

## Topic 3

### Lake Biwa and Religion

**Keywords:** Lake Biwa, Buddhist statue, Religion

Mt. Hiei, located in the southwest of Lake Biwa, became the center of Buddhism in Japan after the establishment there of the Enryakuji Temple, the principal temple of the Japanese Tendai Sect of Buddhism in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Many high priests emerged from the temple, resulting in the naming of Mt. Hiei as the “Mother Mountain of Japanese Buddhism.”

The towering Mt. Hiei that looks down on Lake Biwa interwoven with the beautiful scenery of the lake has been admired from ancient times. “Ryojin Hisho (Songs to Make the Dust Dance on the Beams),” a collection of poems from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, feature the poem:

*“Omi no umi wa umi narazu  
Tendaiyakushi no ike zokashi  
nanzo no umi  
Jyorakugajyo no kaze fuke ba  
Sipporenge no nami zo tatsu.”*

This poem expresses the meaning that “Lake Biwa is not an ocean, but the east lake of the pure lazuli land where Bhaisajyaguru, the healing Buddha of the Tendai sect able to cure all ills, resides, and when the winds of Sukhavati (Amitabha’s Pure Land) blow, waves like lotus leaves sparkling like the seven treasures (gold, silver, pearls, agate, crystal, coral, lapis lazuli) arise,” telling us that this is not worldly scenery, but rather scenery with a religious significance.

Lake Biwa is also home to many Buddhist statues.

Like the statue of Bhaisajyaguru (the healing Buddha) at Shoju-raigo-ji Temple (Otsu City), a number of Buddhist statues exist in Shiga Prefecture that are said to have appeared from Lake Biwa. The story involves a large tree flowing from Lake Biwa causing bad things to happen wherever it drifted. The tree was cut into

three with each piece being made into a Buddhist statue. This story has been passed down within and outside the prefecture. Moreover, there is an anecdote that says that these three Buddhist statues appear when fishermen pull their nets from Lake Biwa.

Thus, Lake Biwa holds a special and indispensable place in the religious fabric of Shiga Prefecture.

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**Fig. T3-1** Important cultural property, bronze statue of haisajyaguru (Property of Shoju-raigo-ji Temple in Otsu City) (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Shiga Prefecture, Biwako-Bunkakan)