The Dawn of Ancient Japanese Wooden Tablets

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Through a reexamination of some of Japan’s oldest wooden tablets, a reinterpretation of the writing in sumi ink on the supplementary material of the pedestal of the Shaka Triad enshrined in the Kon-do (Main Hall) of Horyu-ji Temple, and a comparison with Baekje wooden tablets, this study examines the start and development of use of wooden tablets in the Japanese Islands and draws the following conclusions.

(1) As suggested by the legends of Wani (Wang In) and Oh Jin-ni, wooden tablets were introduced to the Japanese Islands at earliest in the fifth century or at latest in the latter half of the sixth century by immigrants from Baekje and other parts of the Korean Peninsula. Though there is no supporting evidence, putting all accounts together, including the articles of Nihon Shoki (the Chronicle of Japan), it can be deduced that the use of wooden tablets was limited to the area in and around the imperial capital, miyake (imperial-controlled territories), and regional hubs. It is considered that at that time, wooden tablets for record purposes were adopted ahead of others. They were used mainly for management of people and goods, in particular when verbal communication was unavailable.

(2) Around in the 640s, the use of wooden tablets spread to some degree. Their existence is corroborated by excavation research. Still, as a rule, the use was limited to the imperial capital and its surroundings, such as Asuka and Naniwa. Not only was the use geographically confined but also the number of wooden tablets excavated from that time is limited. Nevertheless, there is an important finding that various kinds of wooden tablets were used in their early stages, such as document, record, shipping label, tag, writing practice, and other wooden tablets. A close examination into the content of wooden tablets reveals that compared to later use, many wooden tablets were free from typical document styles and used in rather special circumstances. This means that there were fewer occasions to use wooden tablets in everyday administration at that time than later.

(3) The Tenmu period (672–686) saw an explosive increase in the use of wooden tablets. Especially, wooden tablets dated using imperial year names appeared consecutively after 675 (Tenmu 4). Moreover, wooden tablets were excavated not only from sites in and around the imperial capital but also in other provinces. With regard to the type and content of wooden tablets, the use of shipping labels multiplied dramatically, and document wooden tablets to report to higher officials, such as...
zenpaku mokkan, were often used. In addition, wooden tablets were also frequently used for record
and writing practice purposes. In contrast, document wooden tablets to give directions to subordinates
were rarely produced. There was a historical background behind this remarkable development of the
wooden tablet culture; with the establishment of the ritsuryo nation of Japan, the imperial government
expanded its territory and document administration system to rural areas. From the Tennmu period
to the Jito period (687-697), when it had no diplomatic relationship with China (the Tang Dynasty),
Japan promoted nation building through direct interchanges with Silla and full use of knowledge of
migrant descendants and Baekje exiles. Therefore, the wooden tablets produced at that time were
significantly affected by Korean wooden tablets.

(4) In 701 (Taiho 1), a mission to the Tang Dynasty was arranged for the first time in the past
three decades (the dispatch was postponed one year due to bad weather), Taiho Ritsuryo (the Code
of Taiho) was formulated and put in effect, and the use of the original era name, Taiho, started.
Japan was more inclined to learn the latest system at that time directly from China rather than learn
old Chinese systems through the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, Japan started to imitate the
description, document style, and calligraphy manner of wooden tablets of the Tang Dynasty, and the
influence of the Korean Peninsula was weakening.

Key words: Japan’s oldest wooden tablets, Horyu-ji Kon-do Shaka Triad pedestal inscription, Baekje
wooden tablets