

Shihi Magaibutsu Engravings

The Shihi Magaibutsu is a cluster of carvings of Buddhist deities etched along a 32-meter stretch of polished rock in Shihi, a neighborhood near the entrance to Eihei-ji Temple. A total of nine figures can be seen: two of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, and seven of Ksitigarbha, a bodhisattva known as a protector of children and savior of beings who are trapped in hell. It is believed that the nine carvings were created by the same two or three amateur artists sometime between 1504 and 1520. Each individual carving was commissioned by a different monk, and the name of that monk is engraved next to each bodhisattva. The images themselves are carved in intaglio, meaning that the artist etched the lines directly into the stone surface rather than carving away the surrounding rock, as in the case of a bas-relief.

The carvings were produced during the Warring States period (1467–1568), a time of widespread social turmoil caused by fierce struggles between warlord-controlled domains throughout the country. During this time, the region around Eihei-ji Temple was the site of several violent peasant uprisings. The neighboring province of Kaga (now southern Ishikawa Prefecture) became known as a “province ruled by peasants” after they revolted and overthrew the local lords. However, it was not just peasants and warriors who became involved in the conflict; other commoners and even the monks were affected by the revolts. Although there are no records explaining the motivations behind the carvings in Shihi, it is possible the images were meant to serve as prayers for safety and an end to the turmoil.