

Jeudi 4 avril 2019

Séminaire interdisciplinaire du
Centre de recherches sur le Japon
(EHESS)

Histoire du Japon moderne et contemporain : permanences et ruptures

« Buddhism and Violence in Medieval Japan: The Ideological Context »

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Abstract

The role of religious institutions and monastics in the violent world of medieval Japan has long befuddled later observers. Seemingly at odds with the precepts of Buddhist scriptures, many monastic members and shrine servants took up arms to solve disputes, especially during the early medieval era (ca. 1100-1400). Members of different monastic complexes attacked one another, lower-ranking clerics fought their own leadership, and leaders of court factions recruited armed members from temples. Modern observers have been quick to condemn such activities, labelling the temples degenerate and sometimes blaming them for the decline of the imperial court in Kyoto. Contemporary sources reveal a much more ambiguous stance towards clerical violence. In this lecture, Professor Adolphson will explore the religious, social and political contexts that in fact sustained the right of Buddhist temples to engage in violence, and how later views on religion and religious violence have affected the way that early medieval Japan is portrayed.