

Designs and Techniques of Japanese Gardens Representing a “Paradise (Ideal World)” on Earth

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1. Introduction: Origins of Japanese Gardens

Japanese people have always believed that the natural sacred spirits are descendants of the various elements of nature such as mountains, islands, forests, trees, lakes and ponds etc., and have revered those elements as sacred objects or places over time. Rivers and seas have also been seen as roads or gates to a sacred place or the paradise of the gods (ideal world) which were believed to exist far away from this world (Figs. 1, 2). Gigantic rocks exposed on the slopes and old big trees have also been considered sacred objects where gods descend from the heavens (Fig. 3). These natural places and objects consisting of rocks, springs, streams and vegetations have the same components and materials as those found in Japanese gardens constructed in later periods. In other words, the worship of nature which the ancient Japanese people possessed has been taken up by later concepts of Japanese gardens, imbuing them with great spiritual meanings.

2. Japanese Ancient Belief of Natural Worship and Its Waterfront Design

It is commonly accepted that the garden concept was introduced to Japan, together with Buddhism, in the 6th century, from the Chinese mainland through the Korean Peninsula. However, the original design and structure that can be found in several archaeological sites of waterfront rituals and religious services bear close resemblance to those of Japanese gardens constructed between the 10th and 12th centuries

(1) Jonokoshi Iseki Archaeological Site

(Iga City, Mie Prefecture)

The meandering waterways excavated at the Jonokoshi Iseki Archaeological Site, were constructed between the

end of the 4th century and the middle of the 5th century, before Buddhism was introduced to Japan from the Chinese mainland (Fig. 4). The three meandering waterways which were constructed by laying rocks and gravel on the gently sloping shores, rose from three springs created by arranging stones and wood, and converged to eventually become a large waterway. Three rocks stood in each corner of the triangle-shaped terrace, located at one of the Y-shaped convergence points, jutting into the stream like a cape (Fig. 5). Stone steps were positioned at the tip of the cape of another convergence point allowing a priest to approach the waterfront in order to conduct rituals and water services.

(2) Remains of waterways in the gardens dating to the 7th and 8th centuries

In ancient times in Japan, the waterfront of rivers and streams were considered as the remarkable areas for landscaping designs and techniques before garden concept had been introduced from the Chinese mainland through the Korean peninsula. Such designs and techniques were found in the later archaeological remains of gardens, the small pond and leading S-shaped stream built in rounded stones of Furumiya Iseki Archaeological Site (the 7th century, Asuka Village, Nara Prefecture, Fig. 6), the winding stream built in rounded stones of Tô-in Garden of Nara Palace, Heijô-kyû (the 8th century, Nara City, Nara Prefecture, Fig. 7), the winding dragon-shaped pond wholly covered with rounded stones of Archaeological Site of Palace Garden in Heijô-kyô Sa-kyô San-jô Ni-bô (the 8th century, Nara City, Nara Prefecture, Fig. 8). In this succession of designs and techniques, rituals at the water streams were sophisticatedly developed into *Gokusui-no-en*, a garden ceremony associated with poetical sentiment.

3. Waterfront Design Seen in the Moat Surrounding a Mounded Tomb

Between the 3rd and 7th centuries, many mounded tombs were built for emperors, empresses and powerful clans. The landscaping designs and techniques applied to those tombs as well as the moats surrounding them played a very important role in establishing the waterfront design of Japanese gardens in later years.

(1) Suyama Tomb (Kôryô Town, Nara Prefecture)

At Suyama Tomb, an excavation was conducted at the narrowest point of the keyhole-shaped mound. As a result, it was found that from the mound, a square terrace had jutted into the moat, covered with paving stones on its gently sloping shorelines, and four standing rocks had been placed at each corner. This discovery clearly indicates that the terrace jutting from the mound was considered sacred as a site of religious services for the buried person in the tomb, and also that the design of the sacred area and that of the waterfront were inseparably associated with each other (Fig. 9). Here, we can see the same landscaping design and technique as those seen in the meandering waterways of the Jonokoshi Iseki Archaeological Site mentioned earlier. Especially noteworthy is the finding that mounded tombs consisting of man-made stone hills and stone-paved waterfronts could be the prototypes of artificial hills and garden ponds, important elements of Japanese gardens of later years.

(2) Gardens of noble residences dating to the 8th century, which incorporated the moat surrounding a mounded tomb of the earlier era

As will be mentioned later, the landscaping design and technique of a pond with edges outlined by gravel and sand, like a sandbar, reached its perfection in the Tô-in Garden of Nara Palace, Heijô-kyû. This is the result of mounded tombs of the earlier era having been gradually recognized as a landscaped space composed of a water body, greenery and an artificial hill. Excavations of noble residences located within the Heijô-kyô capital revealed that man-made hills of mounded tombs had been placed within the premises of those residences, decorative garden stones were placed among

paving stones, and additional gravel was laid to complete the waterfront landscape (Fig. 10). Construction of mounded tombs required the technique to represent a sacred area and the waterfront landscaping design. People of later years positively adopted such a design and technique for garden making, which eventually resulted in the establishment of the style of a pond with edges outlined by gravel and sand like a sandbar. Thus, the Japanese garden-making design and technique of the 8th century had undergone its own unique development, building on traditional waterfront landscaping design and technique, while being affected by the garden cultures introduced from China and Korea.

4. Garden Concept Introduced together with Buddhism

Between the introduction of Buddhism into Japan from the Chinese mainland through the Korean peninsula in the 6th century, and its establishment as a political control system of the country in the 8th century, Japanese gardens were built especially in the royal palaces of the capital of Nara. In those sites which were created in pre-Buddhist Japan, square ponds constructed by piling stones on the shores were found. These were different from the artificial waterways for religious services designed to imitate natural streams, and also from the waterfront areas with decorative stones and a sandbar-like shoreline with gravel and sand, facing the moat at the foot of a mounded tomb. Garden concept introduced together with Buddhism firmly rooted in Japan and unified with the Japanese unique designs and techniques for waterfront rituals developed in the preceding period.

(1) Square pond at the Ishigami Iseki Archaeological Site (Asuka Village, Nara Prefecture)

In the Asuka region of Nara Prefecture, where the Yamato Government, Japan's first unified government, was established, many garden sites have been discovered by excavation. In those sites which were created in pre-Buddhist Japan, square ponds constructed by piling stones on the shores were found. These were different from the artificial waterways for religious services designed to imitate natural

streams (Fig. 11). At the Ishigami Iseki Archaeological Site (Asuka Village, Nara Prefecture), the remains of the royal facilities for entertaining foreign guests, a six-meter square pond made of stones was uncovered in a courtyard surrounded by buildings. A stone fountain in the shape of Mt. Sumeru (Fig. 12) was also discovered in the vicinity, indicating that the water ceremony was held here to entertain foreign guests.

(2) Furumiya Iseki Archaeological Site

(Asuka Village, Nara Prefecture)

This site is considered to have been the palace of Empress Suiko (554-628), where archaeological remains such as a meandering waterway and pond made of stones, and a building that could be the main hall of the palace, were uncovered. Considering that the stone pond and the building are about 20 m apart, this space could have been used as a site for ceremonies and rituals. The stone pond measures about two or three meters in diameter, and from the pond, a meandering waterway of about 20 cm wide extended southward (Fig. 6). Presumably, water overflowing from the pond was carried to the south by this meandering waterway. According to *Shoku Nihongi*, an ancient Japanese history text, a purification event called *Gokusui-no-en* was generally carried out at the waterfront in early March. In light of this fact, the stone pond and the meandering waterway in Furumiya Iseki Archaeological Site might have been used for *Gokusui-no-en* and other rituals and entertainments.

(3) Tô-in Garden of Nara Palace, Heijô-kyû

(Nara City, Nara Prefecture)

As a result of an extensive excavation conducted between 1968 and 1980, a quarter called Tô-in was uncovered at the eastern end of the ancient Nara Palace Site (which was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1998 as a component part of the "Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara"). A large stone pond was also discovered at the southeast corner of the quarter.

This garden is known to have undergone major renovation in the mid 8th century. In the early 8th century, the garden pond had the shape of a reverse "L", and a strip of round stones

about 30 to 40 cm in diameter was laid on the bottom of the pond along the shoreline (Fig. 13). In the later 8th century, however, the pond was entirely covered by gravel, and a complicated and elegantly curved sandbar-like shoreline was formed (Fig. 14).

Considering that most of the garden ponds created in the Heian-kyô capital (present Kyôto City) in and after the 9th century had gravel all over their bottoms and elegant sandbar-like shorelines (Fig. 15), it is reasonably inferable that the style of a pond with a curved shoreline had already been perfected in the Tô-in Garden of Nara Palace in the 8th century.

5. Establishment of Landscaping Design and Technique of Residential Gardens

(1) Ritual garden (garden of the imperial palace)

Japanese emperors had continued to live in the imperial palace called *dairi* in Kyôto for about a thousand years till 1868, when the Japanese capital was relocated to Tôkyô following the Meiji Restoration. In the Kyôto Imperial Palace, there still remain wooden buildings such as Shishinden and Seiryô-den, the living quarters of the past emperors, and an extensive space covered with white sand is provided in front of these buildings. This space was created as a site of seasonal ceremonies and rituals, and should be distinguished from general gardens designed to represent nature (Fig. 16).

(2) Establishment of garden of *shinden*-style residence

In the above-mentioned white-sand-covered extensive space in front of the main residential building, a pond was created to set afloat boats of musicians and dancers who participated in ceremonies and rituals, and the waste soil from digging the pond was used to build an island and hills, where wild plants and flowers were grown. A bridge was provided between the island and the shore, and tents were set up for musicians waiting for their turns in rituals. In this way, gardens incorporating the landscaping philosophy, design and technique unique to Japan began to be created around the 9th to the 10th century as residential facilities indispensable for various ceremonies and rituals.

Historical picture scrolls depicting noble residences dating from the 10th to the 12th centuries clearly reveal the designs and structures of such residences and gardens, and, more importantly, indicate how they were used in ceremonies and rituals in specific details (Fig. 17). These picture scrolls elaborately describe the living building (*shinden*) of a noble family, located at the center of the premises. To its south lay a white-sand-covered extensive space where performances were staged, a large pond where boats of dancers were afloat, and an island where tents were set up for musicians. From these depictions, it is clear that the architecture and the garden at its front, including the extensive space and pond, were used for the purposes of ceremonies and rituals in an integrated manner. In this way, the style of Japanese gardens was perfected as an outdoor site for ceremonies and rituals, and also as a landscaped space designed to imitate nature by incorporating natural objects such as water, rocks and plants.

6. Buddha Realm (Pure Land) as a Paradise Realized on Earth and Japanese Gardens

After the 11th century, *mappô shisô*, the belief that the world had entered the long and degenerate Latter Day of the Law which preceded the appearance of the future Buddha, became popularized among Japanese people. People eagerly desired to seek divine favor through creation of the “purified world” on earth, where Buddhas had been training and practicing continually, and also eagerly desired to be reborn, especially in the Western Pure Land where Amitabha Buddha existed after he or she died. Hence, to realize the “purified Buddha realm,” on earth, many temples including gardens were built to represent the Buddha realm (Pure Land).

(1) “Hôchi” pond depicted in historical illustrations of the Pure Land of Amitabha and actual Pure Land gardens

The Pure Land temples were constructed as three dimensional embodiments of the Pure Land, based on “Amida Jôdo Hensô-zu”; the illustrations of the Amitabha Pure Land which could be also found in the wall paintings of “Magao Caves” dating from the 5th to the 13th centuries in China,

or the image of the Pure Land that the Japanese Buddhist priest, Genshin (942-1017) had described in his literary work, *Ôjô-Yôshû*, based upon Chinese Pure Land Buddhist scriptures. The typical drawing of the Pure Land depicted in historical illustrations of the Pure Land of Amitabha showed three images of Amitabha appearing on the surface of the “Hôchi” pond, and at the back of them, symmetrically arranged “Hôrô” magnificent buildings, with a main building sandwiched by two buildings on both sides. In many Pure Land illustrations, the “Hôchi” pond, an important element of the Pure Land, is outlined by the platform of the “Hôrô” buildings or the stage installed in front of them and depicted as being rectangular. The result of the excavations of the Pure Land temples, however, indicated that no rectangular or square shaped ponds were created in those temples, and that the ponds had been elegantly curved, outlined by the shore covered with small gravel and sand to imitate a sandbar, instead (Fig. 18).

(2) Significance of mountains located in the back of Pure Land gardens

During the process of the popularization of the Pure Land thought, correlations began to appear between the garden itself and the natural hills or mountains in the background of visual representations of the Pure Land of Buddha. For example, some of the paintings called “Yamakoshi Amida-zu”, which depicted the appearance of Amitabha approaching from the back of the mountains (Fig. 19), indicate the close relationship between mountains and the Buddha realm (Pure Land). These paintings were made on the deathbed of Buddhist followers in order that he/she was to be surely reborn in the Pure Land after he/she died. There is no doubt that the image of Amitabha in the center of the picture, with half of his body rising from behind the mountains, as well as two images of Bodhisattva on the left and right hand sides who had just flown into the scene, surely gave a Buddhist follower at his/her deathbed a reassuring glimpse of the Western Pure Land located in the far distance beyond the mountains. The religious meanings of mountains illustrated in these artistic works are basically considered to be common

to those of natural mountains identified at the back of the actual archaeological sites of Pure Land temples. Mountains behind Buddhist halls, associated closely with the ancient Japanese belief in the existence of the world of the dead in mountains, took on special symbolic importance as a clue to indicate the location of the Buddha realm (Pure Land).

7. Japanese Garden Concept and Designs/ Techniques indicated in *Sakuteiki*

Various ornaments and decorative objects in conformity with the way of Buddhist rituals and ceremonies were placed in the gardens to represent the Buddha realm (Pure Land). However, the spatial composition, design, and structure of the garden itself were basically similar to that of noble residences dating to the 11th and 12th centuries.

Garden-making standards for *shinden*-style noble residences were described in details in *Sakuteiki*, a manual for Japanese garden making produced in the later 11th century. This shows the spirits behind garden making in reproducing natural scenery using natural features such as rocks, water, and vegetation. Môtsû-ji Temple Garden in Hiraizumi is the most typical and exceptional example which was created in conformity with the standards indicated in *Sakuteiki* and also an unparalleled entity which has been miraculously handed down to this day (Fig. 20). This garden was created representing the “Pure Land of Yakushi, healing Buddha.” However, designs and structures of several elements of this garden; curved edge of the pond representing sandy beach line, meandering waterway designed with transformation from active to gentle stream, an artificial mound with rock works and a cape jutting into the pond with standing rock at its tip, clearly demonstrate that this garden was created in conformity with the standards of garden-making indicated in *Sakuteiki*.

8. Conclusions

As discussed above, the design and structure of Japanese ancient gardens were closely associated with rituals conducted on the waterfront based on the worship of

nature. This had undergone unique development, affected by the landscaping designs and techniques stemming from the garden concept introduced to Japan from China and Korea together with Buddhism in the 6th century. The interactions between the Japanese indigenous religious belief and the newly introduced Buddhist thought had resulted in the repeated unification and integration of the separate waterfront designs underlain by those respective thoughts. As mounded tombs with surrounding moat which were constructed in the earlier era were reused as garden elements, the edges of those ponds gradually took on the shape of sandbars with gently-curved shorelines. Eventually, the style of a pond with sandbar-like edges was perfected in the Tô-in Garden of Nara Palace in the 8th century, which was further refined as part of the landscaping design and technique of gardens of *shinden*-style residences in and after the 9th and 10th centuries. When the *mappô shisô* belief prevailed in the 11th and 12th centuries, Pure Land temples consisting of Buddhist halls and garden began to be built to represent Buddha realm (Pure Land) on this earth. In this way, Japan’s unique style of “Pure Land Garden” was established, building on the garden concept and landscaping design and technique perfected in the garden of a *shinden*-style residence.

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*Translation's Notes

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Fig. 1 Okinoshima Island (Fukuoka Pref.),
provided by Fukuoka Prefectural
Board of Education.
Sacred island to which the spiritual
deities descent.



Fig. 2 Kasuga Taisha Shinto Shrine
(Nara Pref.)
Mt. Mikasayama (sacred small round
hill) viewed in the backdrop of the
shrine gate, Ichi no Torii.



Fig. 3 Kumanohayataka Taisha Shinto Shrine
(Wakayama Pref.)
Sacred gigantic rock to which the
spiritual deities descent.

Fig. 4 Jonokoshi Iseki Archaeological Site (Mie Pref.)
Plan of the sacred springs and waterways

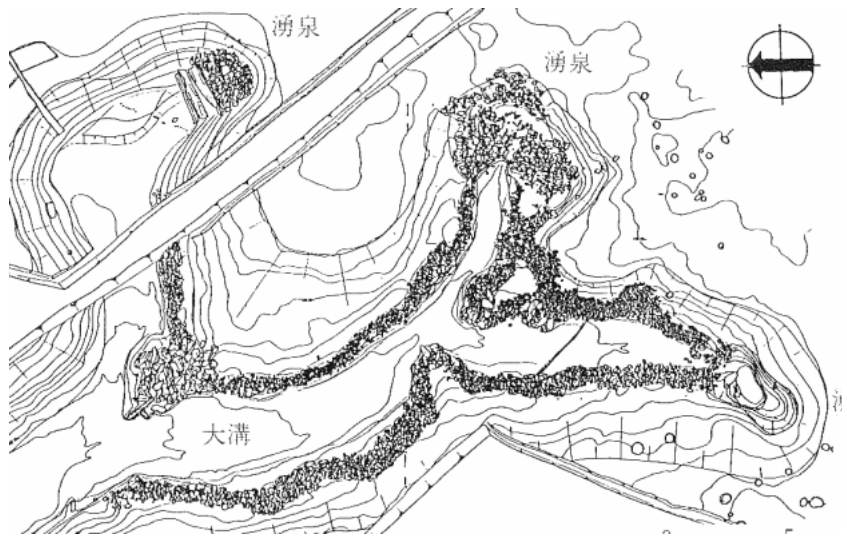


Fig. 5 Jonokoshi Iseki Archaeological Site (Mie Pref.)
Triangle shaped terrace with standing rocks, located at the Y-shaped convergence point jutting into the waterway.



Fig. 6 Furumiya Iseki Archaeological Site (Nara Pref.),
provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties.
"S" shaped garden stream built in rounded stones





Fig. 7 Tô-in Garden of Nara Palace (Nara Pref.), provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties. Shore line of the garden pond covered with gravels (front), and meandering stream paralleled to it (back)



Fig. 8 Archaeological Site of Palace Garden in Heijô-kyô Sa-kyô San-jô Ni-bô (Nara Pref.), provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties. Dragon shaped garden pond built in rounded stones



Fig. 9 Suyama Tomb (Nara Pref.), provided by Kôryô Town Borad of Education. Square terrace with standing stones in the corner, jutting into the moat from the mound



Fig. 10 Archaeological Remains of Garden Pond in Heijô-kyô Sa-kyô Ichi-jô San-bô (Nara Pref.), provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties.
Garden pond of noble's residence formed in reusing the earlier tomb



Fig. 11 Ishigami Iseki Archaeological Site (Nara Pref.), provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties.
Square pond built in stones

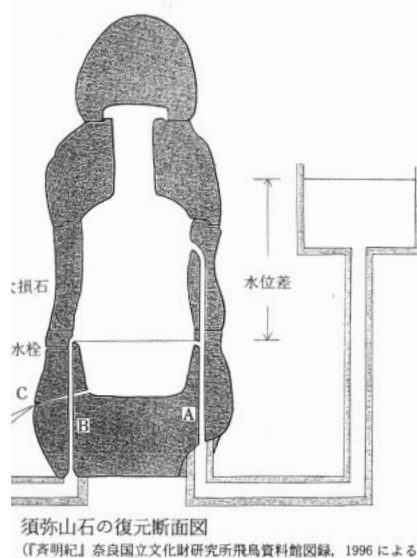


Fig. 12 Stone Structure of Mt. Sumeru (Nara Pref.), provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties.
Stone structure of fountain excavated in Ishigami Iseki Archaeological Site, which could be considered symbolizing Mt. Sumeru located in the center of the Buddhist world.



Fig. 13 Tō-in Garden of Nara Palace (Nara Pref.), provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties.
Garden constructed in the former half of 8th century



Fig. 14 Tō-in Garden of Nara Palace (Nara Pref.), provided by Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties.
Garden constructed in the latter half of 8th century



Fig. 15 Garden of Toba-dono (Kyôto Pref.)
Shoreline of the garden pond covered with gravels



Fig. 16 Kyôto Royal Palace (Kyôto Pref.), photograph by Dr. UCHIDA Kazunobu.
Courtyard covered with white gravels, in front of Royal Residential Building of *Shishin-den*



Fig. 17 Garden of Noble's Residence Depicted in the *Nenchû Gyôji Emaki* (Picture Scroll of Annual Events),
Nihon no Emaki 8 (Japanese Picture Scroll), published from *Chûôkôronsha*

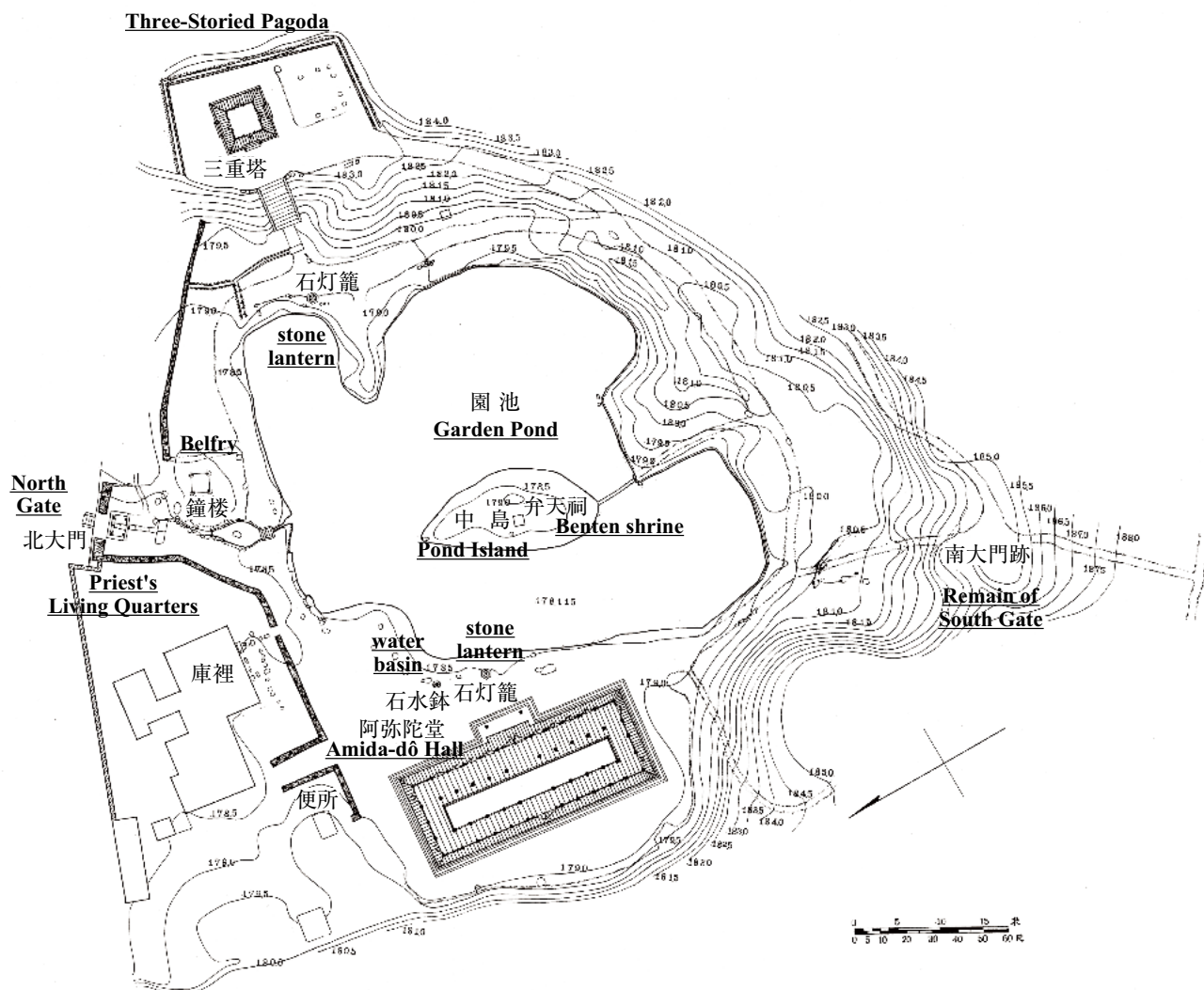


Fig. 18
Jōruri-ji Temple Garden (Kyōto Pref.)
Plan (upper) and photograph of the
Amida Hall viewed from the eastern
shore of the garden pond (bottom)



Fig. 19 Yamakoshi Amida-zu,
possessed by Zenrin-ji Temple.

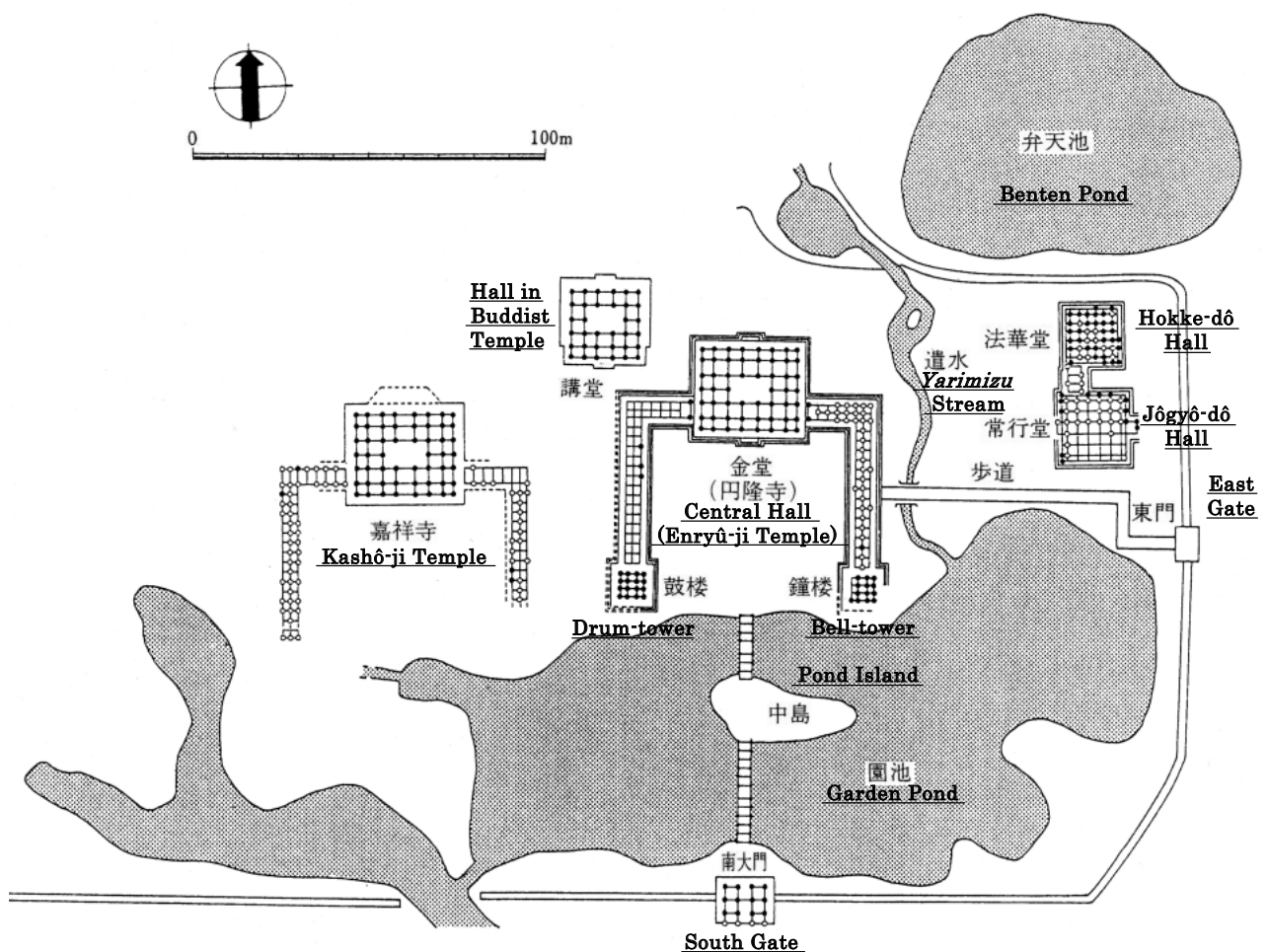


Fig. 20 Môtsû-ji Temple (Iwate Pref.) Plan of the garden