanying inscription (fig. 4.40).[98] It was on the exterior of the same container that a nirvana Buddha was depicted in a fluid outline style (fig. 4.41). The reclining figure occupied the entire lid top, appearing all by himself amid floral and ray-like patterns that decorated the remaining surface space on the lid top and the four sloping sides. Albeit a noted difference in medium, the nirvana Buddha from Haiqing Monastery was similar to the mural rendition in Jingzhong Cloister in terms of costume, posture, and facial expression.

With the Haiqing Monastery relic container, our discussion of the nirvana image in relic deposits has come full circle. The matching of the

classic nirvana figuration with a relic type closely associated with the Buddha Śākyamuni no doubt fulfills the expectation we may have of the motif's elemental representational value in signifying a specific moment in the life of the Buddha. In this case, the nirvana image reinforced the make-believe function of the inscription label by associating the enshrined "relic" with the greatest achievement of the Buddha. Without knowing its exact physical property, a devotee would have believed in what the inscription and the image claimed the horse tooth to be. Yet the reality of medieval Chinese relic deposits was far more complicated than this, as so clearly demonstrated in all the examples we have examined in this chapter. The scenario at Haiqing Monastery adds yet another dimension to the wide range of meanings that the nirvana motif had solicited in relic deposits of the time.

As a way to conclude, it is fitting to return to Jingzhong Cloister and Xingshengjiao Monastery with the question of whose nirvana it was represented in these hidden spaces. If we approach the question purely from the standpoint of iconography, there is no question that the two specimens at hand possess many of the key attributes of a nirvana image, namely, as a representation of the Buddha Śākyamuni's attainment of ultimate release. But when we begin to gauge the impact that the image had on the objects assembled around it as well as the spatial structure it inhabited, a rather different kind of interpretation begins to emerge. As a most critical component in facilitating the monastic sanctification

Fig. 4.40
"The Buddha's tooth." From Aśoka Pagoda, Haiqing Monastery, Lianyungang, Jiangsu, eleventh century. Lianyungang City Museum. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 4.41
Relic casket decorated with the Buddha's nirvana. From Aśoka Pagoda, Haiqing Monastery, Lianyungang, Jiangsu, 1026, gilt metal. Lianyungang City Museum. Photograph by the author.

process, our two nirvana images at hand have come to signify more than an episode in Śākyamuni's life story. In both cases, the temporal specificity of the Buddha's nirvana was superseded by a greater interest in the metaphysical richness of the experience itself. By stripping away the time element, the reclining figure was re-positioned to evoke the broader concept of nirvana as the ultimate sign of spiritual attainment. In so doing, the image's age-old value as a straightforward representation of Śākyamuni was thus compromised.

In hindsight, the instability in signification that resulted from the intentional conflation of subject and exemplar in the two Northern Song cases was indeed at the greatest in the history of the nirvana image in medieval China. In many of the pre-tenth-century examples, the temporal specificity of the nirvana moment in Śākyamuni's life story was the very basis of the motif's associative power. But as it has been demonstrated in this chapter, the hidden space of relic deposits had

opened up a new realm of interpretative possibilities by exploiting the ambiguity inherent in the motif's very configuration. It is truly fortuitous that the deposits at Jingzhong Cloister and Xingshengjiao Monastery were sufficiently complete and well documented enough to allow us to glimpse into some of the motivations and rationales behind this latest reinvention of the motif. With these two cases, we have encountered a nirvana image that was not exactly the Buddha's nirvana, and yet true to its spirit as a pictorial representation.

Fig. E.1
Banner hung during the revival celebration at Great Buddha Monastery, Zhangye, July 1–3, 2006. Photograph by the author.