

The One Million Pagodas

Empress Koken (718–770) commissioned craftsmen to print one million Buddhist dharani (incantations or paper prayer charms), and the creation of the same number of tiny wooden pagodas. The entire project was finished by the time she passed away in 770. Empress Koken was the 46th monarch, reigning from 749 to 758. She abdicated once and ascended the throne again in 764 as Empress Shotoku, the 48th monarch, after her male cousin was deposed.

The one million pagodas were distributed to temples around Nara. The rolled-up scrolls are some of the oldest examples of printed paper in the world and are still contained inside the hollow pagodas beneath the removable decorative spire at the top. None of the miniature pagodas that were distributed to some nine other temples survive, but 46,000 of the 100,000 that were donated to Horyuji Temple miraculously remain.