Japanese Decorated Tombs



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Japanese Decorated Tombs

Symbols, Society, and Identity in the Late Kofun Period

Edited by

Silvia Vesco, Mark Hudson, Claudia Zancan

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PREFACE

JAPANESE DECORATED TOMBS:

SYMBOLS, SOCIETY, AND IDENTITY IN THE LATE KOFUN PERIOD

This volume introduces to an English-speaking audience an important yet—for non-Japanese speakers—largely inaccessible heritage of the Japanese archipelago: the *sōshoku kofun* 装飾古墳 or 'decorated tombs'. These monuments are decorated on the walls of their stone chambers and on stone sarcophagi, featuring a rich and complex iconographic repertoire such as geometric patterns, human figures, horses, boats, and weaponry. They constitute some of the earliest surviving works of funerary art in Japan, and their study raises important questions not only about ancient artistic traditions, but also about ritual and burial practices, and the socio-cultural dynamics of the Kofun period.

The scholarship on *sōshoku kofun* exists almost exclusively in Japanese, rendering it largely inaccessible to international researchers working in related fields such as prehistoric and protohistoric art, comparative funerary archaeology, cognitive archaeology, or the archaeology and anthropology of death. One of the editors, Claudia Zancan, encountered this obstacle directly in the course of her own fieldwork, and it was the recognition of how consequential a gap this represented that gave rise to the present volume. Japanese decorated tombs are not an isolated phenomenon: their iconographic repertoire raises questions of broad significance—concerning beliefs about the afterlife, the relationship between the living and the dead, the dialogue between local tradition and continental influence, and the role of images in protohistoric societies—that are of interest not only within the Japanese context but from a global perspective as well.

A further ambition of the present work is to create a genuine communicative bridge between two scholarly traditions, the Japanese and the European, which have too often been regarded as operating at opposite ends of the disciplinary spectrum. It therefore brings together different methods, approaches, and backgrounds, with the hope that these tombs will attract the interest of a wide range of scholars.

The volume opens with an introduction designed to guide readers through the world of Japanese decorated tombs, providing the essential terminological, typological and contextual foundations needed to engage with the contributions that follow. The book is then organised into three parts: Part I deals with current fieldwork and documentation, tracing the emergence of decorated tombs in Kyushu and their spread across the archipelago; Part II interprets the meanings of specific iconographic elements in relation to funerary beliefs and practices; Part III situates the Japanese material within a comparative global perspective, examining connections to different contexts, the Koguryŏ Kingdom and the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tombs.

Three editors with complementary expertise shaped the volume. Silvia Vesco, specialising in Japanese art history, contributed her knowledge of artistic development in the archipelago from ancient times to the modern era, helping to contextualise the uniqueness of this protohistoric visual tradition. Mark Hudson's expertise in Japanese archaeology and ancient social dynamics ensured that the contributions were grounded in a broader understanding of the historical and socio-cultural context of the period. Claudia Zancan, as a specialist in Japanese decorated tombs, evaluated the individual contributions and ensured their coherence as a collective scholarly dialogue.

The editors wish to thank all the authors who chose to be part of this project and who were so cooperative throughout the editing process. They also wish to express their gratitude to Professor Ken'ichi Sasaki for his invaluable assistance in proofreading the abstracts in Japanese.

Author Biographies

In Alphabetic Order

Romina Bartocci

Romina Bartocci is a PhD Candidate at IFRAE (Institut français de recherche sur l'Asie de l'Est, Paris), under the supervision of Laurent Nespoulous and Estelle Bauer. Trained in art history and archaeology of ancient Japan, she developed her initial research focus on the mural paintings of the Kofun period, with particular attention to the technical and material systems underlying decorated tumulus spaces including the articulation between colour, drawing, and spatial organisation, and the cosmological programmes of tombs such as Kitora and Takamatsuzuka. Her doctoral research extends this foundation towards the Late Kofun funerary architecture, examining octagonal tomb forms as sites where pictorial, spatial, and political transformations converge.

Andrea De Benedittis

Andrea De Benedittis is currently Professor of Korean Language and Literature at the University of Naples L'Orientale. He received his academic training in part at Sapienza University of Rome, Korea University, and Jilin University, where he conducted research on the mural paintings of the Koguryŏ Kingdom. De Benedittis has also served as a visiting researcher at several Korean institutions, including Ewha Womans University, Kyunghee University, and the East Asia History Foundation. He has authored several publications on the history of ancient Korea, including '*La Via del Guerriero: Storia dei 'hwarang' di Silla*', '*Norm and deviance: some considerations on eroticism in ancient Korea*' and '*Ancestral monumentalization: Considerations on the keyhole-shaped tumuli in Korea*'.

Mark Hudson

Mark Hudson is a Researcher in the Language and the Anthropocene Research Group, Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology, Jena, Germany. He has a PhD in archaeology from the Australian National University. His research focuses on Japanese archaeology and premodern history in a comparative perspective. His recent publications include *Europe and the End of Medieval Ja*pan (Arc Humanities Press, 2024) and (co-edited with Martine Robbeets) *The Oxford Handbook of Archaeology and Language* (2025). He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

Ken'ichi Inada

Ken'ichi Inada is a Senior Associate Curator of Cultural Heritage Management at the Hitachinaka City Centre for Archaeological Excavations and Research, located in Hitachinaka City, Ibaraki Prefecture. He graduated from Risshō University, Tokyo, in March 1993, and joined the Centre in April of the same year. Since then, he has dedicated himself to the excavation of archaeological sites in Hitachinaka City. While many of these sites are destroyed prior to infrastructure development, he also holds responsibility for the protection and preservation of nationally designated Historic Sites. In addition, he is actively engaged in research on decorated tombs and *yokoana* tombs from the Kofun period.

Marianna Lázár

Marianna Lázár is Associate Professor at the Department of Japanese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. She holds a PhD in comparative

cultural history (Ryukoku University, Kyoto) and an MA in Japanese Studies with a specialisation in Japanese history (Károli Gáspár University). As a historian, her research focuses on the artistic, cultural, and ideological development of the Four Gods belief in East Asia, ancient East Asian tomb murals, and cultural exchange, with particular emphasis on ancient Japan. In 2013, through an internship programme at the Ikikoku Museum, she gained practical experience in archaeological research and fieldwork at the Haru no Tsuji Site. Her recent publications include *Animating the Cosmos: The Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior in Han Tomb Art and Thought* (2026), *Archaeology and Onmyōdō: Human-Shaped Ritual Objects Associated with Purification Rites and Curses* (2025), and *Ancient Chinese and Korean Influences on Japanese Tomb Murals* (2021). Her recent work also includes the first Hungarian translation and commentary of the *Gishi Wajinden* chronicle chapter.

Kazutaka Kawano

Kazutaka Kawano is Senior Curator at the Tokyo National Museum. He is an archaeologist specialising in Japanese archaeology, with interests in stone objects from the Yayoi and Kofun periods, as well as comparative studies of decorated tombs and royal tombs in world archaeology. His research examines funerary monuments as material and symbolic devices for visualising power, sacredness, and collective memory, especially through comparative archaeological approaches to mortuary landscapes. He has published widely on Japanese archaeology, funerary archaeology, and cultural heritage, and his publications in Japanese include *The Mystery of Decorated Tombs* (2023), *The Mystery of Royal Tombs* (2024), and *Why Were Kofun Built?* (2026). In recent years, he has also pursued interdisciplinary approaches to cultural heritage research that integrate digital image restoration, AI-assisted analysis, and comparative archaeology, with a particular interest in developing new methods for the study, interpretation, conservation, and public presentation of archaeological and museum materials.

James Frances Loftus

James Frances Loftus is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Science Tokyo (Institute for Liberal Arts). His research centres on computational and digital archaeology, combining statistical analysis, high-resolution three-dimensional surface recording, and machine learning to study material production, technological transmission, and human behaviour in the past. His work focuses on integrating quantitative methods with traditional archaeological approaches to develop more explicit and testable models of material culture. Through this approach, he aims to move beyond descriptive analysis toward reproducible frameworks that can be applied across archaeological contexts. He has conducted fieldwork and collaborative research across Japan and internationally and currently leads projects on cultural transmission during the Yayoi agricultural transition and the development of predictive models of innovation using archaeological data.

Keitarō Sakaguchi

Keitarō Sakaguchi is a Senior Consultant at the Kumamoto Prefectural Decorated Kofun Museum. After graduating in Archaeology from Nara University in 1984, he served as a Curator and later as Head of the Curatorial Division at the Decorated Kofun Museum. His career includes extensive work with the Kumamoto Prefectural Cultural Affairs Division, where he managed rescue archaeology for the Kyushu Shinkansen project and the preservation of National Treasures, including the Tsujunkyo Bridge. Specialising in Japanese archaeology, his research focuses on the preservation environments of decorated tombs and traditional restoration materials such as *ganzeki*. Sakaguchi has served on numerous high-level committees, including the Agency for Cultural Affairs' Working Group on Decorated Kofun. His recent work involves nationwide surveys of decorated sites and disaster

mitigation research concerning the 'Great Kansei Tsunami'. His latest publications (2025–2026) include a comprehensive national index of decorated *kofun* and studies on the archaeological sites of the Tohoku region.

Britta Stein

Britta Stein studied Prehistoric Archaeology and Japanese Studies at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg in Germany where she is currently completing her PhD. In addition, she received Japanese language education from Sophia University and Keio University in Tokyo. From 2016 to 2024 she was a lecturer, and from 2018 to 2024 also a research fellow at Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, researching Kofun period horse culture and teaching seminars on Japanese and Korean archaeology, heritage management and public archaeology in Japan, and ancient Japanese history. Since 2025 she has been employed at the State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology Saxony-Anhalt —State Museum of Prehistory—. Her research focuses on Kofun period equestrian culture, the history of archaeology and public archaeology in Japan and Europe. Her interests include exchange and trade networks in Eurasia, early Korea-Japan relations, mortuary practices, regional identity, state formation, the archaeology of entanglement and the archaeology of war and conflict.

Doreen Thierfelder

Doreen Thierfelder is a PhD Candidate at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg (Germany), specialising in the study of religion and the significance of the sun in Kofun period Japan, with a particular focus on bronze mirrors. She studied Japanese Studies and Prehistoric Archaeology and holds a Master's degree in Japanese Studies with a focus on sun worship in Japan's Kofun period. The author has presented at international conferences in Europe and Japan, including the Tenth Worldwide SEAA Conference, the 30th Annual Meeting of the EAA and the Ninth Conference on Archeoastronomy (Dai 9-kai kōkogaku tenmon-gaku kaigi), and has forthcoming publications on the significance of the sun and gender in Kofun period Japan.

Tōmei Yoshida

Tōmei Yoshida is the Head of the Buried Cultural Properties Research Division, Kyushu Historical Museum. An archaeologist specialising in Japanese archaeology, he has been involved with Kofun period and ancient sites and artefacts from an administrative perspective. With regard to decorated tombs, Yoshida has been engaged for many years in the protection of decorated tombs located within Fukuoka Prefecture. He participated in the survey of decorated tombs in Fukuoka Prefecture conducted by the Fukuoka Prefectural Board of Education between 2022 and 2024, and contributed as a co-author to *Decorated Tombs of Fukuoka Prefecture* (2025). In recent years, his research interests have focused on stone beads of the Yayoi and Kofun periods and ancient mountain fortresses. He has published the following articles: *Stone Beads Made of Amazonite in Fukuoka Prefecture* (2021); *Buried-Wood Beads from the Tomihisa Site* (2023); and *The Outer Enclosure Line of Dazaifu* (2024).

Silvia Vesco

Silvia Vesco is Professor of Japanese Art History at the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari University, Venice. After obtaining a Master's degree in Art & Archaeology at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies University of London) and a PhD (a joint Italian-Japanese degree), she lived and studied in Japan for a long time. She has organised several international conferences and curated major exhibitions of Japanese art in prestigious Italian venues and in Japan. Her scholarly interests focus on *ukiyoe* prints and paintings ('Pictures of the Floating World'), with particular

reference to the work of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Japonisme, as well as on collections of Japanese art in public and private collections in Italy. Her latest publications include contributions dedicated to prints by Andō Hiroshige (1797-1858) and Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865), and to the refined iconography of the *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji), as well as the first translation into a Western language of two manuals of pictorial didactics by Katsushika Hokusai. In addition, the first of two volumes on the *History of Japanese Art from Prehistory to the Modern Era* has been published by Einaudi.

Claudia Zancan

Claudia Zancan obtained her PhD in Japanese Archaeology at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy) under the supervision of Professors Silvia Vesco, Mark Hudson and Ilona R. Bausch. She is a Research Associate of the Language and the Anthropocene Research Group, Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology, Jena (Germany). During the 2026-27 academic year she is Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Postdoctoral Fellow at the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures. She holds a MA Degree in both Archaeology (Leiden University) and Asian Studies (Ca' Foscari University). Her area of interest sits at the intersection of Archaeology of Death, Cognitive Archaeology, and Archaeology of Prehistoric Art. Her PhD research investigated the agency of images in Kyushu Island's decorated tombs, examining how this imagery actively shaped 'deathways' and the perception of funerary spaces. She conducted archaeological fieldwork in Kyushu (2023–2024), collaborating with local heritage management and major Japanese museums. Her IRIAE project—*Sōshoku Kofun Tales*—is officially recognised by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI).