

Shigebumi Tsuji

CREATING AN ICONIC SPACE.
THE TRANSFORMATION OF NARRATIVE
LANDSCAPE¹

In a singular but significant way, traditional Japanese art shares an essential characteristic with devotional imageries of Byzantium, and, to some extent, with those of early Western medieval art. Namely, to borrow a term from the subtitle of Hans Belting's monumental work *Bild und Kult*², both Byzantine and Japanese imagery belong to the era "before the age of Art". To the Japanese, the Western concept of 'Art' had been utterly alien before Westernization in the second half of the nineteenth century. Being pressed by the urgent diplomatic agenda of that time, Japanese intellectual leaders deliberately adopted the European notion of Art and institutionalized it as a part of their national policy. It took the Japanese almost three decades to understand and appropriate, at least to some extent, the European concept of Art. However, we Japanese are yet to be convinced that modern Japanese art completely integrated into the Western tradition of Art³.

This historical fact allows us to bring up a set of interesting, though general, comparisons between devotional imageries of Byzantium and those of Japan, specifically in terms of their performative aspects. An important facet is that the essential qualities can be experienced not just through vision but through a variety of ritual performances, in which all senses are put into op-

¹ My sincere thanks should first go to Dr. Alexei Lidov, the organizer of the international symposium on 'Spatial Icon and its Performativity' in Moscow, June, 2009, for his kind invitation to the invaluable occasion and heartfelt hospitalities during the sessions.

² *Hans Belting*. *Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*. Munich, 1990.

³ *Michinobu Sato*. *Japan as a State under Emperor Meiji: Politics of Art* (in Japanese). Tokyo, 1999.

eration⁴. For example, in this respect, the role of the various utensils used in the Japanese tea-ceremony is extremely important. There, the initiated must learn not only how to handle them at the ceremony but also how to appreciate their form, colour, touch, and further, the weight, the delicate sensation on the lips, and their effect on the taste of the tea. For those who experience all these elements, as they are brought into direct physical contact with them, a simple tea cup is transformed into a source of profound aesthetic experience. The keen appreciation of the aesthetic quality of daily implements forms an important part of Japanese life⁵.

Sharing such characteristics, images before the era of Art in both Byzantium and Japan constitute a fundamentally diversified but intriguing set of objects that deserve a deep and intense deference and admiration in their own right. In Byzantium during the iconoclasm. John of Damascus asserts that, since Christ wore his material body through the Incarnation, a number of material objects should be also counted among the objects of veneration, in addition to the icons of holy personages. Importantly, his list of the objects of veneration comprises several famous *loci sancti*, saying: “Then there is the veneration offered to the places (*Chora*) of God, as David said, ‘Let us venerate the place, where his feet stood, or things sacred to Him, as Israel venerated the tabernacle...’”⁶

Meanwhile, the veneration of natural objects and phenomena is a fundamental part of indigenous Japanese religiosity from prehistoric times. Our ancestors believed, and many still believe today, that a spirit hides itself in a gigantic rock or a centuries old camphor tree. Mountains are nothing but the dwellings of the deities. Such a folk religiosity has not been lost through the centuries despite the influx of foreign cultures: first that of Buddhism, then Taoism, Confucianism, and finally Christianity. Rather, the endemic elements were fused together with these alien spiritualities. As a result, there appeared a variety of ascetic sects, *Shugen-do*, the discipline of which consists of the long — sometimes months’ long — endurance of ascetic life in

⁴ As for the synesthetic experience of Icon, see the recent contribution: *Bissera V. Pentcheva*, *The Performative Icon // Art Bulletin*, LXXXVIII, 4, December 2006, p. 631–655.

⁵ The issue of the iconic quality of Japanese ceramic works has been thoroughly discussed with a special reference to their performative aspects in my article: “Yasunari Kawabata and the Japanese Ceramics. A Dialog” // *Otemae Journal of Humanities*, III, 2003, p. 17–33.

⁶ *John of Damascus*. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images / Transl. by Andrew Louth*, esp. I, 14–16. p. 24–37, et pass., Crestwood, N.Y., 2003. Despite the apparent and irreconcilable divergence between the Byzantine and Japanese list of the objects of admiration, they are in fact ontologically linked closely together in terms of the veneration of the ‘material’ or ‘materiality’. This important issue should be fully discussed independently. Cf. also my previous article: “The Holy in the Dust: A Japanese View of Christendom’s Cult of the Non-Representational / Ed. G. De Nie et al. // *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Utrecht, 2005, p. 185–209.

mountains under extremes of weather. Today, most of the ascetic sects have conformed to Buddhism or Shintoism, or to their syncretised sects. You can find *Shugen-ja*, ascetic leaders and trainees, in their unique attire, frequently at popular pilgrimage sites that are located in main within or nearby holy mountains.

For such Japanese spirituality, its icon is, quite understandably, none other than the image of a holy mountain, or a sacred precinct in *hierotopos*. In Byzantium, where the visual depiction of nature is scarce — except for those distant echoes of the classical Roman landscape painting that will be soon discussed — there is no such elaborate and minute landscape representation as seen in specific types of religious images in ancient Rome and Japan.

The iconicity of these religious landscapes can be attested by their performative aspects. Various portable forms of painting were invented, or imported from China and Korea into Japan. Most of the visual works became the focus of oral interpretations delivered to the public. Above all, the illustrations of texts that explain the history of a holy temple or shrine from its origin were frequently turned into the objects of such a performance of public interpretation, *E-toki*, which literally means ‘Picture-Explanation’⁷.

This particular type of illustration, Picture of the Origin of the Sacred Place, often takes the shape of a hanging scroll. It is virtually an icon, which is in its own right a sacred object of veneration, and sometimes hidden from the public eye. It is shown to them especially on the feast day, and its explanation, *E-toki*, is performed in front of it often in rhymed recitation. The public, in its turn, not only listens to it and looks at the picture but also worships it and recites the sutra or kinds of sacred text in response to the recitation by the priest. *E-toki* is still in practice today annually in more than a few temples and shrines in Japan.

Another type of such a devotional image in Japan is called *Sha-ji Mandala*, or Mandala of Sacred Temple (or Shrine). Although seldom completely neglected, the representation of the landscape of the sacred place itself yields its dominant role to the depiction of the buildings, i. e. the holy temple or shrine. Further, often by introducing an enormous epiphanic figure of the deity in the centre of the composition, *Sha-ji Mandala* acquires a more austere, iconic atmosphere⁸.

I would like to illustrate this point with an example of the landscape painting representing one of the oldest Shinto shrines on Lake Biwa, near Kyoto. A hanging scroll painting from the Kamakura period, now in the col-

⁷ Tatsuro Akai. Development of E-toki (in Japanese). Tokyo, 1989; Ikumi Kaminishi. Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan. Honolulu, 2006.

⁸ As for Mandala of Shinto Shrine, cf.: Ancient Chorography (in Japanese) / Ed. Toru Nannbata // Nippon no Bijutu, V, no. 72. Tokyo, 1972, p. 17–30.

lection of Nara National Museum, represents the precinct of Hi-Eh Shrine and its holy mountain, which is its Holy of Holies⁹ (fig. 1 and 2). The mountain is in reality a little more than a hill, but, as in many other Shinto shrines, it is believed that gods descend from heaven to dwell on the summit. Therefore, the mountain is represented in an enormous size. The two tiers of figures along the upper edge of the painting consist of both indigenous and Buddhist deities.

To quote another well-known instance, a small hanging scroll painting dating from the end of the Kamakura period circa 1370, represents the precinct of Kotobiki (=harp-playing) Shrine in Kagawa Prefecture, Shikoku Island (fig. 3). It seems as if the precinct seen in bird's eye view were on an island, though in reality it was originally located at the end of a small peninsula¹⁰. Like many other landscape paintings in Japan, this small hanging scroll painting has also been an icon, and hence, an object of veneration to this day. Moreover, importantly, the sanctity of the *locus* is visually guaranteed not only by the depiction of the precinct seen from above, but also by a series of miniature narrative scenes incorporated into the landscape. They tell the miraculous origin of the shrine. In short, the description of the sacred landscape is completed with the historical account of its origin.

The above two types of *Mandala* picture began to emerge during the early Middle Age of Japanese history, that is, from the late twelfth century. Later, from the end of the Middle Age of Japanese history in the sixteenth century, there appeared unexpectedly a great tide of pilgrimage among the common people in Japan. In order to plead Buddha, indigenous gods, or Buddhist deities, for a blessed afterlife, people travelled long distance, individually or in group, despite all sorts of difficulties that were predictable in medieval life and society. It is in association with this pilgrimage movement that a third group of large, portable paintings was created.

Today these paintings are generally called *Sankei Mandala*, which literally means 'Mandala for Temple/Shrine Visiting'¹¹ (fig. 4). Whereas a number of the ancient and medieval mandalas, especially those created by the esoteric sects, are composed on various cosmological programs, *Sankei Mandala* represents, if not none, very little of speculative element.

⁹ Ibid. Colour plate, 3.

¹⁰ Nara National Museum: Catalogue of the Exhibitions of the Paintings Representing the Origins of Shrines and Temples Shaji-engi-e (in Japanese), 1971, No.27, p. 97–99. Due to the modern land reclamation, the temple is now found within the city area. Cf. *Mikako Tamitu*. Problems of the Hanging Scroll Painting on the Origin of Kotobiki Shrine (in Japanese) // *Bijutushi* (Journal of Japan Art History Society) CLIX, October, 2005.

¹¹ *Pilgrim's Mandala* (in Japanese) / Ed. Osaka City Museum, Introduction and Commentaries by Toshio Fukuwara. Tokyo, 1987.

First of all, its format is noticeably large as a portable object: it was normally folded and carried on the back of a travelling monk or nun, who displayed it on the street for a public sermon. Undoubtedly, the sermon on street by wandering monks and nuns were not only performed in rhymed recitation but also accompanied by music and even by dance performance. In this regard, a popular homilist on street could also be a singer, dancer, or all. As the well-known No-play, *Jinen Koji*, proves, he or she could be a very popular actor or actress on street. In fact, a number of performative arts in later periods grew out of such popular religious performances.

Most of the surviving examples of *Sankei Mandala* are mounted as hanging scrolls, which are sometime as long as two meters when unrolled and hung on the wall. Though seemingly very schematic, a *Sankei Mandala* yields marvellous geographical and architectural accuracy, serving as a sort of guide map for a pilgrim visiting sacred place. Further, *Sankei Mandala* includes not only geographical and architectural schemes but also a certain number of narrative scenes related to the legendary origin of the sanctuary or famous historical anecdotes that took place at the location¹².

Thus, art historians assume that *Sankei Mandala* actually grew out of the two preceding types of devotional images, *Engi-e* and *Sha-ji Mandala*, which we have already discussed above. Usually, vast landscape of sacred *topos* unfolds in the former, while the sanctuary with its main buildings is represented in the latter. Strengthened by the presence of the formidable image of a deity or saint, the latter, *Sha-ji Mandala*, can well be regarded as an icon, an object of veneration.

It may be pointed out here that all these devotional images in Japan not only represent the holy *topos* but also introduce an iconic figure or monument in the centre of the composition. In the case of *Engi-e*, the Picture of the Origin of the Sacred Place, the central image is a remarkable natural formation, such as an island, a mountain, or a waterfall. This is fathomable because the origin of *locus sanctum* in Japan is without exception associated with a specific natural environment. Thus, as stated above, such natural forms themselves are the objects of adoration/veneration. More importantly, however, the sacro-sanctity of the *locus* is all the more emphasized by the pictorial narrative cycle incorporated into the composition. It may well be called a visual persuasion for the sanctity of the picture.

In the second type of the Japanese devotional image, *Sha-ji Mandala*, the holiness of *locus* or sacred precinct is explicitly visualized by the innermost edifice in the centre of the composition, and, as stated above, the image of the deity introduced there dominates the whole composition and turns it into a real icon. Finally, in *Sankei Mandala*, the focus of both visual and

¹² Ibid. Entry No. 4, p. 90, pl. 4.

iconographical configuration is occupied mostly by the holy edifice, but occasionally by the narrative scenes that represent the climax of the legend or the important historical incidence closely connected with the *topos*.

In sum, in a Japanese devotional image what seems to be a mere depiction of a landscape or a map, or a bird's-eye view of a sacred precinct, acquires a profound sanctity either by the presence of an iconic figure or an awesome object on the one hand, or, on the other hand, by the visual persuasion introduced by means of a series of narrative scenes into the landscape.

If we turn to the ancient and medieval West and Byzantium, we see frequently that cyclic illustration based on the religious or epic text is combined with an iconic figure. Above all, the Hellenistic-Roman narrative cycle offers a number of extremely interesting instances in terms of the combination of the narrative and the iconic. For example, one of the well-known Campanian fresco paintings in Boscotrecase represents a series of narrative scenes derived from the story of Perseus rescuing Andromeda chained to the rock to be the prey of a sea-monster¹³ (fig. 5). It must be noted that the naked figure of the king's daughter occupies the very centre of the composition, and Perseus hovers in air, rushing to her rescue. Although it is a part of the entire narrative cycle, the image of Andromeda placed in the centre is iconic indeed, and attracts viewer's attention as the symbol of the entire story¹⁴. Perhaps, more interesting is, however, the iconographical configuration of the so-called *Tabula Iliaca* or *Tabula Odysseaca*¹⁵. Favoured by the dilettantes of the Roman 'intellectual' society, *Tabulae* illustrate the *hypotheses* of Homeric epics with a number of miniature reliefs. For the most part they faithfully follow the sequence of the Homeric narrative from one Book to another. However, the large composition in the centre which is surrounded by these miniature reliefs contains plural scenes in a large monumental composition, thus expressing the climax of the entire narrative. In case of the *Tabula Odysseaca* in Warsaw, three scenes highlight the apogee of Odysseus' adventure at Circe's mansion (fig. 6): first, he receives the protective herb moly from Hermes, and then he threatens the sorcerer with the dagger in his hand. Finally, the sorcerer dispels the magic exerted over Odysseus' crews.

¹³ Bibliography on this Andromeda and Perseus picture now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, is numerous. Here I cite only a few basic works: von Blanckenhagen P. H., Alexander C., Papadopulos G. The Paintings from Boscotrecase // *Römische Mitteilungen*, 1962, p. 38–51; Phillips K. M., Jr. Perseus and Andromeda // *American Journal of Archaeology*, LXXII, 1968, p. 1–23; Simon E. Andromeda I // *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Vol. 1. Zürich, 1981.

¹⁴ I am preparing a paper that specifically discusses the iconic character of the Andromeda picture in Boscotrecase, its origin and development through the early Julio-Claudian period.

¹⁵ Sadurska Anna. Les tables iliaques. Warszawa, 1964.

All these three scenes take place in and around the same gorgeous mansion of Circe as described by Homer. It is important indeed that such an iconographical formation with multiple scenes in a single picture also plays its role as an icon. The decisive moments of the narrative are visually accumulated in a single composition, thus expressing the essential meaning that is deep-seated under the entire narrative cycle¹⁶.

More than a millennium later, after the iconoclasm, the Byzantines revived a similar iconographical device, when they created a new type of the iconography of *Dodekaorta*. Namely, they combined a set of detailed narrative scenes related to the Nativity to form a quasi-monumental compound iconography. The Byzantine artist even inserted such a monumental composition comprising multiple scenes abruptly into a genuinely narrative sequence, as seen in the Tetraevangela of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, cod. Gr. 74, which was made most probably soon after the middle of the eleventh century¹⁷ (fig. 7).

The same compound iconographical configuration is adapted on a number of ivory reliefs dating from the mid-eleventh century. It is more than likely that this group of ivory plaques, named by K. Weitzmann 'Die Rahmengruppe', were originally intended to form the central piece of small ivory-triptychs¹⁸ (fig. 8). Further, at about the same time, an icon painter displayed a marvelous landscape on one of the wings of polypteral painted icon now in Sinai, where a number of detailed scenes relevant to the Nativity story are dispersed all over the picture¹⁹ (fig. 9). They are separated only by undulating lines that suggest mountain ridges. Meanwhile, the entire composition is dominated by a composite iconic image of the Nativity at the most conspicuous place of the composition. Thus, it sanctifies not only all the narrative scenes but also the entire landscape that forms its background. It radiates the grace and mystery of God that becomes visible through the Incarnation of Christ.

In concluding my short argument on the transformation of narrative landscape in the East and in the Roman-Byzantine world, my final question should

¹⁶ My forthcoming paper, based on my presentation at a symposium in September 2010 at Waseda University, Tokyo, will discuss in detail the formative process of such narrative representations in rectangular panel. At present, the most elaborate argument on this subject is found in: *Brilliant R. The Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum / Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, Vol. XXX. Rome, 1967, Part III: The Great Panels: p. 167–250. The results of his description and analysis is reinstated succinctly in his later publication: *Idem. Visual Narratives. Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*. Ithaca and London, 1984, p.90–117.

¹⁷ *Weitzmann K. Narrative and Liturgical Gospel Illustration / Edrs. M. M. Parvis, A. P. Wikgren // New Testament Manuscript Studies*. Chicago, 1950, p. 151–174.

¹⁸ *Goldschmidt A., Weitzmann K. Die byzantinische Elfenbeinskulpturen des X–XIII Jahrhunderts*. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. Berlin, 1979, Entry 197 et seq., p. 73–77.

¹⁹ *Sotiriou G. and M. Icones de Mont Sinai*. Athens. 1956, p. 59–62, pls. 43–45.

be: if such sanctification of a holy place could universally be practiced with regard to a devotional image, couldn't the same process be applied for consecrating a *topos* that exists in reality? Then, I may further ask: didn't the pilgrims who walked on the land that was purified in such a way venerate it, as John of Damascus already suggested, in the same manner as they adored a painted or carved icon? Once, I concluded my discussion on the method of art history after iconology by citing the famous relic of the pebbles and earth in a wooden casket now in the Vatican Museum (fig. 10). Later, I found that Charles Barber had begun his discussion on figure and likeness with the same object²⁰. Certainly, the earth and stones by themselves have neither representational nor symbolic significance. What guarantees their sanctity is the visual narrative painted on the reverse of the box's lid. The historical truth of the events visualized in the image can be, in turn, confirmed partly through the depiction of the monuments in the Holy Land, and partly, but more importantly, by the earth and stones, which the pilgrim dug by his/her own hands. If we carefully examine the famous *Nachi-Kumano Sankei Mandala*, we notice the tiny figures of a couple of pilgrims, probably a husband and his wife, in white robes, faithfully following the steps until they reach their final resting place at the top of the mountain. The pilgrimage and the pilgrims' steps are the real source of the sanctity of *hierotopos*.

²⁰ Cf. *Shigebumi Tsuji*. A Survey of the State of Research in the Era of Post-Iconology (in Japanese) // *Otemae Journal of Humanities*, V, 2005, pp. 1~24; *Barber Ch.* Figure and Likeness. On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm. Princeton, N. J. 2002, p. 13ff.

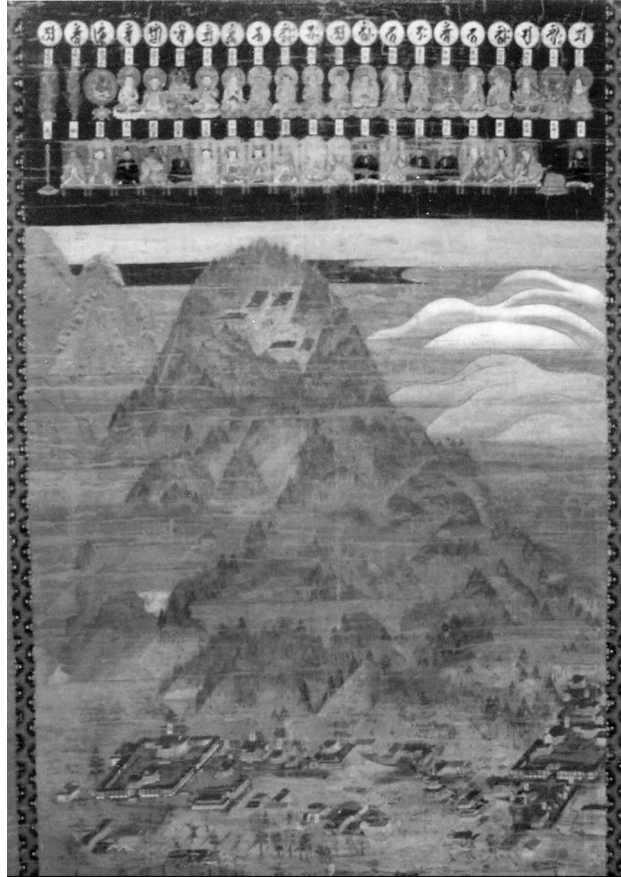
Шигибуми Цуджи
Kanazawa College of Art, Japan

СОЗДАВАЯ ИКОНИЧЕСКОЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВО.
ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ ПОВЕСТВУЮЩЕГО ПЕЙЗАЖА

Японская религиозность глубоко укоренена в местных обычаях почитания исключительных природных объектов. Наряду с крупными скалами, водопадами и древними деревьями, для японцев настолько важны горы и источники, что большинство синтоистских святилищ основаны в том или ином приближении к ним. Традиция была унаследована буддизмом, принесенным из Китая через Корею в VI в. Сегодня некоторые аскетические секты, с энтузиазмом борющиеся за мистическое единство со сверхъестественными существами посредством усердных тренировок в суровых природных условиях, ассоциируются либо с конкретным синтоистским святилищем, либо с буддистским храмом. Соответственно, целый ряд иконических изображений, используемых в их ритуалах, представляют не только антропоморфные фигуры божеств, но и горы, водопады или, зачастую, панорамные виды окружающего их пространства, которые представляли своего рода *иеротопию* места, охватывающую как природные мотивы, так и священные объекты.

Необходимо отметить, что такая панорама священного места часто включает серию небольших нарративных сцен в пейзаже, часто повествующих о создании сакрального пространства. Позднее, в конце XV в., панорамная картина превратилась в путеводную карту для паломников, посещающих окрестности того или иного святилища. Но, по-прежнему, картина представляла пути и нарративные сцены, рассказывающие о сакральном происхождении данного места. Руководство для паломников совместно с представлением сакральной истории в устной форме передавались странствующими монахами и монахинями, зачастую в сопровождении вокального и танцевального представления.

Не следует упускать из виду, что в этих уникальных религиозных картинах в Японии иконическое в тонкой манере сплавляется с нарративным. Однако это не исключительно японское творение. В истории европейского искусства со времен классической античности и в византийский период предпринимались нередкие попытки соединить визуальный дискурс на основе нарративного текста с иконической репрезентацией протагониста истории. Соединение имело обоюдное воздействие: нарратив объяснял источник святости места, в то время как иконическое обеспечивало святость истории.



1. Mandala of the Precinct of San-no Shrine (Miya Mandala), Shiga Prefecture. Collection of Nara National Museum. Kamakura Period. ©Nara National Museum



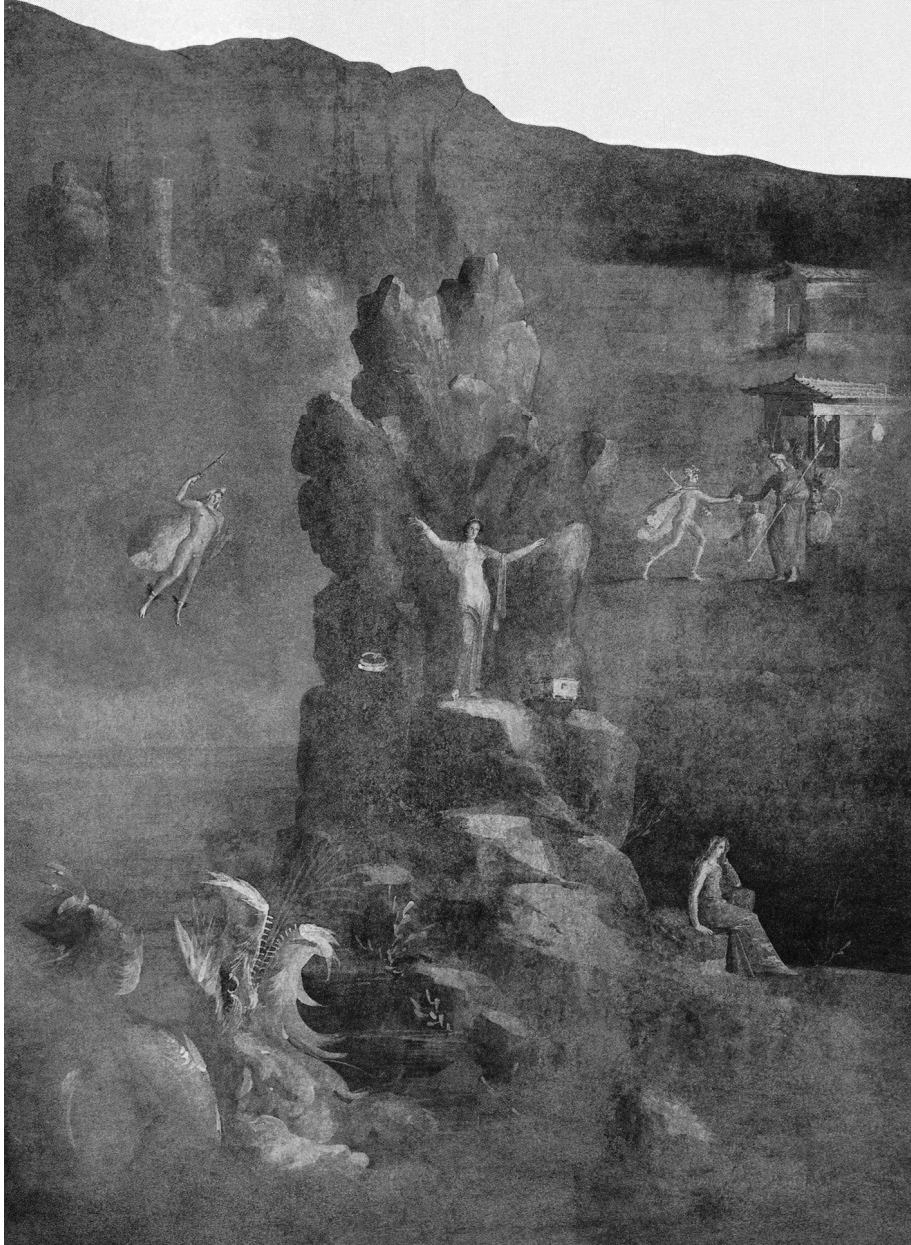
2. The gate to the precinct of San-no Shrine with the Holy Mountain (Mount Hachi-oji) in distance. © Author



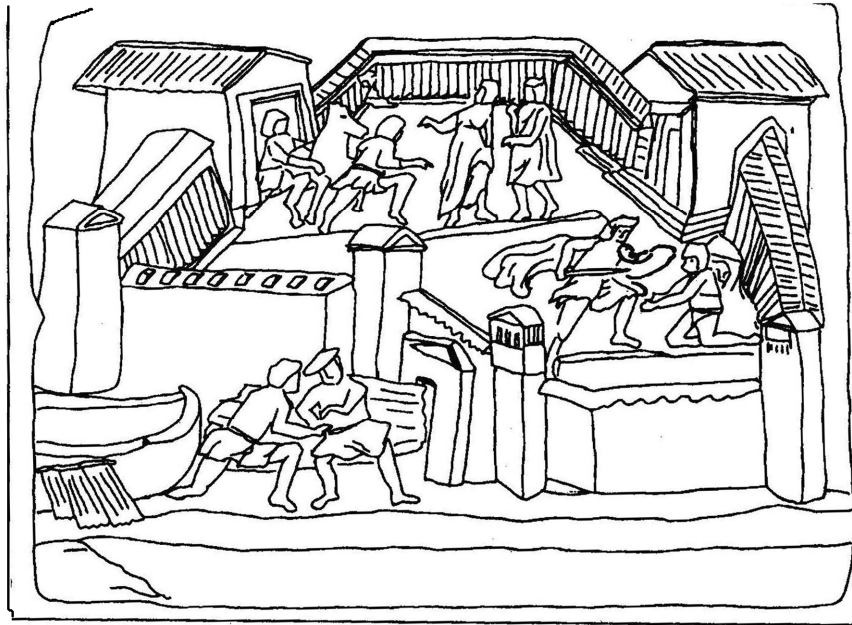
3. Mandala of the Origin (or Miya Mandala) of Kotobiki Shrine,
Kagawa Prefecture, Shikoku Island. Circa 1370.
© Kan-non-ji, Kagawa Prefecture; Entrusted to Kagawa Prefectural Museum



4. Sankei Mandala (or Pilgrim's Mandala) of Nachi-Kumano,
Wakayama Prefecture, Collection of the Library of Kokugaku-in University, Tokyo.
The first half of the seventeenth century. © Kokugaku-in University



5. Perseus and Andromeda, Fresco painting of the villa of Agrippa Postumus, Boscotrecase. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N. Y. Circa 11 BCE. © 1987 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



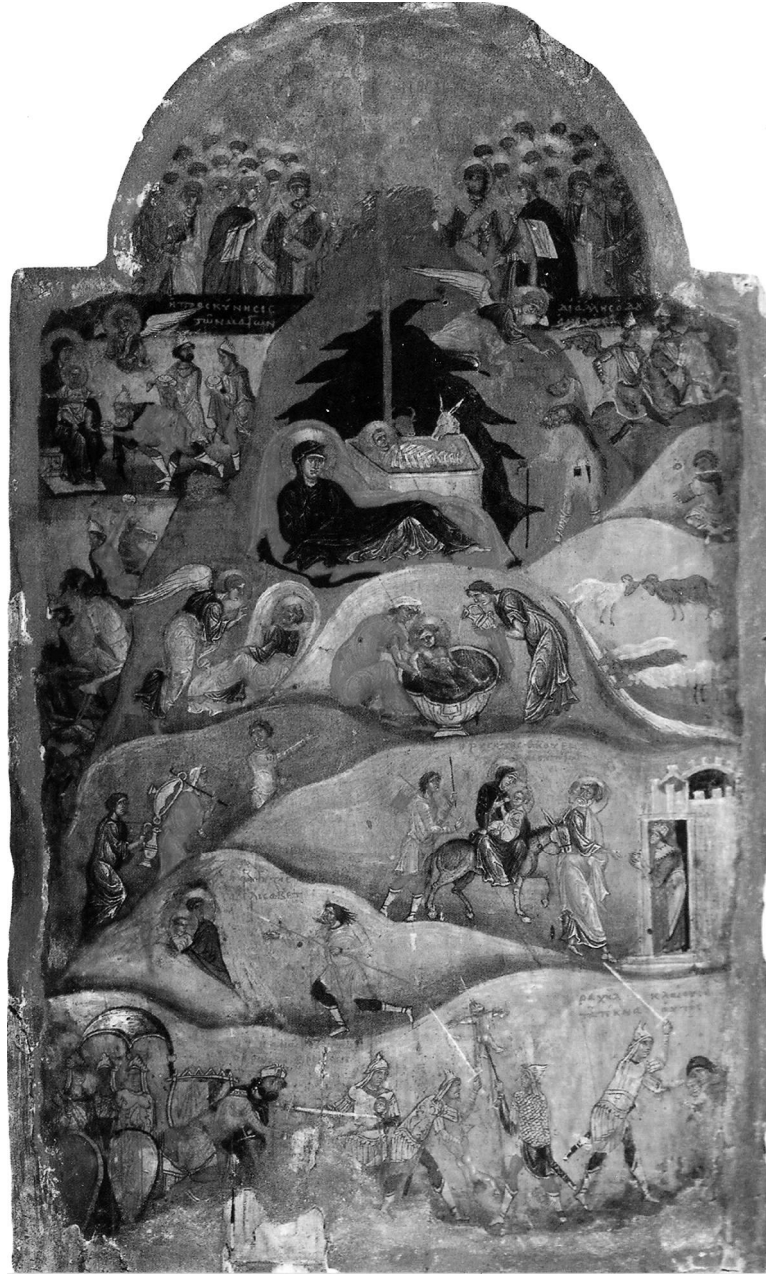
6. Three scenes from the adventure of Odysseus at Circe's mansion, *Tabula Odysseaca «Rondanini»*, Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw. Drawing by author.



7. The Nativity of Christ on the Gospel of St. Luke, Manuscript illustration. Paris, Bibl. Nat. ms. gr. 74, fol.4^r. Circa 1070.
© Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des manuscrits, *Evangelies avec peintures byzantines du XI^e siècle*, Paris 19-- ?



8. The Nativity of Christ, Ivory plaque, Ravenna, Museo Bizantino. Early twelfth century. © A. Goldschmidt – K. Weitzmann. *Die byzantinische Elfenbein-skulpturen des X–XIII Jahrhunderts*. 2nd ed., vol. 2, Berlin, 1979.



9. The Nativity of Christ, Panel Painting. Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, around 1100. © K. A. Manafis (ed.), *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, Athens 1990.



10. Reliquary box; Painted lid and the content of pebbles and earth collected in the Holy Land. Vatican Museums. © The Walters Art Museum